

EI-500

MARY ISHKANIAN BELEMJIAN

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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EGYPT (BORN TURKEY, ARMENIAN), 1922 RESIDENCE: AINTAB, TURKEY/  
OMDURMAN, SUDAN  
AGE 15 US RESIDENCE: CAMBREIDGE,  
MA  
PASSAGE ON "THE CONSTANTINOPLE" PORT: ALEXANDRIA/PATRAS

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, July 12, 1994. I'm in Troy, New York with Mary Belemjian. Mrs. Belemjian came from Turkey. She arrived in New York on August 1, 1922. She was fifteen years old at that time. Also present is her grandson, David Belemjian. Anyway, thank you for letting me come out and interview you. Can we begin by you giving me your birthdate, please?

BELEMJIAN: August 18, 1907.

SIGRIST: And where in Turkey were you born?

BELEMJIAN: Aintab, A-I-N-T-A-B.

SIGRIST: And where in Turkey is Aintab? Do you know where?

BELEMJIAN: Asia Minor.

SIGRIST: What part of Turkey is it? Do you know? Is Aintab a city or a smaller . . .

BELEMJIAN: A city. A small city.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what you remember about Aintab when you were a little girl?

BELEMJIAN: I was a year-and-a-half when we went to Africa. My father was sent as a missionary to Africa. So I don't remember anything.

SIGRIST: But you do remember Africa.

BELEMJIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Where in Africa did you go?

BELEMJIAN: We went to three villages. Sobat, one is Sobat, one is Melacan, and the other one is Dofagir. We lived . . .

SIGRIST: Can you say the last one again, slowly.

BELEMJIAN: Dofagir. So, we lived in these three villages. I

was three years old there. I remember Teddy Roosevelt came to that village to hunt and the villagers tried to show them, to show him their marksmanship. So they circled around with spears and they put a cow in the middle, so when the signal was given they all aimed at the cow, and the cow fell down, and that's all I remember. I started to cry because the animal was dead. That's what I remember.

SIGRIST: How long did your family stay in Africa?

BELEMJIAN: We stayed until five years old.

SIGRIST: And then you returned to Turkey?

BELEMJIAN: No. We went to Sudan.

SIGRIST: This is fascinating. Um, before we get to Sudan, tell me what else you might remember about Africa. Do you remember, like, the house that you lived in?

BELEMJIAN: Oh, yeah. It was a round mud, and then there was, the roof was straw, and there were a lot of snakes, lots of animals, and my mother did the washing, and then she, she just stepped in the house and the

lion was roaring at the thing. He almost got my mother. We used to come in the house and we see curled snakes in the house. And I remember those things.

SIGRIST: What, how did, how did you eat in Africa? How was food prepared?

BELEMJIAN: How was, I don't remember. My mother used to keep, they used to have chickens, you know. They don't know any money there. You give them little bells, you know, and decorations, beads and things, and they give you chickens, they give you eggs, and there wasn't too many food. So . . .

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the villagers, any of the native people stick out in your mind at all?

BELEMJIAN: Well, they were all decorated their hairs, you know. They, they didn't wear any clothes. My mother, she gave one to a woman. She was, she wasn't wearing anything, so she gave one of her dresses to the woman and told her to put it on, you know, and come. So the next day she came just the same. She didn't wear it. So they were wild, you know. You see, in things, they dance, you know.

SIGRIST: Were there other white missionaries in this town?

BELEMJIAN: No, just the doctor. And my father used to work in the drugstore with the doctor as a, you know, and they preached to them. And I learned a few languages, you know. They used to close, at noontime they used to close the drugstore, and my father used to sleep. So the villagers used to come, and they want my father. I used to tell them, (Shilik). That means, "What do you want? Abraham is sleeping. When the bell rings, the store opens." That's their language, Shilik language.

SIGRIST: The Shilik language.

BELEMJIAN: The Shilik language.

SIGRIST: Did your parents speak that language?

BELEMJIAN: We were learning, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you know, do you know how your father got sent there in the first place?

BELEMJIAN: That I don't know how they, how he got there. The missionaries sent them from Aintab.

SIGRIST: And he was a missionary for what religion?

BELEMJIAN: Uh, American missionary, Protestant.

SIGRIST: Protestant missionary. Can you remember when you lived in Africa what you or your family did for fun, for entertainment?

BELEMJIAN: Nothing. ( she laughs ) Nothing. There was nothing.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the villagers, any of their celebrations, perhaps? Any of their customs? Did they dance?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah. Oh, dance, they danced, and their drums, you know. But I don't know what, I was five years old.  
So . . .

SIGRIST: Where did you go when you left Africa?

BELEMJIAN: We went to Sudan.

SIGRIST: And how long did you . . .

BELEMJIAN: Omderman [PH].

SIGRIST: What was the name of the . . .

BELEMJIAN: Omderman [PH].

SIGRIST: Omderman [PH], in Sudan. And how long did you stay in Sudan?

BELEMJIAN: We stayed about five years there.

SIGRIST: Talk to me about Sudan, and what you remember being there?

BELEMJIAN: Well, I remember they used to wear long dresses, and they have the thing, uh, (she gestures)...

SIGRIST: Like a headdress?

BELEMJIAN: The headdress, yeah. And they were nice people. They used to bring vegetables and things. And I, then they sent me to boarding school. They said, "This is not a place, you know, to raise a child." I was the only one. So then they had my brother, Dick, then my sister, Jean, and my brother, Leo. We stayed there until we were, uh, thirteen, twelve years old. And from there we came to Cairo, Egypt.

SIGRIST: This is, you're seeing quite a lot of the world as a young person.

BELEMJIAN: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the house that you lived in in Sudan?

BELEMJIAN: I remember, no. I don't remember.

SIGRIST: You probably remember the school, maybe, that you were sent to?

BELEMJIAN: It was a missionary school.

SIGRIST: And it was in Sudan, right?

BELEMJIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the boarding school that you, that you were sent to?

BELEMJIAN: I didn't like their food. ( she laughs ) I used to go, my father used to talk to the captain of the ship on vacations, he used to bring me back home. And they used to ask me, "How do you like the food?" I said, "I don't like the food." So, uh . . .

SIGRIST: The school is quite a distance, then, from where your parents are?

BELEMJIAN: Yes, yeah.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about being sent to school in the first place?

BELEMJIAN: Because they wanted me to get education.

SIGRIST: But how did you feel about being sent away?

BELEMJIAN: Well, I had to go. I didn't have any choice. So the captain used to bring me home and then take me back. And . . .

SIGRIST: Who were the other students in the boarding school?

BELEMJIAN: They were all colored, uh, black. I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Wealthy people, or . . .

BELEMJIAN: Middle class, I think.

SIGRIST: So from the Sudan you went to Cairo.

BELEMJIAN: Cairo.

SIGRIST: And how long were you in Cairo?

BELEMJIAN: Four years.

SIGRIST: And is your father doing the same kind of thing in

Cairo?

BELEMJIAN: No. Then he stopped that, and he was doing, in the, you know . . . ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: That's all right. You can speak, David, if you need to.

DAVID: Dry cleaning? Is that what you mean?

BELEMJIAN: No. Uh . . .

DAVID: Say it in Armenian. What's the Armenian word?

BELEMJIAN: Hardware store, hardware store.

DAVID: Oh.

SIGRIST: He had a hardware store in Cairo. Why did he get out of the missionary business?

BELEMJIAN: I don't know. I didn't ask him.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

BELEMJIAN: Abraham.

SIGRIST: And what was his last name, your maiden name?

BELEMJIAN: Ishkanian.

SIGRIST: And can you spell that, please?

BELEMJIAN: I-S, I-S-H-K-A-N-I-A-N.

SIGRIST: Ishkanian.

BELEMJIAN: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me a little bit about his family background?

BELEMJIAN: Well, his family, my grandfather was a doctor. My uncles were doctors, three doctors, three uncles. And the cousins were all doctors and dentists. My only father, my father wasn't a doctor.  
( she laughs ) So they were in Aleppo. We are the ones that we got out of Aleppo to Africa. So, uh . . .

SIGRIST: What was your father's personality like?

BELEMJIAN: He was a nice man. He always used to read the Bible, read the Bible and sing hymns. And he used to tell us, you know, give us advice to be good, you know. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Did he ever teach you, maybe a hymn in Armenian or a poem, something that he taught his children how

to say?

BELEMJIAN: I'm not good at remembering hymns and things.

SIGRIST: Okay.

BELEMJIAN: He used to sing, "The days come, and the months come, and the years come, and then what else?"  
Something like that. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

BELEMJIAN: Arbou, A-R-B-O-U.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

BELEMJIAN: Kupelian, K-U-P-E-L-I-A-N.

SIGRIST: Was she, were your parents both from Aintab?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your mother's family background.

BELEMJIAN: Well, my mother had seven sisters, and that's all . . .

SIGRIST: That's all you know.

BELEMJIAN: That's all I know. My grandmother, my mother's mother, came to America. We're five generations here in America. My grandmother, my mother, me, Eddie (gesturing to her grandson David) and you. Five generation.

SIGRIST: Do you know when your grandmother came over to America?

BELEMJIAN: 1923.

SIGRIST: So she came after you came?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your mother's personality, what she was like.

BELEMJIAN: She was an angel. She, uh, they didn't have any pictures taken, you know. My mother used to work and she said, "I'm going to have our family picture done," you know, "and I pay for it." So we had, she worked, and she had the picture taken, and that's the remembrance we have of the family.

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met?

BELEMJIAN: I don't know.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you any stories about when she gave birth to you? Do you know anything about the circumstances of when you were born?

BELEMJIAN: No. They never used to talk about those things then. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Do you know how your mother, you may not know this, but I'm wondering how your mother must have felt to go with your father to Africa.

BELEMJIAN: I didn't think she liked it, but she followed her husband, and she went.

SIGRIST: One look at those black snakes. ( they laugh )  
Um, tell me a little bit about, you were in Cairo for four years, right?

BELEMJIAN: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: You were in Sudan for five years.

BELEMJIAN: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: And you were in Africa until you were five.

BELEMJIAN: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: So you were a young lady by the time you get to Cairo.

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about everyday life in Cairo.

BELEMJIAN: Well, we had relatives there. They had a big house. They have walls, high walls, and once in a while the Egyptians used to revolt, you know. And all the relatives used to gather in that house, the big house, and we used to have fun there with the children. And we used to say, "Let her do it again," you know, so we get together. So, uh, we, uh, we had a nice time there.

SIGRIST: Did you have your own house in Cairo? You said this was the relatives' house that had the, that had the wall, correct? Did you have your (?) somewhere?

BELEMJIAN: Oh, yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you kind of just describe for me what the house was like?

BELEMJIAN: Well, it was, it was a second story, and the floor was slate-like, you know. They didn't have any linoleum or anything. And I don't remember much.

SIGRIST: Do you remember going to church when you were in Cairo?

BELEMJIAN: Oh, yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little about that?

BELEMJIAN: When we were in Africa, we didn't go to church. So when we went to Egypt, we went to church, and the priest, you know, has, wears the thing.

SIGRIST: The vestments?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah. My brother, Leo, said, "He's got a blanket on him." You know. A lot of boys, we were embarrassed because we didn't, he didn't, he didn't see any before. So we learned.

SIGRIST: Cairo's a big city, isn't it?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Right. I'm sorry. I interrupted you. You were going to say you learned . . .

BELEMJIAN: No.

SIGRIST: Um, tell me what Cairo was like as a city at that time. What were some of the things that you saw in Cairo?

BELEMJIAN: I remember they had the nice, uh, garden. Isbekaya [PH], the name was.

SIGRIST: Isbekaya [PH].

BELEMJIAN: And we used to go on Sundays and walk around. And the Sudanese had eye problem, you know. They all had these flies and things, you know. They used to have eye diseases. So we used to keep away, and keep clean.

SIGRIST: Was that a problem in Egypt?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: The eye problems.

BELEMJIAN: Mm.

SIGRIST: Was Cairo a clean city, or is it a dirty city?

BELEMJIAN: Well, they had nice, clean part, and some old parts.

SIGRIST: Did your father have a shop? Did he have his own hardware shop?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what the shop looked like?

BELEMJIAN: It's a small place, and they used to have gasoline, uh, thing, you know, you . . .

DAVID: (?)

BELEMJIAN: You cook on it. He used to sell those things. I wasn't interested in anything. If I was, you know, I would have asked a lot of questions.

SIGRIST: Did you go to school when you were in Cairo?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Talk to be about, maybe, how, if school was different in Cairo than it had been when you were in the boarding school in Sudan.

BELEMJIAN: Well, in Sudan it was American missionary. In Cairo, it was Armenian school, Castjian [PH], the name was. So we were all Armenians there.

SIGRIST: What kinds of subjects did you learn in school?

BELEMJIAN: We had Arabic, French, Armenian and, Armenian, Arabic, French, what's the other? English, English.

SIGRIST: Oh, so you learned some English.

BELEMJIAN: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, you mentioned relatives had a house with a wall around it.

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Who were these relatives?

BELEMJIAN: Ishkanians.

SIGRIST: They were on your father's . . .

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Relatives.

BELEMJIAN: Mm.

SIGRIST: Can you talk to be a little bit about them, and who they were and why they were in Cairo?

BELEMJIAN: Oh, I don't know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything about the people themselves?

BELEMJIAN: Well, some of them came to America, some of them stayed there, some of them in California and I don't know if anybody left there.

SIGRIST: Were your parents close to their relatives?

BELEMJIAN: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: So you're in Cairo for five years . . .

BELEMJIAN: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: And then what happens? Where do you go?

BELEMJIAN: We came to America.

SIGRIST: So you left from Cairo.

BELEMJIAN: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Who wanted to go to America?

BELEMJIAN: My aunt. My father's sister, uh, sent the affidavit, or whatever, yeah. And he said, "Come to America, you know, it's a nice place." So we

decided to come.

SIGRIST: Where were they living?

BELEMJIAN: In Cambridge, Massachusetts.

SIGRIST: And what were they doing for a profession? What, what was your uncle doing?

BELEMJIAN: My aunt and uncle were retired, and their sons were, they had a dry cleaning place.

SIGRIST: How did, did your mother want to come to America?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: How about your father? Did he want to come?

BELEMJIAN: Yes. My mother had two sisters here in America. So she wanted to come.

SIGRIST: Um, what did you know about America when you were growing up? What did America mean to you, when you, before you got here?

BELEMJIAN: You know, when I was in Sudan, we had visitors. And they came, they asked the children who was their king. And when they asked me, my father used to say, "Jesus Christ, the Lord, the King," you

know. And when they asked me, I said, "Jesus, the Lord, is our king." So I think they got a kick out of that. ( they laugh )

SIGRIST: Did you ever remember seeing people who had been in America who, who had come back when you were still in, you know, and they looked different to you somehow?

BELEMJIAN: No. But they said it's a paradise, America is paradise. So, uh, it's a nice place, so if you can go, go.

SIGRIST: Which country did you enjoy living in the most before you came to the United States?

BELEMJIAN: Well, I enjoy here.

SIGRIST: But before, which, as a little girl, which place did you, did you like the best?

BELEMJIAN: I think Egypt. We had a lot of relatives there.

SIGRIST: Was your life a little easier in Egypt, somehow?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you remember what, the kinds of food that you

ate when you were in Egypt?

BELEMJIAN: Oh, we had all kinds of food there. Yeah, we had everything.

SIGRIST: Did you have your own garden?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What did you grow in the garden?

BELEMJIAN: Cucumber, tomatoes, pepper, parsley, scallions.

SIGRIST: Did people eat meat in Cairo?

BELEMJIAN: Oh, yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: What kind of meat did you eat?

BELEMJIAN: Lamb. We used to eat lamb. We didn't eat beef until we came to America. Most, and chicken, we used to eat.

SIGRIST: Was there one food that your mother prepared that was your favorite?

BELEMJIAN: Oh, it's stuffed peppers.

SIGRIST: How did she do that?

BELEMJIAN: Well, she had ground lamb, wheat, crushed wheat, tomatoes, tomato paste, chopped green pepper in it. You mix it up, and you stuff the peppers and put it in the pot, arrange it, and then you put a dish on it so to keep it in place, and you put water, and put a glass of water on it to keep it in place. We put lemon juice and salt, and put water to cover it, and we cook it about half an hour, and it's done. And we used to make, uh, she used to make grape leaves. The same mixture, she used to roll it up, and that used to taste good.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me how you celebrated Christmas when you were, when you were on the other side?

BELEMJIAN: We used to, we couldn't wait till Christmas come, you know. But nowadays, Christmas comes and goes so fast. So we didn't have any toys or anything. They used to make dolls with rags, you know. And then they used to give us orange and apple. We didn't have any toys.

SIGRIST: And then did you go to church?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Um, can you explain to me, did you have any animals? Did you keep animals?

BELEMJIAN: We had a deer. It was, uh, the mother died, you know, in Sudan, and it was a baby. So we took it and we fed it with a bottle, you know. And we had monkey, two monkeys. And my brother used to tease the monkey, and then the monkey got mad and bit him on the stomach. ( she laughs ) It was a little monkey, grey. And, yeah, we had, when we go, when we were going with the boat, the captain take me home, we used to see hippopotamus, you know, in the water, they stick their heads out, you know, all over.

SIGRIST: So you saw the hippopotamuses?

BELEMJIAN: Oh, yeah. We had elephants and camels and . . .

SIGRIST: Do you remember the deer that you had that you raised?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did it have a name?

BELEMJIAN: No. I didn't, I should have. ( she laughs )

Baby. We used to call him baby.

SIGRIST: Um, tell me about what you remember of the process of getting ready to leave to come to this country.

BELEMJIAN: Well, we got our tickets, and we got, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Where did you go to get the tickets?

BELEMJIAN: Uh, my father took care of it. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Do you know if your father paid for the passage for the family, or if your aunt did in Massachusetts?

BELEMJIAN: No, my father did.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: And do you remember what you took with you, what you packed to take with you?

BELEMJIAN: ( she laughs ) We had a basket, and we used to wear a hat, you know. We had a hat, and it was, when we came to Ellis Island, we didn't like those hats, so whatever we sat down, we left, we, uh, left the basket there. We said, "Let them take it." You know, "We don't want it." Wherever we

went, they used to bring it and say, "This is yours." ( she laughs ) So, anyway, we took it. Then we threw them away.

SIGRIST: What did you actually pack? What did you take with you from Cairo?

BELEMJIAN: Well, our clothing, you know. But my father was very fussy eater. So he wouldn't eat any in the boat. So he bought cracked wheat, lentils, tomatoes and things. He used to go near the cook and cook for ourselves, you know, Armenian food.

SIGRIST: You mentioned clothing. Can you describe the kind of clothing you wore when you were in Cairo? What kinds of clothing did people wear at that time?

BELEMJIAN: Oh, regular dress. My mother was a dressmaker. I mean, she's a dressmaker. She used to sew for us. So she sewed all our clothes.

SIGRIST: Is there a dress that you remember having in Egypt or in Sudan before you got here that sticks out in your mind very strongly?

DAVID: The one you were talking about.

BELEMJIAN: Huh? The clothes?

DAVID: The dress that you liked that your mom made.

BELEMJIAN: My mother made? Yeah. She made a dress. It had a panel, two panels there (she gestures). And she embroidered Ikkak [PH] with colored thread. I used to love that. I used to love it.

SIGRIST: And you mentioned that you had hats on.

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What kind of a hat? What did it look like?

BELEMJIAN: Funny hats. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Was it a big hat or a small hat?

BELEMJIAN: Uh, small.

SIGRIST: How did you wear your hair when you were a young girl?

BELEMJIAN: My hair was straight. When I was twelve years old, my hair started to curl up. It's natural now, but when I was twelve years old, it was so straight. So, uh, my mother used to wash my hair and braid it so it would be curly.

SIGRIST: And to have curly hair was more fashionable?  
That's . . .

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: More attractive. Do you remember when you left  
Cairo, did your, did your relatives who lived there  
give any kind of a party or a dinner or something  
for your family before you . . .

BELEMJIAN: Yeah, a farewell party, yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that?

BELEMJIAN: Well, they were all there. They gave us gifts, and  
wished us, wished us, you know, to be happy where  
we're going.

SIGRIST: Was it sad to say goodbye to your relatives?

BELEMJIAN: It was sad. ( she coughs )

SIGRIST: Was it more difficult, do you think, for your  
father or for your mother, to leave the family?

BELEMJIAN: Both, both of them. Because we had many good  
friends and good relatives, to leave them behind.  
But later on they came to America, too, so we met

them.

SIGRIST: Where did you go to get the ship that came to the United States?

BELEMJIAN: We went to Alexandria, from Egypt, Alexandria. And from there we came to Greece, Patras, I think.

SIGRIST: Patras? Did you take a, how did you get from Cairo to Alexandria?

BELEMJIAN: We took a ship, boat.

SIGRIST: And then from Alexandria to Patras?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah. And from there we came to America.

SIGRIST: Do you know what the name of the ship was?

BELEMJIAN: Constantinople.

SIGRIST: And, tell me what you remember about being on the ship.

BELEMJIAN: The ship, there was a lot of, the captain said, "Everybody stay down," you know. Because there was a storm. The water was coming all over, you know. And my brother and I were up walking, you know. Some people were seasick, but we were the only ones

walking. He came and chased us down. He said, "Go down," you know, "it's dangerous." And we were having fun. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Do you remember where you slept on the ship? Where did you sleep on the ship?

BELEMJIAN: Oh, downstairs. We bought second class tickets, but there was no room. They put us on the third. They didn't give us our money back, you know, the difference. So . . .

SIGRIST: Can you describe what it looked like downstairs?

BELEMJIAN: Well, there were . . .

SIGRIST: Bunk beds?

BELEMJIAN: Bunks.

SIGRIST: Was it one big, open room, or were there lots of little rooms?

BELEMJIAN: Open room.

SIGRIST: And who else was traveling on the ship? Who were some of the other passengers?

BELEMJIAN: There was a woman that came with us. She had a

baby. She came with us. I don't know her last name. Her name was Mary.

SIGRIST: And why was she traveling with you? Was she a relative?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah. My father's niece, I think it was.

SIGRIST: Now, it's you and your mother and your father.

BELEMJIAN: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: And then . . .

BELEMJIAN: Me, my brother.

SIGRIST: Leo.

BELEMJIAN: Dick.

SIGRIST: Dick.

BELEMJIAN: Jean.

SIGRIST: Jean.

BELEMJIAN: And Leo.

SIGRIST: And Leo. So that's, that's quite a group of people.

BELEMJIAN: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: How old are the kids? Now, you're fifteen. Are the others older or younger?

BELEMJIAN: My brother Dick was born in 1911. My, Jean was 1913, and Leo was 19, uh, '15.

SIGRIST: So you're the oldest.

BELEMJIAN: I'm the oldest. And then I, after we came to America, we had another brother, Harry. He was born 1929.

SIGRIST: Because you were the oldest . . .

BELEMJIAN: '27.

SIGRIST: 1927. Because you were the oldest of all the children, did you have to assume any responsibility for your younger brothers and sisters?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things were you responsible for?

BELEMJIAN: Well, to watch them and play with them, you know, and take care of them.

SIGRIST: What did your parents do while they were on the ship?

BELEMJIAN: My father used to cook. ( she laughs ) And my mother was seasick.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how they treated her seasickness, if they treated it at all?

BELEMJIAN: No, they just stayed in bed. They didn't give them anything.

SIGRIST: You know, that reminds me, I should ask you, in these very exotic places that you lived, do you remember any, any practices of medicine, or the way they treated illness like in Africa or in Sudan? Does anything stick out in your mind about how, how maybe local people treated illnesses, or . . .

BELEMJIAN: Well, there was a native that, uh, something bit him on his leg, and they were going to cut his leg. So my mother, my father said, "Don't do it." So they brought some kind of fat. I don't know where, what kind of fat. She melted that, and she put the cloth in it, and she wrapped the leg on it, and that saved the leg. Sure, that's all I remember.

SIGRIST: And probably animal bites were a frequent occurrence.

BELEMJIAN: Yeah. But they were going to cut his leg off. It was swelled up.

SIGRIST: Thank you. I didn't mean to digress and get us off the boat, but I suddenly thought that would be a good question to ask you. Do you know how long you were on the ship before it arrived in New York?

BELEMJIAN: Twenty-one days.

SIGRIST: That's a long time.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where you were fed on the ship?

BELEMJIAN: They had a dining area, I think. They used to give hot dog and things like that. We didn't eat it. We didn't know what they were. ( she laughs ) We ate our food.

SIGRIST: Your father took care of that in the kitchen, probably driving the kitchen staff crazy doing it.

BELEMJIAN: Yeah. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when

you arrived?

BELEMJIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did you know what that was?

BELEMJIAN: We didn't know, but we know it was Statue of Liberty, until we found out about it.

SIGRIST: And tell me what you thought when you saw the New York skyline for the first time, maybe from the ship. Did you have any impressions of that?  
( she pauses ) No?

BELEMJIAN: No.

SIGRIST: Okay.

DAVID: Not even excited?

SIGRIST: Well, of course, you'd lived, I mean, Cairo's a big city, and the ship, you said the ship went from Alexandria to Patras, from Patras to . . . It didn't stop in Italy?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah, it stopped in . . .

SIGRIST: Or in France?

BELEMJIAN: In Spain, I think.

SIGRIST: Maybe at Gibraltar, before it went in. Usually those ships stopped at multiple ports before they ended up going into the Atlantic.

BELEMJIAN: I wasn't too interested. Portugal, I think. We stopped at Portugal.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything that sticks out in your mind about any of those stops, when the ship stopped, seeing something you had never seen before, or . . .

BELEMJIAN: Oh, they used to bring food, you know, to sell. But we used to have bananas in Africa. So they used to bring bananas, and they had oranges and things, you know. We used to buy . . .

SIGRIST: I have to say that you were probably the only immigrant coming to America who knew what a banana was before you got here. ( they laugh )

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: You are probably the only person I've ever interviewed who . . .

BELEMJIAN: My father used to buy one, you know, the big thing, the green one and the yellow one. So we, I got sick over it, you know. I used to eat about three or four of them. I had fever.

SIGRIST: Tell me, tell me about what you remember about being processed at Ellis Island. You told me the story about you wanted to get rid of your bag, but people kept running behind you.

BELEMJIAN: When we got in, they were examining the eyes, you know. So they took the men separate and the women separate. So they took my father, they thought he had something wrong with his eye. They kept us in Ellis Island four days. And we were worried. It was a beautiful place, and they were feeding us, you know, but we were so scared that they were going to send us back, we didn't enjoy it. But if we didn't scared, it was a nice place.  
( she laughs )

SIGRIST: What do you remember about having to stay there? What sticks out in your mind about having to be there for those four days?

BELEMJIAN: We were just worried that they were going to send

us back.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where you slept at Ellis Island?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah, on the bunks. And then they found out that my father's eye was all right, so they told us we can go. When they gave us permission, we got out of the door and my father said, "Hurry up. Let's go fast before they call us back." You know.  
( she laughs ) So we, we walked past. And then my aunt met us a certain place, and they took us to Cambridge.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, do you remember where you were fed at Ellis Island.

BELEMJIAN: Where what?

SIGRIST: Where you were fed.

BELEMJIAN: Fed?

SIGRIST: Where did you eat when you were at Ellis Island?

BELEMJIAN: Well, they had, they had a place, you know, with tables, and everybody sits down and eats. I remember they used to give us hard boiled eggs, and I used to like that. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Were there lots of people there when you were there?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And do you remember, do you remember being examined when you were there, physically examined?

BELEMJIAN: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: What did they do, specifically?

BELEMJIAN: No, I don't think they examined. They looked at our eyes and the heart, I think, and they passed us. We were okay.

SIGRIST: Because it was your father that they thought something. Did they take him away, and take him somewhere?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did he ever talk about where they took him and what they did with him?

BELEMJIAN: No, they just kept him there and they examined him, and they found out that he was all right.

SIGRIST: Did your aunt meet you at Ellis Island, or did you meet her somewhere else?

BELEMJIAN: I think she came by the door, and when we got out she took us.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about the trip from New York to Cambridge? How did you get up to Cambridge?

BELEMJIAN: By train, I think.

SIGRIST: And does anything stick out in your mind about that train ride?

BELEMJIAN: No. We were glad to get out of there and be safe.

SIGRIST: Tell me, tell me how, when you arrived in Cambridge, tell me about how you spent your first night in America.

BELEMJIAN: It was nice. Uh . . .

SIGRIST: Who was at the house that you went to?

BELEMJIAN: My aunt.

SIGRIST: Well, she was with you, because she's taking you. But is there anyone at the house waiting for you?

BELEMJIAN: Oh, yeah. My uncle was there, and their son was there, and her daughter was there. We were all, a big family.

SIGRIST: This is your mother's sister?

BELEMJIAN: No, my father's.

SIGRIST: Your father's sister. And what was her name?

BELEMJIAN: Takouhie.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

BELEMJIAN: Queen. That means Queen in Armenian, Takouhie..

SIGRIST: How is it spelled?

BELEMJIAN: Takouhie. T-A-K-O-U-H-I-E.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what your aunt was like as a person.

BELEMJIAN: She was, uh, strict. She was, she was Christian. And she was strict.

SIGRIST: What were some of the rules that you had to follow in her house? What sorts of things made her strict?

BELEMJIAN: We had to read the Bible and pray all day. And Sundays we didn't do anything. And, uh, they used to cook Saturdays, and Sundays we didn't do anything. And she was strict. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Did you stay with your aunt for a period of time?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah. We stayed about a year.

SIGRIST: And, um . . .

BELEMJIAN: We, we, August, September, October, four months later they said, "We're having Thanksgiving." And we said, "What is that?" So they explained it, that it was Thanksgiving, you know, when the Pilgrims came and, uh, the Indians, you know, had the thing. So that was the first Thanksgiving we spent. It was nice.

SIGRIST: Was there anything that struck you as being odd or unusual about the celebration from what you were used to?

BELEMJIAN: No, it was nice.

SIGRIST: Were you put into school right away?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And tell me about what it was like to go to school?

BELEMJIAN: Night school. I went to night school.

SIGRIST: Of course, you were fifteen now. Um, explain to me what night school was like. What was, what was it like for you to go to night school?

BELEMJIAN: I don't know. I, I was afraid, because at night, you know, I was afraid. Then when I was sixteen I quit.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did you learn in night school?

BELEMJIAN: Well, give us the lessons. I wasn't happy.

SIGRIST: Did they try to teach you English in night school?

BELEMJIAN: Well, I knew English from Cairo. I, uh, I didn't like arithmetic.

SIGRIST: Talk to me a little bit about how your parents adjusted to America.

BELEMJIAN: When we came to Cambridge, they had apartments, you know. So we had an apartment. We didn't have any furniture. They got orange crates. ( she coughs )

So we used to, my father, my mother used to put, cover it up, and we used to sit on it. Then we found out that we can buy furniture on instalment, you know. So slowly we start to buy some furniture.

SIGRIST: When you were in Cairo, did you have nice furniture and that kind of thing?

BELEMJIAN: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: So this was, this was a very different way of living than in . . .

BELEMJIAN: Yeah, different.

SIGRIST: Were there any other kinds of hardships that your, you and your family went through, things that were so different here than they had been when you lived in Cairo?

BELEMJIAN: Well, my father wasn't too well, and he couldn't get a job. My mother worked in Hood Rubber Company.

SIGRIST: Hood Rubber Company.

BELEMJIAN: And then I went to work with her, too. And then,

uh . . .

SIGRIST: How old were you when you went to work for the Hood Rubber Company?

BELEMJIAN: Sixteen, seventeen.

SIGRIST: What was your job there?

BELEMJIAN: I used to put the buckles on the overshoes.  
( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Was that a hard thing to do?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your hours were?

BELEMJIAN: Well, I used to go with my mother about eight o'clock, and then come home four or five. I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how much you were paid?

BELEMJIAN: Oh, then it wasn't much, I don't think.  
( she laughs ) I didn't even open the envelope. I used to give it to my mother.

SIGRIST: Would you say that as a young lady you were

somewhat sheltered?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Is that, is that typical in Armenian households,  
that the women aren't . . .

BELEMJIAN: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Could your parents read and write? Oh, they must  
have been able to.

BELEMJIAN: Yeah, my, yeah.

SIGRIST: Um, because he was a missionary. Did your mother  
want to go to work when you came to America, or did  
you have to?

BELEMJIAN: We had to, we had to.

SIGRIST: You said your father wasn't always well. What was  
wrong with him?

BELEMJIAN: Uh, he used, he used to have trouble with his  
bowel. He used to have bleeding and diarrhea and  
things like that.

SIGRIST: Enough to keep him from . . .

BELEMJIAN: Hmm.

SIGRIST: Did he have a job when he got here?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What was his job here?

BELEMJIAN: Well, he was a tailor. He, when he came to Troy, he used to alteration, you know. And he used to tailor, like.

SIGRIST: How long had you been in Cambridge before you came to Troy?

BELEMJIAN: Uh, two years.

SIGRIST: Why did he come to Troy?

BELEMJIAN: Because my mother had two sisters in Troy. So she came to see them. They came to see us, and then they said, "Oh, come on, Troy is better, you know, come over." So we came, she came and then she wanted to be with her sisters, so we moved. We moved here. But my aunts were always fighting with each other. My mother used to feel bad, you know. She says, "I miss my sisters." But when she came and she saw them fighting, she said, "I don't like

this." So she said, "I don't like it." So she moved to, I got married. That was an arranged marriage. I said, "I don't want to marry him." They forced me. They said, "You must have a boyfriend." I said, "No, I don't have a boyfriend." They insisted that I, I said, "I don't have a boyfriend." "Then you better marry this boy." So that's how it was. And then after I got married, my mother and father, family, they went to New York. You know, the woman that came with us in the boat, she was in New York, and she got married, and she took my mother and father in, and then my mother got a job, and then they lived in New York.

SIGRIST: But you stayed up here when they came. How old were you when you got married?

BELEMJIAN: Eighteen.

SIGRIST: And, um, can you explain to me a little bit about the process of what an arranged marriage is? How does that work?

BELEMJIAN: I didn't know anything about it. They arranged it.  
( she laughs ) I don't even remember.

SIGRIST: What was the man's name that you married?

BELEMJIAN: Jack.

SIGRIST: Jack Belemjian.

BELEMJIAN: Hmm. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: And do you remember what year you got married?

BELEMJIAN: 1925.

SIGRIST: 1925. When your parents moved down to New York and you stayed up here in Troy, did you see them often?

BELEMJIAN: Oh, yeah. You know, they used to have excursion train, two dollars. Every other, every other week I used to go to see them. And my husband used to leave me there, and then come back, and two weeks later he used to come and bring us back. So . . .

SIGRIST: How many children did you have?

BELEMJIAN: Three.

SIGRIST: And what are their names?

BELEMJIAN: Edward, John and Lucille.

SIGRIST: And how many grandchildren do you have?

BELEMJIAN: Eight.

SIGRIST: Counting David, who's sitting here.

BELEMJIAN: Yeah. And I have four great-grandchildren.

SIGRIST: Terrific. Let me ask you one final question. Was there anything that your mother or father taught you when you were little, some philosophy of life that has carried you through your whole life?

BELEMJIAN: You know, nowadays the people get mad and they say, "I want divorce." The Armenians, they say when you get married you're married all your life, you know, to the end of your life. So they used to say, "You got to get along with your husband. You don't have to, you know, you have to obey him." That's how they did it.

SIGRIST: And that's something that was important to your parents that you do.

BELEMJIAN: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Well, are you happy that you came to this country?

BELEMJIAN: Yeah. ( she laughs, her grandson David nods in

agreement)

SIGRIST: David is. All right. Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Belemjian. I appreciate you letting me ask questions. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Mary Belemjian on Tuesday, July 12, 1994, with David Belemjian in attendance. Thank you very much.