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YERVANT (EDWARD) CHOLAKIAN

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PORT: MARSEILLES

RESIDENCES: HALIJIN, ARMENIA

**NEW YORK CITY; BINGHAMPTON,NY; ROCHESTER,NY; VISTA,
CA**

FEENEY: Okay, and it's Yervant Cholakian?

CHOLAKIAN: Cholakian, that's right.

FEENEY: Cholakian or Sholakian?

CHOLAKIAN: No, it' "Cholak." Really the last three letters means "son of." Really the name is Cholak.

FEENEY: Ah.

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CHOLAKIAN: Son of Cholak. That's what that means, the last three letters.

FEENEY: Okay, Yervant Cholakian.

CHOLAKIAN: Very good.

FEENEY: I think I can manage that.

CHOLAKIAN: (he laughs) I'm sure you're doing all right.

FEENEY: (he laughs) I'm fine until you - -you're making me nervous? (they laugh) (pause) This is Brian Feeney in the recording studio at Ellis Island. It's October 19th, 1990 and today we are interviewing Mr. Edward Cholakian. Mr. Cholakian, can you tell me where and when you were born?

CHOLAKIAN: Yes, I was born September 13, 1907 in town called Hahjin, Armenia.

FEENEY: And just for the record sir, could you spell your name for me please? Would you spell your name for me please?

CHOLAKIAN: The last name?

FEENEY: Your first and last name.

CHOLAKIAN: Oh, first name is Yervant, Y-E-R-V-A-N-T. It means Edward in English. The last name is Cholakian, C-H-O-L-A-K-I-A-N. The last three letters really mean "son of" Cholak, they really should be Cholak.

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FEENEY: And can you tell me what you remember about your native country?

CHOLAKIAN: Oh yeah, I remember quite a bit. See, I was seven and a half when the Turks kicked us out of our country, Armenia, and they dumped us into the Syrian desert. If you survive, you survive. I was seven and a half years old and I remember all of it because the Turks told us to get out and that's what happened. A million and a half people perished during that time. 19...

FEENEY: How old were you when it happened?

CHOLAKIAN: Seven and a half.

FEENEY: Was anyone in your family killed?

CHOLAKIAN: All were murdered. In fact, my grandfather and three uncles, great uncles, they were beaten to death. This happened in a town called Daresor, this part of Syria at that time.

FEENEY: Do you remember why this happened?

CHOLAKIAN: Why? Because the Turks wanted to keep the land. See, they conquered Armenia 1375 and so Armenian state under the Turks all these centuries. Well, I think not they wanted to keep the land but they want for religious purpose. You see, Armenians are Christians and Turks are Mohammedans. Well, so they just wanted to keep the land so they kicked us and dumped us into the Syrian desert.

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FEENEY: Was it a small village that you came from?

CHOLAKIAN: Twenty thousand population. It really wasn't small for that part of country,

FEENEY: So it wasn't like a rural part of the country, an agricultural part of the country?

CHOLAKIAN: No, it wasn't agri, just people live. They seemed like they were all happy. They made a good living.

FEENEY: Did your parents survive this ordeal?

CHOLAKIAN: Well, my father came here to America seven years before I came, so that would be something like 1912 or 13, and, uh...

FEENEY: What did he do in Armenia?

CHOLAKIAN: Armenia, he was a shoemaker and I don't know really real reason why he left to come to America. One reason why was he didn't want to serve the Turkish Army because they didn't want to pay him anything. He had two children and so he just left. I remember just like today when he left, just barely remembered him.

FEENEY: Did you have brothers and sisters?

CHOLAKIAN: I had one sister. During the war after we were out of Armenia, kidnapped by an Arab. Last we heard she was in Baghdad, that's right. So I don't know if we will ever find her. She was younger than I was. She was probably four or five years younger than I was, you see.

FEENEY: Now, did you go to school in Armenia or were you too young to attend?

CHOLAKIAN: No, I went to school very little. I don't remember too much. I went to missionary school. They had missionary school where I was born and this missionary took in all the people that couldn't afford a dime in school, so I was one of them. Lot of people were poor anyway, you know. The missionary school you learned English and also they would not let the missionary talk Armenian. You have to talk Turkish. Yeah, so like I say when the Turks wanted to get us out of there, the year was 1915. They told us, they didn't have newspaper you know, so they announced that all Armenians get out of town, just leave everything and walk. Can you imagine that? Didn't take nothing with you. I don't really remember even eating anything. I don't remember nothing. All I remember, seven and a half years old and all I remember is that I asked my mother for a drink of water. There was no water so she gave me a stick of unsweetened chewing gum so it would help my saliva, you see. I guess after that I don't remember too much except then we wound up in another town after Syria, they called Aleppo. That's the name of the town where a lot of Armenians were dumped into.

FEENEY: What do you remember about that town?

CHOLAKIAN: Well, all I know is it's really an old town. Way, way back it was a Syrian town, you see. We were out of Armenia now, you see, we didn't have no country and I really couldn't remember too much. That one time I wound up in school where there were three hundred children and so this lady who took charge of me, us, was an Armenian woman and she knew my mother, so when the Turks came to take us away she saved me. She finally wound up in America, too, but she

always used to say, "You owe me your right arm." But the three hundred children that the Turks took away, never found. They were all murdered. That's a true story. And somehow I, from there I wound up in a Turkish place, a whole bunch of Turks. Children were there so it was a twenty-four hour place, you know.

FEENEY: You're still in Aleppo at this point?

CHOLAKIAN: Aleppo all the same. But I wound up there. I was told not to talk Armenian at all. I was supposed to be a Turk. My name was changed to Raieeff. (he laughs) I remember like today. Anyway, I stayed there quite a while and I saw a lot of deaths. Even if they weren't murdered, they were starved to death or disease. That's where I got this trachoma, you know, where treat me nice America. So, I really don't know how I survived but I did, you know, and when the war ended that was the end. So, see, my mother couldn't take care of me, you see. Being a women she had hide all the time. But all the rest of my family, grandparents and all that, they are all gone. They just, Turks did whatever they want with the people. It was a terrible thing. Anyway, after the war was ended we wound up in a town called, that's where we have a air force. Atana, that's the name of the town where Americans have an air force there. We stayed a little while there. We wound up in Istanbul. Istanbul is where I went to another school again and it was Armenian school, you know. Stayed there twenty-four hours, you know.

FEENEY: This is Istanbul?

CHOLAKIAN: Istanbul now. We wound up in Istanbul after Atana. And so we stayed there two years because my father wanted to come back. He was in the U.S. My mother didn't want him to come back. She

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wanted to come here, so it took two years to convince him that he should stay and we come to America.

FEENEY: Did he send you the money to come to America?

CHOLAKIAN: I presume, I presume, because I don't know too much about that part. See, by that time I was eleven years old.

FEENEY: Do you remember what port you left from?

CHOLAKIAN: Yeah, town of Marseilles.

FEENEY: In France?

CHOLAKIAN: France.

FEENEY: How did you get to Marseilles from Turkey?

CHOLAKIAN: Well, with a boat. I don't know how I got there. I don't remember too much that part but I was with my mother, you see.

FEENEY: Do you remember the ship you traveled to here from?

CHOLAKIAN: Yes, yeah. The ship's name was "Rochambeau." It was a French line. That's what it was and they had put beds right into the engine room. They just like a human cargo, that's what it sounds like, you know, and before we got to, before we took the boat my mother took me to an eye doctor and he gave the paper, "no-bono," you know. "No-bono" means you can't enter the boat but, anyway, my mother was desperate so she found somebody who would erase the "no" on it. So that's how I got onto the boat to get here.

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FEENEY: When you say your mother took you to the doctor, she took you or the steamship company?

CHOLAKIAN: No, no she took me. You had to show the paper from the doctor in order to enter boat. Otherwise, they say you couldn't get in a boat without the paper.

FEENEY: So then the steamship company then did not examine you. They just wanted credible certification from a doctor?

CHOLAKIAN: No, they just wanted, that's all. They didn't examine, no. Anyway, she took, found, like I said, she found somebody to erase the "no," so in I go.

FEENEY: What were you suffering from at the time?

CHOLAKIAN: Trachoma. Eyelid disease. Very contagious.

FEENEY: Did they, did the doctor treat you in any way for the disease?

CHOLAKIAN: When I came here, to Ellis Island. Nine months.

FEENEY: But not in Marseilles?

CHOLAKIAN: No, no, not in Marseilles.

FEENEY: What else do you remember about the boat trip?

CHOLAKIAN: Well, boat trip (he laughs), it was like a human cargo. It took ten days, I think. I had that paper too, but I lost that but, they marked

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every day. So it took us ten days to get here. Well, as soon as we got out of boat here they stopped me. That was it. Doctors right away knew that. They didn't have to examine me. I had trachoma. They could tell, you know. So here I stayed nine months but my father was in the United States so he was able to tell them he would pay the room and board, I presume that's what you call them. And so they kept me here but they were talking about sending me back but they couldn't. We had no country. Turks took everything, the land and everything else. In fact, the town I was born in, damn Turks even changed the name. It was called Hahjin. Now it's something else. Somebody told me that the other day but I don't want to hear about it. The only place you can find Hahjin now is an old, old Turkish map. In fact, I saw one place. I wanted to steal that book (laughs)but I didn't. Too damn honest, I guess. (he laughs)

FEENEY: Do you remember what year you came to the United States?

CHOLAKIAN: Yeah, September 20, 1920.

FEENEY: That's when you landed?

CHOLAKIAN: That's when I landed. In fact, I have the passport home! The passport I came with is this big. (he gestures)

FEENEY: Do you remember what Ellis Island was like when you first got here? What was your first impression when you saw Ellis Island?

CHOLAKIAN: You know, I really didn't think about nothing.

FEENEY: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when your ship came in the harbor?

CHOLAKIAN: Yeah, I saw it every day but nobody told me what it was.(he laughs)
It was really funny. My father used to come visit me, my mother used to come visit me, but they didn't know either. My father came here seven years before we got here. He didn't know word of English because he stayed with the, his uncle or somebody and he used to go to, I think, he worked in the steel mills. He used to work there and come home and never talk to anybody, so never learned English. And, in fact, after I got off Ellis Island, my father took me to school, you know. I was already fourteen by that time and so by that time I was able to catch on the language pretty fast.

FEENEY: If we can go back to Ellis Island for just a moment, you say you were detained nine months for treatment of trachoma. Do you remember where you were kept here? Were you on what we call the south side of the island in the medical wards?

CHOLAKIAN: It seems to me like I saw the Statue of Liberty. Is that side where the medical ward was?

FEENEY: From the south side, you mean you could see it from your windows?

CHOLAKIAN: No, I had to go outside, but I did see it everyday. I had nothing else to do, just...

FEENEY: Were you in the ward with other children or were you isolated?

CHOLAKIAN: No, I wasn't isolated but there was no children. I guess there might have been but I don't remember that part but there was people coming and going everyday.

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FEENEY: Do you remember if you were in one of the, like a big room with many beds or were you in a little, like a small room with just a single bed?

CHOLAKIAN: That's another one I don't remember. I don't remember at all where I even slept.

FEENEY: Do you remember anything about the nurses or doctors or...?

CHOLAKIAN: Yeah, I remember the doctors coming and going, you know. They used to hold my legs and hands to treat me with some kind of blue stone. You know, they didn't have medicine in those days, not for trachoma. They have it now but nobody has trachoma. That came from filth and everything else under the sun, dirt. The only people that have it in the United States now is Indians, you know. These Indians, they still live in tents, in things like that. They're the only ones have it.

FEENEY: And so how exactly did they treat you?

CHOLAKIAN: They just...

FEENEY: In other words, what you say that they didn't have medical treatment as we know today. What sort of treatment did they give you? Do you remember?

CHOLAKIAN: Yes, I remember the treatment. They held my legs and hands and there was a bunch of doctors. They would turn my eyelid up and rub a piece of stone.

FEENEY: Really.

CHOLAKIAN: Yeah.

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FEENEY: You mean like a mineral or something?

CHOLAKIAN: Something like that, yeah. All know is that it wasn't very pleasant.

FEENEY: Was it painful?

CHOLAKIAN: It must of been (he laughs) because I remember them holding my arms and legs so...

FEENEY: Do you remember what you did to keep busy? I mean, you were here for nine months.

CHOLAKIAN: I didn't do anything. I just roamed around the hospital, went outside look at the Statue of Liberty, nobody told me what it was. (he laughs)

FEENEY: Did they have any toys or games or anything for you to play with?

CHOLAKIAN: No, nothing, not that I know. They used to have, uh, entertainers come through once in a while, I think. The one I remember, this guy came, was "Pack Up Your Troubles In An Old Kit Bag. " I remember that part of it and it was kind of interesting. Every so often somebody could come out and entertain you. That's the only reason I learned English, a few words like that because that people come and entertain. They wouldn't talk in other languages; it would be English, you see.

FEENEY: So they didn't let you attend any classes or anything like that?

CHOLAKIAN: No, there was no classes but I did see, I remember, I see children. Not many but few but I don't remember too much about it. In fact, very

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little of it, but anyway, I just roamed around. I don't even remember what I ate. Well, that's too long. (he laughs) But I existed here. People come and go everyday.

FEENEY: How often could your parents visit you?

CHOLAKIAN: Oh, I don't remember that either. Probably once a week or whatever.

FEENEY: You do remember seeing them?

CHOLAKIAN: Oh yeah, they used to come all the time really and they used to give me money. Then I remember giving one of the guys that clean the place, I used to give him some of the change. I had no place to spend it, I don't suppose. I don't remember giving something and I guess I remember the "thank you" word from him. (he laughs)

FEENEY: So by the time the nine months were over you were able to speak English fairly well?

CHOLAKIAN: Not too, not too much but I had enough to exist, you know, the words because see, first we wound up in Coney Island where my father and two other people had a concession. I learned from there a little bit. Then we found a place, it was called Binghamton, New York, so he took me to school, you see.

FEENEY: So you first lived, after you left Ellis Island, you lived in Coney Island a few years.

CHOLAKIAN: Yeah, that's right. No, a few months.

FEENEY: Did you attend school at the time or no?

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CHOLAKIAN: Well, you know, they took, somebody took me to school, you know. They gave me a whole bunch of books. I didn't know word of English. Couldn't even read. (he laughs) I went back and forth with it and so finally the time came to leave. I left the books there and we wound up in a little town called Binghamton, New York.

FEENEY: Binghamton, yes.

CHOLAKIAN: Yeah, and so it was a small town and my father took me to school and he didn't know word of English and I had to translate for my father. (he laughs) So the principal says, " Who brought who here? " (he laughs) I remember that much, you know.

FEENEY: What sort of work was your father doing?

CHOLAKIAN: At the time I really don't remember but, he did work in the steel mills for quite a while, I think.

FEENEY: Did he work in the shoe business at all?

CHOLAKIAN: Yes, he worked in a shoe factory.

FEENEY: Because there is a big shoe factory...

CHOLAKIAN: That's right, Binghamton, that's right. Endicott Johnson, yes.

FEENEY: Endicott Johnson, yes.

CHOLAKIAN: He worked there, yeah.

FEENEY: Maybe that's why he went to Binghamton? Because you say he was a shoemaker.

CHOLAKIAN: Yeah, could be, could be but I don't remember too much why he went there. It wasn't too long we wound up in Rochester, New York. Rochester, New York we had cousins, so we had to rely on them for language, see. Binghamton he didn't have to talk much English. They were all Armenians going back and forth all together all the time.

FEENEY: So there was an Armenian community in Binghamton?

CHOLAKIAN: Oh yeah. There still is. In fact, I met the family, just see, my hometown where I was born, they have a picnic once a year in Los Angeles, no, Glendale, California and so these people from Binghamton came to see us. This one guy, he was head of clan. He was born in the same town I was. I was surprised he was much older than I. I guess he must be pretty close to ninety. Then there was another guy there in Los Angeles, he's a hundred and three, so maybe they all, all Armenians live long time. I don't know (laughs)'cause my mother died when she was ninety five.

FEENEY: And your father?

CHOLAKIAN: My father got killed crossing the street. Whoever the driver, it was a colored woman, she didn't have a dime. She didn't have nothing. So I had to, my father didn't have much either, you know, so I took care of the burial part.

FEENEY: Do you remember anything about the Armenian community in Binghamton, what it was like? Are there...?

CHOLAKIAN: They all stayed together, though.

FEENEY: Did you speak your native language?

CHOLAKIAN: Oh yeah, not only that, hometown language too.

FEENEY: Which was different?

CHOLAKIAN: Oh yeah, it's different from Armenian.

FEENEY: Different dialects.

CHOLAKIAN: Different dialects. Oh yeah, it was okay. We didn't stay too long Binghamton, though actually, but I don't remember how long it was. But when we come to Rochester they had Armenian clan there, too. So we were pretty close for a while. In fact, I stayed there seventeen years before I start, I had enough of Rochester, went to California.

FEENEY: What year was this?

CHOLAKIAN: 1938, January '38 I packed and left and this guy here you see outside (referring to his son with him), he was only two years old. (he laughs)

FEENEY: Where did you meet your wife?

CHOLAKIAN: Oh, my wife, I met her in Beirut when I was about twenty six, twenty seven. I wanted to take to trip where I was during the First War. I did but, this was Aleppo, I told you before but, when I come back there, back to Beirut, I had one relative there he says, I said, " 'm leaving tomorrow. " "Oh no you don't", he says,"I want you to meet a girl."

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That's where I met my wife. That's when we got married.

FEENEY: In Beirut?

CHOLAKIAN: Yeah.

FEENEY: How many children do you have?

CHOLAKIAN: Just two. This guy and another boy.

FEENEY: You mean your son who is with us today. What is his name?

CHOLAKIAN: Edward.

FEENEY: And your daughter?

CHOLAKIAN: I don't have a daughter.

FEENEY: Oh, I'm sorry.

CHOLAKIAN: Two boys.

FEENEY: And the other son?

CHOLAKIAN: Other son, Richard.

FEENEY: And what is your wife's name?

CHOLAKIAN: Antionette.

FEENEY: Do you remember her maiden name?

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CHOLAKIAN: Antionette is her first name.

FEENEY: But her...

CHOLAKIAN: Yeah, I remember because her father was born same town I was. Their name is Kaklikian. That's the name, it means the name of a bird. And the Kaklikian family was a big, big family but during the war most of them died, starved, whatever. But they had one of the family in Chicago. He wound up to be quite a professional bone specialist and he, in fact, he treated Senator Dole for many years because, you know, Senator Dole has crushed fingers, so he treated him for many, many years. He died just a while ago.

FEENEY: So after you and your wife settled in California, you spent most of your life in California then?

CHOLAKIAN: All of it, 'til today.

FEENEY: And what did you do for a living?

CHOLAKIAN: I work for newspaper. The guy that donated this building, Hearst, I worked for that company thirty years. (he laughs)

FEENEY: What did you do for the Hearst Corporation?

CHOLAKIAN: I worked in the mailing room, you know, taking care of newspaper where they went, all that. That's what they call the mailing room. And so I stayed there thirty years until they had a strike. So I had a piece of land in little town called Vista, California. It was a little avocado place. I called my sons. I says, " You know, we're not going to go

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back to work anymore. I think they determined to keep the scabs, you know." So that's what it was. I finally built a house there and lived, moved there. That was twenty years ago.

FEENEY: And that's where your retired?

CHOLAKIAN: That's where I am now, that's right.

FEENEY: You the only Armenian in your area there or...?

CHOLAKIAN: No, they're about two or three. They usually stay together.

FEENEY: But it's not like living in the Armenian community like you did years ago.

CHOLAKIAN: But, don't worked out because it was too small of a town. Lot of people around lived there but not in the little town I live in. In fact, it was 5,000 people, now its 68,000 (he laughs), so it's not a small town no more.

FEENEY: What was your impression when you came here to Ellis Island and saw it again after so many years?

CHOLAKIAN: Oh well, I can't remember much, you see. Seventy years is a long time, you know.

FEENEY: But how did you feel being back at Ellis Island?

CHOLAKIAN: Oh well, I was happy (he is moved)to see it. I started crying a little bit.

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FEENEY: Did you really?

CHOLAKIAN: Because (he is moved) they saved my life. Without coming to Ellis Island I don't know what would of happened to me. I might have lost my other eye. I already lost one, you know. I really felt that good. That was it. Really, Ellis Island was a lifesaver to a lot of people, I can tell you that. Some of them got to be pretty wealthy, too. Oh, oh yeah.

FEENEY: Really?

CHOLAKIAN: Lot of Armenians, they really determined to go ahead and they, in fact this one guy invented the one arm faucets for the water. He gives money, millions, like it was water, he makes so much money. He owns twenty-five factories turning out faucets and things.

FEENEY: Mr. Cholakian, anything else you like to add today?

CHOLAKIAN: Well, I'm happy to be in the United States, all I can tell you. (he laughs)

FEENEY: Mr. Cholakian, I'd like to thank you very much for being with us today. Again, this is Brian Feeney. We are at the recording studios at Ellis Island today with Mr. Yervant Cholakian. I want to thank you very much for coming in and sharing your experiences.

CHOLAKIAN: I'm glad to tell you what I know.

FEENEY: Thank you, sir.

CHOLAKIAN: And one thing, the Turks you know, they still admit nothing happened

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to the Armenians. They had nothing to do with it. It's true it did happen, a million and a half people lost their lives. But that's it.

FEENEY: Thank you, sir.

CHOLAKIAN: You bet.

FEENEY: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW