

EI-720

SARAH ACHMAKJIAN

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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- **TURKEY: CASSIDIQUE**
- **SYRIA**
- **FRANCE: MARSEILLES**
- **THE US: BOSTON AND WATERTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS**

LEVINE: Today is November 12th, 1995, and I'm here at the Armenian Nursing Home in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. And I'm here with Sarah Achmakjian, who came here from Turkey. We're not sure exactly what year that was, but you were about eighteen—

ACHMAKJIAN: I think it was May, May, yeah. May.

LEVINE: May?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, make sure that month I take the boat to this country, with the Leviathan.

LEVINE: Okay, and you came on the Leviathan.

ACHMAKJIAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Well, I'm going to see if I can look at the records here, and maybe they have the idea of when.

ACHMAKJIAN: Excuse me, also I worked [unclear] for the nursing home.

LEVINE: Oh!

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, I was in [unclear] teaching.

LEVINE: Oh good. Let's start at the beginning when you were first born. You were born in Turkey?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yes, yeah.

LEVINE: And what was the name of the town?

ACHMAKJIAN: Cassidique. [PH]

LEVINE: Cassidique?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, [unclear] Cassidique. That's like a town close to the capital. Half a mile from capital.

LEVINE: Okay, and did you live in Cassidique until you came to the United States?

ACHMAKJIAN: No, that time just to baby-sit. That's what I—I couldn't do anything, just to baby-sit. That's why they saved me.

LEVINE: They saved you because you could baby-sit?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah. I couldn't do more than that.

LEVINE: Do you remember your childhood before the genocide, when you were growing up, a little girl growing up? Do you remember that?

ACHMAKJIAN: No, I was grown, no child, nothing. My child was born in this country.

LEVINE: No, I mean when you were a child. When you were a little girl, do you remember what your life was like in Turkey when you were a little girl?

ACHMAKJIAN: No, I didn't any.

LEVINE: Okay, but you do remember the genocide?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, they killed us. They killed us.

LEVINE: And what do you remember? What did you see?

ACHMAKJIAN: I remember I heard my mother ask—she was dying in the mountains, and she asked for water. And when they, when they—all the friends went and heard it, find the water. When they come, Turks dumped them in the fields, you know, top of the hill. They rode them up and down. So she didn't have water. And my two [unclear], they were so hungry! They went and asked for bread, you know, door by door, and they killed them two, two brothers, the youngest ones. And two sisters. My mother, she couldn't take that, and she left them in the bush, two years old and five years old. Turk is very—Turk against the Jesus.

LEVINE: Tell why you were saved.

ACHMAKJIAN: To baby-sit.

LEVINE: Can you talk about that? What did you have to do? How did you—how did it happen that you got to baby-sit, and not—

ACHMAKJIAN: Well, they see I can able to do it, I am able to do it, little girl. They can't hide the two big ones. They married, but I was young, too young. Just good enough for baby-sit. That's why they saved me!

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and who did you baby-sit for?

ACHMAKJIAN: Turks. Turks. Well, nobody—no Armenians. They take all the property, everything, and they push them out. Yeah, that's the way they did. They take everything, and even ammunition. Even the kitchen knives. They take them away, so they can't fight back. So that's the way. But I was good enough to baby-sit; they saved me. When they go visit somebody, and I have to carry the baby, dirty and I have to wipe them up, and things like that. That's why they saved me.

LEVINE: And how did they treat you?

ACHMAKJIAN: Well, not too good. You know, sometimes all right, sometimes—

LEVINE: How long did you baby-sit? For how many years?

ACHMAKJIAN: About, until I came to this country, yeah.

LEVINE: Was that a long time?

ACHMAKJIAN: No not much, about six, seven years, like that. Seven, eight, that much. And so I come to this country.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you have any Armenian friends when you were baby-sitting?

ACHMAKJIAN: Not much. They killed them!

LEVINE: Yeah. Were there any others left besides you?

ACHMAKJIAN: No, nobody from my family, or any neighbor or anything like that. Nobody did, nobody Armenian. They killed it already. They didn't want them, because first time it started, some good Turks said if you, like they saved me for baby. And second time he did, so nobody, make sure nobody left. See, that's the way they did it.

LEVINE: So did you know any good Turks? Did you know any?

ACHMAKJIAN: Well, see, that Turk was good, save me for baby-sit, that's why. Some of them, they help. That's why they did second time, in case some good Turks helped them out. And they did second time so make sure clean them out. But that I remember all right. That I remember all right.

LEVINE: Mm-hm. So you took care of one baby?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, one baby, one baby. When they go visit each other, they had no carriage there, no carriage. That's why make sure somebody has to carry their baby with them, if they go to the bath house, or visit their friends. Yeah, that's the way.

LEVINE: And did you have any other duties, or any other things you had to do besides watching the baby?

ACHMAKJIAN: Housework.

LEVINE: Housework.

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, cleaned the house, or anything, after do the baby. And still you have to do work. I was do as much as I could.

LEVINE: Do you remember the name of the person who you were baby-sitting for?

ACHMAKJIAN: Oh, the big shot. I remember, Haja Arif [PH]. Haja Arif. Arif, yeah. That's a big shot.

LEVINE: What did he do? What did that big shot do for a living?

ACHMAKJIAN: Oh, he was in the government job.

LEVINE: The government.

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, whole family was in the government job. Yeah, they government job.

LEVINE: So how was it decided that you would come to this country?

ACHMAKJIAN: Oh, one Armenian boy married with me, and he come first. His aunt was here. Aunt was here, live in Boston, Back Bay. Here aunt was, so he had her niece's life, and right away he bring in this country, and stayed five years so he can be citizen. And then—

LEVINE: He sends for you. He sent for you?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, how did you know your husband? How did you know him?

ACHMAKJIAN: Oh, we meet there. Some Armenian woman introduce, said nice little girl; she have nobody. And my husband was like me. His family's all killed also. His family's all killed, so—

LEVINE: Now, why was your husband saved? Why didn't he get killed, too? How come he was alive?

ACHMAKJIAN: Oh, well, he—somebody saved him, Turk too, for working.

LEVINE: What did he do for work when he was there?

ACHMAKJIAN: Not much after the baby-sit I do, dusting and things, sweep the floor. Whatever I can do it. Whatever they say, do it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and how about your husband? What was he doing for work?

ACHMAKJIAN: My husband was like, same as I do, he was.

LEVINE: He was baby-sitting and cleaning?

ACHMAKJIAN: No baby-sitting, no one. He was like, take their cows and things, and so, eat the grass, and things like that. Man's, yeah.

LEVINE: What was your husband's name?

ACHMAKJIAN: Arshar. [PH]Arshar.

LEVINE: Arshar. And that's Achmakjian?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So he came here to his aunt in Back Bay, and he became a citizen--?

ACHMAKJIAN: Excuse me. That aunt's son was doctor in Waltham Hospital, was doctor.

LEVINE: Waltham Hospital?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, I see.

ACHMAKJIAN: Doctor Peter Titus.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, Doctor Peter Titus. So, now just, he have a sister left. When he died, he was [unclear]. He died, and his mother died, father died. All the sisters died. Just one sister left, yeah.

LEVINE: So after he became a citizen, he sent for you to come to this country?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yes, and they bring [unclear], and he became a citizen, and he bring me. I come Ellis Island. Right away, he was waiting, and he picked me up.

LEVINE: Okay, well tell me first about leaving, leaving the family you were baby-sitting for. What was that like, when you left?

ACHMAKJIAN: Oh, I don't know. I can't—nothing. Not much good, yeah.

LEVINE: So how did you go? How did you go from the town where you were, to the ship port, to the port to get the ship?

ACHMAKJIAN: Oh, some poor Turk transferred the people at that time. Whatever left, they want to move, come to Syria, because Syria was good to open the door, so we can survive from there. That's where I appreciate it. Syria, yeah. [Unclear] Syria. If he didn't open the door, we couldn't move. Yeah, that's true, you know.

LEVINE: So you went to Syria first?

ACHMAKJIAN: From old country, went to Syria, [Unclear]. From Syria move for France, France to here, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, so did you—as soon as you got to France, did you get on the ship?

ACHMAKJIAN: When I can—no, I stayed there two years until my husband became a citizen. Yeah, he came before yeah. Yeah, he came before me, yeah. His aunt bring, so can be citizen, so he can able to bring me.

LEVINE: Where did you live in France?

ACHMAKJIAN: Oh, just a lot of apartments, France. Lot of apartments.

LEVINE: In what town, do you remember?

ACHMAKJIAN: Pardon?

LEVINE: What city or town?

ACHMAKJIAN: Marseilles, France.

LEVINE: Marseilles?

ACHMAKJIAN: Make sure, yeah, station is there, yeah. Really big, Marseilles, France, has a beautiful station! It's oh, when you get up, restaurant is there! All those lights, the steps! It's really unbelievable thing, Marseilles, France.

LEVINE: Now, how did you have money to stay in Marseilles, France, for two years?

ACHMAKJIAN: Oh, my father had property. I, after that thing, and they rented, and they gave me that money. And of course, it was in those Turkish family I lived. He was a big shot, I couldn't do it. But they helped me to get my property, to rent, and get it rent a little bit, so I had that money.

LEVINE: So the big shot, the Turk, he arranged for you to get money, rent, from your father's property?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, yeah. If wasn't that, I couldn't do it. Yeah.

LEVINE: I see. So then he gave you that money for you to go?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, after [unclear], they helped me to come to France, my husband, family.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And when you were in Marseilles, were there other people, Armenian people, who were also there?

ACHMAKJIAN: A lot of Armenian people was there. France, lot of Armenian people. Even the boat, I had the same place, friends, in the boat. Yeah, no, I had them.

LEVINE: You had them.

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, friends. I had friends to visit them a little bit, and we was visiting each other, yeah.

LEVINE: I see, so you weren't—were you traveling alone?

ACHMAKJIAN: No, I didn't—friends, any place any good. We were back and forth, work. Sometimes when boat was come in, they was making—I was working night time, even, come home late. Because we have to finish the laundry, so boat going to take, move. Yeah, France I work. Syria, no work there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how long were you in Syria?

ACHMAKJIAN: About a year, a year, like that.

LEVINE: Okay, and you didn't work in Syria—

ACHMAKJIAN: No, no work there.

LEVINE: But you worked in Marseilles?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: You worked in a laundry?

ACHMAKJIAN: I worked for laundry, yeah, yeah. Whatever time I worked there. I worked for laundry.

- LEVINE: And when you traveled to France from Syria, were there other Armenian people traveling with you?
- ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, was lot of them with us. A lot of friends, we came together, same boat, yeah.
- LEVINE: And, let's see. What do you remember about the voyage on the Leviathan, on the ship? What do you remember?
- ACHMAKJIAN: Oh, ship was big ship. Big ship, and Leviathan, boat. That's Germany's King's boat. That's what they were saying. And he come just six days. Then I take the boat from Cherbourg to Ellis Island.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh. We're pausing here. [Tape off/on] Resuming again. And when you were on the ship, was that—what kind of memories do you have about the ship?
- ACHMAKJIAN: The ship, and France, [unclear] line had trouble, some kind of trouble. But the Leviathan didn't.
- LEVINE: No trouble?
- ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, no trouble. Take from Cherbourg, France, and come to this, Ellis Island right away. My husband was there, picked me up.
- LEVINE: Did you see the Statue of Liberty when you came into the harbor?
- ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, I see it, yeah, yeah. It was—oh, beautiful! Yeah, it's beautiful. Yeah, Statue was beautiful, really something!
- LEVINE: What do you remember about Ellis Island?
- ACHMAKJIAN: Ellis Island is big, big place. Big, big place, really, yeah, big place. Nice place, too. Big place.
- LEVINE: Did you get examined there?
- ACHMAKJIAN: No, no, no, I was citizen. Yeah, no. They didn't give no trouble, nothing. Right away, my husband, we came Back Bay.
- LEVINE: And what was it like to see your husband at Ellis Island?
- ACHMAKJIAN: Oh, it was a pleasure! So happiness!

LEVINE: So when you left Ellis Island with your husband, how did you get to Back Bay?

ACHMAKJIAN: He bring there. He bring to his aunt's house.

LEVINE: Did he have a car, or did you go by the train?

ACHMAKJIAN: We, I think, no, he didn't have a car. We came, I suppose, some kind of, no.

LEVINE: Do you remember, those first few days and weeks when you were in this country, any of the things that you saw that were new to you?

ACHMAKJIAN: [Laughs] My aunt, my aunt was so good! You know, that was in the Back Bay, of course that Back Bay, before nice place. And so visit, some other people come with me, visit each other. That's it.

LEVINE: And then did you stay with your aunt, you and your husband?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, I stayed a little while, until we were able to make, you know, money.

LEVINE: What was your husband doing for work when he was here?

ACHMAKJIAN: He was a machinist, become a machinist, yeah.

LEVINE: And did you work, too?

ACHMAKJIAN: With automobiles. He could do it, take the old car, and buy a new motor, [unclear], and make that car brand new. That was good, so we can able to do it.

LEVINE: Then did you work as well?

ACHMAKJIAN: After I started, yeah.

LEVINE: And what did you do?

ACHMAKJIAN: Just, like, cleaning, things like that. Not much.

LEVINE: Then, did you have children?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, I had two sons. That's where they went [unclear]. One of them was in Germany, and the other one was in the Korean War, and that's the one did, like the President Kennedy did. But after he did, died.

Thirty years after, he had a heart attack and died. Of course, today's Armistice Day. It's very sad, yeah.

LEVINE: So what were your son's names?

ACHMAKJIAN: Joseph.

LEVINE: Joseph, and the other one?

ACHMAKJIAN: Jackie.

LEVINE: Jackie. And so did you and your husband settle in Back Bay? Where did you live?

ACHMAKJIAN: No, no, no. After we get, buy our own house, yeah. Watertown, yeah. Watertown.

LEVINE: So tell—because you told me this before we put the tape on, but tell me about your son going into the service?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, he went to the service, four years without pay. Join it. And that's [unclear] thirty years in government job. And he did what the President Kennedy said.

LEVINE: What was that?

ACHMAKJIAN: He said, don't wait for see what your country do to you. You do what you can do for your country. That's what he done. And he did appreciate. Even he died, and I put a stone, and President Bush put under the feet, how much work, how good was in the government or anything. And of course, we got a picture to stand side by side. And the flag, they [unclear], whatever war did, honor them. That's a paper, we got the pictures.

LEVINE: So your son was honored for being in the service?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah. Yeah, after he retired, yeah, heart attack.

LEVINE: When you look back on your life of coming to this country, how do you feel about it? How do you feel?

ACHMAKJIAN: Oh, it was a pleasure to come! I was so happy, so happy! Because nobody left, nobody left!

LEVINE: Mm-hm. And what can you think of that you have done in your lifetime that makes you feel proud?

ACHMAKJIAN: Not much. Not much, just when I was [unclear]. John Adams, when I was working in the nursing home, John Adams, President John Adams, I think the cousin was there. Every time I go to just the [unclear] after work, just for natural things, she was saying I good. I did nothing. "You visit us, pleasant to me. Come on, we sit down," and they start give me good [unclear]. "You know, if you work, if your children, they won't help you, they won't do, they don't like you before, don't get mad! That's the thing changed." And said, when I go to get up, says, "Everything is all right? Your visit was pleasant to me. Don't forget, come again." Yeah!

LEVINE: So you visited in the nursing home?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, and I was work in nursing home!

LEVINE: How long did you work in the nursing home?

ACHMAKJIAN: I don't know. I don't remember more.

LEVINE: Was this after your boys were grown up?

ACHMAKJIAN: I come to this country.

LEVINE: Oh, when you first came?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah. So, that's the way. Yeah, she was Mrs. Adams, and she was a smart woman. She was making a doll and things like that. She was little one, but she was smart.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So that gave you a lot of pleasure?

ACHMAKJIAN: And also, she had somebody in England, and he died, [unclear]. Cousin, whatever, he left money. And he left, he went three months there, he sailed, and came to this country. Yeah, she was a little one, but smart! Mrs. Adams.

LEVINE: Have you been a religious person in your life?

ACHMAKJIAN: No.

LEVINE: Not particularly, uh-huh. How about this time, and being here in the home here? How do you like this?

ACHMAKJIAN: I like it because it's no good back [unclear]. Over here, you can talk, yeah. I'm all right. I won't expect too much, yeah. So—

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LEVINE: So you have friends here?

ACHMAKJIAN: Oh, yeah, everybody not bad to me. They say hello. They ask me and I ask them. I'm satisfied anyway. I won't expect too much.

LEVINE: Is there anything else you can think of about your life in this country that you want to say?

ACHMAKJIAN: No, not—not, no.

LEVINE: Well, it's been a very big pleasure for me to talk with you. Thank you so much!

ACHMAKJIAN: And the pleasure was to me to talk to you. I was the one looking. Thank you millions!

LEVINE: Well, thank you. I've been speaking with Sarah Achmakjian.

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, that translates baker.

LEVINE: It means baker in English, uh-huh. And you were in Turkey, you started out in Turkey, and then you lived in Syria, and then you lived in France, before you came?

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah, Marseilles, France.

LEVINE: And today is November 12th, 1995, and you think that you're in your nineties somewhere. We have to see if we can find that out.

ACHMAKJIAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay, well this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Thank you, I'm signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW