

NPS-56

MANOUK PAPAZIAN

BIRTH DATE: 1914

INTERVIEW DATE: MARCH 21, 1974

RUNNING TIME: 27:45

INTERVIEWER; MARGO NASH

RECORDING ENGINEER: UNKNOWN

INTERVIEW LOCATION: UNKNOWN

TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: CHARLENE KEYLOR,  
3/1979

TRANSCRIPT RECONCEIVED BY: CHICK LEMONICK, 6/1996

TRANSCRIPT NOT REVIEWED

TURKEY VIA ARGENTINA (ARMENIAN), 1956

AGE 42

SHIP NAME NOT RECALLED

NASH: Today is March 21, 1974. I am sitting in the studio of Mr. Manouk Papazian, one of the few luthiers in the United States. Mr. Papazian makes fine string instruments with the exception of the piano. Mr. Papazian was born in Smyrna, Turkey in the year 1914 and came to the United States in the year 1956. And now we are going to learn how it was that Mr. Papazian came to the United States.

PAPAZIAN: The reason that I came first to this country is that my eldest brother, who recently passed away, he was a very fine, well known sculptor in this country and also in Europe. I came to see him. But while I was here as a visitor things happened in Argentina where I had migrated from Greece in 1949. And the reason that I didn't want to go back to Argentina is that this political upheavals, social disturbances, I couldn't stand anymore of it because I had seen so much of it my youth in Europe. Happily, just at that time during the Eisenhower administration, a quota of three thousand skilled technicians was created and again hopefully that the law required not to go outside of the country, but could apply while staying in the country. So I make my application and I was accepted and here I am.

NASH: Tell us something about your childhood, Mr. Papazian.

PAPAZIAN: Well, as it is told, I was born in Smyrna, 1914.

I am Armenian, Christian, but maybe you have heard about Armenian massacres in 1914-1918, during World War One. And after World War One the British policy was such that they wanted to dominate as a counterpart of the French influence in Europe because the French were victorious over the Germans. The Greeks invaded Turkey and there was an agreement that they could occupy a certain part of Turkey and annex eventually. That was the promise of England. But as there is always political rivalry between the big powers and policy change and England stopped helping Greece and it was a hopeless situation for the Greeks and were driven out and massacred. In Smyrna at least two hundred thousand people were massacred, Armenians and

Greeks. We, fortunately, escaped this misfortune and took refuge in Greece. So from 1922 until 1949 I lived in Greece without any citizenship. We were countryless. That is, if you know, after 1922, massacre in Smyrna, Dr. Mussem, a Swedish philanthropist, created--he asked the big powers and somehow he got some funds and other benefits for those unfortunate refugees, and it was created the Mussem passport which one could somehow travel in a certain part of the world temporarily.

NASH: Could you describe--what do you remember about Smyrna?

PAPAZIAN: Well, there were some sightseers of the big powers and they brought some fifty-two battleships, French, Italian, American, were on a parade, and the British fled because the Turks were terribly against the British because the

British were who introduced Greeks to Turkey. And, of course, there was a massacre, mass massacre. We hopefully escaped to a Catholic convent which was immune because that convent was through Armenian but under the protection of Austrian government. And from there when the fight started, the Turks set fire to the entire town, the entire city. And the only way to escape was the seashore where the battleships were there at night, fire pieces of burnt lumber falling on us. Almost a million people were on the shore, on the seashore, and the big battleships that were standing several hundred yards away with their blinding reflectors, they took pictures, movies. and after ten days of intense massacres, somehow the massacre subsided and this, as I explained, Dr. Mussem came to agreement with some powers, European powers, French, Italian, who admit some of the refugees, but nobody wanted them. Very few traveled to

France, very few to Italy, but most of it because they were Greeks, the Greek government had to accept them. And they provide different kinds of transport ships. So we boarded on a British cargo ship and we were just actually dumped in Salonika, Greece where I grew up.

NASH: How do you mean you were dumped?

PAPAZIAN: Well, we were deprived of everything, only our bodies, nothing else. We were just like cattle. And I grew up in Greece and after graduation of grade school, Armenian grade school, I went to American Junior College. This college was informally in Turkey, but since there were no Armenians and Greeks, the majority were Armenians, of course, in that Anatolia College, there were no more students, no people living over there, so they got an agreement with the Greek government and they established the junior

college in Greece, in Salonika where I attended and graduated in 1934. Meanwhile, I was working as a rug designer.

NASH: As a what?

PAPAZIAN: Rug designer.

NASH: Rug designer.

PAPAZIAN: Yes, Persian rug designer.

NASH: How were you prepared to be a rug designer?

PAPAZIAN: Well, in the school that I was studying, Armenian school, the sponsor of the school was an Armenian in this country, in the United States, a very big firm of Rotgillum, and he raised the funds for the school. And one of the partners who was trustee of the school, he saw

that I could do drawings. You see, I did all the walls of the school, I decorated all the walls of this classroom. I decorated with charcoal drawings because I couldn't afford to buy oil or (?). Without any teacher or anything else. Big personalities, big scientists, poets, and so on and so forth, international. It just appealed to me the face of the person, I drew them. And they saw that I could do drawing and they needed a rug designer badly, so I went there. There was another worker over there, and in six months I grabbed the idea of the drawing the rug designs and I became the first rug designer over there. But in 1929 when, so after the grade school, I did not go to any school for three years because the trustee said, "We are going to take care of Manouk and we are going to," because my mother wanted to send me immediately to college. I mean this junior college. But the sponsors, because they needed

me, they said, "We are going to take care of this young man for his education, private tutoring we will do, so don't worry about that."

Because my mother also was a teacher in the same school, she couldn't say no. Anyway, in 1929 when the big crash came to this country because they exported exclusively to the United States, when this big crisis came, all the factories closed because the United States didn't buy anymore rugs. Later on they started in this country machine made rugs. So what could I do. And my mother said school. So I went to American school and it was such a course that designed partly American style of education and partly Greek type of education, so this junior college had the seven years course which I finished in five. After graduation I get the scholarship. I could come to this country and continue my education because I want to become either a physicist or a chemical engineer. I

had the qualities. In fact, I was first in class and first in school. This is I guess no modesty, but I have to say it. But I couldn't come to this country for the following reason; the Greek government would give me passport to go out of the country but never return. And on the other hand, the United States would accept students provided after they finished their education they must go out. So, since I couldn't go out, this country wouldn't accept me. So what could I do? Because I played the violin also. I played the violin in the school orchestra and I studied at State Conservatory of Salonika. Then because I couldn't afford to buy a very good violin for me, I wanted to make myself. Parenthetically, my father was a very fine cabinetmaker, furniture maker. So at the age of twelve, I almost knew how handle all tools perfectly, so this part was not a problem for me. It was how to shape it, how you were

taught. I had no idea, no teachers, nothing. Anyway, I managed and the first didn't come out so good, the second was better, the third better, and I started to sell to the Conservatory students and even teachers, they bought. So that is the way the start of my career. And when I went to Argentina after World War Two, 1949, I start to make guitars, (?), violins, castanets, and I make money. Because I make money, I want to come and see my brother in this country. When I came here--

NASH: What year was that?

PAPAZIAN: 1956, when I came here, after six months they started upheavals in Argentina again.

NASH: You want to go back a little bit and talk about how you went from Greece to Argentina? You sort of skipped.

PAPAZIAN: Yes. Well, the reason that I went to Argentina, it was not choice, but it was the only country that opened its doors to immigrants. Well, because of it I went to Argentina.

NASH: And why did you leave Greece?

PAPAZIAN: Well, because I was fed up with all this political upheavals and I saw revolutions, war, famine, danger of life, and I wanted to go not because of the Greece, I wanted to go out of the European continent somewhere where there is peace, at any cost.

NASH: In your own life did you experience these upheavals and famine?

PAPAZIAN: Yes, of course, of course. And that is the reason I went to Argentina. And after I came

here, six months later it started again in Argentina, such political rivalries between politicians and--

NASH: And how did that affect you?

PAPAZIAN: I said, can't I get rid of this problem. The only way to get the--I said this country is a peaceful country so I'll try to stay here. Hopefully, during the Eisenhower, as I said the Eisenhower administration, a quota was created for three thousand skilled technicians. I applied and was admitted and so I am here.

NASH: But what I am trying to get at is I understand that when you were in Smyrna that you were part of that horrible massacre although you escaped, but in what other ways in your life did you actually suffer in other countries, that you wanted to get out of them? In what ways did

these--

PAPAZIAN: No, I did not have any complaint that I lived in Greece, and I didn't have any complaint that I lived in Argentina, but the only reason, I said, I want peace, I am fed up with all this abnormalities, I call it. War is most senseless thing and I couldn't stand that. That is the reason. If, God forbid, anything happens in this country, likewise, I'll go to the moon. Because I am not interested in politics, but it doesn't mean that I don't know politics. All the evils of politics I know, but I don't want to mingle with such things because I have no interest. I am interested in my work. That's all. Now I am married here, I have one son, and all my desire is to bring up this child as good as in health and mental education as possible.

NASH: How did you come to this country?

PAPAZIAN: By boat, yes.

NASH: By boat.

PAPAZIAN: Yes, I don't travel by air, see. No, I am not a flier.

NASH: And what port did you arrive in?

PAPAZIAN: New York.

NASH: Well, did you meet any customs or immigration officials when you got off? How did you take care of the whole immigration process?

PAPAZIAN: Well, as I said, my brother was here, see. He actually sent me the affidavit to come here. As you know, I knew the English language. Even I forgot now. Believe me, my English was much

better when I was in school. But I didn't use  
for thirty years, I not use it.

NASH: The last thirty years? Which thirty years are  
you speaking of?

PAPAZIAN: I mean from 1934 until I came here in '56, it  
makes twenty-two years, yes. Almost I didn't  
use the English language.

NASH: So what were your first impressions of the  
United States?

PAPAZIAN: Well, the impression is that you feel lost. It  
is a big country. But I am a type of person  
that I can mold myself to the environment, to  
the situation. In fact, it wasn't too strange  
to me because I know the English language, our  
teachers were Americans. I used to read the  
English American books and magazines. I had

some idea before I came to this country how it looks like.

NASH: How did you go about getting your first job and establishing yourself?

PAPAZIAN: Well, I started my own job immediately, directly. When I was admitted as an immigrant and I got my green card with permission to work, that is permanent resident, I opened my little studio.

NASH: How did you find your studio?

PAPAZIAN: Well, my brother had the studio. Next to that was another small studio. I rented that because from Argentina I make money and I came with money to this country. I was not penniless. If I didn't have money I couldn't come.

NASH: So what was the hardest part of your adjustment?

PAPAZIAN: Well, it wasn't too hard because, of course, as a musical instrument maker, you must make your name. But it did not take me more than three years to be well-known and the more I sell instruments, the more instruments are distributed all over the States, then my reputation becomes bigger and the demand becomes better.

NASH: Well, I would like to know a little bit about your art of making guitars. What is the thing that you enjoy most about making a guitar?

PAPAZIAN: Well, that question, somebody has asked me again. There was a person who is a--how do they call it--sound engineer or something like that, he makes recordings for advertisement other things and he calculates the intensity of the

sound and so on and so forth. He happened to have owned one of my guitars, directly, not from me but through another person that bought it.

And the same question was asked me, which part of the instrument is the most interesting thing.

And you know what I said? I said, "When I cash the check." Well, that is the truth. To many people it is sounds from first sight, it is a very interesting thing, a very complicated thing, but for me it is a routine and doesn't impress me much. In fact, my real, what I feel is bad is that I want to become a musician. Not professionally, but to my own pleasure to play it. I want to become a physicist or a chemist, that didn't happen. But by working with your hands you cannot play. Either you make or you play. Your hands become rough. So even for my own pleasure, I could not play the violin. If I had a clerical job or something like that, it would be very beneficial for me because I didn't

have to strain my fingers and I could play the violin. But this, you have to work with your hands and they become rough, difficult.

NASH: How did you meet your wife?

PAPAZIAN: Oh, I met my wife because my brother, a I said, he was a sculptor and he used to teach at Oxford and Cooper Union, two of the best schools in this country, art schools. In fact, Cooper Union also is very famous as an engineering school, the best in this country. And my wife also paints and does some sculpture and being a student of my brother. So I met her in the studio, that was the beginning.

NASH: Is she Armenian?

PAPAZIAN: No, she is American, yes. American, American born.

NASH: Well, tell me something about the people who own  
your guitars.

PAPAZIAN: What they think of--

NASH: Well, what they think of and who they are. What  
sort of people buy your guitars?

PAPAZIAN: Well, my guitars buy, not the big shots. I mean  
like Sigovia or Julian Bream, though Julian  
Bream was here. This, I am sorry to say, but  
this puzzles many people and almost unbelievable  
that the big performers are the most biased  
people. They are the worst judges of  
instruments. So my customers are teachers and  
performers not of the first magnitude, but for  
the second and third who really appreciate.  
After I sell a guitar, six months later they  
will write me letters to thank me saying that,

"Thanks to your instruments, it gives me more pleasure to play, it is easier to play, and I have the desire to study more because it is so easy, the tone production and the quality of the tine."

NASH: Are you friendly with the people that you make  
guitars for?

PAPAZIAN: Yes, definitely yes.

NASH: I mean you see them socially?

PAPAZIAN: Well, it is difficult to say because my clients are scattered all over the country, as far as goes to Hawaii. West Coast and Hawaii.

NASH: Is there anything you would like to say about being--do you think of yourself as an immigrant?  
Do you think of yourself as an American?

PAPAZIAN: Well, I don't feel a stranger to this country  
(?). Just a normal life for me. Nobody bothers  
me. I don't bother anybody else. I am a law-  
abiding person. I have no problem.

NASH: Do you think of yourself as a person of a  
particular nationality?

PAPAZIAN: Well, of course, I am Armenian, but since I have  
been formerly countryless, Argentina was the  
first country who gave me the citizenship when I  
was naturalized. I am naturalized Argentina  
citizen now. After marrying, in two years I  
could have applied for American citizenship or  
five years as a bachelor. Now I am in this  
country eighteen years, but you see, I don't see  
any difference as an immigrant or American  
citizen. That is the reason I am not changing.  
Some day maybe I will change. ut I don't feel

a stranger. If I felt stranger and that being an American citizen I will feel much better, I would shift from the Argentina citizenship to the United States citizenship, but I don't feel any, I am not embarrassed. I don't feel any discomfort having another kind of citizenship. even if I didn't have any citizenship, it wouldn't bother me because I am accustomed. You see, once somebody is countryless, then no matter what kind of citizenship you get, actually you are a stranger. If you think very deeply, you are a stranger. You cannot wipe the psychology apart. You see, it is impossible. As my late brother used to say, he was an American citizen, but he said, "I am a galvanized American citizen," you see.

NASH: I don't get it.

PAPAZIAN: Galvanized, yes.

NASH: Galvanized?

PAPAZIAN: You see, you get a piece of an item and you galvanize it, you plate it with gold or silver. Outside you see silver or gold, but inside is not. So, if even I become an American citizen, I would be galvanized. Actually, I am not. And I have another philosophy, believe me. I say this, for immigrants or naturalized Americans or minorities, believe me, I say my philosophy is they shouldn't be mingled with politics. They enjoy the liberty to do business, travel, they have got all things. they don't get high jobs in the government, no, I don't approve that. Let that to majority. This is my philosophy. If they propose me to be a governor, for example, I wouldn't accept it, believe me. I don't want it. Let the majority decide. Besides, this majority is not killing the minority, to my

understanding. You have your choice of working for this person or that person, so you have the choice. But for me, no. Minorities shouldn't mingle to a high level of political positions.

NASH: Do you think that people should be able--do you think it is important to immigrants to vote?

PAPAZIAN: No. after they acquire the citizenship they have the right to vote, of course. But now I can't vote. In fact, to speak the truth, I live under the Republican administration or the Democratic, I don't see any difference. You can say the Republicans are traitors or the Democrats are traitor. They are but patriots. They want the good of this country. So it is a matter of preference, I might say. The system is the same again. It doesn't make much difference. What difference does it make whether it is a Republican government or

Democratic government. I don't see any difference. I don't understand because the system is the same. Now if you want to change the system, then it differs. This is a capitalistic country, both are capitalists. They call the Democrats leftists or Communists.

I laugh at them. The Democrats are as capitalistic people as the Republicans are. But if you change to another form of social system, then it is completely different.

NASH: Well, I have enjoyed speaking with you very much  
Mr. Papazian.

PAPAZIAN: Thank you.