

NPS-74

HARRY APRAHAMIAN

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TURKEY

AGE 17

SHIP: AMSTERDAM

PORT: MARSEILLES

RESIDENCES:

TURKEY: SAMSUN

MID-EAST: HAMA, SYRIA; BEIRUT, LEBANO

US:

NASH: Today is September 10th, 1974. I am speaking with Mr. Harry Aprahamian who came to the United States from Turkey in the year 1921 at the age of seventeen. Mr. Aprahamian - in nine-in the year 1920 - Mr. Aprahamian is of Armenian descent. Mr. Aprahamian, what is your Turkish name, and what is the name of the town you came from, or your Armenian name?

APRAHAMIAN: I came from Samsun, Turkey, on the Black Sea near Sevastopol. I came in 1920. My name originally, Armenian name, was Hrant Aprahamian.

NASH: What are your earliest memories of Samsun?

APRAHAMIAN: The earliest memories of Samsun was my childhood and our deportation to the interior of Turkey.

NASH: Why were you deported?

APRAHAMIAN: All Armenians by the order of Sultan was deported into - into the interior of Anatolia, Turkey, you see, on account of the War. So I was in Beirut (when my mother sent me to the University of Beirut) until after the First War. I had the idea of coming to America from that day on, you see.

NASH: Let's go back to--you remember when you were deported actually into the interior?

APRAHAMIAN: Yes.

NASH: Could you describe what happened?

APRAHAMIAN: Well, I have lost two brothers in the massacre or deportation and a sister of mine. My mother and myself were saved by the - by our maid.

NASH: Could you describe in more detail how these things happened?

APRAHAMIAN: Well, they - they - they just killed all the men folks and I was a little young then, you see, so that was the case.

NASH: How did your servant save you?

APRAHAMIAN: The servant? I used to wear lady's, girl's dress in the tent when we stopped overnight from place to place and they thought I was a girl. So that way I was saved, which is the truth. Because the Turks were always looking for boys, see.

NASH: How did you leave the interior of Turkey?

APRAHAMIAN: We arrived - we arrived in Syria. The place was Hama. One year I stayed in Hama in Syria. With some connection we moved from Hama to Beirut, Lebanon.

NASH: This was all part of the Turkish Empire at that time?

APRAHAMIAN: Yes, this was all part of Turkish at that moment before the First War, see. And when we arrived in Beirut, my mother sent me to American college -- or University of Beirut it is now, at the moment. And I studied under - under Mr. Beyardach [ph], who was my teacher at that time. His father-in-law was Dr. Bliss. And after the war we came back to see what we had or what we could get, back to Samsun in Turkey. We find practically nothing. Tried to get money, as much as possible, for a journey to Constantinople, which at that time my uncle, my mother's brother, was alive, so we went over there and then from that day on that I returned from Beirut, I had ambition to come to America. Because I heard so many good things about America.

NASH: Had you ever been in Armenia?

APRAHAMIAN: In Armenia? You mean the present Armenia -- Armenia now? No, I have never been in Armenia. Armenia now is under the Turkish--

NASH: Russian.

APRAHAMIAN: No, on the Russian. Magit [ph] -- [pause]

NASH: I would like to know even though you grew up in Turkey, how did you maintain your Armenian tradition?

APRAHAMIAN: Always I did maintain my Armenian religion which is Christian. And so we were in Beirut and I studied in college over there -in -- university.

NASH: What did you study?

APRAHAMIAN: I studied just regular - regular courses, you see. Nothing special because I was young then you see. And in 1919, we returned to Constantinople and to my city Samsun on the Black Sea to get as much as possible money, whatever was left. So we came back to Constantinople, back again, and I tried to come to New York but my mother wouldn't let me for little while at least. But I - I - I persis-- persisted so much that at last she says, "All right."

NASH: Why didn't she want you to go?

APRAHAMIAN: Well, she didn't want me to go and leave her alone there. But, of course, we had our maid, the nurse that was with us, you see. My nurse was with her, you see. But they decided that it is best that I come here first because I had some distant cousins here. And so I came here as an -- a student.

NASH: How did you prepare to leave?

APRAHAMIAN: Well, I had the passport as a student to learn here so I came over here.

NASH: You remember the day you left?

APRAHAMIAN: The day - where? In -- in Turkey? Yes, I left in - in May. I left in May 1920, and I arrived--we passed through France, Marseilles. We came from Marseilles. I took the boat, Amsterdam Line.

NASH: Do you remember the name of the boat?

APRAHAMIAN: Yes, Amsterdam I think was the name on the boat.

NASH: And how was the trip?

APRAHAMIAN: The trip was wonderful. I had few dollars. Mother gave it to me in gold pieces. The money that she could spare. So I came and visit with my distance cousins.

NASH: Well, what happened when you actually got off the boat? And do you remember any details about your trip?

APRAHAMIAN: Yes, I used to speak a little bit English because I went to college there -- American college so it wasn't so hard for me to understand or to speak about.

NASH: Do you remember anything that happened to you on the ship?

APRAHAMIAN: No, nothing special happened. Everything was -- went smoothly.

NASH: And when you got off, did you go to Ellis Island?

APRAHAMIAN: Yes, when we get off we went to Ellis Island and I passed immediately because my record was clear and good and my passport was in order, so I came and visited my cousins.

NASH: Did your cousins meet you at Ellis Island?

APRAHAMIAN: Yes, my cousins meet me, but they lost me. We couldn't get the contact. I mean the boat was late or something of that sort, you see. So. Well, I - I - I was smart, pretty good smart. I took a cab and went to their home.

NASH: And where did they live?

APRAHAMIAN: They lived in Washington Heights.

NASH: What was the occupation of your cousin?

APRAHAMIAN: My cousin's occupation was accountant. He was a good accountant. They had immigrated from Constantinople to Montreal, Canada and from Canada they came here many years before.

NASH: I want to ask you a question about the place that you originally came from. Was it a small place?

APRAHAMIAN: It is - the -- Samsun city is a seaport, the - the gateway -- gateway of the interior of Turkey. It is very well known for Turkish tobacco leaves. It's grown over there a little distance from our city -- main city and small village, Bafra we call it, Bafra. And the custom of the Turkish tobacco is in -- located in Samsun, see, all those customs for tobacco exports.

NASH: What I am trying to find out is how was it for you to come, you know, was it very strange for you to come to New York? What was different?

APRAHAMIAN: It was not so different. As I said that I lived there almost four years in Beirut, you see, with -- in touch with Americans in Beirut. They were terribly nice to me and I use - I did not board in there - in the college but I used to go and come, you see. I used to live in commute, you see.

NASH: So when you came to New York it wasn't hard?

APRAHAMIAN: It wasn't very hard for me. But the hardest thing was I changed so many jobs. Then I sent for my mother. I start -- I worked, you see, in many other jobs and --

NASH: Tell me about some of the jobs and how you got them.

APRAHAMIAN: Well, I got it through the YMCA. We had a student--a student - Riverside Drive - there is the Rockefeller's. I think, they have an International House. You remember? On 125th or a hundred and something like that, 120th I think, yes. Through there I got few jobs, you see. Different types of jobs. But, for instance, had a -- I lived with a family in South Hampton, as a -- as a boy, you see. I was young, you know. And then I did a little--what you call --

NASH: What did you do with the family when you were living in South Hampton?

APRAHAMIAN: Well, I - I did everything. I used to do housework and to wash the dishes and things of that sort. Be useful because it was a very nice family. That summer was very nice, you see.

NASH: And what struck you about the differences between American families and say your family?

APRAHAMIAN: Well, of course, the customs were different, but here in this country everything was free and you - you - you felt very secure, you see, in life. And so I tried to do my best. In the meantime, I used to go evening school to study and so I had a friend recommended to me to a rug man.

NASH: What evening school did you go to?

APRAHAMIAN: I went to -- to 59th Street. That was, let me see, Clinton - the Clinton School.

NASH: West 59th?

APRAHAMIAN: West 59th, yes. I think it was on Eighth Avenue or something. Night school I went, I used to.

NASH: For what reason?

APRAHAMIAN: To learn a little more. You see, I used to take--I was taking business course for info, you know, to learn the ways and conditions of the commerce. And then I stayed and learned the rug business with a rug man who was very, very expert on antiques, you see. And then my cousin from Constantinople sent -- started sending rugs, you see. So I became a rug man.

NASH: Why are so many Armenians involved in rugs?

APRAHAMIAN: Well, reason -- they not only Armenians, others nations, but they recommend, you see. They - they try to put their friends or their relation into the line that they know.

NASH: But in Constantinople, it is a big industry?

APRAHAMIAN: Yes, it is a big industry at that time and still, there is an industry in Constantinople at this time, see. And so I was lucky and in the meantime I was working very hard. And then I had a job through International House, evening job delivering telegrams. Yes, for about two months, in the evening after, you know, work. To get extra money I used to save few dollars each week. I used to send my mo-- mother a few dollars all the time, you see, as much as I could spare.

NASH: How was your mother doing then--

APRAHAMIAN: My mother? She was alright. They were in -they were in Constantinople. And then I sent for my mother in 1934 I think, yes. But, of course, I got married in 1927.

NASH: Was your wife from the same background?

APRAHAMIAN: No, she's a - she's a Armenian parentage, but she's born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

NASH: How did you meet your wife?

APRAHAMIAN: I met her through a student - Armenian student dance in Philadelphia. They had this dance. At that year the dance was being held in Philadelphia. So with my cousin here we went over there for dance, so I met her there. That was it. Her father, who is Naigian - Davison Naigian [ph] of Philadelphia. They were in the rug business also, see. So, she -- I was a fairly good-looking fellow with curly hair and the minute she saw me, you know, she said she thought this was the young man for her. So we got married. But unfortunately, after we got married the crashes came. Then the Depression came. At the Depression time, I sent for my mother and the poor thing, good soul, she passed away in 1944.

NASH: Tell me something about the rug business.

APRAHAMIAN: The rug business is very interesting. I have here a selected book I brought for you to look. This is selected shopping New York City. All kinds of dealers, silver, furniture and so forth, you know, and there is something about me too in the book. It says over here, you see?

NASH: It says, "Harry Aprahamian, not so much a shop as a personal finder. This knowledgeable man comes by many European and Oriental rugs. Indian, Chinese, Aubusson, Savonnerie, Needlepoint, Persian. The antique market is getting rarer and rarer." Why is the rug business interesting?

APRAHAMIAN: Very interesting. It is an antique line, you know. Now, you have to see in my apartment here, that is three hundred years old. The coat of arms of the Austro-Hungaria -- families. There is another needlepoint here, right here on - on the floor. You know, it costs a fortune. It is all done by hand.

NASH: When did you--

APRAHAMIAN: I started in business right in the depression time unfortunately. You know, things were very bad. Everything was cheap but money was very scarce.

NASH: Well, how did you make out during the Depression?

APRAHAMIAN: I struggled. I struggled. My wife used to work for me too. I mean she used to come and take care of telephones and things of that sort. Then I went and--

NASH: But you were able to make money during the Depression?

APRAHAMIAN: Yes, I would just make both ends meet. I mean you couldn't put any money aside. We just - we just tried to make both ends meet. Things weren't so good naturally for -- until 1938 '40. Then I become a buyer for a very rich man and I used to go to Europe, buy for him, you see. And in the meantime, in 1950, I left him and went into business for myself, exclusively retail for decorators. And then from there on I start cultivating a taste for French, English, antique tapestries or rugs. So I went in business and that's - that's that. Now I am seventy-five. I'm not very active, but I still go look around, go to auctions. Main auctions, of course, are Parke Bernet Galleries in New York, Plaza Art Galleries in New York.

NASH: You certainly live in the right neighborhood.

APRAHAMIAN: Yes, we used - we used to live in Washington Heights for many years, but conditions were a little better financially for me so we thought we would come downtown and meet New York City here. We are next to the museum here, Metropolitan Museum, and so we tryin' to do our best. As I said, I am semi-retired. I gave up the shop, the gallery here that I had. The man died and - and so the place where I had the gallery was in his building, see. And they sold the property so I was - I was just out of a shop. But in the meantime I had also a --

NASH: Well, since your wife and you are both--your wife is of Armenian descent and you are too, what role does that have in your life today? I mean are there any little ways that you still keep these customs or friends that you have or food that you eat?

APRAHAMIAN: Well, you see, my wife is a very good cook. She wasn't so good cook when we got married, but her mother was excellent cook and she told her that if you want to keep this young man happy, you better learn how to cook. So, she is a very good cook. She is a very sociable, hard worker. As I said before, that she used to give me a hand when I had the gallery. I had gallery in the San Moritz Hotel in the depression time. I had a shop there. I used to know Mr. Taylor, the owners of the place, so he used to give me the place on a commission basis instead of rent. This was on depression time, you see. So she used to help me and she is a good--she has good taste, she developed good taste, and I developed good taste, so this is it.

NASH: Do you still go to any Armenian churches?

APRAHAMIAN: Yes. I belong to Armenian churches, yes. We have been members since I have been married and we contribute as much as I can afford. And we go to -- there always function. But as you get older, you see, you slow down a little bit here and there.

NASH: What is the thing you love most about Armenian traditions or culture or the people

APRAHAMIAN: Well, the Armenians, you see, they are very good people and they're -- and they are Christian, and they are also - they are also hard workers. They like not to work for anybody, if they can help it. They

like to own their business, you see. And it is an old nation. I think we are the first Christian in the world to receive the Christianity in the fourth -- third or fourth century, if I am not mistaken, you see. And, what else can I say. Armenians are scattered all over the world. We have very well Armenians, quite a number of ones in India, we have it in Europe, we have it in England, we have it in Abyssinia. You know, we have it all over the w--all over the world.

NASH: Are you proud to be Armenian?

APRAHAMIAN: Always. That is why I didn't change my second name. The funniest thing it is, I would like to tell you a little--. When I went to get my first paper, my first Armenian -- first name is Hrant H-R-A-N-T. I want to ta-to change this Hrant to Grant, so I spelled it and the fellow, instead of Grant, when I got my second papers was Harry, so I got stuck with Harry. But the second name, I will never change. I never did change, you see. Anything else?

NASH: Well, do you feel that the two cultures, if you think there is an American and an Armenian culture, you think you were able to blend it very well?

APRAHAMIAN: Very well, yes, I blend the two cultures very well together, you see. And it is nice to be in America. It is nice to living here, you see. It is the best country at this time and I am happy that I am here, but I am terribly sorry that I have lost two brothers and a sister of mine who was married to a Guilvekian family because these Guilvekians, they were all killed during the massacre of 1915, you see. So, we have been married almost forty-seven years together. We have no children. God hasn't given us any, so we make the best. That's it.

NASH: Thank you very much.

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