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NAOMI OUZOUNIAN

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PASSAGE ON "THE ACROPOLIS"

NASH: Today is June 18, 1975. I am speaking with Naomi Ouzounian, who came to the United States in 1922 at the age of 22. She was born in Turkey. Mrs. Ouzounian, tell me something about where you were born. What city were you born in?

OUZOUNIAN: I was born in a small town way up in the Taurus Mountains, that is Selisha. It was a town of 90 percent Armenian population, a settlement that came from Armenia proper in the maybe ninth or tenth century. At the age of ten I was sent to boarding school in Constantinople where I really spent my growing up years. I went to a boarding school for girls and I was there until 1914, the summer of 1914. I went back to my home town for the first time because it takes two weeks of traveling on horseback, wood-burning train, and slow boat to come from Hogen to constantinople. and that is why

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I went home on vacation for the first time after four years with full intentions of going back to school.

At fourteen I had done one year of high school already and it was time I had a rest. This is what my teachers decided on. Unfortunately, war started in 1914, or news of war, of Turkey's implication with world war, and I was not able to travel back. All roads were closed to civilians.

NASH: Tell me something about your family.

OUZOUNIAN: My family was a typical family of Armenians. My father was a farmer who had land in the valley, but he died when I was seven years old of an accident. It would be too long to tell you the surrounding circumstances of the accident, but this is why we went back to Hogen, which is the city, and my mother decided that I should have an education and this is how I was sent to school.

I came from a background of education-minded people.

An uncle of mine, my maternal uncle, had been educated in America. He had a Ph.D. from Yale, believe it or not, all the way around, halfway around the world. And they believe girls should have an education.

And with my father gone, I suppose my mother thought that her daughters should be educated.

NASH:Was that unusual?

OUZOUNIAN:Not at all unusual after the revolution of 1908 in Turkey.

Before that traveling was not very easy. You didn't even travel freely in your own country let alone travel to foreign countries. And that isn't unusual, but it isn't everyday practice. For one thing, every family does not believe in educating girls. At that time they didn't, and every family did not have the means or the ambition. But that wasn't the case with my family. You see, my family had been influenced by American missionaries and this is where the, probably the ambition to get an education, a higher education, came in. And anyway, let's go back to 1914. I wasn't able to go back to school to Constantinople, and in 1915 Armenian deportations started. Turkey was allied with Germany. The allies thought that they were fighting a noble war. They were going to make democracies, or the world safe for democracy and give back minorities their lands and

their countries and their freedoms. Big talk, big ideals, which irritated the Turks. And probably with the help and suggestion of Germany, they thought, well if there are no Armenians, if Armenia is without Armenians, to whom are you going to give a country to. And they proceeded into a diabolical plan of creating an Armenia without Armenians. And, of course, they did not have the sophisticated gas chambers then. How would they accomplish this, armenia without Armenians, so they would displace every Armenian and get them out of their own homes or out of their own towns and drive them into the desert, the Syrian desert. It was called Deir ez Zor. The idea was to get every Armenian there. By the time they got there they would either die of hunger or exposure or pestilence.

NASH:You said it was called what?

OUZOUNIAN:I think the proper pronunciation in Arabic is Deir ez Zor, and that is a desert. You might think it is unusual to find a desert in Green Asia Minor, but there is. so they deported practically every Armenian family,

young, old, blind, lame, everybody had to go, including my family, without regard of the fact that there were not even any male members left in my family.

My father had died, my brothers had been taken into the army, and there were only my mother and my old grandmother and we three sisters. The youngest was seven years old, the oldest was sixteen. Well, we walked in the summer heat through impassable roads, mountains. That land is mountainous, and valleys, and crossed rivers, and we became parched and hungry and sore feet and resentful.

NASH: Did you go en masse? I mean was this the whole village traveling?

OUZOUNIAN: En masse, en masse. Like, for instance, there would be five hundred to a thousand in a group. They couldn't drive out forty-eight thousand population in one group. This would be impossible, so they divided them in groups. first they took the young male separately. Then the older male.

NASH: Why?

OUZOUNIAN:I think that the idea was to take the male population first and kill them along the way someplace, but later on they changed their minds, I believe, and then the entire population, men, women, old and young. Or probably they wanted to leave us helpless. Who knows, because if the young male were with us they might start some rebellion, but what can a bunch of old women, helpless children, do. After three months we reached a place called Hatma, and this was hell on earth. Others had reached that area, concentration. There they concentrated the exiles and then from there they sent, again in groups, separate groups, to Deir ez Zor. Well, this place was hell on earth. You cannot imagine. I cannot describe. If I tell you only that it was impossible to breathe the air from the stench of the dead and the rotting. maybe this will give you an idea. We wanted to close our noses and choke to death so we wouldn't have to breathe that air. Well. it would take too long to describe the circumstances to you, but a group of very young people, like sixteen seventeen, they found a way they hired Arabs with horses to put the few things, belongings on this horse, and we would walk at the speed of the

horses to reach Aleppo, which is a large Syrian city, and there we might be able to find a way, a means, to get into the city and maybe hide in the crowd. Well, I was young, I was daring. I had had some exposure to the larger world and the freer world, and Constantinople is a fantastic city. It is a beautiful city. You don't live four years in Constantinople and remain a backwoods little girl. We walked at the speed of horses after three months of walking already. My feet were bleeding, my head was like a great big sore, but for the sake of saving my little sister and my mother, I walked. I walked. We reached Aleppo in nine hours of horses speed walking.

NASH:Was the idea to get help?

OUZOUNIAN:You always hope for help. Somewhere beyond that other mountain there might be help. We got to Aleppo and into another concentration camp, detained again, guarded day and night, but I must have been quite intrepid. I can't believe it myself. I can't believe the daring or when your life is threatened, you get some kind of energy, courage, from nowhere. I did

escape. I entered Aleppo.

NASH:How did you escape?

OUZOUNIAN:I was in rags. I was clad in rags. I always saw that my face was a mess because I was also afraid that I might be abducted. Although, to tell the truth, this did not happen very often. But I took some rags and I said to the guard --there was a little stream I noticed running around this concentration camp. I said, "These are my child's rags. May I go to that stream and wash them?" He said, "But don't you dare to try to escape because I won't let you." Well, I escaped. I saw a road and I followed it and he with a couple of others, they tried to catch me. I went back to that road afterwards and tried to measure the distance. It must have been at least two miles before i reached the outskirts of a city where a Mohammedan, they call them Mohla, got out of this carriage and he talked Arabic, which I don't understand, to these guards and I think he scolded them for persecuting a young poor little girl; "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" So I want to say that the kindness

--people must not think that just because the Turkish government planned this atrocity, there weren't kind Mohammedans or kind even Turks. That would be very wrong to say because I did see extreme kindness later on too. so he asked me in Turkish where I wanted to go. I said I am looking for the pastor, minister, protestant minister of the Armenian Church. He got out of his carriage and told his driver to take me to this minister. He wasn't home when I got to his home. I waited for him. I don't know how long. It seemed centuries. He came in, and how should I describe him. He was not a man, he was a saint. He had devoted his life, his energies, to saving as many exiles from the concentration camp as possible. He said that I would not go back to the concentration camp, that I would stay there and that he would do his best to save my family too, which he did eventually. I won't go into the details. At great difficulty, at great probably expense, he did save my family. I and then my family were in Aleppo. This was the optimum of good luck. Okay, we did not go to the desert. we were in a civilized city. For two years we hid in the sub-basements in God forgotten

attics. Several times they caught us and sent us to the concentration camp and we escaped again. That would take a thousand pages, those experiences. But came time when the Turkish Army was defeated in Jerusalem by the allies, and the entire city of Aleppo became a hospital center. And who was going to take care of these wounded, sick, torn, burnt soldiers? The Mohammedan woman does not show, did not show her face to any other male but her immediate family. Therefore, the military government sent news through various ways to Armenian exiles who were hiding in Aleppo to come out because if even one member of the family was able, accepted to serve in the military hospitals, her family would be safe from deportation.

They could come out from their hiding places and live like free men. This was, of course, too much to resist. I went and applied and through again some miracle, I was accepted. I was waiting to be interviewed. A military doctor, tall, good looking, walked into this waiting room. He looked around and said, "Naomi, child what are you doing here?" I didn't recognize him. I had been away from school two years. He was our school doctor. He took me in

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and introduced me. I was accepted without questions and I served in the military hospital for two and a half years. I had a very responsible job. I did a very good job. The chief surgeon once called me in and said, "My child, if I defer you, separate you in my head and my mind, from my own beloved daughter, may I be deprived of heaven." This is kindness again.

He was a Turk, he was an educated Turk, he was a Turk with a heart, he was a Sorbonne graduate. He loved to speak French with me. And I even tutored his daughters into French during a war when we were fighting the allies. This takes nobility. Well, then the turks lost the war completely. Aleppo was occupied and the Turks vacated it. I am taking too much of your time. I don't know whether you wanted me to go into these details or not.

NASH:How did it sort of come to pass that you --

OUZOUNIAN:Okay, this phase ended. We went back home to a ruined city.

I mean my home town where I was born, named Hogen, which will exist only in this conversation, if you use this conversation, because the Turks now say that

there never was such a town, that we must be mistaken.

We wanted to establish my husband's birth date some years ago and we wrote to the American Embassy and the American Embassy wrote to the Turkish Embassy and the word came from the Turkish Embassy, such a town never existed because it really doesn't exist now. They tell me there is a way station, there is an inn, but there is no town. It didn't get ruined all by itself. Now town gets ruined to that extent by itself. They had poured kerosene over it and burnt it down to the ground. Well, we went back to these ruins with courage to build it. The survivors from 48 thousand had remained into a 10 thousand, which in itself is a miracle. Later on the Turks, the new takeover, the Turks killed those 10 thousand too, and there will be many to testify to the truth of my statement. But before this happened I wrote a letter to the French occupation, the head of the French occupation was a military man, I wrote a letter to him in French. He was surprised to find someone who could write French in this desert country. And he said, "I will help you go back to school if you promise that you will come back and teach in the schools that

I intend to establish here." Hallelujah, that's what I want. Well, again let's make it short. I did go back to my school who accepted me this time without tuition. They were so happy that I had survived. I stayed, then it took me three years to finish school, and I was lucky enough to get a job, a teaching job in an American-established, American-financed school for boys. There was here, there still are, maybe they are not in business anymore, but the Karagusian family. Maybe you have heard of them. They are the very famous rug manufacturers. And they had made it their business to help on their own and they had adopted one hundred boys and gathered them in a beautiful building and they gave them to see that they are educated and nursed back to health, etc., etc, and I was one of the first teachers in that school.

I taught school there a year. I intentionally took this job because it was a boarding school, because it would help me save my money. I wouldn't have to pay room and board elsewhere. And I taught there one year. I was very happy at my job. By the way, I didn't tell you that I lost my family during this last --while I was in school this happened and I lost every

member of my family in that massacre. All my efforts and my hard work, nothing. I don't know what they did to my mother or grandmother or my older sister.

I don't know to this day what their fate was. If you think that is not enough to send somebody to the door of insanity, I have news for you. I sometimes wonder myself how I did survive it or how I retained my sanity. Well, everything was fine, but one morning I got up and the English Navy had pulled out from the Bosphorus and I felt terribly unprotected and terribly angry and terribly afraid. The principal of the school called me. By this time it was June.

NASH:What year was this?

OUZOUNIAN:This was 1922. And he said, "Miss Arswanian," that was my maiden name, "Are you going to stay with us next year?" I said, "No." He said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "I'm going to go as far away as I possibly can." And since I was fluent in French, France would have been the right place to go to, but France was swamped with Armenian exiles, survived exiles, and they were beginning to call the Armenians

Sol Armenian already, Sol Armenian, which means dirty Armenian. That hurt. That always hurts. And believe it or not, since I had read Uncle Tom's Cabin, Lincoln was my hero and I thought of a card once my uncle had sent to my mother from Pasadena, California, which said, "Dear Sister, this is paradise on earth.

Some day I would like to live and die here." And I thought, well maybe not Pasadena, but America. If there is a heaven in one spot in America there might be another one for me so I decided to come to America.

Okay, it so happened again --you see, I am here through a series of miracles. It so happened that the principal of the school was a close friend of the American Ambassador. they had their summer homes adjacent. By the way, the principal was not just a principal. Not that a principal is always a great man, but he was a medical doctor who had married one member of the Karagusian family who had given up his private practice to be a father to these hundred boys.

And he said, "Well, I don't see that I can blame you," he said, "and what's more, I think I can help you."

He said, "I will give you a letter of recommendation to the Ambassador, who is my personal friend, and he

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will give you every possible help." He did. He was putting his baggages on a carriage because he was leaving in half an hour for England for his summer vacation, but he did read my letter, he signed it, and he said, "Take it to the Consul this very afternoon." I took it to the Consul, the Consul was very angry because this was discrimination, there were so many waiting in line and why should I be first, but he couldn't very well go against the order of the Ambassador. This is how I got on a boat, on a little impossible thing, I don't know how it ever crossed the ocean, it will be a mystery to me to this day, called the Acropolis of all things.

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

A little Greek boat. I got deathly sick on it while we were crossing the Gibraltar, which is very wavy. We got to the beautiful harbor here. I had to travel third class, I had no money for first class. Well, third class passengers had to go to Ellis Island. I thought well, what's the difference. I am traveling by the express consent

of the Ambassador of America. I am a school teacher, therefore, a professional person which is not subject to the common rules and regulations of immigration laws. What a disillusionment. If you traveled third class, nothing helps. Well, first of all the quota for the month was filled. I said, "I am not traveling by quota system.

I am traveling as a professional." He said, "No, no, school teachers aren't professionals." First they had to find out whether school teachers were professionals or not, considered professional. Then they had to find out whether my diploma, the school I graduated from, was the equivalent of American schools. They had killed every professor, every man of letter, and when I returned to school it had been reduced to a common, ordinary high school. I wasn't bragging that I was the equivalent of an American college graduate. Of course not. But still, in my own country I was a school teacher. And one thing led to the other. Finally, I had to swallow my pride and send word to the Karagusian family that I was one of their school teachers and I regret very much that I had to leave my job and that I was suffering difficulties here, would they help me out, and they did.

NASH:I would like to know more about what happened at ellis Island,
how they treated you.

OUZOUNIAN:Oh, Ellis Island, Ellis Island, oh Ellis Island. I read

--we were pushed around. Now with my knowledge of what it means a patronite job. I explain it. They were a bunch of patronite job holders who were ignorant. What's more, they didn't have hearts, they didn't have minds, they had no education. They were very crude. Well, foreigners, other immigrants who delighted in the fact that they could lord over the new entries, new immigrants. They had accents as thick as molasses, you know, every kind of it, but they felt, you know how people become, small people become who acquire a little power. They pushed everybody around, virtually literally pushed. You are afraid that maybe they can do you harm. Therefore you close your mouth until you can't close it anymore, so one day I said, "Look, if you can't read English, I can. The sign said employees are required to be civil to immigrants, employees are required to be helpful to immigrants."

NASH:There was actually a sign that said that?

OUZOUNIAN:Yes. didn't you see those signs? Didn't anybody photograph those signs? I'm not saying Ellis Island

or the organization was responsible for it, it was the petty employees, petty employees who sat behind desks and felt like Mr. Wilson sitting behind the White House desk, and pushed you around. They pushed you into showers. You had to take a shower every day, pushed you into showers, burning hot water. The control was outside. The control, the cold water control, the mixture. They had to control it. It was either too hot or too cold. They didn't care. So you got out and they pushed two blankets into your arms and they pushed you into a room, bare cots, one blanket under you, one blanket on top of you, and that was your bed. And maybe 150 in one dormitory, and I can't even describe the food. It must have been uneatable because, or is it ineatable. I still mix my uns and ins.

NASH:Someone once described it as cattle food.

OUZOUNIAN:Well, I can't even describe it because I don't think I ever ate it. Maybe a piece of bread. And I thought to myself, well, you know cruelty is not the privilege of one nation or one group of people or another. God

almighty, I said it can happen here. It happened there and I thought that was unique, but it can happen here, given the same set of circumstances. It can happen here too.

NASH:What else happened to you at ellis Island?

OUZOUNIAN:One of my students who was a sixteen year old boy, whose relatives in America were discovered in the meantime, was traveling with me on the same boat, and the poor boy was goddamned a hundred times a day, and he came one day to me and said, "Miss Arswanian, what does goddamn mean? It must be a good word because God is included in the sentence. But then I thought this is a christian world and the name of God is not supposed to be used in vain. What is going on here, you know, goddamn, goddamn, goddamn all day long." And I had the sad duty to tell my student, who was coming to America with big dreams too, that that was the worse kind of swearing one can wish upon somebody else. And things like that, you know, misery and rebellion, disappointment and disillusionment. Is this the land of Lincoln, is this the land of Washington, is this

the land of Wilson, because Wilson was god, our god, the man we looked up to. Is this the land of the wonderful missionaries who had worked with us, opened the schools, taught us how to take care of the sick, taught us how to teach, tried to teach us Christianity which was, of course, an idle thing to do because the Armenians were the first Christians and this is historically true. nobody can deny it, and yet they were going to make Christians into Christians. Well, they couldn't, the Moslems absolutely refused to be exposed to missionaries of any kind. This is forbidden, to listen to anyone, by their Koran. And since they were sent ahead to find a field of action and they found the Armenians who were Eastern Catholics, you might call, and so if they made the Eastern Catholics into Protestants, they were accomplishing their purpose.

NASH:We were talking about Ellis Island.

OUZOUNIAN:We were talking about Ellis Island.

NASH:How long did you actually stay there?

OUZOUNIAN:Three and a half weeks, and three and a half weeks, without exaggeration, made me go through as many fears and anxieties as four years of exile because different sets of circumstances create different fears. I was threatened to be sent back where I came from, where I did not have a job, I did not have a family, I did not have a home, I had spent every last cent of my money. Before I left even I was replaced. Where would I go?

NASH:You mean they actually threatened to send you back?

OUZOUNIAN:Yes.

NASH:Why?

OUZOUNIAN:Because if the quota was full and you were not acceptable, you had not come through the regular channels and if you did not have somebody here to back you financially, you could be a public charge. Healthy, educated, twenty-two year old who spoke four languages, could become a public charge here in America. Well, tell

me, is this possible? But then I could be a public charge and I was threatened to be sent back. If Mr. Karagusian had not sent his lawyer to Washington to intercede for me, I would have been sent back. My present day, my oldest daughter's parents were sent back all the way to Greece where they had to again apply for re-entry and spend all that money and anxiety and the time to come back. They didn't hesitate to put you on a cattle boat and send you back. Now this is not becoming a country like America.

NASH:How did you get on with the other immigrants at ellis Island, the different nationalities?

OUZOUNIAN:Misery likes company, misery makes friendship. You are in the same boat, you make friends. There were many French with whom I conversed, many Greeks with whom I conversed, and it was a sad, sad brotherhood, the same boat so to speak. And I hate to think that some of those were really sent back. This was, of course, in all fairness, 1922, september of 1922, towards the end of 1922. Ever since the end of the war, say 1919, for three years immigrants had crowded the Ellis Island in America, all the resources, and by then

probably people I speak of, the people behind the desks and the people behind the halls, people in the shower rooms, they were saturated and they had become hard and unfeeling. There was an inscription on one wall.

It said, "Why should I fear the fires of hell? I have been through Ellis Isle." An inscription, this was in English for everyone to see and read.

NASH:Who put it there?

OUZOUNIAN:An immigrant. There were immigrants from all countries and it was probably employment conditions were being worsening, etc., etc., and they had gotten very hard and very elective, selective, you name it.

It is easy to analyze and find the reasons for. If you want to, you can even find reasons for a genocide.

It doesn't take away the harshness though.

NASH:Well, you left ellis Island.

OUZOUNIAN:Yes, Ellis Island, one happy day I was put on a train to go to Rochester, New York where I had made my destination because I had friends who had previously come and settled in Rochester, New York. And I went

to Rochester, New York. After a while, my husband who was a childhood friend whose sister was my classmate at boarding school and my best friend, whose family had completely been wiped out. He had heard that I was in Rochester. He lived in Chicago, worked and lived in Chicago. He, I guess, wanted to see the nearest thing, the person who had been the nearest to his family, and he came to visit me. He said, "Won't you come to Chicago with me where you have many other friends and countrymen," and I consented. Well, should I use a cliché and say that two little orphans of the storm --we didn't have to take time to fall in love. Those were not for us. Those are wealth or what do you call --luxury that we couldn't afford. We got married and I don't know, I had been in love before, naturally, I had my puppy love affairs, but even if I had taken time to fall in love with my husband, I don't think we could have had a happier marriage. See, there was need for each other. and we had two beautiful daughters. By the way, I have two daughters, two granddaughters and two great granddaughters. I worked with them a long time, but we managed to acquire the necessities and we gave our

children a good education. They married good men and there came a time when I wanted to go back to teaching.

You become a little bit snobbish if you come from a country where education is not for everybody, it is a privilege of a few, and if it is acquired with great sacrifices you are bound to become a little bit snobbish. And all the years that I worked for my husband, with my husband, I said, what am I doing in this kind of menial work, I am a school teacher for goodness sakes. Well, there came a time when they needed teachers like me and when they decided to introduce a second language in school I applied. I had fortunately kept my diploma and my credits. In the meantime, by the way, I had gone to American colleges, I had become Epa Michelle Lewinson's student. I had a great fortune because that beautiful woman inspired me into again finding myself and I studied English with Epa. I really went back to college to polish up my French and then realized that I have had only six semesters of English and not at great length. Oh, let me interrupt by saying that when i was in Ellis Island --can I go back to Ellis Island? When I was in Ellis Island my English teacher

was working for her Ph.D. at Columbia. She came to visit me, and very defiantly I said to her, "Miss Badrocian, is the language you taught us or attempted to teach us, English or the language spoken in this hellhole English." Can I swear on tape? I did. Wipe it off if you don't want it. She said very sadly, "Naomi, as little as I taught you is Shakespeare's and the king's language, not this brogue." Well, anyway I had some knowledge of it, but I had never continued it and I thought why don't I go to night school and get some courses, and that is where I met Epa and took English 101 and Creative Writing, etc., and once I fell in love with her I never wanted to give up. But at first I went to sort of review my French because one day a French woman came to me and they had told her that I spoke French and I could hardly carry on a conversation with the poor woman. So I had accumulated 36 American college credits, so when I applied for teaching French in elementary schools I was easily accepted and, as I was telling you a little while ago, that is where I met a fifth-grade teacher who said, "You try so hard to have the children like you." And I said to her, "I am teaching them a foreign

language. It is foreign goods. If they don't like the salesman, how do you expect them to like the material that she is selling?" And she just made a face and said, "Well, you are a little pushy too." And I said, "Well, I have news for you, it is that pushiness that brought me from the road of exile to central America. If I hadn't been a little pushy, a little daring," I said, "I would have turned into a few grains of sand right there in the Syrian desert."

And I could have talked to the walls and they would have understood more. She was born in America, raised in America, her grandfather probably had come from Germany or Ireland or someplace and that gave her a sense of superiority. And my being able to survive the holocaust with the help of God, but by my own efforts too, that gave me a sense of superiority too.

And, by the way, I'm taking too much of your time, let's end it by saying that miracles happen by your own efforts and also by the fact that there are men probably put on this earth to do the job of God. If it wasn't for a man named Reverend Eskigeon, if there is a heaven, I'm sure he is there, I and many others would not have survived. And by the same token, if

there weren't saints, maybe there are Mahammedan saints too, they weren't saints like Kaima Kam Kalilbay, I'm talking about my chief in the hospital.

There would not have been any survivors. Maybe it doesn't behoove an Armenian to give credit to any Turk, but if I have to be a just person, I will say that there were many humane Turks, that the principal responsible for the genocide and all the ensuing cruelties and all the impossible unexplainable, unimaginable cruelties, the truth has never been completely told. Even the man who wrote a best seller called Forty Days of Mossadegh could not have told the bare truth because the bare truth is too ugly to be told. But there was kindness among the Turks too and let's not forget it. I am not trying to softsoap the Turks, but the people and governments are two different things, as we all know. Right? Right, thank you.