
BRUCE M. STAVE: Interview with Arthur Shahverdian, by Bruce M. and Sondra Astor Stave, for the Armenians in Connecticut Oral History Project, December the 20th, 2013, at Mr. Shahverdian’s home in Newington, Connecticut. So first, thank you for participating.

ARTHUR SHAHVERDIAN: Oh, it’s a pleasure. Whatever I can do to help out.

BS: Good. Okay, we’d like to talk to you about your life, your family. So, do I gather correctly you were born in the U.S.?

AS: I was.

BS: How about your family?

AS: Both parents were born overseas. My mother was born in Turkey, and my father was born in Iran. Both areas were historically Armenian, meaning going back more than a couple of centuries, going back at least a thousand years or more.

BS: Okay, and what brought them to the United States? What were conditions like when they left?

AS: I’ll discuss one individually.

BS: Sure.

AS: My dad was born in a city called Khoy, in the northwestern part of Iran.

SONDRA ASTOR STAVE: Could you spell that?

AS: Khoy, in northwestern Iran. And his background was that he thought he was born in 1905, although subsequently, records that he had, that I found after he had died, indicated he was baptized in 1903, so clearly
he couldn’t have been born in ’05. [Laughs] But he held to that date. The other interesting piece is that he wasn’t sure if he was born in January or in May, and yet clearly the baptism indicates he was baptized in the middle of May. And the tradition would be, with the Armenian Church, you were baptized very—very soon after birth. They wouldn’t wait from January to May to baptize him. He had two older sisters who had moved away. One was a secretary, and lived in Tabriz. The other one was a married woman who married the head of customs in Tehran. He was home with his parents and brothers.

At the time of the massacre that occurred—and I’m not sure; I know that in the history of Khoy, they’ve talked about a group of marauders having come through, Turkish marauders having come through, in around 1908 to 1910-’12 neighborhood. That’s vague, and I’ll connect that to why I think there’s a question mark there. Another group in the history of Khoy was that a band of Turkish marauders—I think that’s their actual phrase in their history—came through in 1915. We do know that—well, to add to some of the question marks—is that the discussion of this was incredibly painful for my father. He was never able to talk about it. It was just more than he could handle emotionally, and so he never talked about it. So we pieced a lot of it together from documents, as well as just the study of some history.

SAS: Did he lose family members?
AS: Yes, they were all—they were all killed.
SAS: All of his family?
AS: His mother, father, and brothers were killed.
BS: How did he—?
AS: He survived by—apparently they had dug wells, wells that they had dug by hand, so they didn’t go very deep. They weren’t, as we know them now, artesian wells. And the story was that he was able to climb into the well, and was hidden for a period of time. How long, we don’t know, but he was hidden for a period of time ’til the marauders left.

BS: Was he helped by anyone?

AS: He was found. Again, whether he was helped out or not, no one knows—coming out of the well. Again, these are all stories, and I’m not sure how valid all of it is. But they seem to fit with what we know. He was found, as a child, then, by a band of nomadic Kurds. He traveled with them for a period of time, and again, we don’t know how long that was. And eventually he found his way back into Iran, to Tabriz. During the intervening years, we have no knowledge. I’m not even sure he would have known where they went. So if it were the 1915, he would have been twelve years old. If it was earlier, he’d be more like eight or nine.

Now, I do know that he had several years in a missionary school, a Presbyterian missionary school, in Khoy. And he did two or three years, and if we go by typical American ages, we’d put him somewhere around eight or nine. That would put us up to about 1912, roughly, that neighborhood. So again, we don’t know exactly when. There’s no data, no other further information about that. But he did find his way back to Tabriz, where he had a sister. Subsequently had some education; got a job, and I have some of his records here that you’re more than welcome to look at. And in fact, if you’d like, I’ll make copies for you as well.
BS: Oh, that would be wonderful. We’re going to have an exhibit.

AS: And at that point he was living there, he went to work for an oil company as a bookkeeper, and then came to the United States.

SAS: What year would that have been?

AS: 1928, and I’ve got the documentation from not only his visa, which I have, his passport, but I also have—his name was on the manifest of the ship that he was on, and we found that online, so we know when he did that. When he came to this country, his first cousin—he had three first cousins that I know of. One of his first cousins, in her second marriage, was married to a man named Hovhanessian, John Hovhanessian. He was known as Mkhitar.

SAS: Could you spell for us his last name and—

AS: Hovhanessian, I’m pretty sure. In fact, I’ve got the documents.

BS: And he was known as?

AS: Mkhitar. Now, my understanding of the word Mkhitar, it’s essentially more of a Turkish word, and has implications of being a village elder. Can I document this? Absolutely not!

BS: Can you spell it? [Laughs]

AS: [Laughs] Yeah, I’m not sure I can do that, either.

BS: All right.

AS: Mkhitar, something of that nature, probably. Anyway, because of that relationship, he got on the list for approval to come to the United States. Again, I have the letters as well, that you can copies of. And so he was on the list to come, and the list took years. At one point, they had written to him saying that if he didn’t show up on the date proscribed, then he would have to go to the back of the list, which might be ten or more years. So he got on the ship. Now, he was
sponsored by an aunt who lived in New Britain, his father’s sister. She had come to New Britain; we don’t know when. She had two sons, and owned a house in New Britain, and so she was able to sponsor him.

So he was able to come into the United States directly. He lived in Mount Vernon for a short period of time; again, I have the address of where he lived, because he had written to people, to companies for work, and subsequently came to the United States and lived with his aunt for a number of years prior to being married. The interesting thing, of his three first cousins that he came to the United States with, one of the sisters of that cousin married her first cousin, who was a son of the woman who sponsored my father. So it was a first cousin marriage, and they had two children from that marriage. And at that point, my father lived here, and was able to get a job, in working one of the factories, as a machinist.

It was interesting, because where you live in the Middle East, of course—I say of course; to me, it’s of course—with all the languages being spoken in the Middle East, it’s not uncommon to be multilingual. And so he had a good working, obviously of Armenian. He had a good working knowledge of English, which got better. He spoke a little bit of French, some Russian, Turkish, Farsi—

BS:   Impressive.
AS:   —and Assyrian.
SAS:  Wow!
AS:   I’m not going to say he was totally versed in all the languages, but had at least a sketchy knowledge of all of them. And in fact, one of his books that we had, he was learning Farsi, and he would write out the
Armenian, and then next to it the word in Farsi. So he was trying to learn more. When he came to this country, he lived with his aunt, worked at Corbin Screw Company in New Britain. Lived in New Britain, really, the rest of his life, and died there. Met my mother, and I’ll tell her story in a minute, and got married on Christmas Day.

BS: What year?

AS: 1938.

BS: ’38, ten years later. Now, I just want to go back to his motivation when he came in ’28. What brought him? I mean, was it simply—or, what was it?

AS: I think while he never talked about it directly, especially in relationship to the murderers, I think he saw, like many immigrants did, a land of opportunity, a chance to come here and finally be free of the potential of Genocide. And I think that was a driving factor for my father. And I think that was true with many others. Now, he could have stayed in Iran, with his sister in Tabriz, and she was a secretary, and I forget exactly where. But she was a secretary—it might have been at the Y or something; I’m not sure of that. And certainly with his brother-in-law’s position in the Iranian hierarchy, in government, he would have been safe, and could have had a job.

But I think he saw this as the opportunity to come to the United States, to be free of fear, and be able to live without the fear of being murdered. My mother, and again, do we have exact dates? No. I’m guessing. Her birthday had always been put down as 1913. When it came time to qualify for Social Security, it turns out that she was a little bit older than that. And again, it was not uncommon to fudge, if
you will, birthdays, because you could get in easier if you were younger than if you were older.

My grandfather had come to the United States to work, earn money to go back to Turkey, and bring the family here. During that time period, the Genocide occurred, and at that point they left Turkey to go—as many Armenians did—to Aleppo, which was close to where they lived. Now, whether she was part of those death marches that have been chronicled, or not, I don’t know. But when my grandfather came to this country, he didn’t know that his wife was pregnant with my mother. During the First World War, of course, he couldn’t travel and come over here, not with the relationship with the Turks and the Axis. But he was able to get overseas.

How he found them, I don’t know. Probably—often times they used the church, the Armenian Church, as a vehicle for that. They may have also had common friends who knew that, so he traveled to Syria, got them. They got on a boat, came to the United States. Well, the trip to the United States was not uneventful. Typically, when you left the Middle East, you stopped in Marseilles, which is why there’s a lot of Armenians in Marseilles, in France. That was the period of time when the quota laws went into effect, and during that period of time, those people, particularly Armenians, as well as I’m sure other nationalities, left Marseilles, hoping to go to the United States, but were not able to. And so you found pockets of Armenians in Cuba, in Argentina, Venezuela, but also Mexico.

BS: This would have been ’24, ’25?

AS: In that neighborhood, yeah. I’ve got the exact dates here, and I’ll show you. You’ll have them.
BS: Immigration restriction modes?

AS: Yeah, all of that. Here is her—this is a photocopy. I’ve got the original document here, but it was, well, they were—it looks like it was—it was 1920. I’m trying to read the dates again. Here it is.

BS: The first immigration restrictions went into effect, the first of that kind, was ’21. And then in ’24, I think, the second one was put into effect, which took a little while, I think.

AS: So, December 13th—the passport to France was—I’m trying to see the dates on this. I’ll give you a copy, and you can transcribe it yourself.

BS: Yes.

AS: And see all of that. Anyway, they ended up in Mexico, in Chihuahua, and from there, during that period of time, my grandfather became a merchant, apparently became reasonably wealthy. And the story was that my mother had an opportunity to go to what was known there as a finishing school for a couple for a couple of years.

BS: In Mexico?

AS: In Mexico, for a couple of years. She became fluent in Spanish, and adopted some Spanish menus, and cuisine, which we ate from time to time. The family tried to get into the United States, and again, you’ll have copies of all of this. But the family was able to enter the United States without my mother.

BS: When was that?

AS: Let me get to my mother’s section here in the book. [Pages rustling] That’s my father.

BS: For the purpose of transcription, we’re going through a loose leaf book that has a lot of documents about the family in it.
AS: Yes. And let’s see; here we are. This is entry into the United States, and again it’s in Spanish, which I could get a little bit of. But it’s listed as July 7th, 1924, at Veracruz.

BS: Veracruz, okay. But why—you said they could come without your mother?

AS: They came into the United States without my mother. On August 18th, 1932, this is the letter that went to my family. [Reads] “I enclose a telegram from our consul in re: Miss Bargamian. Good news. I wired him requesting her admission. With best wishes, Samuel Shortridge.” It went to Fresno, California, which is where the family had gone. Originally, they couldn’t get into Fresno, and so Fresno might have been the center for this. And Fresno had laws at that time prohibiting Armenians from living there.

BS: Hm!

AS: And so my grandfather moved to Fowler, which is very close to Fresno, and again, opened a store there. The story goes, by the way, that there’s no documentation of this, but the story is that my grandfather, because he had sufficient funds, was able to bribe the appropriate officials into letting my mother come to the United States.

BS: But why was she held out originally?

AS: I’m guessing because of age. I have nothing here which would tell me why. Let’s see, what’s this one? Again, this is more the Consul of the United States.

BS: She would have been about ten, eleven years old at that time?

AS: Well, in 1926, ’27, ’28, to ’32. She would have been older.

BS: Yeah, older.
AS: Yeah. It depends on when they wanted—then, at least—well, she was born, let’s say, let’s go back to 1910. She would have been twenty-one, twenty-two years old at that time, so she wasn’t a child any longer. But the background here, before the Consul, Vice Consul of the United States, in Juarez, and that her full name and true name is Rosa Bargamian. That’s an interesting thing, because Rosa is not an Armenian name. The Armenian for Rose is Vartouhi.

BS: So is that the Hispanization of the name?

AS: It is, and supposedly—again, we’re talking now family information; who knows how valid? Supposedly my grandfather’s cousin had a relationship with a Mexican woman whose name was Rosa, and asked that my mother be named Rosa. True or not, I don’t know. But it does say that she was born in the city of Kharput, Turkey, the 29th day of November, 1913. She is not unable to present a Turkish passport, there being no representatives of Turkey in Mexico. And again, you’ll have copies of these, so you can see all of this, and go through it.

BS: So she finally got in, in 19--?

AS: She finally got in, in 1932.

BS: ’32?

AS: To El Paso, and then traveled up to Fresno. [Clock chimes] Her sister, my aunt, had an arranged marriage with my uncle. I’m not sure—this is Jennie. You’ve talked to Jennie Garabedian?

BS: Yes, we’ve actually spoken with her.

AS: Okay. This is Jennie’s brother, who married my aunt.

BS: Oh.
AS: And Jennie may have already told you this, but he was one of those people who, when they got to Marseilles, couldn’t debark to come to the United States. He stayed in Marseilles for four years, and he apprenticed as a tailor, to develop a skill that he could then use. The rest of the family had already come, his parents, and then he came to the United States. The dates, Jennie would know, but I don’t. You may already have those in your records. So my mother had not seen her sister in quite some time, so she came to Connecticut, New Britain, Connecticut, to visit her sister.

My father living in New Britain, they met. Whether they were introduced deliberately, or they met somehow, I don’t know. And got married in 1938, December 25th, 1938. And from there on, of course, now we entered into the First World War. Transportation was long and expensive to go back to California. The first time she went back to see her parents was in 1947, with two children, one of whom was me, and my sister, who’s a little bit older, so, to not having seen her parents in a number of years, and then to have seen them again. This is the telegram, the actual telegram, by the way. I’ll photocopy that with all the documentation for you.

BS: Right.

AS: And you can see, August 18th, 1932. This is the—I happen to have found this somewhere. This is the announcement of marriage between my parents. The announcement was from his aunt, and my aunt and her husband, for her sister. So it wasn’t two parents announcing marriage; it was relatives announcing marriages. From that point on, the story is just very typical of immigrant families in the United States. They lived in my aunt’s house for a number of years.
My father was a factory worker, and my mother was an at-home housewife, raising children. They were able to save enough money to buy a lot, and build a house in New Britain. And that’s where they lived until they died.

SAS: How many children in your family?

AS: Three. I have an older sister. It’s interesting, because she has an Armenian name. My younger brother has an Armenian name. And mine was not an Armenian name. There is a translation from Arthur to Ardashes, but the used the Armenian name on my baptism—I mean, my English name. And you know, the guess is that it was 1943, the War years, being American, giving me an Americanized name, or an English name, as opposed to an Armenian name, for which I’m eternally grateful.

BS: [Laughs]

AS: [Laughs] From that point on, they lived in New Britain. They were like so many other immigrant families: honest, hard-working, careful with their money, but able to build their own home, and raise three children. And all of us went to college.

BS: Okay, now let’s talk about you for a moment. What was your education like? Who were your friends when you were younger?

AS: We grew up, up until I was fourteen, we grew up in a neighborhood of—there were tenements, or apartments; it depends on whether you want to be fancy. If you want to be fancy, they were apartments; if not, they’re tenements. Ours was a six-family home that was owned by my father’s aunt. We used to call her Grandma, by the way, because we had no other grandmas that we knew. And the neighborhood was an absolutely mixed neighborhood of ethnic
backgrounds. In our building was a—I don’t know their country of origin, but they were Jewish, who lived upstairs. Next door to them on the third floor was an Italian family. My aunt, and we lived on the second floor; we were Armenian. And on the first floor of the home was another Italian family, and a mixed marriage, Portuguese and Spanish.

BS: Now, what street was this?

AS: This was on Glen Street in New Britain. The house still stands, by the way, and looks better than it ever looked! [Laughs]

SAS: Great.

AS: Whoever owns it now took care of it, and sided it, and all that kind of thing. It was a four-room home: kitchen, where we ate, and that was where we socialized, two bedrooms, and two small closets, and what was known then as a parlor, and not a living room, and which we shut off, because it was a cold water flat. We heated the house initially with coal, and then later converted the stove to oil, and we had gas, and we had a hot water tank to heat water.

BS: Now, who were your friends, ethnic groups and stuff?

AS: Well, my closest friends at that point, in the neighborhood: a friend across the street—his father was Greek; I don’t know what his mother’s background was, but his father was Greek. Next door were Italian. I was friends with a young man who lived the next house over after that; he was German. His family had come out of Germany in the early fifties. The other friends I had down the street were Polish backgrounds, and further down the street was Irish.

BS: So did you have any Armenian friends?
AS: No, not in that neighborhood. There weren’t any Armenian kids in the neighborhood at all. As I got older, my father had gone to the Presbyterian Church growing up, because it was this missionary school. And there being no Armenian—he used to go to Presbyterian services in the morning, and then later in the morning he’d go to the Armenian Apostolic Church, where he—he sang at both churches—quite a singer.

BS: Was that in Saint Stephen’s?

AS: No, that was—

SAS: Holy Resurrection?

AS: In the United States. It was Saint Stephen’s in the United States, where he sang. The one he sang at in Khoy is Saint Sarkis. I was able to find online pictures of Saint Sarkis Armenian Church, because I had where he was baptized. As a matter of fact, my sister and late brother-in-law are close friends with an Armenian priest up in the Boston area, and he has a friend who’s a bishop, I believe, in the Middle East. He was going to check into finding out if the church, Saint Sarkis Church, had any records whatsoever concerning my father and his family. There might be, or not. I don’t know. But he was going to look it up. But the church still stands. In any event, you asked about Armenian friends.

BS: Yes.

AS: When they got married, the Armenian Church had really not been in operation for some time in New Britain. It had a lull during some times when there was some political turmoil and strife. But almost across the street from us lived an Armenian Congregational minister, Dr. Hadidian.
SAS: How would you spell his name?

AS: I’m going to guess it was Hadidian.

SAS: Thank you.

AS: Hadidian. You know what? It might be here. No, it’s not. In any event, so when they got married, they got married in the Congregational Church. In New Britain, the Armenians had a Congregational chapel, at the First Church of Christ Congregational in downtown New Britain. And other ethnic groups had different affiliations with different areas, so my father had made friends with Dr. Hadidian. He ended up being the officiant at their marriage. Dr. Hadidian later went to Watertown, Massachusetts, and became the minister of the Armenian Congregational Church, which is probably within a hundred yards of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Watertown. So that’s how that happened.

In any event, that’s the background to my going to the Congregational Church. We became actively involved, my sister and I, in the youth—what was known as Pilgrim Youth Fellowship program, and there were some Armenian families in that area, in the church. And I became friends with a couple of Armenians. One became a very close friend, Michael Najarian, and his brother Harry Najarian. They had younger siblings as well. And that was pretty much it for Armenian friends. We didn’t live in New Britain in the Armenian enclave, if you will. Where Jennie was raised, there were Armenians all over the place, and in fact, there were two Armenian Apostolic Churches. You’ve probably, if you’ve researched the divisions?

BS: Yes.
AS: Yes, you know all about that. The two of them were almost a block away from one another, on parallel blocks, Tremont Street and Irwin Place in New Britain. But because of the division of the Armenian Church, they didn’t build one church; they built two. And that area had a lot of Armenians, which is why the churches were built there. Jennie had a lot of family and folks in the area who were Armenian. Where we lived, on Glen Street, which was really in another part of town, there were no Armenians. I’m sorry; I shouldn’t say that. Dr. Hadidian lived with a family across the street who were Armenian, but they didn’t have any children our age at all.

BS: Was there any reason that you lived on that side of the town, on Glen Street? I mean, was it simply—?

AS: It was my father’s aunt’s house.

BS: Yes, and that’s it.

AS: He lived with her, and then [laughs] when he and my mother got married, they just moved next door, just with a common wall, to the two—to the two apartments. And they lived there, because it was his aunt’s house.

SAS: Yes. Now, how important was the religion and the church in your family, as you were growing up?

AS: The Armenian Church?

SAS: Yes.

AS: Honestly, it was marginal—marginal. There wasn’t much action in the Armenian Church, in the part that my parents would have been part of. There was a different head of church. You’ve studied that, so I don’t have to repeat that, but it was not much. They really didn’t attend church. When we went to church as a family, on occasion, the
only recollection—I know I was baptized in the Congregational Church. In fact, I later [laughs] worked with, in the Congregational Church in Bristol, with the man who was the Christian education minister at that church in New Britain. So we went there whenever we went, but it was rare. I do remember once going on an Easter Sunday to church as a family, but other than that, I really have no recollection, when I was young.

SAS: So as you were growing up, did your family, your parents, give you much of a sense of being Armenian?

AS: They did to the point where we had a lot of Armenian food. They spoke Armenian as well as English. And of course, Jennie or others may have told you this, but whenever their friends were over, and they didn’t want us to know what they were talking about, they talked in Turkish, which is really kind of ironic, given the fact that, you know, if my father heard Turkish music at a wedding, he would get up and leave the wedding!

BS: [Laughs]

AS: And yet, they would talk Turkish, because we couldn’t understand it. So, you know.

SAS: So what language was spoken in your house?

AS: Armenian and English, both.

SAS: Both?

AS: Both. Initially it was mostly Armenian. In fact, my sister started school without having learned any English at all, and she learned English in school. I had a little bit of background. Both were spoken at home, and so we became reasonably conversant. Never learned how to read and write the language, but we did understand, and could
speak the language. So the connection with the Armenian Church was really very, very thin.

However, and this occurred probably around 1958, ’59, in that neighborhood? The Armenian Apostolic Church, Saint Stephen’s in New Britain, to which Jennie belonged as well, was having a bishop, archbishop, come to the United States, to try to help revitalize the church. They had had, prior to that, an itinerant priest, if you will, who served in New Britain as well as serving in Indian Orchard Armenian Church. He lived in New York City, because his wife didn’t want to leave the city. She loved the cosmopolitan life. So he would either drive or take the train to New Britain, spend the night, have a church service, and the next day go home again.

And so there wasn’t a lot of community action. There was, however, connection with Armenians through political organizations. My father was an active member, at one time very active, but still maintained ties, with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, the political party from Armenia. And they had regular gatherings and meetings, and they used the Armenian Church basement, the church hall, for various kinds of meetings. And you know, my sister and I, and my brother, became members of the Armenian Youth Federation as well.

SAS: And what were the purposes of these organizations?

AS: Really, to keep the Armenian culture and spirit intact. It really wasn’t—

SAS: And what would constitute the culture and spirit?

AS: Well, essentially they wanted you to be able to meet with other Armenian youth. Secondly, there was a connection to the Armenian
Church, but not a strong connection. The culture, music, particularly
dancing music—nothing in the way of symphonic music, or church
music, or that sort—it was primarily for dancing purposes. I think the
hope was that you would marry an Armenian, maintain the connection
with the Armenian history in particular. So there were—there were
times when you did—you had historical presentations at these various
meetings. The political party that my father belonged to, and which
he later belonged only marginally, was really dedicated to the idea of
Armenian freedom, and maintaining the pressure, if they will, to stay
connected to a free Armenia. And so that’s essentially what this was
all about.
BS: What age were you?
SAS: This was in the fifties, I think?
AS: It was late fifties. I would say the Youth Federation—well, I had my
first connection with that—
BS: So sixteen, seventeen? Fifteen?
AS: No, younger than that. I would say my first connection was—might
have been when I was around eight or nine, ten, that neighborhood.
BS: Oh.
AS: Not through the Armenian Youth Federation, but the Armenian Youth
Federation, which was also, by the way, sponsored by the Armenian
Revolutionary Federation, sponsored a camp, an Armenian camp, in
Massachusetts, called Camp Haistan, Haistan meaning Armenia. And
my cousin—
SAS: Could you spell that?
AS: It depends how you want to spell it. I’ll give you one spelling.
SAS: Any one of them.
AS: Haistan. If could be Hay. It’s kind of interchangeable.

BS: Okay.

AS: Jennie’s niece, who was essentially the same age as Jennie, Helen, was a member of the Central Executive Committee of the Armenian Youth Federation. And she was very actively involved, and was a real leader, Helen, in that organization. She was a brilliant woman, and sweet as can be. She was just a sweetheart person. Helen got us, and my parents, I guess, into sending me to the Armenian camp. So I went for a week. That was probably my first real indoctrination to being with all Armenians, in a camp setting, for a week, where we had Armenian music, and Armenian lessons, as well as typical camp activities like swimming and such. There were two other young men my age who went, as well, at that time.

BS: Who went from—?

AS: From New Britain with me, to the camp.

SAS: And how did you feel about that?

AS: I enjoyed it, but I didn’t really know what was going on. I can remember feeling somewhat homesick. Everything was strange and alien.

SAS: So you didn’t have a feeling that these are your people, and you’re supposed to—?

AS: No. I had a feeling of being there, but enjoying some of it, but not feeling a part, you know? It’s an odd feeling to describe, but I never felt I was part of that. Because these people all—a lot of them knew each other, from having been to the camp before. They knew each other, either because they were friends in their own communities, like Worcester, Massachusetts, Whitensville,
Watertown, Somerville, Haverhill. They were a strong Armenian group. Then they were also a group from the New York City area, Philadelphia. They knew each other from their Armenian activities, Armenian Churches, and having been to the camp before. We were kind of outsiders. We didn’t know any of it. But we went; it was nice. And in fact, the funny thing was we were so well-behaved that they wanted us to stay for another week, on a scholarship, which we turned down, of course, and we came home. I was in—I was probably ten.

I went back to the camp again around the age of 14 because by that time I’d gotten involved in the Armenian Youth Federation, actively involved, and enjoyed the meetings and all that sort of thing. And so, I had saved money, and went back for two weeks, and had a wonderful time, and made some good friends. Again, I didn’t know anybody when I got there. My sister, by the way, was a counselor at the camp. Helen had gotten her a job as a counselor, or had recommended her for a job as counselor. So I went to the camp, and had a wonderful time; made some really fine friends, one of whom I’ve kept—I keep in touch with on an irregular basis. He happens to be my brother-in-law’s first cousin, my late brother-in-law’s first cousin, and so we see each other—we’ve seen each other at weddings and funerals. And we connect immediately—just a really neat guy.

But there were other people there at the camp that we—that I had a great time with. We did—we had, again, we had Armenian history. When you count it off, to make sure you’re all that there, you had to count in Armenian. Well, that was easy for me, but it wasn’t easy for the people who had no background with the Armenian
language which is there, because one member of the family was Armenian. But it was a good time. I enjoyed myself.

And so I got heavily involved in the Armenian Youth Federation, which encompasses people through the age of late twenties, mid to late twenties, and remained with them for a number of years, until I was in the middle of college. And having decided that I was spending much too much time in the Armenian community, and neglecting the academics, I decided at the end of my sophomore year to either get out of one or the other. And I chose to stay with college.

SAS: Now, where did you go to college?

AS: I went to Central Connecticut. It was just after it became Central Connecticut State College. And my sister went there as well. And at that point, I decided I’d had enough of that. Not that I didn’t enjoy it, but at the same time, going back to the Armenian Church, I mentioned that the archbishop was coming to revitalize the Armenian Church. And they were looking for singers. Now, I had been singing in the choir at the First Church of Christ, but they had been in downtown New Britain. I could walk to church. My parents encouraged my sister and me to go to church regularly, and we did. We belonged to the youth group there. We did everything, including retreats. But the church moved from downtown New Britain to another part of town, where there was a larger cluster of people, and there was also room for parking. There was no parking in downtown New Britain. Well, I had no way of getting there.

BS: This is the Congregational?

AS: Congregational Church. I had no way of getting there. At the same time, the Armenian Church was looking for people to sing. Well, I
had done a lot of singing in high school, and continued to. And so one of the deacons of the Armenian Church—not a deacon; I should stay trustee, because deacons are different in the Armenian Church than trustees. He was a trustee of the Armenian Church in New Britain, and lived, oh, not too far from us. And he said he would pick me up and take me to church. And so Steve would pick me up, take me to church, and I started singing; was eventually ordained a deacon.

I never really went through what I should have gone through to be ordained, but they had to do it so that I could sing on the altar with the priest. Understand, the deacon in the Armenian Church—if I had gone one more step beyond that, it would have been ordination. And if I hadn’t been married, I would have been a celibate priest, and if I had been married, I would have been a married priest, would be the next step. So you know, my being called a deacon was really for convenience sake.

So I did sing in the Armenian Church for many, many years. And subsequently I met my wife, who is not Armenian, and she was also, by chance, a Congregationalist. And so we tried going to the Armenian Church, and this is not going to work. And sitting in the congregation, I felt a degree of estrangement. It was foreign. So if it was foreign for me, it was foreign for my fiancée. And so we decided we’d return to the Congregational Church, which is where we have remained, and very actively so. So, the Armenian Church, the itinerant priest, or the priest who went between communities—the community finally were able to get a young graduate from seminary, who came over to this country with his wife, had a child, lived right up the street from us, in fact, in New Britain. We had moved to
another part of town by that time. My parents had built a house. And so he lived in the street up the street, he and his wife, and they eventually bought a home. And he became the full-time Armenian priest in town. He was good, and so of course, he didn’t stay very long. Then he had no choice; they moved him, I think, to San Francisco. Sad story, but I’ll tell it anyway.

BS: [Laughs]

AS: He really was a nice guy; I liked him. His wife was wonderful—sweet woman. In any event, that’s where my connection with the Armenian Church was. During that time, because I had a lot of interaction with Armenian priests, I became rather fluent in the language, and could carry on a regular conversation with almost anybody. Again, I couldn’t read or write, so in order to sing the part that I had to sing, I phonetically transcribed it into English, and wrote the entire Armenian mass, called a Badarak, into English language, with all the notations so I could sing.

SAS: Wow.

AS: Eventually, I had it all memorized, so I never used the book again. But you know, I did it every Sunday; I sang the entire service. And so that—

BS: And you still do this?

AS: No, no. The only time I go to the Armenian Church is for funerals and weddings now. No, my wife and I have—we decided to go back to our roots as Congregational Church. And in fact, we belong to the Congregational Church in Bristol, where both of us have been incredibly active.
BS: What was your family’s feeling, that you married someone who wasn’t Armenian?

AS: They didn’t like it, obviously. I mean, there was no question about that. They weren’t pleased by it. My mother found a great way of dealing with it. She said, “Now that she’s married to an Armenian, she is now an Armenian.”

SAS: Oh!

AS: That was my mother’s way of handling it!

BS: [Laughs]

AS: And so she actually loved Sharon, my wife. My father struggled more so he did come around.

SAS: And did your wife learn to cook any Armenian food?

AS: Oh, yeah. As a matter of fact—

SAS: Has that helped?

AS: Well you know, it’s interesting. We didn’t start cooking Armenian food, really, until after my parents had died.

SAS: Oh!

AS: And it started because I had some friends; we wanted to do something together, guys I work with and their wives, so we got along well. And we had a gathering, and we decided to make an Armenian meal, so we started doing more Armenian cooking. Other than rice, the Armenian pilaf—other than that, we never did much of anything. But since then, we do quite a bit of Armenian cooking.

SAS: You say we, so you cook, too?

AS: Oh, yes. Yes, I do a lot. We share the cooking. We’re both retired, so we share the cooking, whoever is around and available. Our kids have come to enjoy some of it, and so we do quite a bit of it.
Interesting enough, we’ve had Jennie, and my cousin Roxie, and my cousin Garo here, from time to time. We try to get together at least once a year, to gather, and it becomes—it’s more convenient to me here than in a restaurant, so we can just sit and talk. And it’s usually an Armenian something, combination of things, that I’ll make. And so we’ve maintained that, and my kids have actually come to enjoy it, as well. They don’t do any of the more intricate or involved cooking, but they do make the Armenian kind of pilaf.

BS: Now, do they have much consciousness of Armenia?

SAS: First of all, how many children do you have?

AS: I have three daughters.

SAS: Three daughters.

AS: Three daughters. They have—they’re aware of their Armenian heritage. At various times in their lives, they have talked about it more and more, have tried to connect with it to some degree.

BS: I assume they were brought up in the Congregational Church?

AS: Yes.

SAS: Now, are any of them married?

AS: One is—well, two are married. She and her husband live in Middletown. And my middle daughter and her partner—it’s not a legal marriage, because Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, doesn’t recognize lesbian marriage, but she and her partner live in Philadelphia, and have a son. And she does some Armenian cooking; she’s had some interest in it, the Armenian dancing in particular. She dances. And my younger daughter actually got interested in Armenian music, like a lot of kids—kids? She’s thirty-seven years old. You know, the tattoo phase.
BS: We know the feeling.
AS: She’s got an Armenian word tattooed on her back.
BS: [Laughs]
AS: [Laughs] Okay? That’s her connection.
SAS: I was going to ask whether they’ve maintained their surname, the Armenian surname?
AS: Jill has, yes. Actually, they all have. The youngest is not married. She’s living with her boyfriend. But Jill has maintained her maiden name.
BS: Are any of the friends, spouses, mates, Armenian?
AS: There was a fellow—I think he’s in the Department of Education down at Quinnipiac, and Jill’s a professor there. And I think he’s the Education Department, and they talk once in a while. His name I believe, is Basmajian, I think. I think, as far as I know, that’s the only Armenian connection she has. Kristen may have made a friend somewhere in Philadelphia, but don’t recall what.
BS: But then married to, or partnered with, an Armenian?
AS: No, no. No.
SAS: So how do they see the Armenian heritage at this point?
AS: They have learned about it. They hear about it. They knew that I was doing the collection. I don’t think they ever saw anything that I ever presented, necessarily, but they know about it. They know about the background. They know about the massacres. They know somewhat about the Armenian Church, and they’ve heard us talk about the Armenian Youth Federation. Because my sister and late brother-in-law—my late brother-in-law was very actively Armenian, and I think my sister became more actively Armenian when she married him, and
they lived in the Boston area, up in Haverhill, where there’s a large Armenian population.

In fact, while she was baptized and confirmed in the Congregational Church, for the last fifty years she’s been a member of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Watertown, Massachusetts. And I think there are times when she feels very comfortable with the Congregational Church, because that’s what she grew up in, but she’s very involved there. And in fact, she taught Sunday church school in the Armenian Church. So she’s maintained more of the Armenian history—more cultural connections than I ever have. And my younger brother has maintained almost none, other than the fact that he played Armenian music in dances, and weddings, and whatever, because it was a job. My brother’s a musician, and so for him it was a job to play Armenian affairs.

SAS: If you were to guess, and we went ahead fifty or seventy-five years, what do you think is going to remain of Armenian-ness, among those people who are ethnically Armenian?

AS: My family exclusively, or are you asking me in general?

SAS: Both.

AS: There seems to be some resurgence of interest among some people who were never involved in the Armenian community. But if I had to guess, fifty or seventy-five, in the United States? I think the Armenian Church could be the center of life for Armenians, but I think they have to change their position. They have started doing some of that. I mean, most of the priests now will do most of the sermon in Armenian, but also will do a small sermon, if you will, or homily, in English. If you’re not Armenian, you can feel left out,
because the conversation sometimes becomes Armenian language again. A lot of what they tried to do with the Armenian organizations was to maintain some of that connection to the history of Armenia. My connection, quite candidly, is more historical than it would be a feeling of cultural belonging. I’m not sure I’m getting that point across.

BS: Yes.

AS: You know, I have an interest in the Armenian history, and the background, particularly as my parents experienced it, but I don’t do anything else with it, other than the Armenian food and the Armenian cooking. I don’t belong to Armenian organizations. My life wasn’t in that direction. My life was clearly American.

BS: What got you started on collecting materials like this, doing the family genealogy?

AS: We had the stuff here; never looked at it. It was my father’s. There’s a fellow at Avon High School by the name of Stu Abrams, a teacher, history teacher. I don’t know if Stu is still there or not. But at one point, Stu developed a course called The Holocaust, Genocide, and something or other. Being Armenian, he asked me if I could come and talk about the Armenian Genocide, and I said, “Yeah, I’ll give it a try, and see what happens with it.” So I started doing some—looking through materials. I would say up to that time, it as just really a collection of papers, put aside.

SAS: About how long ago was this?

AS: Probably six, seven, eight years ago.

SAS: Okay.
AS: That I started that. I haven’t done that unit in his course in a number of years, so I don’t know if he’s still teaching it, if he’s no longer teaching, whether he just didn’t need me there anymore. We had an interesting—and I’ll share this with you because the information might be interesting to you; I don’t know if it is or not. You can delete. Stu and I had this interesting conversation in front of the class. Now, most of the kids who took that class were juniors and seniors, who were bright, and had taken Advanced Placement courses in European History and U.S. History. So they were knowledgeable. And obviously, the last time I went to the class, they were so well prepared, they were able to ask me very involved questions, which I was able to answer, fortunately, because I don’t think my intelligence is anywhere near what theirs is! [Laughs]

But he asked me this question, about my current feelings about Turkey, and the Turkish. And I said that I felt that the biggest problem with Turkey was acknowledging the existence, the history, of the Genocide. I said, “The current Turkish people, the citizens, had nothing to do with it. The current government had nothing to do with it. The denial, however, sticks in the craw for everybody.” I said, “Germany—again, my opinion—Germany acknowledged the Holocaust, tried to make some amends for it. And as a result, people don’t have the hostility towards Germany, at least currently, that they did. If Turkey were to acknowledge the Genocide, I think it would dissipate the hostility that a lot of Armenians feel.” And I said to him, “It’s like the Nazis. They were not the entire German country, and the Ottoman Turks were not the current Turkish government. I don’t know why they refuse to acknowledge it, but they don’t.” He said,
“So you could be comfortable with them?” I said, “Yeah, under those circumstances, I could.”

BS: Okay.

AS: I don’t know why, but that was at least a way for me to reflect how I feel about the Turkish people, and Turkey itself. And Jennie has traveled Turkey, and said it’s a beautiful country. The people have been good to her, and receptive to her. Our histories and our culture are really intertwined a great deal, and although we’re Christians and most of them are Muslim, it really didn’t affect the development of traditions. But having said that, that’s when I put this together.

BS: I’d like to go back. You mentioned you went to Central. When you were growing up, what was the family’s attitude towards education, and such?

AS: It was just assumed we would go to college. It wasn’t even a question: are you going to go to college, or are you going to go to trade school? It was assumed we would go to college. It was as simple as that.

SAS: And we left you as a sophomore in college, before we went off. So what kind of—what did you study in college, and what kind of professional life did you have?

AS: My initial major I designated before I graduated from high school and went to college, was to be a social science major. Prior to entering college, I was convinced by a few people that I should major in French. I had taken four years of French in high school. I spoke well. I had a good accent—you know, that kind of thing. You have to understand that I was essentially a lazy student, and so I could speak
French reasonably well, but it wasn’t the kind of French that professors would love.

So I started French in college, and I decided, well, if you’re going to major in French, if you think you might teach, you should also take Spanish, because it’s very similar. So I entered Spanish. I passed, barely. I got credit; let’s put it that way. So at the end of the time, I said, “You know, I really don’t know French the way I should know it, if I’m going to do anything with it legitimately—legitimately. In the meantime, I had gotten a part-time job working thirty hours a week in a store, which I loved! So I decided, well maybe I’ll go into business. Well, Central didn’t have a business major at that time.

SAS: What kind of store was it that you worked at?

AS: It was a men’s clothing store, and I worked in the young men’s department. Absolutely loved it—absolutely loved it! So I said, “Well, I’ll study accounting,” because that’s what they had as a major. Within two weeks, my typical academic history came out full force. In the second week of the course, the professor came to me, and she said, “Mr. Shahverdian, you really should withdraw from this course, because you have no idea what we’re doing.” [Laughs]

BS: [Laughs]

AS: And she was absolutely right! I had not idea what they were doing. I didn’t have the dedication to the kind of study that you needed to be successful in courses like accounting, mathematics. It’s cumulative, day to day to day to day to day, and I wasn’t doing it. So second semester I became undeclared major, and at that time I decided that I would stay in school. I’ve got to do something that I can enjoy studying, and so I decided to go back to social sciences, with a
concentration in American history. And the social science was just because I enjoyed sociology, psychology, political science, economics. And so I was able—geography.

I could teach all of those, if I stayed with it. I didn’t, and when I graduated from school, I had a job offer from a cousin who had a furniture and rug store. So I went to work for him for three months, and didn’t care for the business at all. And so I left, and in the mean time I was offered a job back at the store I was working in, as the manager and buyer of that department, and that’s what I did for a number of years. So I stayed with that, in retail, for many years. Decided that that wasn’t how I wanted to live, and I frankly had enjoyed student teaching. I taught seventh and eight grade; seventh grade geography, and eighth grade U.S. history, and absolutely loved working with young kids.

So at that point in my life, in my later twenties, decided that I would have something to do with education again. When I graduated from college, everybody who wanted a history job got it. In 1968, ’69, nobody got them. And so I wasn’t sure what I was going to do, but a few friends told me about what was happening in public schools and education with work study programs and career development, and I said, “Well, gee, with my background I business, my work with kids, it’s an ideal combination.” And so I decided to go into school counseling. And so I became a school counselor, and it was the best thing I ever did in my life. I just absolutely loved it!

BS: And that’s what you did, full career?
AS: That’s what I did.
SAS: So at what level were you?
AS: I started in middle school for a few years, and then to high school.
BS: Which high school?
AS: Avon High School, and then later I went to Hall High School in West Hartford. And then I went back to Avon as the director of the counseling program for the school district. It was the best decision I ever made in my life.
SAS: So that was your career, was in school counseling?
AS: It really was. I mean, my wife will tell you, I never once woke up feeling I didn’t want to go to work. Never said that. No matter what it was like, the kids were fabulous, and their parents were wonderful.
SAS: That’s great.
AS: It was just, I was fortunate; I worked in two great school districts.
BS: Yes, very good schools. Just a couple of other points.
AS: Anything you want to ask, by the way, feel free.
BS: Today, do you keep up with Armenian events and politics very much?
AS: Whenever there’s an article in the paper. I get the Hartford Courant every day, and I get the Times every day, so the Times every once in a while will have an article about Armenia. I’ll read that. If anything happens in the world that I’m aware of, over the internet, I’ll read up on that. But that’s pretty much it.
BS: You don’t read Armenian media on the internet, or something of that sort?
AS: No. Honestly, I don’t have time for that. I’m retired, but I don’t have time.
SAS: Have you had the opportunity to travel to that part of the world?
AS: No. The furthest we’ve gotten in the Mediterranean was Italy. I had always had—I was a little reluctant to go to Turkey, and then Jennie
convinced me that it really was a beautiful country to visit. By that
time, we had grandsons, and we did a little traveling, but never got as
far as Turkey. Hopefully some day we may do that. I’d love to go
back, if we ever could get into—if we ever normalize, in some way
normalize, relations in Iran, I would prefer going there, and into
Turkey, where my parents—I’d love to visit the church where my
father was baptized. Whether that all will every happen or not, I don’t
know.

SAS: Well, what are your thoughts about what’s happening now? There
seems to be some efforts to normalize relations with Iran. Do you
think those are going to be successful?

AS: I think it’s going to be—I think the potential for success is there, if we
can keep Congress and its nose out of it, as they turn around and they
try to be hard-liners about the nuclear issues. It may not be a popular
statement to make, but quite candidly, if other countries have nuclear
capabilities—I don’t mean bombs, necessarily, but how does a
country that used the only nuclear weapon turn around and say to
another country, “You can’t have them”?

I mean, I understand the whys and wherefores, and the security
of Israel is critically important as well. But China has the bomb;
Pakistan has the bomb. Israel supposedly has the bomb. China has
the bomb. North Korea has the bomb. I mean, England, France.
How do we say that you can’t use uranium? I mean, I’d love to make
sure it’s only—I think the potential among some of the extremists in
Iran would be to use a nuclear weapon, at least in some way, tactical
way. But I struggle, personally, with that, from that perspective. But
I think—I think there’s a lot to be said there.
The problem is that the United States has too often altered Iranian history through our intervention. I mean, the Shah was planted there by the U.S. We know that. Why wouldn’t the Iranians, the Persians, feel offended by that? Why would they not feel? We’ve done that, unfortunately, too many—as a country, we’ve done that in too many places. And hopefully we don’t continue to do that in the future. So I understand their hostility towards us, but I do think most people, not the governments, but the people, of the countries, would welcome more normalized relations with the United States.

BS: Okay. Have you given any material assistance, financial assistance, to Armenia at all?

AS: No.

BS: Were you involved at the time of the earthquake, by any chance?

AS: No, not involved at all. Interesting—my sister’s, on my late brother-in-law’s side, my brother-in-law’s family, his first cousin Ellen married a guy who’s a child psychiatrist on Long Island. And Louis has had several trips to Armenia to assist in various ways, medically as well as, I’m sure, psychologically. But other than that, no, we haven’t, in any way.

BS: Okay. Is there anything else?

SAS: You’ve done a wonderful job. You have marvelous command of the information that you were able to share with us.

AS: Thank you.

SAS: And I thought it was one of the easiest interviews, for an interviewer, that we’ve had.

AS: Well, thank you. I appreciate that.
SAS: Because it’s all very logical, and sequential, and interesting. We thank you very much.

BS: Is there anything that you’d like to add?

SAS: Yes, is there anything that you thought we were going to ask you, and we didn’t?

AS: No. As a matter of fact, I kind of anticipated what you were going to want to know, and we went through this. Would you like me to make copies now? Would you like me to make copies and send them?

BS: Can you make copies now?

AS: Sure. That will take about ten minutes.

BS: That’s all right.

SAS: We’re not in a hurry.

BS: That would be wonderful.

AS: I’ll make copies for you right now.

BS: Oh, great. Thank you so much, really.

AS: Well, if I helped you in any way in the work you’re doing, I’m grateful.

BS: That’s great. Thank you.

End of Interview