Interview with Lorina Abalian by Bruce Stave and Sondra Astor Stave, for the Armenians in Connecticut Oral History Project, Farmington, Connecticut, October 10, 2013.

BRUCE STAVE: Interview with Lorina Abalian, by Bruce M. and Sondra Astor Stave, for the Armenians in Connecticut Oral History Project, October 10th, 2013, at Ms. Abalian’s home in Farmington, Connecticut. So first, thank you for participating. We appreciate it.

LORINA ABALIAN: You’re welcome.

BS: And what we would like to do is to begin talking to you a little bit about where you were born, and when you came to the United States, etcetera.

LA: I was born in Baku, Azerbaijan, former Soviet Union Republic, and—

SONDRA ASTOR STAVE: Could you spell the name of the region?

LA: The city name is Baku.

BS: Baku?

LA: Baku, yeah.

BS: In Azerbaijan?

LA: Azerbaijan.

SAS: Oh.

LA: Do I have to spell it, too?

SAS: No.

BS: No, we have been to Azerbaijan.

SAS: Because we were just there.

BS: We were just in Baku.

LA: Oh, really? In Baku, you were just there?

BS: Yes.

LA: Yeah.
BS: Beautiful city.
LA: You can say that now, but—[laughs] when we lived there, I spent thirty years—I was born there, and my parents were born there, and my grandparents moved there because they were victims of the Genocide in 1915. And that’s how our family ended up living there. But in 1988, they started this political, you know, venture against Armenians. They wanted suddenly everybody to get out. And that city was international city, a lot of Russians, Jewish, and Armenians lived there. Everybody spoke Russian Armenian on the streets, in the public transportation. You would never hear Azerbaijan, you know, speech.

Anyway, everything, all the business was conducted in Russian. Russian was the first language. We would learn Azerbaijan language as a second language in school, but no one really ever used that language for communication purposes. So then one day, they decided they don’t want us; they want us to get out, because we are Christians. And they started to kill people. And they started in Sumgait.

SAS: Started where?
LA: Sumgait. It’s a second industrial city in Azerbaijan. And it was a big industrial city. A lot of Armenians lived there. So they started from that city, and they basically just came to people’s homes, and they burned them, and they killed them, and they tortured them.

SAS: And this was which year?
BS: ’88, did you say?
LA: Yeah, it was—it started in February, February, 1988. So, because of that, a lot of Armenians started to move out, because they didn’t
believe in our government. They didn’t believe in Russian government, because they didn’t do anything to protect those people. So people started just to get out from this country, you know, republic? So we moved. My family, my husband, and I, we moved to Armenia. And we lived there for like four years, but Armenia—the government in Armenia helped us a lot, of those refugees. [Sobs] But yes, they helped, but after the earthquake come, in December 1988, a lot of people were left homeless, and you know, think everything, the government wouldn’t be able to help everybody. So we decided to apply, and use this opportunity to come to the United States. [Sobs]

BS: Where in Armenia did you live?

LA: We lived in a little town called Abovian. It’s fifteen kilometers from—

BS: Yerevan.

LA: Now, it’s a big city, too. So it was very nice, just we lived in students’ dormitory. They give us apartment. But because of all that earthquake, and a lot of people who needed help, I realized that the government wouldn’t be able to help me in my lifetime. So I didn’t want to take chances. I had two little kids. And that’s why I decided to use this opportunity to come to the States. So we applied. We had to go to Moscow, to the Embassy, and I filled the application. And that’s how we ended up here. So we went for interview, and then we came here. Our sponsors here were Catholic Charities here in downtown Hartford. They helped us to get our first jobs, and we knew English. I used to be a programmer, so I knew English. So I didn’t have a lot of practice, but I could read it and write, and that’s how they found me a job.
SAS: What kind of job did they find for you?

LA: For first time data entry at Cigna Corporation, here. But then after a couple years, I went for another position. And so.

BS: Now, can we go back with your family for a minute? When did they go to Azerbaijan? You said after the original Genocide?

LA: You mean my grandparents?

BS: All the way.

LA: My grandparents, they moved to Azerbaijan for different reasons. My grandmother, my dad’s side. She was born in Turkey, and her family moved to Azerbaijan because they were going to reunite with some other family members. That’s how she ended up there. My grandfather on my dad’s side, he was born in Karabakh.

SAS: Where?


BS: Oh, the area that’s contested?

LA: Remote area in Azerbaijan.

BS: Yes, the one we heard about.

LA: A lot of Armenians lived there, and they always lived there. But the whole thing with Azerbaijan independence, and genocide in twentieth century, started from that specific area, because they wanted to be independent from Azerbaijan government. And Azerbaijan government, they wanted to keep controlling that area, you know? And that’s how the whole thing started. But my grandfather, he was born there. His family was there. So they got married there. This was my grandparents, and then the whole family. My grandparents on my mom’s side, they’re both from Nagorno-Karabakh, and they had
families there. So that’s how we ended up living in that part of Russia.

In the Soviet Union, you couldn’t just freely move from one part to another, because you had that registration in your passport, and you would get a job according to the registration of certain areas, you know? If you would move to another part of country, no one would give you a job, because you don’t have that registration in this area. So that’s why it wasn’t really up to us, to leave. It’s basically where you’re born, you live there for your entire life. So.

BS: No, in 1988, was the reason that they started attacking Armenians because of Nagorno-Karabakh?

LA: Yeah, Nagorno-Karabakh, when all this perestroika and all this—you probably know.

BS: Yes.

LA: When Gorbachev announced that we’re going to go have Perestroika, no Communist Party anymore, and all these nice things, every small republic or independent—Nagorno-Karabakh was called independent sub-republic of Azerbaijan, but it was within Azerbaijan country. And the Azerbaijan government dominated on that republic. That’s why they wanted to get out, and they wanted to do the—industry and agriculture. They wanted to have independence from that thing. And they never said they want to reunite with Armenia, so they just want their own independence. And obviously, Azerbaijan government doesn’t like that, and that’s why they started the politics against Armenians, and all these killings, and all this thing.

BS: I see. So when you applied to come to the U.S., was it hard to get a visa, and such?
LA: When I applied, I applied, actually, in 1990, and they called me for an interview in ’91, so—or, no, ’92. So you just go, and you just have an interview. You have to prove that you are a refugee from the Azerbaijan country, and you lost everything, which we did. And you just have that conversation with one of the officers, in the Embassy, United States Embassy in Moscow. And then they would determine, based on that interview, if you are eligible for status of refugee or not, and they would give you specific documents to get into the country.

BS: And when you went from Azerbaijan to Armenia, was it hard to get the permission to do that from the Soviets?

LA: No, not really, because Armenia used to send airplanes. [Pause] [Sobs] They would send airplanes to get Armenians, free of charge, to Armenia.

BS: There was an airlift, uh-huh?

LA: Yeah. They would—they know that they are going to send a lot of free airplanes just to save those people’s lives. And the Azerbaijan government, they created a mess in the airport. They wouldn’t let people—they made everybody buy tickets. They made everybody to spend money, and they were saying that Armenian government doesn’t care about us, and stuff like that.

BS: Now, who was saying that?

LA: The representatives of the government, you know, police.

BS: The Soviet?

LA: Yeah. In Azerbaijan, not Russia.

BS: Oh, Azerbaijan?
LA: I had interference with the police in the airport, because they wouldn’t let us get onto the plane. And they would make fun of us, and our last names, and stuff like that, so. [Weeps]

BS: I understand. What about your husband? Was he at the same time getting permission?

LA: Yeah, we moved at the same time. So we didn’t need permission; we just wanted to leave, you know? If we wouldn’t leave, they would kill us, so we just left.

BS: When did you get married?

LA: We got married in 1982, in Azerbaijan, yeah. But we just decided to leave, because like I said, if we would have stayed, they would kill us. There’s no way we would survive. You know, sooner or later they would kill us. So we just packed our bags, whatever we could take, and we just left. We went to the airport. We bought a ticket. We got onto the plane, and we left. That’s all.

BS: Okay.

LA: But they were trying to create a mess in the airport. They were trying to say that there’s no plane. They would lock the doors. They wouldn’t let us to the terminals, and they would do things like that. That’s why I had that interference. A lot of people were with babies in their hands, and a lot of old people. They would come and they had that—they call it Naronii Front. Those are people who would go and kill Armenians. They would give them addresses of all Armenian people who lived. They have maps, and they—

SAS: These people were called what?

LA: Naronii Front. People’s Military, if you translate. But in Russian, called Naronii Front. The government, obviously, police and other
government officials, they very much were just participating in these events. They would give them maps, and they would mark on the maps certain areas where Armenians live. And they would have list of Armenian people with certain addresses, you know, phone numbers. And they would come to your house. They’d knock the door out, and they would kill people.

BS: Okay, now let’s—you come over to the United States, ultimately.
LA: ’92, April, ’92.
BS: In ’92. And what were your first impressions of the U.S. when you came here?
LA: [Laughs] First impression was freedom. [Sobs, pause] And safety. You know, because we knew nobody here. No one will come after us, because of our religion, or national origin, or any of that. So, that was what was the first impression, you know. But then, we knew that we can get a job, and we can, you know, support our families.

SAS: And you had children with you at that time?
LA: Yes, I have two daughters. My oldest daughter was nine years old, and my youngest was two. So it was just four of us.

BS: Where did you live when you first came?
LA: I remember it. It was real bad. [Laughs] Yeah.

BS: Where did you live when you first came?
LA: Oh, like I said, we got a sponsor. This organization who supported these tragic refugee from Azerbaijan, they would find us a sponsor. And our sponsor—we didn’t know where we were going. We could end up in any part of the United States. So I don’t know how they picked the place for us to live, but they gave us paperwork, and it says that we’re going to Hartford, Connecticut, and our sponsor is going to
be Catholic Charities here in downtown Hartford. So that sponsor, they rented us an apartment. It was like on Washington Street, across from Hartford Hospital. So we lived there from April through November, and then once we got—they found us a job, so we both started to work in August. And so we could afford our own apartment, so we moved to West Hartford then.

BS: Okay, and the jobs that they found for you, you said?

LA: I started to work at Cigna. I had a temporary position at Cigna, but then I applied, and I moved on from one position to another by myself. But they helped me to get this first job, because I didn’t know how to apply to job. I didn’t know how to write a resume. I did not know anything about that. So they helped us with all these details.

BS: And your husband? Did he get a job, too?

LA: My husband, too, got a job at small factory in Hartford. And then once he—

SAS: What kind of factory?

BS: A small factory.

LA: It’s a small factory, making some plastic things, some cups, something like that.

BS: What did he do?

LA: We both are engineers. We both have master’s degrees. I have master’s degree in computer science, and he has master’s degree in electronics. He is a very good electronic engineer, and so because of his language, they couldn’t find him anything closer to that position. But he found some jobs later in his life, and he moved, and now he works for a very good company.

BS: Doing electronic work?
LA: Yes, he is a maintenance manager, so he does a lot of things for this company.

BS: But you had English before?

LA: I learned English at school. In Russia, everybody had to learn one of the foreign languages. So in our school, it was English, and we started to learn it from the fifth grade. So I really liked the language, and then in the university we had to pick one of the foreign languages, so I kept continuing learning English. So, it just was my hobby, you know! [Laughs]

BS: But your husband did not have the language?

LA: He also learned, but he didn’t pay too much attention to that subject, because if you’re going to live in Russia all your life, and you’re not going to go abroad, and you wouldn’t interfere with anything, you know, which has to do with foreigners, or any foreign companies, you don’t really need to use that. So that’s why he didn’t, never really paid attention. But he learned very quickly, you know, when we moved here.

BS: What about your children? Did they—?

LA: My children, they started to learn English in school. My older daughter, she went to the fourth grade when we moved here, and she had English second language class when she started school in September. But then when we moved to West Hartford, in November, they told me that she doesn’t need that class anymore, because she’s really good. They did some tests, and they said—I remember, because I was concerned. I wanted to have her continue having English second language class. And they said, “Look, her score is 98.5, like everyone else’s, so she doesn’t really need that,” so. My
younger daughter started Kindercare, actually at my workplace. And she picked up very quickly. She was like four when she started. They don’t have any problems. They don’t have any accent. When people are talking to me, they’re asking me sometimes, “Where are you from?” My kids, not the case. [Laughs]

SAS: And what education have they continued through?
LA: Oh, my older daughter, she graduated from Boston University, and she is working in New York in public relations department, communications department. She has her master’s in journalism. She is a very good writer. My younger daughter, she graduated from UConn, actually. Her major was history.

BS: Her major was history?
LA: Yeah, her major was history. And now she graduated from Columbia University, teaching school, and she wants to be a history teacher.

BS: Oh! That’s good. It’s hard to find jobs, but it’s good!
LA: Yeah, she’s looking for a job.

SAS: What years was she at UConn?
BS: Yeah, when did she graduate from UConn?
LA: She had—the last year she was at Columbia, so the year before, 2010 she graduated.

BS: I see.
LA: Yeah, she graduated from UConn.
BS: Very good.
BS: Okay, now in terms of your meeting people in Connecticut when you were here—when, by the way, do you move to Farmington?
LA: We moved to Farmington in 1996.
BS: 1996.
LA: November ‘96, yeah.
BS: Did you buy a home?
LA: Yeah, we bought this house, because we were thinking, since we had been moving all the time from one place to another, so it was like, too much. So we decided to buy a house, and we were looking for better schools for our kids. So we did our little search, and that’s how we bought this house, and moved in here.
BS: Okay, so how did you—did you initially make friends with people when you first came?
LA: When we first came, we went to church, you know. For Armenians, everything starts from the church! [Laughs] It’s our culture; it’s our tradition. If you need help, you go to church, so. Our church helped us a lot. They had English second language course for us every Sunday, at the church. And they helped with any advice we could, you know, ask for, like, “How do you do your taxes?”
BS: This is Saint George Church?
LA: Saint George Armenian Church. Yeah, at that time we had another priest, and they set up a group of people. I think the initiative came from Women’s Guild. They had a group of people who were dedicated to help all these people who come from Azerbaijan and Russia. So you could go to them for any advice that you need. Like say, “I want to move to another apartment. How do I find it? Where do I look? How do I go and talk to people? What do I do?” Or, “I need a daycare for my child. Where do I find that?” Everything! Or even, say, “I need some clothes for my kids. Would you help me to get that?” So they set up room in our parish house, and they would
collect clothes and everything, like furniture, and china, and all the kitchen accessories, from all Armenians. And people would donate things that they don’t need or use for—even money. And that’s how they helped us.

BS: I see. And so now, did you go to church every Sunday?
LA: Yeah, we go to church every Sunday.
BS: Okay. And did you make friends there?
LA: Yes, of course, because we all knew each other, and people who moved from Baku, we don’t really have a lot of relatives here, so we are like a family. So we invite each other and everybody to each of our families’ events, weddings.
BS: And do you have much interaction with people who are not Armenian?
LA: Yes. You know, from work, at workplace, I have a lot of friends. And other people. You meet people, you know. You go to places. You meet people; suddenly you become friends. Even like not related to your work or church, or I don’t know—your kids’ friends, say. You know, like you meet people like that. So like everybody else, we’re normal people! [Laughs] We do normal things. The only difference is that we came from another country. Otherwise—

SAS: Are there many Armenians living in Farmington?
LA: Actually there is another family who came from Baku, and they lived on the next street.
BS: Oh!
LA: Yeah, they were there. And yeah, there are a few families who live in Farmington—not specifically who came from Russia, or Armenia, or Baku, but some Armenians, yeah. They live in Farmington.
BS: Did your children go to Armenian Sunday School?
LA: Yes. Both of my kids, they graduated from Armenian Sunday School, from our church.

BS: Do they speak Armenian?
LA: My older daughter, she went to Armenian school when we lived in Armenia. She spoke Armenian. But when we moved here, she—she forgot. But she still understands, and she can keep up with small conversations. She wouldn’t be able to write and read fluently in Armenian, but she knows the language.

SAS: And do they continue to go to church on Sundays?
LA: Yeah, they go. Not every Sunday, because it has to do with their schedule, like my younger daughter, she goes to Columbia University. But they go to our cathedral in New York.

BS: Uh-huh. Now, do you keep up with events in Armenia, or in other words, what’s going on there?
LA: Yeah, we travel to Armenia. We still have some family in Armenia.

SAS: How often do you go?
LA: We go for vacation. You know, in the United States, you can’t take a month vacation. But we just went, actually, this summer, for two weeks. I can’t say we participate. I don’t know what you mean by events. We don’t participate in their life, but we help Armenia. We sponsor some events, donate some money to different projects. They are trying to help ecology in Armenia. So we participate there; we donate money to that project.

So then we sponsor kids who are orphans in Armenia, who lost their parents for some reasons, and their other family members, they couldn’t support those kids. So we donate money to that project, and
they help those kids to get on their feet. They give them education, and they feed them, and buy them everything that they need.

BS: Do you do this on a systematic basis?
LA: Yeah, we do it all the time.

SAS: Now, there are some newspapers that come out weekly, and a magazine, *Yerevan Magazine*, that talks about matters relevant to Armenia. Do you get any of those?
LA: We get Armenian weekly newspaper, which is coming from California, and yeah, they have news of Armenia. So, also you don’t necessarily have to get any publications, because you can read everything on the internet.

BS: [Laughs]
LA: You don’t need to get newspapers.
SAS: This is true.
LA: So we are pretty much aware of what’s going on in our country. I can’t say that, like I said, I don’t know what you mean do you participate in the event of that country. We really don’t, because we’re not there. We can’t vote. I don’t know. We can’t, you know, do things like that.
SAS: But you keep up with what’s going on?
LA: But we keep up. We know—we are aware of what’s going on, like I said, because we still have friends and family who live there, and we connect with them. And yeah, because it’s our country.
SAS: How do you think the country is doing?
LA: I think it’s doing better. It could have been much, much more better, but slowly, it’s getting better.
SAS: Why do you think it’s not progressing as rapidly as you think it could?
LA: I think because Armenia is still small country, and geographically it’s located between Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey. And it doesn’t have its own transportation ways that have direct connections with the outside world. It has to go through Turkey, Georgia, or Azerbaijan. Obviously, Turkey and Azerbaijan countries, they block this, so the only way out for Armenia to do any interactions, like in any way—I mean, industrial and anything else, is through Georgia, and airways. So that’s why I said it could have been much more better. Or, Iran. So Russia helps a lot, you know, and they have good connections with—I mean, good relationship, I should say, with Iran. So, that helps. But like I said, it could have been much more better if we wouldn’t have that constant problem with Azerbaijan and Turkey.

BS: With respect to what we would call issues of gender, the issues of dealing with women—

LA: In Armenia?

BS: In Armenia and here, do you find much difference?

LA: I’d say that out of question, we never had gender problem living in Armenia. Everybody has same rights. Armenia is a Christian country, and like every other Christian country, they respect women’s rights. I didn’t feel that I have something, somebody is like, you know, relates to me because I’m a woman, and I have less rights than men. No, it doesn’t exist. No. Same as in United States. That’s not a question, not a problem.

BS: What about here, in the church? Are women treated the same as men?

LA: Yes. We have Women’s Guild. Our Women’s Guild does a lot of things for our church. We sponsor different programs in helping
Armenia. We’re raising a lot of money from our church. We are very active in our church.

BS: Now, did you become a U.S. citizen?
LA: Yes.
BS: Talk a little about that process. When did you become a citizen?
LA: So we moved here in 1992, so we got our green cards, because we got our status right away. Our sponsors, they helped us to get the green card and then after living here for five years, which is according to United States law, we submitted our applications for the citizenship. And we had to go and had interview for citizenship, like everyone else. So, that’s how we became citizens.

BS: What kinds of things did they ask you?
LA: Oh, they ask you about American history, American government, questions like that. They wanted to make sure that you can read and write in English. My husband and I, it was just both of us taking that test. But our kids were under sixteen, so they didn’t have to do the test.

BS: So they became citizens?
LA: They became citizens automatically, because we got that.
BS: Is this something of other people who migrated? Is this common, to become citizens?
LA: Yes, yes. Everybody who—I believe everybody. At least from my surroundings, everybody got citizenship.
BS: Okay. Now, when you go back to Armenia, you say went on a vacation this summer.
LA: Yes.
BS: In your own head, are you comparing the U.S. and Armenia?
LA: You can’t really compare, because it’s really two different countries, and Armenia is much different now than it used to be, when we moved here, you know. Because—

SAS: How is it different?

LA: It’s much, much more better. It’s independent. They try to develop their own industry. It’s mostly agriculture, and scientific country—they have a lot of scientific companies and computers, and programming, stuff like that. So, but they rebuilt all the earthquake areas. They were totally destroyed—a couple cities, towns, and villages. They rebuilt. With help from outside they rebuilt those, and it’s beautiful. They are building new houses, new churches.

SAS: Now economically, do you think Armenia is better now than it was under the Soviets?

LA: It’s better, but the progress is going very slowly, because of that geographical location.

BS: Oh, oh, I see. Okay. In terms of your activity with respect to—did you engage in any associations outside of the church, voluntary associations? Are you active in any kind of groups, or anything?

LA: Not really, because first of all, due to the time. We both have full-time jobs, and we are both very active in the church life. So we do so much for our church, so that we don’t really have—

BS: What kinds of things do you do with the church?

LA: I participate in Women’s Guild, and my husband is a member of Parish Council. So we do a lot of fundraising, for the church, and we’re taking care of our church. So having full-time jobs, and doing those things for the church, you don’t really have time to do anything else. I mean, we donate money. Outside of our church, we donate
money to the United Way Campaign, and I don’t know, like cancer awareness—groups like that. But other than that, like active participation, going there and doing something? Not really, because we don’t really have time.

BS: Okay. And did you say, in terms of your job, you’re still with Cigna?
LA: Yeah, I’m still with Cigna.
BS: Still with Cigna. Okay.
SAS: Now, have your daughters gotten married?
LA: The older one is getting married next summer. She just got engaged.
SAS: Is he Armenian?
LA: Yeah, he’s Armenian.
SAS: Where did she meet him?
LA: They met in New York. They both work in New York, and they met through the church. They met in church.
SAS: So, does she have a strong sense of being Armenian?
LA: Yes.
BS: Now, was he born in the U.S., or is he—?
LA: No. [laughs]
BS: No?
LA: No, he was born in Armenia, but he moved here because he went to college here. And then, you know, after graduation he found a job, and he stayed.
SAS: And do you think your younger daughter will be looking for an Armenian husband?
LA: I hope so! [laughs] I hope so.
BS: Okay. Let’s see. Anything else that comes to mind? Oh, your mother. Now, when did she come? Did she come with you?
LA: No, she didn’t come with me, because it was just our family who got status to come to United States. But once we became citizens, we applied for a green card for our parents, and they got permission.

SAS: So she was living in Baku at the time?

LA: No, they moved to Armenia. We all moved to Armenia. So my parents, they lived in Armenia before they came here, because they were old. And again, the whole thing with the earthquake, and all these people who were left homeless, and they needed medical help and stuff like that. So I decided that they don’t have too many years to live, so I just wanted them to come here, and have some life here.

BS: And how have they—how has she adjusted?

LA: She’s very well. My parents, they adjusted very well. My mom, she can’t read in English. She can’t speak very fluently, but she speaks Armenian. She goes to church; she has her friends. And so, she’s good.

BS: Is she able to do much outside the house, or no?

LA: Yeah, she’s very independent. She doesn’t live with us. She just came to visit today. She lives in her own apartment. She lives in one of the assisted living in West Hartford. There are a lot of Russian people who live there, so they all know each other.

BS: These are Russian Jews, and—?

LA: Yeah, from Jewish community, but because they all lived in the same area, they basically know each other, you know. They get some assistance from the government, and so their life is pretty much, very good! [Laughs]

BS: That is good.
SAS: This has been extremely interesting, and we thank you very much for speaking with us.

LA: Yeah? You’re welcome.

BS: Let’s see if there’s anything else that we want to touch on. Let me just check here. Is there anything that we haven’t asked you about, that you think we should ask you about?

LA: I don’t know! [Laughs] You can ask me anything.

BS: Okay, well, I think that we’ve covered much of what we wanted to talk to you about. And I guess we will thank you on that note, and stop here.

LA: You’re welcome.

BS: Unless there’s something you want to add?

LA: I just want to say that we are very happy that we made that decision to come here, and we had that opportunity to raise our kids here.

BS: Okay. I think on that note, we’ll stop, and we thank you very much.

SAS: Thank you.

LA: You’re welcome.

BS: We thank you very much.

LA: Sorry I become emotional.

End of Interview