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From Immigrant to Ethnic: Interview with Nishan Mikaelian by Joseph Conforti

Nishan Mikaelian

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Rhode Island College
ETHNIC STUDIES PROJECT

Oral History Interview # 4

with

Nishan Mikaelian
April 15, 1976

By Joseph Conforti

Tape 1 Side 1

7 Remembers being born in village with 350 families. He was there until he was 12, then they were expelled.

12 They were expelled by Turks because they were Armenian. He says Turks had conquered the land and were afraid that Armenians were smarter and would find ways to reclaim their land so Turks sent them away.

26 Life in village--just like farmers here--but no equipment. Work done by hand and used oxen. He did a little work but everyone had a task according to age and ability.

40 Went to school at age 5. Attended until 1914--about 6 years. When war began, schools were closed.

51 Father was farmer, whole family. He was only an infant when his father died. Family had land, were tenant farmers.

59 One of his uncles came to America and sent aid.

62 Everyone helped to farm the land. Mother cooked, everyone else helped in fields.

70 He was satisfied with life there.

78 Can't compare values and customs to life here. Didn't have much, just got by, didn't dress very well. Describes the life of the village.

88 Biggest difference: clothing, houses, education somewhat different.

97 House in village. Had 5 or 6 different buildings for various activities--cooking, sleeping, barns.
Nishan Mikaelian

111 Owned house. Everyone in village owned their houses.

124 Mostly he knew only people from his own village. He went to a few neighboring villages on errands.

135 His aunt lived with them. Families stay together until the parents pass away then property is divided.

142 People were very friendly in village. For example, a wedding included everyone in village without special invitation.

164 His father had 2 brothers and 2 sisters. Had many relatives in his village. Saw them daily.

171 Had church in village and 2 schools, one for boys and one for girls. People used to go to church twice a day.

182 Church had special feasts. Church was very important.

206 Church held community together.

216 In 1914, schools were closed. Soldiers stayed there. They were thrown out of the country in May 1915.

230 Soldiers gave them only a few hours notice. Wanted to destroy Armenians. Cleared village in 3 days. First day 150 families, second day 150, third day 50 families. They left important people for last.

261 He was happy to get opportunity to see new places. Didn't realize difficulties they would have. A few young people were shot but at age 12 it meant nothing to him. People were made to march out of the village and just keep walking out of the country.

272 Young people shot for no reason. They just wanted to destroy Armenians.

283 He took very little with him. When he arrived in Syria he had nothing but the clothes he was wearing. He was the only one left of his entire family.

295 He was put in an orphanage in Syria.

298 His older sister and his cousin couldn't walk anymore so they had to leave them. They couldn't even stop to bury them.

312 Same thing happened to his mother--she couldn't walk farther. She told them to go on and just leave her.
Nishan Mikaelian

317 Left village in May and arrived in Syria alone. This happened to many.

346 Orphanage he was in had 2,000 children. 1½ million killed.

359 Left in 1920 when he was 17. His wife was in the orphanage also. They married and came to America. She had brother and he had an uncle here.

375 Uncle came to America in 1911. He had spent 6 months in Istanbul and then came to America. Her brother came in 1913.

393 When he came had to get passport in Istanbul. Had eye problems and they were treated there. Then they went to Greece and stayed a month, then to America.

406 His relatives were living in Providence so they came here.

420 His uncle provided money for him to come to America.

429 He spent 15 days at Ellis Island—bad in sense of being anxious to get out and come to Rhode Island.

460 People come here now because it's free and because of opportunities. His case was different—he had nowhere else to go: no country, no home.

475 Had no idea about freedoms here—they didn't mean anything to him then. He just wanted place to live.

500 Trip: ship from Greece, "Calabria," used to be troop ship. Took 20 days to cross to New York, not comfortable.

522 Were many Armenians on that ship, now there are quotas.

Tape 1 Side 2

1 Lived in Orms Street area until 1963 then bought home in Cranston.

5 Lived in Detroit in 1928-29. Worked for Ford there and then returned to Providence when uncle here died.

10 Got job in Detroit through cousins—had lost job here.

19 Left family in Providence and went to visit, got job, moved family to Detroit, lived with cousins for that year.

29 When uncle in Providence died, they called him. He came alone then decided to get work here, moved family back.
From 1921-28 he worked in wire works here. Had many friends here, wife's father here, hoped to get job back at wire company.

Large Armenian community in Douglas-Orms area. Most didn't speak English when they came so they looked for other Armenians for help with language, with shopping, with everyday things.

Helped one another. Went shopping with friends who knew more English. He helped some in that way--he had learned some English in orphanage.

In getting job, needed someone to help with questions, application.

He belonged to 3 organizations: group from his village, educational group and Armenian Revolutionary Federation.

Mostly friendly with people from own village but also with all Armenians. Some truth to assertion that they didn't learn English faster because they had things provided by other Armenians--no need to learn English.

Had Armenian grocery stores.

Would go downtown for suits, shoes.

At least half a dozen groceries, had barber shop in area.

Church was not important at all till 1930's. Not the same as in old country. People lost their faith because of 1915 massacres. Used church when they had to--for weddings, baptisms.

His grandfather was a priest but he doesn't go to church because he saw so many hardships when very young. They were good people yet bad things happened to them.

Now new generation goes to church--didn't experience massacre. He encourages his children and grandchildren to go.

People tried to keep old-world customs. Easter time, painted eggs. But he thinks it's diminishing, very little left now.

Douglas Avenue mostly Jews, a few Irish and Polish. Italians were in Eagle Park area, only a few on Douglas Avenue.

They were friendly with other ethnic groups--they were so happy to be in U.S., they tried to get along with everyone.
Their neighbors were understanding despite language problems.

He was happy living in that neighborhood—he appreciated everything he had then because it was so much better than in Armenia.

No electricity, no plumbing in house he first lived in here.

People always found a way to communicate.

Worked in American Electric Works from 1922-26. Then he was out of work. Worked in restaurant for short time, then to Detroit.

Man came in 1911 and helped him get his job.

Lived with uncle about a year then rented small house for $7. a month off Chalkstone Avenue. Lived there 2 or 3 years. Then moved to Danforth Street.

Didn't have many things to move around. Friends would help; hired horse and wagon to move.

Moved from first house because too small. Both his daughter and son born there.

Rented house with electricity next—paid $12. a month.

Sometimes moved when rent was going to be increased even by $2. or $3.—couldn't afford the increase.

Lived at 65 Douglas Avenue after return from Detroit—$26. a month. Uncle who died had lived there and they moved in.

Had some trouble getting job after Detroit. Got job in restaurant as vegetable man then as short order cook, chef's helper, cook for 8 years. Would keep checking at wire works, finally got job back there, till retirement.

Didn't have much difficulty getting restaurant job because man thought he was dependable and the cook wasn't—Irishman who got drunk often and he didn't drink.

Learned job by doing it. He got job by going around and he had a friend who worked there who told him about it.

Lived in house uncle had lived in for 8 years.

Lived at 328 Douglas Avenue for 8 years, then at 446 Douglas Avenue for 20 years.

Bought house in Cranston in 1963.
Nishan Mikaelian

Worked at electrical company for 31 years.

Changes in community--few Armenians left, houses torn down, highway.

Tape 2 Side 1

For the last 30 years Armenians have moved out of area.

Neighborhood still important. Still have Armenian club at 209 Douglas Avenue. Bought building and established club so that retired Armenians can spend time together instead of staying home all day.

Another club nearby--also for socializing, talk about old days.

Armenian church on Jefferson Street. Also one on Broadway and one on Franklin Street.

Only one Armenian store left in area. His daughter goes there to buy meat.

Still a sense of a community there even though most people are gone, memories still important.

He goes to the club especially during cold weather.

Was not difficult for him when he moved to Cranston because he had car and could go back easily to visit friends, go to club. To him, that area is like hometown.

His children are totally Americanized he feels. He tries to speak a few words in Armenian to them--good to have another language.

His children speak Armenian well

He belongs to ARF. Has been a member over 40 years. Works for Armenian cause. It was organized in 1890.

About 70 active members in Rhode Island. Have some members who were born here, but most from old country.

Have a group for younger people, AYP--up to 25 years of age. Have group for 10-16 year olds as well.

Some of younger people have an understanding of what the older generation went through in Armenia.
Nishan Mikaelian

176 Future of Armenian community: As Americans the future is very good.

188 Newcomers from Middle East have helped renew Armenian heritage. They speak Armenian very well and that will help preserve culture here a little longer.

198 New generation born here are 99% American and he says everybody is American here anyway. He feels the future is in Armenia.

204 He visited Armenia 3 years ago. People living under Communist regime but they're not Communist. Americans are helpers now for the Armenians.

Interview with his daughter

225 She attended Armenian school sponsored by the parents. Paid whatever they could afford. Held 3 days a week from 4-6, after regular school.

232 She enjoyed going. Father worked nights so children rarely saw him. He required them to write something everyday in Armenian.

239 She found learning another language helpful in other school work. They studied language, history, music.

253 She wanted to preserve her culture because she knew what her parents had gone through. She learned about the culture at home, was encouraged to belong to youth groups, lived in Armenian community.

262 School was on Douglas Avenue over old fire station. Still have a school at church hall on Broadway.

276 School now on Saturdays for 3 hours and she thinks children get less from it.