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From Immigrant to Ethnic: Interview with Sarah Leylegian by Joseph Conforti

Sarah Leylegian

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Rhode Island College

ETHNIC STUDIES PROJECT

Oral History Interview # 5

with

Sarah Leyelegian

April 15, 1976

By Joseph Conforti

Tape 1 Side 1

- 5 She doesn't remember much about Armenia because she was only 6 when massacres began.
- 10 Was left alone--father killed, mother died. Was taken in by different families for 4 years.
- 20 Group of Armenian men disguised as Turks took her to another city in Turkey to an orphanage.
- 28 Refugees took her to Turkey.
- 35 After the war, there was a depression, not enough to eat.
- 42 The family she was with at one time had stolen her away from another family. The woman beat her every day--she wanted her to run away.
- 57 She knew the route to the city so she left early in the morning. She was 8 years old then, had nowhere to go, hid when she heard people coming.
- 85 She found refugees all over the city. An old Turkish woman took her in. They had 3 children, she helped care for them.
- 115 Woman's brother came and felt she was too young and frail to work for the family so one of their neighbors took her in.
- 138 She met an Armenian girl who helped her and told her about an orphanage where she could live. Arrangements made by friend to send her to orphanage. She ran away from family but they searched for her.
- 186 She hid from family then caught up with the wagon going to the orphanage and left for another city.
- 226 She stayed with another woman for about a week then went to orphanage. She had no memories of her life in Armenia.

Sarah Leylegian

- 260 She felt safe in the orphanage. She went to school while there. They lived in tents on outskirts of city, used to stay in school building during war. Food scarce but evenly divided.
- 308 In orphanage for 6 years. After 3 years there, her father's brother discovered she was alive. He was in America. He had come here in 1909.
- 352 He sent money to support her in the orphanage. She was the only one left of a 14-member family.
- 370 Her family had lived in a village and were farmers. The whole family had lived together.
- 380 Family had land, winery, many animals--not poor.
- 397 She came to America when she was 16 in 1925 or 1926. She went to night school in New York and lived there with her uncle.
- 410 Her uncle had a store and she worked there. Lived with them for 3½ years.
- 430 She married an Armenian. Her uncle had moved here from New York--to Narragansett Boulevard. She married here and came to her present home as a bride.
- 448 Uncle had 3 children and wanted to live in better surroundings. He was not well-educated but was self-made man.
- 464 He was not living in Armenian community in New York. His store was on 33rd Street.
- 478 Uncle had lived in Providence until 1920. Returned to Constantinople to get married then went to New York.
- 489 When he first came in 1909, he went to Providence because he had relatives here. They were all bachelors when they came. They rented a house and one would stay home and cook. They intended to go back to Armenia but after the massacres they gave up that idea, married and settled down.
- 514 She was married in Providence in 1929. Neighborhood was mostly Armenian. New house father-in-law had built for his family was her first home here.

Tape 1 Side 2

- 3 Sense of community--she was isolated for 3½ years with uncle so when she married she really didn't know anyone.

Sarah Leyelegian

- 9 Her husband worked at YMCA.
- 12 She never went out. Sometimes went for walks with husband but otherwise stayed in house. She thinks most of people were Armenians but there were some Jewish tenants.
- 24 She didn't belong to or join any organizations at that time.
- 26 She never worked outside the home. Her husband had a restaurant and she helped for 9 years. After marriage, they moved to New York for awhile. Husband had store and she helped.
- 32 Moved back to New York because her husband wanted a store. Stayed for 2 years then left because unsafe area for eldest son who was 2 years old when they went to New York.
- 48 Returned to Providence, to same neighborhood.
- 53 She has 2 sons.
- 71 Changes in neighborhood--more blacks, especially in projects; fewer Armenians now.
- 80 Still likes the community, happy there. Active in Armenian Relief Society for 12 years. She never has had occasion to ask them for help.
- 110 She's chairman of her chapter of the Society. Conscious of war in Lebanon. Collected money to send aid.
- 134 Society helps newcomers to settle in Providence.
- 140 Active in church now. Church very important to Armenian community. Historically, nation governed by head of church because they have no government.
- 156 Community: younger generation more aware of customs and heritage, nationality.
- 170 One of her sons was asked to change his name to get a job and he refused.
- 184 Grandchildren belong to Armenian youth group, try to learn language.
- 196 She reads Armenian daily newspaper from Boston.
- 209 When she should have been learning about Armenian culture as a child, she was with Turks.
- 214 Had forgotten language but learned it again at orphanage.

Sarah Lylegian

- 228 She thinks future of Armenian culture good--younger generation getting more interested, she's hopeful.
- 236 Younger people might lose language, but they'll keep the culture.
- 240 Her children never went to Armenian school. Her sons speak Armenian, know history, read widely about it.