

Transcription

Narrator: Andrew Hagopian

Interviewer: Rance Olliges

Date & Place: November 21, 2001 – St. Gregory Armenian Community Center

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A]

Rance Olliges: The date is November 21, 2001. I am interviewing Andrew Hagopian at the Armenian Community Center. My name is Rance Olliges. This is tape one, side A. And Andy could you give me your full name, your date of birth, and your place of birth?

Andrew Hagopian: Andrew Hapopian, January 24, 1923, born in Granite City.

Olliges: Okay, I would like to start out and could you describe for me what your family life was growing up in Lincoln Place, and what your family life is like now?

Hagopian: Yes, of course my parents immigrated. My father came here in 1913 and stayed for seven years working and saving money. And then he went back to Istanbul where he met my mother and they married and then came back and of course they settled in Granite City because there was work here for people who were not familiar with the language and really had no financial means other than a job. And I had, I have, I had three sisters. I'm the oldest, and two of them have passed since and there is only my youngest sister Mylet, and she lives in Detroit, Michigan. Our family life was all built around the family and around the community where we lived,

and Lincoln Place. We attended all the local schools, and our, we didn't have a Church in our community at the time. So, back in 1954 we were able to establish a Church in the community which was very vital to the maintenance of the community. My life, I graduated high school after like a year I guess, a year and a half, Uncle Sam called on me, so I went into the service and during that time, during the war all the local people here were working, and volunteering, and doing everything they could to help the war effort. And I was very fortunate I got into the Air Force and I was commissioned as Second Lieutenant as a bombardier on a B-17 flying fortress. I served three years in the military. I, we flew twenty-one missions out of Italy into Austria, Yugoslavia, and Germany, Northern Italy. And after my twenty-one missions were completed why the war ended and fortunately I came back home. And after about nine months of laying around doing nothing, I decided I better go to school. I went to Carbondale, Southern Illinois and attended one year there, and then I transferred to the U of I in Champaign an additional two years and I got a B.S. in Marketing and Accounting. And I graduated in 1949, now I'm giving you my personal history here. [chuckles] Maybe that's not exactly what you want.

Olliges: No, that's good.

Hagopian: And in 1949, I graduated the first part of June and I got married in the middle of June to Angeline Manoogian who was my first wife, unfortunately she is deceased. And I was very active in our local

community. We had political organizations, and of course we had the Church. Like I said, that was one of the main goals after I came back from service and school. Well, we started working on that in 1954. We did establish our first Church in Lincoln Place. The Armenian community was a very close knit community and it was really enjoyable growing up in Lincoln Place because in the early years, in the 30s we were set apart from the rest of the community. We were living on the wrong side of the tracks so to speak and so we hung together real well. And I stayed active community-wise, we started having bingos and rented facilities in Venice. And after about three or four years of that, why we decided we were going to build this community center. We had purchased five acres of property out here and so we built this community center and with the thought that we need something that'll produce revenue so we could build our new Church because we were occupying an old abandoned Bulgarian Orthodox Church. We refurbished it and used it what thirty years. Thirty? Let's see, no forty years we used that church. Forty-four actually because in ninety-eight we had accumulated enough interest and money to build a Church on the same property that we had the community center. Okay, now let's go from there. What else did I miss?

Olliges: Do you have any kids at all?

Hagopian: I have three sons, and like I mentioned earlier, my first wife, we were married for twenty-five years and then she passed unfortunately in 1973, and then in 1974 I remarried a young lady from Waukegan, Illinois.

Annette Derbedrosian and I've been married to her now twenty-seven years. And two of my sons are, two of our sons I should say, are here living in the area. One is in Edwardsville, one lives in Granite here, and the other one of our sons is in Michigan. His wife was from Detroit and so when the job opportunities here were no good for him he moved up to Michigan, and he has three daughters. My second son Stephen has two boys and a girl, and the third son Jeffrey has two girls. So that's my entire immediate family.

Olliges: Okay, now what kind of jobs did your parents hold, and what kind of jobs did you hold?

Hagopian: Well, my parents, they worked at the Commonwealth steel plant in Granite City. Like I said, being not conversive with the language originally and not having the financial means to do anything else they went to work at the steel plants, local steel plants. And my father worked in those plants until 1948. And then in 1948 he went into business in St. Louis, dry cleaning plant. And when I finished college in forty-nine, he and I went into business together and we operated that my father retired in fifty-eight and my one sister and I continued the operation until she married and went to Michigan. And then I operated until about 1985, and I retired.

Olliges: And you take care of the community center here?

Hagopian: Oh yeah, I work here harder than I worked for myself, but it's all voluntary. I enjoy doing it, I get a lot of satisfaction out of it. Although it

is hard work at times, but we're trying to get the Church paid off and that's our biggest project now. We're carrying about a \$193,000 mortgage on it right now, and we're working to liquidate that. And if I'm fortunate enough to live that long, why we'll get that done.

Olliges: And what kind of types of recreation did you used to partake in, what kinds do you do now?

Hagopian: Recreation-wise, well I had a, I forgot to mention I had an Armenian band. We had ethnic dances and we played for these dances for the Armenian dances and songs that were necessary. Gee, there was basically three or four of us. Art Bedian, myself, Bob Parsaghian, Sam Meradian. We had that band going until about in the 60s I guess, and then everybody got tired of it so we abandoned that, but that was one of my recreational deals. Well, I played softball, and bowled, and those kind of things. And I did some golfing. So, currently I'm not doing too much outside of working here. [laughs]

Olliges: I know you know a lot about the Turkish genocide against the Armenians. Would you like to say some stuff about that?

Hagopian: Sure, I'd be glad to address that. In 1915, well actually you know they talk about from 1915 to 1921, but actually where my parents were born they started this thing way back in the 1890s. The original persecution of the Armenians started then. But, the big genocide occurred when the war was on. Everybody else was occupied with their problems and so the Turks took advantage of that. And they drove our people off of the land

they had lived in for hundreds of years. Took all their property, put them out in the desert, the ones they couldn't kill right off the bat, drove them into the desert. And many of them perished walking through the desert as the Turks harassed them. It was a very meaningful event in our history, but it was all negative of course. So, Armenian is located in the Islamic world. We're the only Christian nation in the Asia Minor there, and we're surrounded by all these Muslim countries, okay. But, we really never had any problems with the others except for the Turkish genocide, and to this day the Turks are denying it. And unfortunately Uncle Sam is beholding to them and he's neglecting us and our history, and we've had problems since from three recent presidents that they will recognize the genocide as it was because it's documented and each of them renigged on their promise. So, we don't have much faith in what the politicians say or do pertaining to the Armenian situation. Today, Uncle Sam is allying firmly with Turkey. I can understand some of it, but you can't rewrite history and accept that rewritten history and keep your moral values. It just doesn't make sense. And we're constantly propagandizing the situation as it exists to them and it's constantly on our minds because I never knew any grandparents because they were not able to get over here. And there's no, they destroyed any records of the Armenian community in Turkey because Armenia was located in the eastern end of Turkey, okay. And we had terrific cities and communities there that were annihilated completely. Today, all that area is a vast no-man's land. Some of the Kurdish people

live around there but it's a down trodden, and empty area that the Turks are refusing to do anything to help even the people who are there now. They have destroyed many of our great architecture as far as our churches are concerned and they're continuing to do that. And unfortunately, the Turkish people aren't too bright doing before the genocide started the architects, the artisans, the merchants they were all Armenians and I guess that didn't sit too well with them because they were not capable of doing the things that the Armenians were doing. So, it's a very hostile attitude and we'll maintain that attitude until justice is done. All Turkey has to do is admit that the genocide occurred because government records here in the U.S.A. document it, you know. And we have to move on from there, right now they have blockaded Armenia along with Azerbaijan and there is no land route into Armenian. Whatever you do you have to fly in there and with this blockade you know Uncle Sam just ignores it and caters to Turkey because Turkey is a strategic ally in that area. And I can understand that, but you can't completely sell your soul to the devil. And that's what we've done as an American government.

Olliges: I'm going to switch gears a little bit, and one of the reasons I'm doing this interview is because you were one of the members of the 1940 basketball team. I was wondering if you could describe a little bit what it was like playing on that team.

Hagopian: Well, we were very fortunate, those of us who were on that team because we had a great leader, Andy Phillip, who went on to become a great

basketball star, hall-of-famer, all the good things that could happen because of his capability. And on that team we had ten people, ten persons, and the ethnic makeup of that team is interesting. We had four Armenians, and these are all from Lincoln Place, four Armenians, one Hungarian, one Macedonian, and one Yugoslavian. That's seven of the members of that team were from Lincoln Place and the starting five were all from Lincoln Place and we had two, three reserves on that team beside the Armenians. Ebbie Mueller, Ed Hoff, and Everett Daniels so that made up our team. And it was coached by Byron Bozarth and his assistant coach was Leonard Davis and Leonard was a school teacher and became an assistant coach there and he later became mayor of Granite City and established a funeral home business here in the city. And his wife survives him to this day.

Olliges: And what kind of role did you play for the team? What position did you play?

Hagopian: I was a guard, I was a guard. Andy Phillip and I were the guards, you had Evon Parsaghian and Dan Eftimoff as the forwards, and George Gages was our center. And we were like I said very fortunate we made it was a cohesive team. There were no jealousies, everybody worked as hard as they could and fortunately we prevailed.

Olliges: And what made the game different than it's played today?

Hagopian: Oh, vastly different, vastly different. The pace of the game is much faster today. The capabilities of the athletes is outstanding, there's no doubt

about that. And it's so fast, a lot of us played above the rim which was unheard of back then. As a matter of fact, you didn't really shoot a one handed shot then in that day. We were shooting two handed shots, now you don't see that any more, that's gone. We used to shoot our free throws underhanded, two handed, two hands underhanded, so you don't see that any more. So, the game's changed radically you know.

Olliges: And, what kind of impact did the success of the team have on Lincoln Place?

Hagopian: Well, as I said earlier, we were on the wrong side of the tracks and people were reluctant to cross the tracks and come down where we lived. And the basketball team in 1940 changed that situation drastically. And our community was not as isolated as it was before. And we had people coming down there then and it helped eliminate the discriminatory aspects that we had experienced in the city.

Olliges: I remember reading in your scrapbook about how there was 2500 people greeting you, a mile long of cars, and you had dinners, a lot of dinners to go to after that.

Hagopian: Yes, yes, we did experience that. When we got back Sunday morning, everybody was out at the high school here and the bus brought us in there. Then the motorcade was formed and we drove through town down to Lincoln Place where we all lived and had a big celebration down there. And we continued having reunions for our team. We had the 40th and the 50th and in the 40th we had it community wide. We filled streets down

there and at the community house and we had a big celebration then.

Incidentally, I got to mention that our community house which was built by Commonwealth Steel for our people down there to use, and we a lady who was a retired school teacher, Ms. Sophia Prather who did a lot of character building for us while we were down there. She was a short woman, about five foot tall and she carried a stick around with her. And she kept everybody in line and kept that place operating with limited funds. So, I think she deserves a mention here.

Olliges: How has she affected your life personally?

Hagopian: Well, you know we didn't have a Church down there and she ran a Sunday school, a non-denominational Sunday school, and some of the teachers were from some of the churches like the Methodist church, and Presbyterian. Some of those women and men would come down and teach the Sunday school classes and that was a great asset, and in the summertime she had all kinds of programs to keep the kids occupied. We had a woodworking shop there in the basement for some of the older boys. I remember building a birdhouse down there. [laughs] And she was just a great influence, unfortunately she died in 1938 before all this basketball thing materialized.

Olliges: And how did the perception of your team and the neighborhood change after you won that title?

Hagopian: Well yeah, I said, I just mentioned it. We were not as isolated as we were before this happened okay.

Olliges: Did you get more notoriety in the community?

Hagopian: Yes, yes, of course we got more recognition and people started to reduce the tension between the wrong side and the right side of the tracks. So, that was a great asset in helping the community come together in that respect, Granite City as a whole.

Olliges: And how has playing on that team affected you life?

Hagopian: Oh definitely, definitely, it was the highlight of my life to be honest with you. And we got certain recognition you know and we enjoyed it and even to this day there was a great event on November the 4th a Sunday I think it was. Yeah, where a tribute to Andy Phillip was erected in, as a sign at the high school. Did you see that sign?

Olliges: Not yet.

Hagopian: Yeah, and on that sign there were two fellas Dave Champion and Gus Lingdow who started this project and brought it to fruition. They need to raise \$40,000 to pay for it. I don't know whether they've got that amount, but they're getting near it. And it is a beautiful electronic sign and you should, you know where the high school is?

Olliges: Yes

Hagopian: You should drive by there and take a look at it because it's got a message board in the middle okay, and then below that it says tribute to Andy Phillip and the 1940 basketball team, and the names of the team members are listed in smaller caps.

Olliges: I will probably drive by there and take a look at that.

Hagopian: Yeah, you should.

Olliges: What are your thoughts on Andy Phillip and his overall career?

Hagopian: Well, he was a fantastic athlete. He not only excelled in basketball, but he even tried football and baseball. Matter of fact, he had signed a minor league contract with the baseball Cardinals and I guess with his success in basketball why that became secondary. But, he never pursued that to any great degree. He did play some minor league ball for them. And then he was a big gentle giant, good-natured, never got angry. He was a great leader.

Olliges: And what was it like for you to be named the most courageous player of the tournament back then?

Hagopian: Well, that was dummy on my part. On our third game in the final minutes there was a loose ball and I dove for it and I separated my shoulder. So, consequently I didn't get to participate in the final game. And I think that really hurt the team because all year long we had been playing these five people. Well, when I dropped out they had to bring in other people and I don't know it just didn't gel and that's why Andy came through. He made fifteen points of the twenty-four points we scored that game. And that was another big leadership accomplishment on his part.

Olliges: And how did you get the nickname of "Huggy"? I read that your nickname was "Huggy"?

Hagopian: Right, right, I had a neighbor Chris Papadinov was his name, he was older than me. And from Hagopian he came up with "Huggy". And that stuck

with me for the rest of my life, even today people I know call me that. So,
I accepted it. [laughs]

Olliges: I think that's about all I had. Was there anything you wanted to add?

Hagopian: Well, I think this is a great project that you guys are doing. And I other people have done this kind of a project on our community, but I don't think it's as elaborate as you guys are doing it, as thorough as you're doing it and I think you guys deserve some credit.

Olliges: Well, thank you.

Hagopian: Thank you.

[END TAPE 1, SIDE A]