

Interviewer: John W. Tedrick

INTERVIEW AND TAPE SUMMARY

Name: A. Andreas Matoesian

Date and Place of Birth: September 4, 1937 Lincoln Place (Granite City)

Address: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Telephone Number: [REDACTED]

Interview Date, Time, and Place:

November 10, 2001 10:00 a.m. [REDACTED]

Interview Summary (attach additional sheets, as needed):

Mr. Matoesian is a first generation American. His father emigrated from Armenia in 1920 and settled in Lincoln Place Granite city. He related a story about his father's experience coming through Ellis Island. His mother emigrated a little earlier and first lived in Davenport Iowa and then Lincoln Place after they were married. Mr. Matoesian was born in Lincoln Place in 1937 and lived there for 21 years. Mr. Matoesian is a Judge in Madison County Illinois. He worked his way through school as a barber in his father's barbershop in Lincoln Place. Mr. Matoesian voiced memories about going to the community center in somewhat of a pre-school or day school setting during his pre-school years. He further related, during his grade school years that all of the teachers were very nice. He states that as an adult he found that they, the teachers, had been hand picked due to their sensitivity to the diverse ethnic group. Mr. Matoesian states that he feels that sports is the great levelizer. Being active in sports allowed people to break through other barriers. Mr. Matoesian states that he feels the exposure to multiple ethnic groups made him a more tolerant person, a person more accepting and appreciative of differences. Mr. Matoesian and I spoke briefly about the Armenian Genocide and his thoughts on the lack of publicity and acknowledgement of this horrific event.

Note any special circumstances involving the interview:

John W. Tedrick
HST 447
November 24, 2001

Biographical Profile

Mr. A. Andreas Matoesian

Working in an elementary school, I have the opportunity to observe children developing at various stages in their lives. One particularly creative second grade teacher had her class write a description of the hatching of chickens from the perspective of the chicks. The actual hatching of several chicks in a nearby classroom prompted the assignment. Most of the children included excited remarks, from the chicken perspective, about the process of getting out of the shell (Wow, this is hard work!), meeting other chicks, and discovering a whole new world. One of the children included a line of little chicken footprints scurrying off toward adventure.

The writings of these children reminded me of some of the information shared with me by Judge A. Andreas Matoesian during an oral history interview about growing up in Lincoln Place, Granite City, Illinois. Judge Matoesian, who is of Armenian ancestry, provided significant insight about the process of developing Americans. He described Lincoln Place as a “neighborhood,” a close-knit combination of different ethnic groups. These groups included Armenians, Macedonians, Hungarians, Bulgarians, Mexicans, and Doverites (people from Dover, Tennessee). When the diverse nature of the United States is considered, the decision to immigrate to an area with multiple ethnic groups, as opposed to settling with only your group, speaks strongly to the goal of becoming Americans. If one makes the analogy of the individual chicks representing the individual ethnic group, then the nest (Lincoln Place) becomes a starting point for development.

A significant part of the “Americanization” process involved the community center. Judge Matoesian voiced memories of his mother helping others with their citizenship classes at the community center. He further relates memories of his mother inviting people into their home to help them read and write letters to the old country. The sense of community involvement was overwhelming throughout the interview. Another aspect of the community center was, and still is, its impressive basketball gymnasium. The gym fostered involvement in athletics. This involvement served as a primary tool to cut through some of the prejudices between Lincoln Place and West Granite City. Judge Matoesian strongly stated that athletics was the levelizer. He related that when the Granite City High School team won the state basketball tournament in 1940, and the whole team was made up of Lincoln Place players, that broke down a lot of barriers.

Grade school was another important step in the “Americanization” process. The immigrant families placed a great amount of importance on education. Teachers were to be respected, period. Judge Matoesian stated that just the threat of contacting our parents eliminated any discipline problems. Beginning school with limited use of the English language created challenges for both the students and the teachers. An interesting memory was the kindness of the teachers. He said, “The teachers were all very, very nice in grade school.” Judge Matoesian stated that he learned later on, after becoming an adult, that the teachers at Washington School were hand picked to work with students from a variety of backgrounds. Sensitivity to student needs was a major concern.

From speaking with Judge Matoesian, it is easy to picture the excitement and determination of those growing up at Lincoln Place. He related an example of determination about his father’s experiences at Ellis Island. It seems that his father was initially rejected due to

illness from being sea sick, but refused to give up, threw those papers away, and went through the line again successfully immigrating to the United States. Closing with a continuation of the analogy, had Mr. Matoesian senior simply given up, his dreams of prosperity from the United States would have died, like a chick that never gets out of its shell.