

Oral History Project on Lincoln Place Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville

Interviewer: Amanda Frauenfelder

Translator: Father Vartan Kassabian

Interviewee: Nevart Hagopian

Date: November 18, 2001

Location of interview: Nursing home in Granite City, IL, behind St. Gregory's Armenian Church.

NOTE: Interviewer previously interviewed Nevart's sisters, Isabella Vartan and Helen Abbott, on October 10, 2001, for an hour and a half. That interview is very useful.

[Tape 1, Side A, Tape Counter at 00:00]

AMANDA: My name is Amanda Frauenfelder and I am interviewing Nevart for History 447, Oral History, we are doing a project on Lincoln Place and today is November 18, 2001. Nevart when was your birthday?

NEVART: May 14, 1908.

AMANDA: And when did you come to the United States?

NEVART: 1920.

AMANDA: How was is it, getting over to the country? Your sisters told me that your dad had gone back to get you and your mother to bring you over here.

FATHER KASSABIAN: Her mother and father came, her uncle was in the old country, but her father already here. He sent one of his brothers, her uncle, back to the old country to get them and bring them back here. Her mother and her were living there [Armenia], they survived the Genocide.¹

AMANDA: How did they survive the Genocide? Did they hide in the fields?

NEVART: [We] lived outside basically...

AMANDA: Okay, sorry go ahead.

¹ The Armenian Genocide took place during WWI. The Turkish peoples killed over 1.5 million Armenians.

FATHER KASSABIAN: They used to hide under haystacks, wheat fields, baskets, boxes, whatever they could find.

NEVART: They [soldiers] used to smoke their water pipers. The soldiers would be huddled around the fields and down in the mountains and [we] could see them. The soldiers had no idea [we] were up there, really. [We] were hiding.

FATHER KASSABIAN: She comes from a place called Moush.

AMANDA: Moush. Armenia.

FATHER KASSABIAN: In Armenia, it is a mountainous area.

AMANDA: And when you arrived in this country, how were old were you, sixteen?

NEVART: Thirteen years old.

AMANDA: Thirteen years old.

NEVART: 1908.

AMANDA: Did she begin to go to public school, or did she stay home?

NEVART: Yes. Washington School.

AMANDA: Did she go to the Armenian school at night?

NEVART: No. [My] sister Isabella used to go to the Armenian school, but [I] didn't. Brother, Evan, and sister, Helen [went].

AMANDA: How did she [Nevart] learn English?

FATHER KASSABIAN: School.

AMANDA: The public School?

NEVART: Yes. [I] was married to a man by the name of Kasper Hagopian, he used to work at the school factory.

AMANDA: Her husband?

FATHER KASSABIAN: Yes. Her father had a diner here.

NEVART: [My] father was an excellent cook.

AMANDA: Her husband taught her English you said?

FATHER KASSABIAN: No, no. She learned English at the school. Her husband was for the most part Armenian speaking.

AMANDA: Was he from the same village?

FATHER KASSABIAN: He was from a village in the province of Moush called Pascal.

AMANDA: Did she know him when she lived in Moush or did she meet him here?

NEVART: Met him here. Three sons all born here. One passed away.²

AMANDA: How old was she when she got married?

NEVART: Around 1924.

FATHER KASSABIAN: It doesn't strike her mind right at the moment, but she said it was around 1924.

AMANDA: Did they live in Lincoln Place? Did she always live in Lincoln Place until she came here.³

FATHER KASSABIAN: Yes, she used to live in Lincoln Place. Then, she moved in with her sister, Zabel,⁴ and then moved here.

AMANDA: Which one is Zabel?

FATHER KASSABIAN: Zabel is the one with the blond hair.

AMANDA: Isabella.

FATHER KASSABIAN: Isabella, right.

AMANDA: I know the [Armenian] names for Helen and Nevart, but I did not know the Armenian name

² One of the sons was murdered a couple of years ago and she has been very depressed about it. It is very hard for her to cope with her son dying before her. Her health has deteriorated since his death.

³ Interviewer is referring to the nursing home she is in now.

⁴ Armenian for Isabella.

for Isabella.⁵

FATHER KASSABIAN: Zabel is Armenian for Isabella.

AMANDA: Oh, okay. We have been studying a lot the clubhouse, community center, could you ask her the role it played in her life? Was she active at the community center?

NEVART: Oh, yes. We used to have our dinners there and luncheons.

FATHER KASSABIAN: The Armenian Relief Society, the Armenian National Committee or the Society of Patriotic Union of Moush. There was a lot of people from another area called Kahi⁶, another area called Van. Van and Moush are pretty close to each other, that's more towards the eastern side of Armenia. That was their gathering place. It was open during the day for men to play cards and gather and talk and have a cup of coffee. We had them all over the country, those kind of clubhouses. In a lot of respects, it kept the Armenian community together, especially in the first generation, it was their rallying point. The church and the community center.

AMANDA: Was the clubhouse separate from the Community Center?

FATHER KASSABIAN: The clubhouse was on corner and the church was another block down.⁶ Very close to each other, catty-cornered from one another. But they were not in the same complex.

AMANDA: Okay. Did she join her sisters for religion classes there [Community Center] on Sundays?

FATHER KASSABIAN: No, well, at the Clubhouse?

AMANDA: Yes.

NEVART: Yes, she did go there too.

FATHER KASSABIAN: Of course, there was the Baptist mission from across the street when we didn't have a church a lot of our people went there. There was really nowhere else to go.

⁵ The Armenian alphabet has 36 letters in it. The Armenian language and English language are quite different.

⁶ There was the Armenian Club building and there was the Lincoln Place Community Center, two separate buildings. The Armenians had, and still do, have events and dances at the LP Community Center. The Armenian Club was the location of many Armenian group meetings and male social gatherings.

AMANDA: What they [Baptists] taught was it similar to the Armenian Church's teachings?

FATHER KASSABIAN: Not really, they just had to learn whatever the Baptist teaching was. Protestant teachings.

AMANDA: I was not sure if they held their own [Armenian] services there.

FATHER KASSABIAN: No, no, no.

FATHER KASSABIAN: We, prior to a full-time priest and a full-time church, they really didn't have a church here until 1954. Prior to that they had priests come out periodically to celebrate liturgy, baptize, marry, bury, and things of that nature. See the old church in Lincoln Place is the first Bulgarian church in the United States. So for the Bulgarians it was a historical landmark.

AMANDA: I was going to also ask her did she go to the girls' night? I know that Helen and Isabella said there was a girls' night. Did she go?

NEVART: Oh, yes. [I] used to go to all those things. The people used to cook with [my] mother and [I].

FATHER KASSABIAN: She was really a hard worker in church up until the time she got incapacitated she was always cooking, cleaning, doing something for the church. She used to make all our holy bread and everything. This lady used to do it all.

AMANDA: Oh, wow. Did she used to dance or sew there? I know that...

FATHER KASSABIAN: I'm sure she could do that, being from where she was I'm sure she mastered the art of dancing.

AMANDA: [laughing]. Isabella mentioned going to the International Festival. Did she go with them?

NEVART: Yes, yes. [I] used to collect money, cook food for them. All the time.

AMANDA: Does she remember Miss Prather?

NEVART: Yes, yes. Oh she was so nice! She mad, she make you mad, but she was a nice woman. Miss

Prather is nice woman.⁷ She took us places, took care of us. She controlled the kids.

[Then Nevart added something in Armenian]

AMANDA: What did she just say?

FATHER KASSABIAN: She [Miss Prather] was a good woman, fine lady.

AMANDA: There were a few other people they mentioned, the head of the Commonwealth, I think

Mr. Howard was his name.

NEVART: No, don't remember.

FATHER KASSABIAN: Who else?

AMANDA: Alice Sobilesky, Does she remember Alice Sobilesky?

NEVART: Oh, yes. She used to watch the kids really good too.

FATHER KASSABIAN: She really did good with the kids.

AMANDA: What did she do?

NEVART: She had a job at the Community Center with the kids.

AMANDA: She taught them?

FATHER KASSABIAN: I think so, that is the way it sounds. I don't know honey. I couldn't give you the information, because I didn't live here then. I am from the East Coast. If you ask me what happened in Providence, Rhode Island, I could tell you. If you ask me what happened in Brooklyn or Boston, I could tell you, but whatever happened here I can't.⁸

AMANDA: I know that Isabella and Helen were bom there [Lincoln Place] and it was easier for them to adjust and grow up here, but what was it like for her to have to adjust to the area?

NEVART: Didn't have much of a problem. You know the younger you are the easier it is. [My] father

⁷ She spoke that in English. She became very happy when mentioning her name.

⁸ Father Kassabian an Armenian priest is in his fifties. He came from the East Coast and has lived in Granite City for awhile now. He knows a lot about Lincoln Place from the members of his church, but did not grow up there.

was here and [my] mother was here, so [I] wasn't alone, family was all here.

FATHER KASSABIAN: It makes the adjustment process a heck of a lot easier to do.

AMANDA: Then, as far as school goes did she just go right into junior high when she got here, or did she have to start over?

NEVART: Regular school, started into regular school.

AMANDA: Her friends, did she stay close to mostly Armenians? Or did she befriend others?

NEVART: Most of [my] friends were Armenian.

FATHER KASSABIAN: I can guarantee you that, 99 out of 100 of them were Armenian. If they were anything like my family 99 out of a 100 of them were Armenian, trust me.

AMANDA: Helen and Isabella said they were friends were some Mexicans and Hungarians.

FATHER KASSABIAN: Oh, I am sure they were, but her being from where she was, she was the older generation. There is quite a few years difference between her and her sisters,⁹ 10, 15, 16, 17, or 18 years, there is a generation gap. It's like my two sons, there is thirteen years between the two of them, you know. Of course, the older one loves his little brother, but there is still a difference, one is twelve and one is twenty-five. There is still thirteen years difference.

AMANDA: Did she go to other events if there was a Mexican event or a holiday?

NEVART: Oh, yes.

FATHER KASSABIAN: This lady was a swinger. She was a swinger, even to this day. I wish I had that kind of energy, God love her. Very active, very energetic, very kind, very generous, very compassionate woman. One of a kind. She's had a rough life, a rough life. No question, no denying it.

AMANDA: She survived the Genocide.

FATHER KASSABIAN: Yes, she did.

⁹ Ages: Nevart is 93, Isabella is 78, and Helen is 75.

AMANDA: She came to the United States. She is ninety-three?

FATHER KASSABIAN: Yes, yes she is.

AMANDA: Does she have any fond memories of Lincoln Place?

NEVART: Oh, yes.

FATHER KASSABIAN: Her neighbors, her friends, she used to sit and tell me when I visited her at home all the stories. She says they had a good time with one another, we all used to gather, they all used to gather at her house. They played cards and talked and passed the time for hours and hours. That is something we don't do anymore. We in this generation don't connect anymore. We are running a really artificial lifestyle. We don't connect with one another. Everyone is too busy, I guess.

AMANDA: Did she go to high school?¹⁰

NEVART: No, just elementary school. Washington.

AMANDA: Did her parents not want her to go to high school?

FATHER KASSABIAN: I think she had to work.

NEVART: All three of [my] sons went to high school.

AMANDA: Where did she work at?

NEVART: Always a housewife. [I] got married young. Neither [I] or my mother worked [out of the home].

AMANDA: Was she allowed to... I know that some females' parents were more strict than others, they were not allowed to date or go out. How were they [her parents]?

NEVART: Absolutely, they were stricter. Absolutely.

AMANDA: Were they stricter with her than her younger sisters?

¹⁰ Isabella and Helen both attended high school. Later on, Helen attended college at SIUE for two years for a business degree, which was offered in a short-term program then. Isabella's children went to college and most of Nevart's also. Helen never had any children.

FATHER KASSABIAN: No, I can tell you that.

NEVART: [laughing] Oh, yes. [parents stayed strict]

FATHER KASSABIAN: I don't know about them, but I was strict with my daughter too.

AMANDA: I know that Isabella and Helen married Americans...

FATHER KASSABIAN: Isabella married an Armenian, Helen married an American, she married Don Abbott. Isabella married Charlie Vartan.

AMANDA: They [husbands] were both in the service at one time or another.

FATHER KASSABIAN: I think they [sisters] worked for the service, military, you mean the two women? I think they worked in the military.

[I meant the husbands]

AMANDA: Did her parents try to introduce them to Armenian men. To marry Armenians, did it matter?

FATHER KASSABIAN: One of them did marry an Armenian, the other one didn't.

AMANDA: Were they [the parents] okay with that?

FATHER KASSABIAN: They must have.

AMANDA: What were the wedding celebrations like?

FATHER KASSABIAN: In the old country, from what I am told, celebration would be two or three days. In the old country they would get married on Mondays. It would go, even before the celebration it would go on for a couple of days, visiting. They have this tradition of stealing the bride from the groom.

AMANDA: WHO steals the bride?

FATHER KASSABIAN: The wedding party. Some of the groomsmen will steal the bride and take her off somewhere and hide her from the groom.

AMANDA: [laughing]

FATHER KASSABIAN: Yes. Or they will take your fingers and paint them with henna, the night before. There was all kinds of that. I was at an Armenian wedding there in Massachusetts¹² many years ago where the girl came riding in on a horse, dressed in a traditional Armenian costume and they did the wedding right in the middle camp, the Armenian camp. It was beautiful. Some Armenian music in the background, the whole thing was really pretty. Traditional, authentic. Oh, I could go on and on.

AMANDA: [laughing] Does she feel she made a good choice, well I know she had to come to America, but did she enjoy her life in America?

NEVART: Oh, yes. Absolutely. We have been very happy and very content. Good family, good family life.¹¹

AMANDA: Has she ever gone back to Armenia?

FATHER KASSABIAN: No, no.

NEVART: NO.

AMANDA: Did she ever want to?

FATHER KASSABIAN: NO. I think she has been all through that once. I guess, because of the memories. She really can't. I just got back from there a couple months ago myself.

NEVART: She goes there every day anyway, we came to Granite City, and that is where we stayed.

AMANDA: Did her husband have any family there. I know she lost her family, but did she have any family left there?

NEVART: No. Lost them all. He [her husband] was a soldier in General's army.

AMANDA: Does she have any sons or daughters?

FATHER KASSABIAN: Two of the three are still alive. A few years back she had a really bad time

¹¹ Her sisters come every day to the nursing home to visit her and bring her her favorite coffee or foods. She is close with her children and grandchildren as well.

because one of her sons died, the one she was closest with, very good with her.¹²

AMANDA: How old are they?

FATHER KASSABIAN: He was seventy-one when he died.

AMANDA: Is her husband still alive?

FATHER KASSABIAN: Oh, no. Her husband died back in 1983. [He was much, much older than her]

[Nevart confirms 1983]

AMANDA: They were married fifty-three years?

NEVART: I don't remember.

FATHER KASSABIAN: At least fifty years, fifty or fifty-five.

AMANDA: When did she come to the nursing home?

FATHER KASSABIAN: A year ago, to this one. She was at O'Fallon Health, where my wife works, before. She moved to this one to be closer. I would say a year or so. A year or two.

AMANDA: And she is close with her sisters?

FATHER KASSABIAN: Very much so. They come here every single day. Her nephews and her niece [Isabella's children] come here all the time too, they are very good with her.

AMANDA: Where are her [Nevart] grandchildren at?

FATHER KASSABIAN: They are all over the place.

AMANDA: How many does she have?

FATHER KASSABIAN: I couldn't tell you.

NEVART: [counting] Four, five.

AMANDA: Does she remember her grandparents? Because I know Isabella...¹³

¹² He was murdered, which makes it even harder on her.

¹³ Isabella said that she never got to meet the grandparents or aunts and uncles because they all were massacred in the Armenian genocide before she was born.

NEVART: Absolutely... [we] had a good life and a good home. Good things, too because father was always sending money and things from the states so [we] were living very well. Family owned farms and stuff

AMANDA: What did she say?

NEVART: Brought quite a few boxes of...

[Isabella and Nevart come in]

FATHER KASSABIAN: I am going to let her finish up because I have to run.

AMANDA: Oh, that is fine.

FATHER KASSABIAN: How are you honey [to Isabella]? That is Isabella and that is Helen.

AMANDA: I know Isabella, how are you?

FATHER KASSABIAN: Everybody knows Isabella.

[laughing]

ISABELLA: Not everybody.

FATHER KASSABIAN: You want me to shut that off for you.

AMANDA: Oh, yeah, shoot.

[Tape 1, Side A, ended at 33:0 on tape counter].

Note: After Father Kassabian turned off the tape I stayed at least another half of an hour and talked to Isabella, Helen, and Nevart. At first, I thought I should leave when Father Kassabian did so Nevart could take a nap or what not. However, Isabella and Helen urged me to stay. Nevart kept smiling and since she can't see very well and speaks primarily Armenian, she gripped my hand numerous times and patted me on the back to let me know she was glad I was there. The three sisters shared many more stories with me; I wished I had kept the tape on!