

**Interview with Hagop Varadian
Conducted by William D. Wasson
Conducted on November 6, 2001**

Interviewer: William D. Wasson

Interviewee: Hagop (Jake) Varadian

Tape 1, Side A

Wasson: It is November 6th, 2001 and I will be conducting an interview with Jake. My name is William D. Wasson and we'll begin. Jake, could you state your name and spell it for us please.

Varadian: Yes, my name is Jake Varadian, last name capital V as in Victor, a-r-a-d-i-a-n.

Wasson: OK, Jake. When were you born?

Varadian: April 12th, 1938.

Wasson: And were born in a hospital or at home?

Varadian: I was born in a hospital in St. Louis.

Wasson: And why were you born in St. Louis? Was there no hospitals in....

Varadian: At the time of my birth, my mother was carrying twins and she had difficulty carrying twins and it was necessary for her to go to the hospital for delivery.

Wasson: So it was for complications and they felt it was better in St. Louis?

Varadian: Correct.

Wasson: Can you tell me something about your parents. Where they were born?

Varadian: Yes. My father (Nishan) was born in a small town in Armenia called Silgavil. And he came to the States in 1914, at the age of fourteen. He traveled from the village to the Black Sea, from there he went to Constantinople, got a visa to France, sailed from Constantinople to Marseilles, France, stayed there six months, until he was able to get a visa to come to the United States. Some from the time that he left his native village it took him approximately eight months to arrive here on Ellis Island in the United States. Now my mother's story was a little different. In 1915, when the massacre had taken place,

my mother's father was killed by Turkish soldiers. She, with her older sister, and mother, were sent into the desert and while they were in the desert, my mother and her sister and her mother, were in a cave. No water, no food. My mother's sister had passed away. My mother's mother was carrying a baby, left to get food, never returned. My mother had left the safety of the cave, roamed the desert, was picked up by some Kurdish people, taken to Lebanon. Beirut, Lebanon, where she ended up staying in an orphanage for several years. Well, after the massacre, there were Armenian papers here in the United States that gave a listing of displaced children. And my great uncle, Garabed (Charles) Pelebosian, in St. Louis, noticed that my mother's name, Mariam Pelebosian, appeared on a list of displaced children and made arrangements to bring my mother to the United States. So my mother came the United States in 1927, with the help of her uncle. As of right now we have no living relatives, that we're aware of, on my father's side or my mother's side, in Armenia or the in the Middle East.

Wasson: Quite a story. Do you know how the information on the displaced children got from Armenia to the United States?

Varadian: If I'm not mistaken, they had American orphanages, French orphanages, and I think English orphanages, in Beirut, Lebanon. And the directors, if I'm not mistaken, my mother always remembered the name Mrs. Jacobson, who had to be an American, doing social work and was in charge of the orphanage in Beirut, Lebanon. And if I'm not mistaken, that Armenians that were here in the United States that had Armenian publications, had a network of finding out from orphanages of any Armenian children that were located in different orphanages, whether it was in Beirut, Lebanon, whether it might have been in Europe, whether it might have been in other parts of the Middle East. And, since we had many Armenians living in the United States, they subscribed to these Armenian papers that had printed names of displaced children, giving them their names, their ages, and what village that they were born in Armenia. Now the village that my mother was born in, in Armenia, was called Malatia. And so, as a result, since there were several Armenians here in the St. Louis area, and in the Cleveland area, that came from that village, they ended up subscribing to the Armenian paper being printed in Boston and they came across my mother's name, from the orphanage in Beirut, Lebanon.

Wasson: That's very interesting. Did your father tell you what he did in France during the six months he was there?

Varadian: Since my father was a teenager, his father (Hagop), which would have been my grandfather, was already here in the United States. My father ended up living in a boarding home, in Marseilles, France for the six months. And the way that he was going to be brought to the United States is a cousin of my father, excuse me, of my grandfather, was from Detroit, Michigan. My grandfather, who worked for the railroads, lived in Oregon, and made arrangements for his cousin to go to Armenia and bring my father to

the United States. Well, because of the complications of getting visas, my grandfather's cousin's visa had run out when he and my father got to Marseilles, France. So, my grandfather's cousin left money to cover the expense for my dad to stay in a rooming house, or boarding house, for the six months until he was able to get a visa to come to the United States. When he came to the United States, there was an Italian man, and a Greek man, older than my father, to this day, or to the day that he died, never was able to get in touch with them because those two elderly gentlemen went ahead and gave my father money to travel from New York City to Detroit. And there in Detroit is where my grandfather's cousin lived and came to the train station to pick up my dad once he came to Detroit, Michigan. From there my dad traveled to Oregon to be with father. Now I had always asked my dad why my grandmother, or his mother, did not come to the United States? And he always said she that had no desire to come to the United States. But then, after the Armenian massacre of 1915, she escaped and got as far as Marseilles, France. But she ended up dying in 1933. When I was stationed in Germany, and I had gone into the service, I had an opportunity to go to Marseilles, France, see my father's childhood friend, stayed a few days and went to the gravesite of my grandmother on my dad's side and took pictures of the gravesite and brought it back to the United States, or sent it back to the United States, for my dad.

Wasson: You don't know why she stayed in France if she made it that far, she didn't, she never came to the States?

Varadian: I think that a lot of this had to do that my father told me that she wasn't a very healthy woman. And that she was content with staying in Marseilles, France. And that in 1933 she ended up dying. So evidently I would have to say that a lot of it had to do with health reasons.

Wasson: Do you know anything about your grandfather? How he came to the United States?

Varadian: I had no idea of how my grandfather came to the United States. He came approximately ten years before my father did. And he had contact with other Armenian here in the United States about the improvement in life, the opportunity to better one's self coming here to the United States. So he left my father and grandmother in Armenia and came to the United States. Now, exactly when he came to the United States, I don't know.

Wasson: Did your father have any memories that he related to you concerning coming through Ellis Island?

Varadian: Yes he did. When he arrived here at Ellis Island, he remembered that he didn't know the English language. He was befriended by this Greek man and Italian man

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who came over with their families and these families helped my father get through the questioning in Ellis Island. And, one thing I forgot to say, that the Greek man also was, with his family, was going to Detroit, Michigan. And so took the responsibility of looking after my father when they traveled by train from New York City to Detroit and stayed at the train station and made every attempt to get in touch with my father's relative to come to the train station to pick him up. My dad did say he had to stay at Ellis Island for approximately two weeks to get the paperwork done, to go through the physical examination, to make sure that he had no health problems. And so, anyway, from that experience he ended up going with the Greek family to Detroit, Michigan.

Wasson: I've heard so much talk about when immigrants came through Ellis Island that sometimes their name was changed, you know, for American purposes and so forth. Was your name changed at all?

Varadian: No. My dad's name, pronounced in Armenian, is Va-RAD-ian, and so translated in English it would be VA-rad-ian, and the spelling is the same on his naturalized papers, his citizenship papers as it is today. Now my maternal relatives, my uncle, which would have been my great uncle, my mother's uncle, his name was Pelebosian. But when he came to the States, he left off the "ian" and went with the name Pelebos, capital P-e-l-e-b-o-s, left off the "ian."

Wasson: So from Detroit, your father went to Oregon. And is that where he grew up?

Varadian: He went to Oregon because my grandfather was working for the railroad as well as many other immigrants that came to the United States ended up working in the northwest railroads. And so my dad ended up staying in Oregon, traveling from Oregon to Yakima Valley, with his dad (my grandfather) working on the railroad. And my dad ended up getting some schooling while he was in Oregon. They stayed there approximately four years and then they came to Granite City because there were so many Armenians from my dad's village living here in the Granite City area. And so they decided to settle here because of the steel mills and the opportunity for employment.

Wasson: So your grandfather and father...

Varadian: Both came to Granite City, yes.

Wasson: What was your, maybe you mentioned, what was your cousin's name in Detroit? And did he work for the railroad too?

Varadian: OK. He did not work for the railroad. He worked for Ford Motor Company in Detroit and his name was Aslan Aslanian was his name.

Wasson: And did he stay in Detroit the whole time?

Varadian: My dad's cousin, stayed in Detroit, yes, he stayed in the whole time. And my grandfather and dad ended up staying here in Granite City.

Wasson: Was there group of Armenian in Detroit as well?

Varadian: Quite a few. For the Midwestern part of the United States, Detroit probably has the largest concentration of Armenians. I've heard anywhere from 30,000 to 50,000 Armenians. Whether that's so or not, I don't know.

Wasson: So, that means your father came here about when he was about eighteen to Granite City?

Varadian: Yes, between sixteen and eighteen years of age.

Wasson: Did he continue any education here in Granite City?

Varadian: He went as far as the eighth grade and then became a naturalized citizen. He went on to school to be able to become a naturalized citizen.

Wasson: What did he get for a job? Both your grandfather and your father, what did they get for employment here in Granite City?

Varadian: My grandfather ended up working at one of the steel mills, whichever one it is, I don't know. But my father was well liked by many of the people in our neighborhood. Regardless of what nationality they were, my dad was a very likable type of person but he never, never, never liked to take on the responsibility of telling people what to do. He worked for Commonwealth, he worked for American Steel, he worked for Scullin Steel, but was never, never really happy working at these places because he always wanted to work for himself. Well, time came that he was able to get along with everyone that he worked with that they wanted to make him a foreman at Scullin Steel. And like I said earlier he wasn't the type of person that liked to tell people what to do, he just wanted to get along with everyone. So as a result, he refused to take the foremen's job, had the opportunity to peddle vegetables and deliver coal so he ended up working for himself most of his adult life.

Wasson: Did he start his own company?

Varadian: He started, he did two things. During the year he would go to Produce Row in St. Louis and he would have a route where he would peddle fresh fruit and vegetables. And in the winter time, with his truck, he would haul coal. And then in 1940 he and

another Armenian from his village, Harry Torosian, went into business in 1940. And they stayed in business until 1976. They owned a neighborhood bar.

Wasson: And what was the name of the bar?

Varadian: Good Neighbor Tavern.

Wasson: Do you know what your grandfather did for employment here?

Varadian: If I'm not mistaken, he worked in the steel mills also. But then ended up retiring and then lived until he was like 85 years old. And then died in 1933. Now which steel mills he might have worked in, I don't know.

Wasson: And when did your mother come to Granite City?

Varadian: My mother came in 1925, she came to the United States. Now she entered the United States through Cuba. And she lived in St. Louis with her uncle, Charlie Pelebosian, or Charlie Pelebos, and aunt Siron. And then my parents were married in 1927.

Wasson: Do you know how they met?

Varadian: Yes. What was unique was that each ethnic organization would have festivals, or dances, or parties or picnics. And the Armenians were no different. And they would have Armenian dances, they would have Armenian picnics and many Armenians from the East St. Louis, Belleville, Granite City, St. Louis area would come and if it happened to be a picnic on a Sunday, then they would bring covered dishes and they would all celebrate a picnic together. And as a result, at one of these picnics, my dad met my mother and started courting her and then ended up getting married in 1927.

Wasson: You mentioned that you were born in St. Louis and your mother was carrying twins, how many brothers and sisters do you have and where are they living now?

Varadian: I had an older sister and a twin sister. But both of them died of cancer, 90 days apart. And what was unique about this is that it's amazing how many of the women in the Lincoln Place area, at a young age, have died from cancer. Whether its been ovarian cancer, or breast cancer, but several of us were talking about the number of women or females from the Lincoln Place area that have died from cancer. Regardless of what nationality to us that it wasn't anything that was hereditary. So whether it was our environment in Lincoln Place that caused it, who knows.

Wasson: How old were your sisters when they died?

Varadian: My twin sister was fifty-five years old, fifty-three years old, excuse me, and my older sister was fifty-eight, fifty-eight, yes fifty-eight.

Wasson: You all grew up and had a childhood and so forth then?

Varadian: Yes.

Wasson: What did your mother do?

Varadian: My mother ended up being an excellent housewife, an excellent mother and helped my dad, along with my dad's partner and his wife, run the tavern. My mother and Mrs. Torosian would end up preparing lunches for noon meal of people that worked at the steel mills that would come to the tavern. And then would fry fish on Saturday evenings. So they helped out at the tavern also.

Wasson: Did she help with the fruit business as well?

Varadian: My mom, no. My dad, when he still had the tavern he still peddled fruit also in his spare time.

Wasson: Where did you live in Lincoln Place?

Varadian: Our address was 1729 Olive Street and it's probably in the middle of Lincoln Place. And it was a four room and bath and partial basement that the five of us lived in.

Wasson: Is the house still there?

Varadian: The house is still there, yes. In fact, we sold the home to a Mexican family and they have remodeled it, putting on new siding and I every once in a while when I drive down Lincoln Place to visit some of my friends I drive by to look at the old house that I was raised in.

Wasson: Where did you go to school?

Varadian: I attended Washington Elementary School, which is located in West Granite, from first through sixth grade; and then Central High Junior High School which was in midtown Granite City, seventh and eighth grade; and then graduated from high school in 1956. And then attended, and graduated, from Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville campus in 1970.

Wasson: How did you get back and forth to school?

Varadian: (Laughter) Going to elementary and junior high school we walked back and forth. For our parents to take us back and forth to school, that was nonexistent, so ??? how that weather was, we ended up walking back and forth to school. To walk to Washington school probably close to a mile and then to go to junior high school it was a little over a mile. But then going to high school we ended up catching the bus. Where we had, I think, to pay 10 cents each way going back and forth to high school on the bus.

Wasson: You mentioned your father had a business and he had a truck. Did the family have a car as well?

Varadian: I think my dad's first car was 1949. We did everything in the truck, the five of us. If we were going to Armenian picnics, or if we were going for a Sunday drive, the five of us would sit in the cab of the truck and go. My dad didn't get a car until 1949.

Wasson: Did you have any trouble growing up, being an ethnic, diverse group and they talk about sometimes Granite City wasn't particularly receptive of it? Did you have any problems?

Varadian: No real physical problems. I guess I sort of felt a little slighted whenever I was in high school. I know that growing up in Lincoln Place we were all children of immigrants and referred to as foreigners. But that didn't bother many of us growing up in Lincoln Place because we had such a wide variety of ethnic groups, of people down there in Lincoln Place that we all got along beautifully with each other and so if people on the other side of the track didn't appreciate us or like us it didn't make any difference to us because we had our Mexican friends, our Hungarians friends, our Macedonian friend, our Greek friends, our Bulgarian friends, our Armenian friends. So we had a lot of other friends in our neighborhood that so of compensated us for not being with the "in" crowd on the other side of the tracks. So it didn't really make any difference to us at all. We pretty well stuck together. They called us "foreigners" or "honkies" but names like that never did phase us at all, didn't bother us at all.

Wasson: Did you feel that Lincoln Place, as an area, offered you everything you needed to where didn't need to go to other parts of Granite?

Varadian: I really do feel that. Nobody locked their doors. Everyone in Lincoln Place probably were in the same financial condition, in other words, no one was exceptionally wealthy, very few people had automobiles, everyone walked everywhere, they took time to visit each other, on the sidewalk, across the fence. We went to each other's festivals. When the Mexicans had their festivals at the Hungarian Home, many of us would go to their festivals. And when the Hungarians had their horos, we'd go to their dances. And so, it just seemed like that everyone got along beautifully with one another because no one

group was any better than the other. And the young people got along even better because we played ball together, we belonged to the Boy Scouts, we went to summer camp together, we went swimming at the canal or the Mississippi together, we went hunting together. So we spent a lot of time together, so we had a very, very close, unique friendship with each other in the Lincoln Place area.

Wasson: You mentioned a horo or something like that?

Varadian: Oh, that's Hungarian for a dance.

Wasson: Oh.

Varadian: Yes. In Hungarian they call them horos, dances.

Wasson: You said you went to Boy Scout camp?

Varadian: Yes.

Wasson: Can you tell me something about the Boy Scouts? And where was the camp?

Varadian: OK. We had an organization in Lincoln Place called the Lincoln Athletic Club and that would have had to be the first. I'm considered the first generation Armenians on my family here in the United States. But there was an older group of residents in Lincoln Place that were first generation also. And these were our older brothers that served in World War II (WW II). Many of them became officers, many of them saw combat during WW II. When they came back from WW II, they started a men's club called, the Lincoln Athletic Club (LAC). And this group of men that belonged to the club sponsored basketball and baseball teams, as well as a Boy Scout troop made up predominantly of their younger brothers and residents of Lincoln Place. Of course we picked up some players that lived in West Granite, or on the other side of the tracks to play on our team. But this organization, the LAC, was very, very instrumental in shaping a lot of younger Lincoln Place residents' lives. We had never gone to the zoo. But the LAC would end up paying for buses, and feeding us, taking us to the zoo. We'd never gone to Forest, to other places in the Forest Park. Or to a baseball game. The LAC would sponsor trips for us to the baseball game at Sportsman's Club in St. Louis. So they actually were very beneficial to the kids my age group growing up in Lincoln Place.

Wasson: Do you remember anything about WW II?

Varadian: I remember being a little frightened because we had to pull down the shades; we had to turn the lights off, I remember that. I remember a Polish family, Grabosky, good, good, good, family, they were neighbors of ours. They had, if I'm not mistaken,

three sons that had gone into the service. And their one son, I think it was Kelly, was killed during WW II. My best friend, who raised me like a brother, lived next door to me, Andy Hagopian, was a bombardier during WW II and I was scared whenever he was drafted into the service. And there were several others in the neighborhood that gone into the service during WW II. I remember that food was in short supply. Whenever I say food was in short supply, meat, chicken especially. It seemed like it was a special treat when we were able to get chicken to eat for a Sunday meal. Of course we had plenty of homemade soup, we had plenty of jarred vegetables and fruit that my mom, and some of the other Armenian ladies, would can during the summer. I remember during WW II that we would have planes flying over Granite City at a low altitude. And then I remember since the engineer depot is located at the end of, the western end of Niedringhaus Avenue in Lincoln Place that the training that they had there, troops would march up Niedringhaus, down Maple Street, and then south on West 20th, and then go to the canal for training. I remember seeing that. But as far as anything else, no. That I do remember during WW II.

Wasson: So they would have troops march up and down through town?

Varadian: Yes. Yes, in Lincoln Place. I don't know whether they went beyond the tracks, I don't think so.

Wasson: You mentioned the ethnic diversity of Lincoln Place. What do you remember as far as ethnic traditions growing up?

Varadian: I remember that the Mexicans probably were the most festive of all of the ethnics there because they had programs where my younger Mexican friends would participate in the program, doing the Mexican dances in their traditional outfits or costumes. They probably were the most festive of all of the nationalities down there. I remember going to the Hungarian dances where they would end up serving their traditional Kobas and Huraka, which would be sausage. Huraka would be blood sausage. We used to go to all these dances because of the food that they serve there. And it would be their traditional foods that were native in their respective countries. And have a great time, no difficulty at all, no problems at all.

Wasson: Did you have to pay to go to any of these festivals?

Varadian: Yes, yes. The way we would get money to pay for them is we would go junking in the alley looking for, I think it was the Novel Clorox jar or bottle, they'd give you a nickel. Or pick up soda bottles and get two cents deposit. And we'd end up cutting grass, or cleaning people's yards and getting money so that we could pay for the admission and have money to buy food at these different ethnic festivals.

Wasson: Did you have any, other than that, did you have a job during your youth growing up?

Varadian: Yes. One real close friend of mine, Mike Hinterser and I, and his brother Jake, they were Hungarians; we had a paper route and during junior high and high school we sold papers. It was the Press Record, twice a week; the weekend edition of the Post-Dispatch and Globe-Democrat and then the daily Globe-Democrat Star and Post-Dispatch. And so we earned money that way, enough to buy my first bicycle. I think I was fifteen years old when I have my first bicycle. And I remember paying \$75 for it and that was money I'd earned from selling papers. And then when I was a junior and senior in high school, Andy Hagopian had a dry cleaning plant in St. Louis. I would work the summers there and Saturdays there and get paid for working at his cleaning shop, his dry cleaning plant.

Wasson: What do remember about Christmases and the holidays, Easter, how you celebrated them?

Varadian: Well, before, since 1954, when we had our church, we would celebrate Christmas going to church and Easter going to Church. But prior to 1954, our neighbors, the Hagopians, after Andy Hagopian was released, or discharged, from the Army Air Corps, we ended up; since there were four children in his family, and his mom and dad, and then three children in my family and my mom and dad, we would take turns every years going to each other 's homes for Christmas Eve. None of our parents had any money but they provided a lot of love for us and made sure that we were kept clean, properly clothed and had a roof over our house. And we received simple things for Christmas, and that tradition today still continues because even though Andy's parents are deceased and two of his sisters are deceased and my father and two sisters are deceased; because of the children that have, were the results of the Varadian clan and the Hagopian clan, we celebrate Christmas Eve together every Christmas. And that's been an ongoing tradition and we even do it today.

Wasson: Do you celebrate it on the 25th?

Varadian: We celebrate two Christmases. We celebrate the American Christmas Eve on the 24th and we exchange gifts there. And then for the Armenian Christmas, January 5th or 6th it is, we go to church that day. We don't exchange any gifts there. But then we go ahead and celebrate Christmas Eve on the 5th I think it is, with church services.

Wasson: How about Easter? Do you remember anything about Easter?

Varadian: Easter celebration was a special day at our home. Our parents right away adapted to the American way of life and made sure that at Easter time we would have

baskets with eggs in it, colored eggs in it, and candy and then for all of the special holidays here in the United States; Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and any of the other holidays, our parents adapted fast to the American way of life and made sure that since we were here in the United States that we were exposed to the American way of celebrating these different holidays. Although we continued to go to the Armenian dances and any of the other ethnic dances that they had here in the Lincoln Place. Many of the ethnic groups in Lincoln Place kept up their traditional holidays and festivals that we would attend.

Wasson: Have you tried to pass on traditions down to your children?

Varadian: Yes. We had a youth organization when I was growing up, Armenian Youth Federation (AYF) that my sisters and I belonged to. And we would have conferences in major cities here in the Midwest whether it may be Chicago or Detroit or Cleveland. And annually we would have a convention at one of major cities out East, whether it would be Boston, or Providence, or Washington D.C. or New York City or Philadelphia. We would go to these Armenian affairs on a regular basis, I should say, after I got out of high school. And when I got married I wanted my boys to live in the same environment that I was raised in. And so they were born and raised in Lincoln Place and went to the same schools that I had attended, except for Central School. Graduated from Granite City High School and then went on to University of Illinois. And at that time, the wife and I moved from Lincoln Place here into Maryville. But while our boys were growing up, they were exposed to the variety of nationalities and my friends' children became good friends with my boys and they continued to go to the Mexican fiestas with me. And grew up with children of from other nationalities in the Lincoln Place area. Because I wanted them to have the same exposure I did. And even today they are good friends with many of their age group friends that grew up in Lincoln Place.

Wasson: Where did you meet your wife? When and where?

Varadian: When I was attending Southern Illinois University, I was a sophomore there I guess, my wife was from Belleville and she was attending Southern Illinois University also. And so we met in the library and we started dating and then ended up getting married.

Wasson: When did you get married?

Varadian: We got married in 1967, September 10th.

Wasson: And how many children do you have?

Varadian: We have two sons. John which is the oldest, is thirty-three and Jake is thirty-two.

Wasson: And where did you live in Lincoln Place? You said you lived there and they grew up there and went to school there?

Varadian: Oh, OK. I was, I spent my youth at 1729 Olive Street. When my wife and I got married we lived on Poplar Street, on the corner of Poplar and St. Louis Avenue in a trailer. We lived there for fifteen months and after fifteen months, a house on Olive Street came up for sale. And I remember when I was growing up, in my mind this probably was THE (his emphasis) prettiest home in Lincoln Place. And it came up for sale. And so the wife and I bought that house. And this house was right across the street from our old house that I was raised in. And so we lived there until 1986. And in 1986, '87 we bought a home here in Maryville and moved up here while our boys were students at University of Illinois.

Wasson: You mentioned that you were in the service. What branch were you in, and when did you go in?

Varadian: OK, I had gone into the Army in 1956. When I had graduated from high school, my, I didn't have any money to go to college, they had the draft at that time and I knew eventually that I would be drafted. My parents couldn't afford to put me through college and so I thought since I would have a military obligation and some of the benefits of going in at eighteen meant that I would qualify for the GI Bill. So in 1956, September, I enlisted into the Army and I took my basic at Ft. Leonard Wood and from then there I went to Chaffee, Arkansas for training in communications and then from there to Ft. Polk, Louisiana for about thirty days and then I spent the rest of my military time

Tape 1, Side B

After I left Ft. Polk, Louisiana, I was stationed there for thirty days and I received orders to go to Herks, Germany (could not verify this spelling with any city on a German map-- may have been a military installation), which was a suburb of Frankfurt Germany and there I spent approximately 14 months. And then in 1958 the difficulties that they had in Beirut, Lebanon, our outfit, our battalion, 299th Combat Engineer Battalion was ordered to Beirut, Lebanon in 1958. My commanding officer, Captain Henson, asked, since I was so short, or I had such a short period of time left in the military, that he would transfer me, but I told him no, this gives me an opportunity to see another part of the world and hopefully I can take pictures in Beirut, Lebanon and my mother would remember some of the sites. So I told Capt. Henson that I would like to go with my outfit, so we ended up going to Beirut, Lebanon. And I was stationed in Beirut, Lebanon for about thirty days I guess it was. My outfit stayed ninety days, but they gave me orders to come back to the Frankfurt, Germany to process to come back to the States for discharge. But while I was in Beirut, Lebanon I had an opportunity to take pictures of some of the sites there. And when I got home I showed my mother some of the pictures I had taken and she

remembered some of those places. Street names she remembered, and she thought she remembered some of the old buildings that were still standing from when she was in the orphanage in Beirut, Lebanon.

Wasson: You mentioned you also visited France some, Marseilles.

Varadian: Yes. While I was stationed in Germany I had an opportunity to go on leave. So I ended up going to Marseilles, France. And my father's childhood friend got as far as Marseilles, France. And my father's mother got as far as Marseilles, France. Well, I, my father had sent me the address of his childhood friend that lived in Marseilles with his family. And so I had scheduled a leave to go to, on leave, to Marseilles, France. So I ended going to Marseilles, France and spending a few days. And I stayed with my dad's childhood friend and while we were there he introduced me other Armenians there. We went to the cemetery where my father's mother was buried. And I ended up taking pictures of that and then sent them home to my dad and mom. So I ended up staying in Marseilles, four days I guess it was.

Wasson: Did you visit any other places in Europe?

Varadian: Yes. I had an opportunity to go to Copenhagen, Denmark,; Stockholm, Sweden. I went to Amsterdam. I went to Brussels. I went to Lyon, France because they had a lot of Armenians living in Lyon, France and then on my way back to Paris I ended up spending several days in Paris because that's the meeting place of some of my friends that were going to be on leave at the same time. We were going to meet in Paris, so we stayed in Paris for a few days. And while I was in Germany I had an opportunity to go to Heidelberg; Munich, Germany. Ended up going to Wildflecken, Germany. Of course I spent a lot of time in Frankfurt, Germany. We went to Aschaffenburg, Germany; Geisen, Germany. So we traveled quite a bit within Germany, being in the military.

Wasson: You speak Armenian?

Varadian: Yes. I used to speak it fluently, I used to write it fairly well, read it fairly well. And now that I no longer live in Lincoln Place, and we don't have as many of our parents left, little by little I'm getting away from the Armenian language. I'm speaking it less and less. Unless I see some of the elderly at church then I'll converse with them in Armenian.

Wasson: Now, seeing as how you served in Europe and so forth and spoke Armenian, did you feel any more or less prejudice in Europe, versus what you might have felt in Lincoln Place?

Varadian: None whatsoever. In fact, I didn't even know what the word prejudice meant

until after I got out of the service, I guess. I just sort of felt like if people didn't want to associate with me because I was from Lincoln Place, it was their loss. It didn't make any difference to me, it didn't bother me at all. I, in later years, I heard that some people were really bothered by it, but it didn't make any difference to me at all.. Because I had plenty of friends. And the friends that I grew up with, we had so much in common because of growing up together. Some of the things that we did together. We had a lot of things in common. But as far as being prejudice, I didn't know the word really existed.

Wasson: Didn't get bothered in the military or anything?

Varadian: No, no. Didn't at all. In fact, many of my friends in the service, and I still stay in touch with a couple of my friends that live in Philadelphia. In fact, I didn't think that there, the word prejudice existed until I went through basic and then being permanently stationed, meeting people from other parts of the United States, especially major cities, that they just wanted to associate with their own kind. And of course, there I wasn't in the "in-group" but then from the way I was raised in Lincoln Place, and with my friends it didn't make any difference with me. I had my select few friends in basic, I had my select few friends in Chaffee, Arkansas and Louisiana. But when I was in Germany everybody was my friend in the outfit. We all got along beautifully, there was no discrimination or prejudice towards one another when we were in Germany at all.

Wasson: When you got discharged from the military, was there any question in your mind that you wouldn't come back to Lincoln Place, you might strike out, because you'd visited so many places? Or was it just a natural that you wanted to return to Lincoln Place?

Varadian: I think it was natural to return to Lincoln Place because I had traveled so much when I was in the service that I really missed my environment in Lincoln Place. And I was glad to get back and now strike out to make a life for myself. Going to college now that I could afford to go to college. And getting my education. And then pursuing my career.

Wasson: Did you live at home while you were going to SIUE?

Varadian: Yes, yes, I lived at home until I got married. And I guess I lived at home until I was twenty-nine years old. And then I got married at age twenty-nine.

Wasson: What did you study at SIUE and how did you decide on that as a career?

Varadian: When I started to school I wanted to go into, to get a degree in Business and financing, Finances. But in 1966 my dad had a freakish accident, so I had to drop out of college and run his half of the bar. And so, I was a student of Cardondale at the time, and

so I dropped out of college and ended up working nights at the tavern. And then I enrolled here at SIU and decided to go into education. And the reason for this was I enjoyed being off during the summer, working straight days, being off on holidays, and being off on the weekends. I enjoyed that amount of time off because, after I got my degree and got my job teaching, I was still running the tavern working seven nights a week, three hundred sixty four days a year. And I did that from 1966 until 1978. So, going into the education field allowed me to work straight nights at the tavern also. Of course that got old after a while, and it got to the point where I told my parents, and their partner, that I no longer can run the tavern. Both of you, my parents and my dad's partner, they were old enough to draw Social Security, and I said, "It's about time that we lets somebody else run the tavern because I can no longer do both jobs."

Wasson: Did you have a car when you were going to school?

Varadian: yes, (laughter), yes. I had an old car. In fact, I take that back, I did not have a car. I used my dad's car to drive back and forth to school until I was able to buy a 1953 Oldsmobile, Ninety-Eight. And I drove that back and forth to school. And that's the only place that I would drive my vehicle because it was in such poor shape. And I really didn't need a vehicle for any other purpose because I was either going to school or I was working at the tavern, so my social life was pretty well limited.

Wasson: So you retired as a teacher?

Varadian: Yes, I'm retired as a teacher.

Wasson: And what subject did you teach?

Varadian: When I got hired in Granite City, I taught Social Studies, and math. And then, eventually, I would teach English or Language Arts and those three subjects, in Junior High. And then when I went to elementary, I stayed as a fifth, or sixth, grade teacher, and taught all of the subjects at that time.

Wasson: Did you teach your entire career in Granite City?

Varadian: Yes, yes, my entire career, twenty-five years.

Wasson: What was your wife taking at college?

Varadian: She also was in education and she's teaching today in the Granite City School District, sixth grade and she's at Coolidge Middle School.

Wasson: Do you keep track of world events as they relate to Armenia?

Varadian: Yes. In fact, I keep track of world events that pertain to every part of the world because I enjoy current events.

Wasson: What was your first, most vivid memory of your childhood?

Varadian: I guess, how close our family was. The love and attention that we received from our parents and how hard my dad worked to provide for his family. And I just felt so sorry for him because there wasn't enough hours in a day that he could put in because he just worked so hard. And how unselfish my dad was because I always remember we always had a clean home, a roof over house, three meals a day, clean clothing. But my dad always sent money to Armenian causes. I remember him, that any time that there was a fund raiser to help Armenian orphanages, Armenian schools, in Europe or in the Middle East, or any fund raiser that pertained to helping needy Armenians outside the United States, my dad always gave. Because he just sort of felt like he was fortunate to come to the United States and provide for his family that there were other Armenians that were worse off than he was. And if he could help, he wanted to. And I guess that's what I remember mostly about my dad.

Wasson: Did you ever feel poor or lacking for anything when you were growing up?

Varadian: I never did feel poor but I felt envious when I was going to school; the new clothes, the bicycles, that the other children had outside Lincoln Place. And then when I got to high school, the vehicles that many of my classmates had and none of us in Lincoln Place had an opportunity to get a car. Maybe a older, older high school student, but I don't remember any of my friends, my age group, in high school that had a car of their own. Yeah, I don't remember that.

Wasson: Do you think you appreciated, like you said you bought a bike for \$75.00, do you think you appreciated it more because you earned the money and bought it?

Varadian: Oh, definitely, definitely. That was something that was instilled in us by our parents. That if you don't have the money to buy something, you don't need it. If you're going to buy anything, you buy it for cash. And so, when I had an opportunity, in the Boy Scouts, to go to jamboree my dad said "Do you have the money to go?" And it was in Irvine, California, 1953. And I said "I can cut grass. I can do odd jobs." And that's exactly what I did to pay for that. And of course Andy Hagopian helped me when I was working at the cleaners too. So I appreciated that trip because I was able to work to pay for it. I appreciated my bicycle because my parents didn't have the money to buy it but then I worked to purchase that. And even today I've tried to instill that in my boys that, you know, anything that you want you have to work for it, don't expect anyone to give you anything. And that's the way that I've lived.

Wasson: You've mentioned your children. Where do they live now?

Varadian: OK, my son John, the oldest, lives in south St. Louis, on the Hill. He's a CPA and he has bought into his company. They install accounting software. And then my youngest son, Jake, lives in Fairview Heights, and he works for Ford Motor Company. And he is with Customer Service. And they both graduated from the University of Illinois and then got their Master's Degree from SIUE. And so they're still in the area.

Wasson: You talked about the businesses. What do you remember about the businesses in Lincoln Place?

Varadian: Oh, every nationality had their own business. The Hungarians' had Yonchie's Tavern, the Macedonians or Bulgarians' had Mike's Twilight Tavern, a good friend and neighbor Mike Antonoff. The Mexicans' had their tavern, Ernie's and Annie's. The Armenians' had their tavern, Sammy's Good Neighbor, Joe and Naz Donjoian had a tavern also. We had the Hungarian Home and that was where most of the fiestas for the Mexicans and the dances for the Armenian and Macedonians and Hungarians were held at the Hungarian Home. They had their bar downstairs. We had grocery stores; we had an Armenian grocery store, we had a couple of Macedonian grocery stores, we had a Bulgarian baker shop, bakery, we had-what else did we have there?-oh, and then we had a Bulgarian ice cream shop, we had an Armenian ice cream shop, we had an Armenian pool hall that sold penny candy, that was owned by Harry and Ozzie Begoshian, who was very, very good to the children of all nationalities in Lincoln Place. Always giving us free candy, and always calling us in when it was too cold outside. Very good, everyone of the businesses were very friendly with the people of Lincoln Place. Now what was unique, was that many of the business owners, before they went into business, might have worked at the steel mills, might have worked construction, might have had jobs outside of Lincoln Place, and many of their friends or acquaintances would come into Lincoln Place and patronize these places of business. And had no problems at all, no problems at all. No fights, nothing at all like that. If there was any kind of problem, it was very seldom between, it was a rarity between nationalities. If there was any kind of difficulty in the taverns, it was people from outside Lincoln Place that got into fights.

Wasson: Was there ever a point in time, living in Lincoln Place as long as you did, when you kind of sensed that Granite City accepted Lincoln Place? You know, a transition in feelings?

Varadian: Not really. I don't know whether there is a point that I thought that Granite City accepted people from Lincoln Place. I've never given it that much thought because it didn't make any difference to me whether did or not, because of the way that I was raised. If you liked me fine, if you didn't like me, then that's fine too. It didn't make any difference to me. I sort of felt like it would be your problem because I don't think I've done anything

to warrant you to dislike me. But my dad always used to say, "You treat everybody alike, you be friends with everyone, if they like you, fine; if they don't, don't dwell on it. Eventually they'll come around." But I've heard other people say that after the 1940 state basketball championship where of the ten players, seven of them were raised and lived in Lincoln Place. It seemed like Granite City accepted the people from Lincoln Place, that was the turning point. Now whether that is or not, I don't know.

Wasson: As a teacher, do you notice any other kind of divisions now in Granite City as a whole? You know, sections are not well liked or anything like that?

Varadian: No. Well, I've been retired for seven years, eight years I guess it is. Since then I don't think I sensed anything like that. But when I was teaching, no, I don't think there was that kind of a division in Granite City at that time. I guess because of the way that Granite City, the Granite City teachers were, because we had such a variety of nationalities that are in the Granite City School District. I sort of felt like they gave a lot, or they went ahead and said a lot about their experiences growing up. Whether you were an Armenian, or a Mexican or whatever, that they sort of felt like they wanted to make sure that people were treated fairly.

Wasson: Have you kept touch with people from your youth?

Varadian: Oh, yes. Mike Hinterser, who's Hungarian, when I'm in from the farm, I make sure that I go into Granite City and have coffee with him. And Pete Munoz, who is Mexican; Rich Delgado who is Mexican; Chris Dineff who is Macedonian; Judge Andreas Matoesian, who is Armenian; Mike Torosian, who is Armenian. I make it a point that when I'm in town, I go and have coffee or go and visit them. So we still stay close together.

Wasson: You mentioned you had a farm. Where's your farm at?

Varadian: Yes, my farm's in Salem, Missouri. Years ago, when we were living in Lincoln Place, my wife and I decided to buy a farm. And so we bought that farm and then bought another farm and so now that's turned out to be a full time job since I've been left teaching.

Wasson: What would you like people to remember about Lincoln Place?

Varadian: That the story they might have heard about how bad foreigners were, the immigrants were, that there was no truth to that at all. That the people of Lincoln Place went ahead and provided the best they could for their family. That they took care of their homes, they took care of their yards, they made sure their children had a warm place to live, a roof over their home, clean clothes, food and an education. Because it's amazing

how many children, first generation, ended up going on to college from Lincoln Place. Because their parents wanted them to have a better life than they had growing up.

Wasson: Have you achieved what you wanted to in life?

Varadian: (Long pause) One thing I always wanted to do was be a pilot. That the, that's the only thing that I wish I was intelligent enough, smart enough, to become an airline pilot. That's something I'd always dreamt of doing, which will never happen. But as far as getting an education, as far as raising a family, I've always wanted a farm, I always wanted to farm, I've achieved that. I've always wanted to travel, I do that. And I've always wanted to be proud of my heritage, I'm that. I've always wanted to take an interest in our church, I've served as a board of trustee member for many, many years. And I've worked to build a new church and an Armenian hall, St. Gregory's Hall in Granite City. Yes, the only thing that I didn't, that I wanted that I didn't achieve, was, I'd have loved to have been a pilot.

Wasson: Do you think you've ever been held back in anything by your ethnic background?

Varadian: I thought at one time when I went out for sports in high school. I thought I was held back because I thought I was a better ball player than some of the people outside of Lincoln Place that had made the team. But whenever I look back at it now as an adult, I probably wasn't as good as them. I thought I was. And I used to believe that the only reason that I was, I never did make the team at high school was because was Armenian. But that was the immaturity in me at that time. But now when I look back at it I probably wasn't as good as them.

Wasson: You mentioned you had the opportunity to travel. Have you ever had the desire to go to Armenia and see our roots?

Varadian: Yes. In fact, the wife, my wife and I, were on a cruise to Alaska last year. When we got back, we brought some gifts back for our sons. We had dinner and we were talking about next year the four of us going to Armenia. We would travel from the East coast, to Armenia and spend a couple, three weeks there. And that my wife and I would pay for the four of us, if we could all go together. And so we started saving money in September, the end of August I should say, and then with what has occurred as of September 11th, that sort of put a damper on our plans to go to Armenia. Not that we would be afraid, but then being an American, being in the Middle East, I don't think is a healthy situation at this time. Not that I would be afraid for myself, I just wouldn't want anything to happen to my wife, or my sons. Hopefully, when the situation worldwide sort of settles down, that eventually we will go to Armenia. Whether it will be all four of us, or just my wife and I, eventually we will go.

Wasson: What nationality is your wife?

Varadian: (Laughter) She's a mixture. I think she's got a little German, a little French, a little Irish, a little Scottish in her. So she's almost a Heinz 57. She's from Belleville.

Wasson: Does she embrace the Armenian culture and so forth? I've heard something about the spouses, and so forth, many times get very involved in Armenian culture.

Varadian: Yes. In fact, my wife is very active in the Armenian circles. In fact, she's on the board of trustees for our church, she attends the Armenian church. She doesn't speak Armenian but she does sing in the Armenian choir. And she's active in the Armenian Ladies Guild, where she has been an office holder a couple of times since she has been in the organization. So she's very, very active in the Armenian circles. Many times if we go to an Armenian function, in Chicago or Detroit, we go together. Because these major cities have weekends beginning on a Friday ending with a picnic on a Sunday, a three day weekend, almost a three day weekend, gathering of a social activity and we'll go to Detroit. In fact, last July I guess it was, we had gone to Detroit for a four day Armenian celebration there, the Armenian Olympics.

Wasson: Is there anything that I haven't discussed that you'd like to bring up about Lincoln Place? Or anything in general?

Varadian: Well, I guess one thing I do want to say is many times, many times a group of us will get together and discuss our childhood friends and mention some of the people that we knew and how we'd love to experience our childhood again. Because it was a unique situation where we all got along beautifully with each other. That we knew each other's families, we spent time eating at each other's homes, doing the same things together and how proud we were that our parents settled in Lincoln Place. And that we all got along so well together, that we, I don't think we'd want to change our childhood raising for anything else, because it was so unique.

Wasson: Do you think some of the camaraderie is lost today in neighborhoods?

Varadian: I think, I think probably people coming from countries that have had conflicts the last several years, like after the Vietnam War. Many of the Vietnamese settle that came into the United States in an area, a small area. I think they're being raised, they're raising their families the same way we were being raised. People coming from Croatia, Bosnia, that have been brought here to the United States, I think they're probably experiencing the same thing we did when we were growing up, being the first generation here in the United States. I guess probably some of the refugees that come from war torn countries settle in a small area probably are raising their families the same as our parents

raised us. But as far as Americans, that have been here for generations, I don't think they would experience the same thing as we did. With our ethnic background.

Wasson: Well, that's all I have and I certainly appreciate the time that you spent. I enjoyed it very much.

Varadian: Well, Dave I want to thank you for having the opportunity to be interviewed. And it make me feel a lot better. I just feel bad that we couldn't do this a lot sooner since I was tied up at the farm. But I want to thank you again for taking the time to come over and interview me.

Wasson: Thank you.

Varadian: Thank you.

Oral History

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