**Kate:** Good afternoon this is Kate Moore for the National Park Service. Today is the 4th of December 1993. I’m in Southfield at the home of- your first name is pronounced?

**Vahe:** Vahe.

**Kate:** Vahe Sekdorian.

**Vahe:** Sekdorian right.

**Kate:** Who came from Turkey when he was 16 years old. Why don’t you begin by giving me your full name and date of birth please?

**Vahe:** My phone number?

**Kate:** Full name and phone number if you like.

**Vahe:** Sekdorian is my last name and my first name is Vahe V-A-H-E.

**Kate:** Your date of birth?

**Vahe:** 1908.

**Kate:** What month and day?

**Vahe:** At that time when I lost my parents we didn’t have any record at all but I am right now 85 years old.

**Kate:** Where were you born?

**Vahe:** The name of the city is Shabin-Karahisar. It’s not any close to Istanbul, its interior.

**Kate:** Could you spell the name of that town?

**Vahe:** Shabin S-H-A-B-I-N Karahisar K-A-R-A-H-I-S-A-R, they’re two separate words.

**Kate:** What size of town was that?

**Vahe:** What kind of town?

**Kate:** What size?

**Vahe:** It’s a small town, probably they’re only about 10,000 Armenians and Greeks also and majority were Turks.

**Kate:** What kind of town was it? What did it look like? What was the major industry there?

**Vahe:** I was very young I don’t have much information about, but shopkeepers and merchants, that sort of thing.

**Kate:** What was your father’s name?

**Vahe:** My father’s first name is Garabed G-A-R-A-B-E-D, Garabed Sekdorian.

**Kate:** What did he do? What was his occupation?

**Vahe:** He was a merchant.

**Kate:** What did he look like?

**Vahe:** He wasn’t short like I am. He was tall, handsome and is very prominent, prominent in church affairs and schools, things like that.

**Kate:** What about his personality, his temperament, what was that like?

**Vahe:** He was a stickler to [inaudible 00:02:33] but he was a good father, he took very good care of our family.

**Kate:** What were his features, his eye color, his hair color?

**Vahe:** In those days, those places they have moustache but not beards just moustache. He was tall and very prominent and very effective.

**Kate:** Dark hair?

**Vahe:** Yeah, he had a dark hair.

**Kate:** Is there a story about your father that you associate with your childhood? Do you have any story that you think said something about your father in relation to you?

**Vahe:** He was strict with his children, discipline which is very important. Some places, even in this country, families don’t discipline their children very well. Discipline begins at home and my father was a disciplinarian, he gave us a good discipline. He make sure that we go school, get education.

**Kate:** Do you remember anything in particular that sticks in your mind about him when you were kid? Any story about, if you were ever really bad and how he disciplined you?

**Vahe:** Let me see what I can think of. I had an uncle too, all I can say is that he make sure that we live well, we are healthy and disciplined. He’s the family disciplinarian, that kind of man.

**Kate:** What was your mother’s name?

**Vahe:** I’m going to spell it for you, Vokoel V-O-K-O-E-L.

**Kate:** What was her maiden name do you remember?

**Vahe:** No, I don’t remember her maiden name.

**Kate:** What did she do?

**Vahe:** You mean her last name?

**Kate:** Yes before she married.

**Vahe:** Vezigian V-E-Z-I-G-I-A-N, that’s her last name.

**Kate:** What did she do for an occupation?

**Vahe:** Housewife.

**Kate:** What did she look like?

**Vahe:** She was very much respected and she’s a handsome woman.

**Kate:** What about her eyes and her hair color?

**Vahe:** I think brownish, her eyes were brownish yeah.

**Female:** He doesn’t have any picture to show you.

**Vahe:** I don’t have any pictures. You know you asked me some of the tragedies we had, Turks and Armenians over there. I lost my parents there and the story is very long. I lost my mother. My father was, because he was very prominent, they took him, they told him that they were going to have some conference or something he never showed up. He was killed.

Armenians knew that something was brewing, Armenians went up the hill, mountain. They burned the houses went to the hill and they fought with the Turks one month and mean time, they burned their homes, everything else so it won’t be in the hands of the Turks. They were always hoping that Russians would come and save them but that did not happen.

For one month they struggled. There was shortage of water, shortage of food. Those elderly people, some people over 60 years old, they escaped behind the mountain and left behind children and women and young girls. And then they sent their women with white handkerchief that they’re giving up.

Immediately the soldiers came up to this mountain and surrounded. They were looking for men, there were no men, there were children boys, girls and women. They were crying, they all were crying.

Then they separated women and children, women they took some other place, children they took some other place. That’s the last I saw my mother and my sister. I had two younger brothers, they were with me.

A Greek family adopted me, he was a baker, I was a young boy. They didn’t have any children they loved me very much, they adopted me. I was there for a couple of years or three years, I don’t quite remember.

Russians were advancing, coming towards Turkey. This time the Turks wanted all the Greeks who were hiding any Armenian boys or girls must give to the Turkish soldiers. They collected all the Armenians left and took them away. Then …

**Kate:** Were you taken away?

**Vahe:** I was taken away yeah.

**Kate:** You were taken from the family?

**Vahe:** From Greek family yeah. Our parents everything else, they were three months to the Syrian Desert and they just starve over there in the desert, no water, no food.

**Kate:** You were there in the Syrian?

**Vahe:** No, I wasn’t there. Then they took me, my two brothers the younger brothers. My sister was with my mother, she was older than myself and my brother was going to college in another city, my older brother.

To make the story long, a Turkish family got interested in me. They had some cows and sheep I take care of them, so I did that. I was so desperate, I was so lonesome, I was crying all the time and then I wanted to go back to Shabin-Karahisar again, I’m barefoot. I did, I did go there

**Kate:** You walked?

**Vahe:** I walked. I walked with a group of people that take merchandise from one city to another on a horseback. I went with them on foot. I’m looking for some Armenians over there. I found one, a shoemaker, an Armenian shoe maker. He knew my father.

He said that, I don’t know what happened after that. I think there was a Greek family who I think he put me over there with another Greek family. Four years pass by and 1919 the World War is over, Turks were defeated and the Allies won the war.

Thanks goodness, Americans used to live here, American who used to live they came and opened orphanages in Sivas, in Karpoot, in İzmir, in Constantinople. Then they got me in this orphanage in Sivas, is another city.

There’s one thing you will surprise what happened, as I was in Sivas when I was walking, I recognized my cousin. I called his name, just imagine, unbelievable. He was in an orphanage over there.

**Kate:** Did you have a big family? This was you had many cousins?

**Vahe:** He took me to his mother, this is in a different city, Sivas they call it. Americans were organizing orphanages already and they put me in an American orphanage. They’re called American Near East Relief.

For four years there were all Armenians, Armenian teachers and some American supervisors. It was sponsored by United Scholar Fund and some Armenians over here. Four years I stayed in that Near East Relief orphanage, I learned my English over there.

Somehow my aunt and my cousin came to America. They couldn’t take me because it wasn’t possible. One day I told them that I want to come to America because it’s unbearable, no what happened? I forgot to mention.

Things got worse again in Turkish government. The Americans thought that it’s better to move these orphans to some other country. They took us to Greece, I went to Greece, the whole orphanage went to Greece.

**Kate:** Let’s go back a little bit, when you last saw your mother how old were you then? What age were you then?

**Vahe:** I couldn’t tell you, I don’t have the papers either.

**Kate:** How old were you when you were in the orphanage, what years to what years, about what ages?

**Vahe:** I was at least 10, 11 years old or maybe 12 years, it’s just a guess, transferred from Turkey to Greece. I was in Corinth in Greece and then I got a job in the American Near East Relief headquarters in Athens. They like me, I could speak a little English, took me there.

Then I asked my cousins in America, I want to come to America. They helped me. I came to America as a student to study, that’s the only way I could come as a student to study.

I came to Ellis Island. They asked me, “What are you going to study in America?” I said, “I’m going to study mathematics and engineering.” He asked me a couple of lab questions in algebra and I knew it, I learned at school. They said it’s okay, they approved I could stay. They sent me …

**Kate:** I have a few questions over this for your memory.

**Vahe:** It’s a long story.

**Kate:** Yeah, we’re going to have some few questions, this is a memory test. If you go back to when before when you were with your family, your mother and your father, before all this happened with your family breaking up and the political situation. If you go back, do you remember your house? Do you remember the house where you were when you were a small child?

**Vahe:** Yeah.

**Kate:** Could you describe it? What was the house like when you were a small boy?

**Vahe:** It was a three story building, big building. When Armenians went to the mountains, they burned everything so they won’t be in the hands of the Turks.

**Kate:** When you lived in this three story building did your family live alone in that three story building or was it an apartment? What type of house was it?

**Vahe:** It was a regular house.

**Kate:** A regular house that was three storeys?

**Vahe:** Yeah family, three story’s.

**Kate:** How many rooms would you say there were there?

**Vahe:** Bedrooms you mean?

**Kate:** Bedrooms all together.

**Vahe:** I’m going to say about four bedrooms, no basement.

**Kate:** Was there a garden?

**Vahe:** Yeah, there was a garden.

**Kate:** Was it a brick house or a wooden house? What was the house made of?

**Vahe:** I cannot tell you, I don’t think its brick, I …

**Kate:** You were small though this is hard to remember the …

**Vahe:** Yeah.

**Kate:** What did you grow in the garden? Anything you remember?

**Vahe:** No, just flowers I think.

**Kate:** What kind of furniture did you have?

**Vahe:** Furniture?

**Kate:** Yeah.

**Vahe:** Regular furniture, not anything fancy.

**Kate:** Was your house inside town or outside town?

**Vahe:** Outside town.

**Kate:** Did you keep any animals?

**Vahe:** We had one cow. My mother used to get the milk and make yoghurt, butter which is my favorite, I remember those things.

**Kate:** Did you have anything else but a cow? Did you have dogs, cats?

**Vahe:** No dogs.

**Female:** [Inaudible 00:17:24]?

**Vahe:** I think we had one cat.

**Kate:** Who did the cooking in the family?

**Vahe:** My mother.

**Kate:** Did you have hired help? Did you have a maid?

**Vahe:** Whenever they make bread, those flat breads, she gets help someone to help her. She couldn’t do it alone.

**Kate:** The cleaning was done by your mother?

**Vahe:** Yeah.

**Female:** You said that you had a maid to take care of four children?

**Kate:** You had a nanny?

**Vahe:** We had a lady to take care of the children too yeah.

**Female:** You told me.

**Kate:** Did you help cook at all?

**Vahe:** Me?

**Kate:** Yeah.

**Vahe:** No.

**Kate:** What about the kitchen? What did the kitchen in your house look like do you remember? You were very small.

**Vahe:** Over there they have, under the ground they burn special wood and warm it. On top of it they put some square thing. You put your feet down and your hands to warm up. We didn’t have any oil or gasoline, we have a gasoline for the lamps for light but that’s about it I think.

**Kate:** What was meal time like when you ate?

**Vahe:** Milk?

**Kate:** Meal time when you ate? When you ate did you eat together or?

**Vahe:** We ate together yeah. The whole family sits down together.

**Kate:** Did you live near other family members? Were there other cousins?

**Vahe:** My uncle lives next door. They disappeared. My uncle’s daughter died lately in Bulgaria, she was adopted by another Armenian, I don’t know how she got there, how she [inaudible 00:19:24], I have no idea.

**Kate:** How about your grandparents, do you remember your grandparents?

**Vahe:** My mother’s mother I remember slightly.

**Kate:** Do you remember her name?

**Vahe:** No.

**Kate:** Were you especially close to anyone in the family? Who are you closest to?

**Vahe:** Now?

**Kate:** No when you were a small boy, who was the closest family member to you?

**Vahe:** My cousin I guess, who live in New York now, at that time.

**Kate:** What is your cousin’s name?

**Vahe:** First name is George Ezekiel. He is one who help me come to this country, he and his mother, my aunt.

**Kate:** Were there any characters in your family? People who were unusual that you could tell a story about? Do you remember any particular member of the family as standing out?

**Vahe:** My older brother is going to American college in Sivas, this other city. My older sister, she was going to Armenian school. I can’t say more. They disappeared.

**Female:** They all disappeared.

**Vahe:** Tragedy.

**Kate:** What about religion, what was your religious life like?

**Vahe:** Our religion? I was a Greek Orthodox.

**Female:** Armenian Orthodox, why Greek?

**Vahe:** [Inaudible 00:21:00] Orthodox?

**Female:** Armenian Orthodox.

**Vahe:** Armenian Orthodox.

**Kate:** Did you have an Orthodox church nearby your house when you were a child? Did you go to church when you were a child?

**Vahe:** Yeah, I go to church.

**Kate:** Was it nearby do you remember?

**Vahe:** Walking distance.

**Female:** Can I say something?

**Kate:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Female:** We went to Shabin-Karahisar where he was born, back in 19 …

**Vahe:** 74.

**Female:** 74.

**Vahe:** For visit.

**Female:** We went there to find their house and …

**Vahe:** The church.

**Female:** Church. We couldn’t find anything. They all rebuilt, it’s all changed. There was some [inaudible 00:21:45] over there instead of church. All the Turkish families has taken off.

**Vahe:** It has changed yeah.

**Kate:** Was every Sunday religious for you?

**Vahe:** Over there?

**Kate:** Yeah.

**Vahe:** Yeah it [inaudible 00:22:04].

**Kate:** Was it prejudice towards your religion there?

**Vahe:** We have a prejudice? No.

**Kate:** Nobody persecuted you?

**Vahe:** Except Turks.

**Kate:** What was the biggest holiday celebration?

**Vahe:** I would say Easter. Easter?

**Female:** For our, is Easter but in Turkish country its Ramadan.

**Vahe:** No, you mean …

**Kate:** For you, for them.

**Vahe:** Easter I would say.

**Kate:** How did you celebrate it?

**Vahe:** Usually parents buy new clothes and special food. Invite relatives or we go to relatives, that sort of thing.

**Kate:** What type of food was special?

**Vahe:** I can’t remember.

**Kate:** It was a lot of food?

**Vahe:** Lots of food, yeah.

**Kate:** Big feast?

**Vahe:** Big feast.

**Kate:** What about school do you remember school when you were very small when your family was together?

**Vahe:** I did go to kindergarten and my other younger brothers they stay home, they were too young. We had Armenian teachers.

**Kate:** Do you remember any particular teachers or playmates? Do you remember your teachers then?

**Vahe:** No.

**Kate:** What was your favorite subject do you remember?

**Vahe:** I’m a graduate civil engineer. I got my education over here. I like Math pretty well, that’s the reason I took engineering. That’s it.

**Kate:** You said already you learned English prior to coming to the States?

**Vahe:** Yeah, because we had English classes over there in the orphanage, I was in the orphanage four years. Then when they took us to Greece I spoke English to American supervisors there.

The important thing is this American Near East Relief saved our lives. If it wasn’t for that, they would have perished an all these young people. Because the Turks are very vicious, the young girls, they did everything the young girls.

**Kate:** When you go back to your childhood do you remember when you were very small what type of games you played together? Were there special games that were particularly Armenian that you played or?

**Vahe:** No, nothing special.

**Kate:** You have a favorite childhood story that you tell?

**Vahe:** I can’t remember anything.

**Female:** They didn’t have a decent childhood these people they were all laying on the streets.

**Kate:** This is the way [inaudible 00:25:11]?

**Vahe:** Yeah.

**Kate:** When did you decide to come to the United States?

**Vahe:** I came to this country 1924, one week later was Christmas.

**Kate:** When did you get the idea to come? When did you think you would first come?

**Vahe:** Life became very unbearable. Near East Relief was disintegrating, they couldn’t support it. They separated some they sent to Egypt from Greece but all their orphans came to Greece anyway. Some were in Corinth Greek town, some in Athens, some in Corinth. I was in Corinth.

We used to live was [inaudible 00:26:03]. Probably they couldn’t support any longer. I had to find something, I wrote to my aunt my cousin, that I must come to America. I came to study here. I went college. I got my degree in engineering. It was unfortunate that we had 10 year depression over here.

**Kate:** That’s right.

**Vahe:** I couldn’t find a job. I worked in restaurants as a baas boy. You know what that is baas boy?

**Kate:** Yes.

**Vahe:** I would get three meals a day. I didn’t want to be a burden to my cousin.

**Kate:** Did your cousin pay for you to come over? Did he send you the money?

**Vahe:** Yeah they did.

**Kate:** They sent you the money to come. What did you have to do to prepare? How did you prepare to leave? Do you remember getting ready to come to the States?

**Vahe:** Near East relief offices, they like me so much over there, I was office boy in headquarters in Athens, American headquarters. They helped me somehow.

**Kate:** Were you excited to leave? Were you excited to come?

**Vahe:** I was very happy that I came here, very happy.

**Kate:** What did you know about America before you came?

**Vahe:** I knew it was a safe place, a good place, no persecution and freedom and I found it.

**Kate:** Did anybody give you a goodbye party? When you were about to leave and you knew you were going to leave …?

**Vahe:** From Greece you mean?

**Kate:** Yeah.

**Vahe:** No.

**Kate:** My father said the same thing. How much luggage did you take? What did you take with you?

**Vahe:** I had one baggage, I didn’t have much.

**Kate:** What did you leave behind?

**Vahe:** To my two young brothers, I found my two brothers they were in different orphanage. Somebody told me that, “I know your brothers such and such orphanage in Corfu Greece.” My other brother was in Istanbul, I had no idea, other people told me.

**Female:** He went and he saw them, didn’t you?

**Kate:** Did you go see them ever?

**Vahe:** No, I didn’t go with there, but I saw them in Egypt. I took a trip to Egypt from here.

**Kate:** When you first came over here though when you decided to come to the States, did you bring any food with you at all?

**Vahe:** No.

**Kate:** Did you take anything special with you that was special to you?

**Vahe:** No. I came through France.

**Kate:** Who came to America with you? Did you come alone or?

**Vahe:** Alone.

**Kate:** You left from which port in France?

**Vahe:** Cherbourg.

**Kate:** How did you get there from Greece?

**Vahe:** I took a boat, came to Marseille. From Marseille, I always wanted to see Paris, we heard so much about Paris. I went to Paris and from Paris I went to Cherbourg, took the boat from there and came to …

**Kate:** You did [inaudible 00:29:38] by boat and train is that it? How did you get from Marseille to Paris?

**Vahe:** I can use the train yeah.

**Kate:** You didn’t walk?

**Vahe:** No, it’s too far away.

**Female:** How about the money, where did you find the money?

**Vahe:** When I worked Near East Relief office, I saved my money.

**Kate:** You saved the money to get to the boat and your cousin paid you to come over?

**Vahe:** No, I was office boy and they paid me money and I saved it.

**Kate:** You saved it for the whole trip over to America?

**Vahe:** No, my cousin helped out. I had a little money with me.

**Kate:** You went to Paris and from Paris you went to Cherbourg?

**Vahe:** Yeah.

**Kate:** How was Paris by the way? Did you have a good time in Paris?

**Vahe:** Obviously you go to Paris and I wanted to see that Eiffel Tower. I thought it was very close, I walk and I couldn’t reach, it’s too far.

**Kate:** But you saw it?

**Female:** I just had a dream about it when I was there in the old country.

**Kate:** Did you see it? You saw it?

**Vahe:** I saw it yeah, Eiffel Tower.

**Kate:** When you got to the port on the ship, what was the name of the ship do you remember?

**Vahe:** It was a British ship I remember that. No, I don’t remember the name.

**Kate:** Did you have to wait to depart? Did you stay overnight before you left?

**Vahe:** Where?

**Kate:** In Cherbourg?

**Vahe:** Cherbourg, yeah.

**Kate:** Did you leave?

**Vahe:** I stay there.

**Kate:** What did you feel like when you were waiting?

**Vahe:** In Cherbourg?

**Kate:** Yeah.

**Vahe:** Meals were included in Cherbourg when I got out from the train they took us to Cherbourg. I stayed there one night or two nights, meals were included in Cherbourg. I wasn’t hungry, yet they feed me.

**Kate:** That’s what you remembered?

**Vahe:** They feed me yeah. Then when the ship came, I came here.

**Kate:** When did the ship depart? Do you remember when it went over, the year and the month?

**Vahe:** I can’t remember but I can tell you this much that it was in 1924, one week before Christmas I came to New York.

**Kate:** What about the ship, what was it like on the ship?

**Vahe:** It was English ship I know that. I had a picture some place.

**Kate:** What class did you travel? What was your ticket?

**Vahe:** Third class maybe.

**Kate:** Describe your accommodations, what was it like? Where did you sleep?

**Vahe:** They gave blankets I think, nothing extraordinary.

**Kate:** Where did you eat on the ship?

**Vahe:** On the ship?

**Kate:** The dining room?

**Vahe:** Dining room I suppose.

**Kate:** Do you remember much about that? What was the food like?

**Vahe:** No, I can’t remember. I wasn’t hungry. I forget [inaudible 00:33:03]. They gave you enough food.

**Kate:** Were you allowed up on deck at all? On the deck of the boat, were you allowed to go up there?

**Vahe:** I think so yeah.

**Kate:** What did you see? What do you remember about that boat trip? What did you smell and hear?

**Vahe:** I was always dreaming about the Statue of Liberty, when I saw Statue of Liberty I said, “God help me.”

**Kate:** Before you saw it, was it a rough trip or smooth trip? What kind of trip was it?

**Vahe:** It wasn’t very smooth.

**Kate:** Did you get sick? Did you get ill?

**Vahe:** It was something new to me going on the ocean.

**Kate:** You were how old then? How old were you in this trip?

**Vahe:** I can’t give you those figures, I don’t know.

**Kate:** Did you get sick at all on the voyage? You were young man, very young.

**Vahe:** I was young.

**Kate:** You were a teenager weren’t you?

**Vahe:** Yeah.

**Kate:** Was it an adventure for you?

**Vahe:** Yeah, it was an adventure.

**Kate:** On that trip you said it wasn’t smooth, were people getting sick on the boat? Do you remember any of that?

**Vahe:** I don’t recall.

**Kate:** Were there any activities on the boat at all?

**Vahe:** Not for me no. I don’t think so.

**Kate:** How long was the trip about?

**Vahe:** I couldn’t tell you. I don’t remember.

**Kate:** That’s all right you don’t have to remember everything, these are just questions. You saw land for the first time, what was the first thing you saw?

**Vahe:** Statue of Liberty.

**Kate:** Were there people, everybody looking at it or were you alone? Where were you?

**Vahe:** I think there were others refugees there, probably from Russia. There were quite a Russian people on the ship. They took us to this island. They kept over there for two nights. Finally my cousin came, but I went for before [inaudible 00:35:19] judges and he says, “Why you come to America?” I say, “I come here to go to school.” “What you’re going to study?” “Engineering.”

“Do you know Algebra?” “Yes I do.” I knew algebra, I studied it in the orphanage and they asked me some questions, very simple questions. I answered and they Okayed. My cousin is waiting outside to take me home and thanks goodness that was it. Happiest day of my life.

**Kate:** When you saw the Statue of Liberty, had you heard about the Statue of Liberty before? Did you know about what it was?

**Vahe:** I think so yeah.

**Kate:** That was the first thing you saw?

**Vahe:** First thing I saw.

**Kate:** Did you see the New York Skyline too? Do you remember New York?

**Vahe:** I don’t remember. I have no idea about New York.

**Kate:** You remember the Statue of Liberty? What did you feel, you felt?

**Vahe:** I felt very confident, there’s a strength come in me.

**Kate:** How did you get from the ship to Ellis Island? How did you get to Ellis Island? You said they brought you to the island, do you remember how you got there?

**Vahe:** I suppose the ship was left some place and they took us to Ellis Island. They had many other people, lots of people there. The beds are side by side, dormitories side by side. It feels pretty good.

**Kate:** When you first walked in didn’t they take you to a big hall?

**Vahe:** Yeah.

**Kate:** What happened? When you first came off the boat, what did you see first do you remember?

**Vahe:** I saw so many people dressed differently.

**Kate:** How were you dressed?

**Female:** Poor, simple.

**Vahe:** Not bad.

**Kate:** Were you frightened or excited? What was your feeling the whole time you were at Ellis?

**Vahe:** I had some fears yeah, there were some fears that I heard to people I talked to, some of them were not accepted they were sent back. That put some fear in me. Then I came to study here and then they ask me some questions about algebra.

**Kate:** You said it was crowded?

**Vahe:** It was very crowded, yeah.

**Kate:** Was it clean?

**Vahe:** Very clean, yeah I would say so.

**Kate:** Were they nice to you the staff, even though they asked you questions? How did they treat you the staff?

**Vahe:** I didn’t have any complains. I didn’t know any better.

**Kate:** Did you have a medical examination?

**Vahe:** Yes I had.

**Kate:** What was it?

**Vahe:** I had a medical examination in Athens first in Greece. I think after that that was it.

**Kate:** At Ellis Island did they check you for anything?

**Vahe:** I don’t think so.

**Female:** Your eyes.

**Kate:** How about your eyes?

**Vahe:** My eyes? They checked my eyes yeah

**Kate:** They checked your eyes?

**Vahe:** In Athens.

**Kate:** You didn’t need a medical examination in Ellis?

**Vahe:** No, I didn’t have one.

**Kate:** What was it like staying overnight at Ellis Island when you waited? What did you feel? What did you see?

**Vahe:** I was lonesome, I could speak English but there were many other people who couldn’t speak English. There were a lot of Russians, Lithuanians from Finland, from all over. Some of them had been there a long time because they’re not coming legally. My case was legal. I have American Council’s approval in Athens.

**Kate:** You had your papers in order and you had your medical examination before you came?

**Vahe:** Right.

**Kate:** How were you sleeping in accommodations at Ellis when they made you stay overnight?

**Vahe:** The [inaudible 00:39:53] side by side.

**Kate:** All nationalities together?

**Vahe:** All countries together.

**Kate:** Did you meet any other Armenians?

**Vahe:** No, not a single one.

**Kate:** You were the only Armenian?

**Vahe:** Maybe if there were any I wouldn’t know it because there were a lot of people there. I wouldn’t know that.

**Kate:** Were you entertained there? Was there any entertainment?

**Vahe:** No entertainment.

**Kate:** Who came to meet you then, your cousin?

**Vahe:** My cousin.

**Kate:** This is the same cousin who helped you come over?

**Vahe:** Right.

**Kate:** His name is George?

**Vahe:** George.

**Kate:** How did you leave Ellis Island and where did you go to?

**Vahe:** He took me directly home.

**Kate:** To his home which is where?

**Vahe:** They were living in Ridgewood River I think.

**Kate:** Ridgewood, New Jersey?

**Vahe:** No not New Jersey, Long Island. It was Ridgewood or [inaudible 00:40:50] around there some place.

**Kate:** What were your first impressions when you got there?

**Vahe:** I was a little shy. I got nothing to offer to them. It was such a great sacrifice to me, I felt very small. Then I got used to it, they were very kind to me and just like that I was son.

**Kate:** What were your expectations about the United States before you came? What did you think about the country before you came?

**Vahe:** I knew that it’s a safe place, there’s a future and no Turks.

**Female:** You escaped from them.

**Kate:** When you first got to your cousin’s house, was there anything you remember you had never saw before? What were your first impressions of things you had never seen?

**Vahe:** They had prepared a lot of good food there that I enjoyed.

**Kate:** You’re [inaudible 00:41:57] around food.

**Vahe:** My aunt took very good care of me. Day by day I got used to the place.

**Kate:** Was there anything you couldn’t do when you first got here that you were unused to doing? Do you remember being at the beginning, not knowing what was going on because you just preferred somewhere else?

**Vahe:** I don’t remember.

**Kate:** What was the neighborhood like where you went to like? The neighborhood how was that?

**Vahe:** The neighborhood, they were living [inaudible 00:42:40] not in [inaudible 00:42:41] but Brooklyn, they were living in Brooklyn now I remember. It was congested. There were individual homes, not many at least. Day by day I got used to the place.

**Kate:** Did you get along well with the neighbors there?

**Vahe:** I didn’t know them.

**Kate:** What jobs in America did your family members have?

**Vahe:** My cousin was a printer. He recruit somebody as his foreman, he was making fairly good money but I didn’t want to depend on him too much, I wanted to be on my own. I went to high school and graduated. The depression came over and I went to college Indiana.

**Kate:** Indiana University?

**Vahe:** Tri-State University in Indiana. I got my degree from there, Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering. I took some graduate courses in Columbia University when I came back to New York.

Then no jobs, I go from one agent to another to get a job, no experience. I go to American Society of Civil Engineers. I remember the man’s name Mr. Parker. He got so used to me.

The depression was very long, almost eight years. Roosevelt came. He was my most praised and most preferred president. He established this WPA, PWA. I got WPA job and I got little experience my engineering, civil engineering. When I go somewhere a place to apply for engineering, I don’t say I don’t have no experience, I say I have experience.

**Female:** You’re lying.

**Vahe:** You got to exaggerate a little bit, otherwise you’re out. I started as a draftsman, drawings. I became proficient in drafting then I said I’m a designer. I became structural designer. When I apply for a job, I say I have experience in the structural designing, I knew foundations, praying it was going to be the foundations in that you’re building, that sort of thing.

I changed from one company to another, I get more experience. Then I ask more money. Sometimes they sent me out of town, they send me to Chicago, they send it to Kentucky. Worked there six months, Chicago one year.

I got more and more proficient in civil engineering through structural engineering. I became very good in three of those country foundations, early recommendations.

To make the long story short, the best job I ever had in my life, General Motors. I worked at General Motors 13 years. I’m retired from them, I get health insurance, I get pension and …

**Female:** All kind of benefits.

**Vahe:** Health benefits.

**Kate:** If I can bring you back a little bit, a little bit back a little further. Do you remember when you first went to high school here when you just came over? Were you treated well by other students? Did people treat you nicely?

**Vahe:** The high school I went was Springfield, Massachusetts. There were a lot of foreign students there.

**Kate:** How did you get to Springfield Massachusetts?

**Vahe:** I knew another man in Athens who, I got acquainted with him. When he went he got to school, he wrote to me that, “Come there’s a school here where I am.”

**Kate:** You went to high school in Massachusetts actually?

**Vahe:** Right.

**Kate:** You were in Springfield, were you the only …

**Vahe:** When I went there I met this friend of mine whom I knew from Athens. He was an old friend, he was Armenian.

**Kate:** Where did you live then?

**Vahe:** Where?

**Kate:** In Massachusetts, with whom did you live, with what family?

**Vahe:** In the school in Springfield, dormitories.

**Kate:** How did you get that? A scholarship?

**Vahe:** For those who needed money, they helped.

**Kate:** You had a scholarship.

**Vahe:** Then I borrow some money from my cousin. I did very well and vacation times I went to Northampton Nuthouse.

**Kate:** You mean the mental hospital?

**Vahe:** Nuthouse, where crazy people are.

**Kate:** Yeah mental hospital.

**Vahe:** Mental hospital yeah.

**Kate:** Northampton Nuthouse?

**Vahe:** As an attendant, summer vacation I made mine over there. When I go back to the high school again, I used to go I have part of tuition, they help me with tuition. Then they gave me little job in the library. I managed pretty well.

**Female:** He used to work during the night and he used to go school during the day. That’s what he told me.

**Vahe:** Even in [inaudible 00:48:54].

**Kate:** You were in Massachusetts?

**Vahe:** Yeah.

**Kate:** Then when you were in Massachusetts when you went there, were you the only foreigner?

**Vahe:** No a lot of foreigners.

**Kate:** Armenians too?

**Vahe:** Yeah, Armenians too.

**Kate:** You weren’t alone?

**Vahe:** Yeah. It’s called American International College, but I was in high school department. They had a college department too and they had a lot of foreigners too.

**Kate:** How did you get from there out to Indiana?

**Vahe:** When I graduated from the high school I went back to New York. The same friend that recommended this high school, he went to Tri-State University, he said, “It’s a good place to go and it’s cheaper too.” I wanted to go there myself. One thing leads to another, very interesting. I had a very colorful life.

**Kate:** When you came here was it difficult the English at the beginning? You knew English already some but …

**Vahe:** I had an accent, foreign accent, but I was in an American crowd most of the time. When I went to Columbia University, I lived in international house, you ever heard of that place?

**Kate:** I’m from Columbia University, I’m doing a doctorate.

**Vahe:** I lived in International House.

**Kate:** Yeah, I know International House.

**Vahe:** Then I took courses at the Columbia University.

**Kate:** That’s a great place by the way.

**Vahe:** It wasn’t easy. Then my free time, I worked in a cafeteria baas boy, you know what that is baas boy?

**Kate:** Yeah.

**Vahe:** Take the plates from the tables to the kitchen, back and forth. Make some money and get my meals.

**Kate:** That was graduate school you were doing in Columbia or was it undergraduate?

**Vahe:** I had my degree, but I was taking some graduate courses there.

**Kate:** Graduate courses.

**Vahe:** There was quite a few Armenians there too. They have The Armenian Club over there and there are some Armenian ladies in the Barnard College.

**Kate:** Yes I taught at Barnard College.

**Vahe:** You taught?

**Kate:** Yeah, did you have any bigotry or persecution here when you came here, was anybody prejudice against you?

**Vahe:** Not really. I’m such an easy going fellow.

**Kate:** What about religious life? Did you continue your religious life here in the States?

**Vahe:** I go to church here [inaudible 00:51:45] down here …

**Kate:** In Armenian?

**Vahe:** In memory of the Armenians. When I was in Indiana or other cities, I go to American church, Presbyterian Church or Methodist Church.

**Kate:** Did you ever return to Armenia?

**Vahe:** We went together a visit.

**Kate:** What year was that?

**Vahe:** When was that?

**Kate:** 1974.

**Vahe:** 1984 was it?

**Female:** No, ‘74.

**Vahe:** 1974 yeah, made a visit.

**Kate:** In general would you say that you are satisfied or dissatisfied with life in America?

**Vahe:** Great place, no other place.

**Female:** There’s no place like America.

**Kate:** To put it otherwise, you say you’re actually very satisfied for having come?

**Vahe:** Absolutely. There is another thing, when I came over here to study. There were many people here from Russia, Portland, other places, men without country. I was one of them, men without country.

When I finished my studies I was supposed to go back, but Greece will not accept me, Turkey will not accept me. I was one of those men without country. That law passed that those who are without country, they can become citizens, I became a citizen, American citizen.

**Kate:** When was that, when did you become a citizen?

**Vahe:** In 1936 around there, that time and of course 1942 I was directed in the army, in combat and [inaudible 00:53:45].

**Kate:** In American Army?

**Vahe:** Yeah, I’m a veteran.

**Kate:** Where did you go?

**Vahe:** I didn’t went a place because for a while I was specialized in [inaudible 00:54:01] bridges, [inaudible 00:54:01] bridges, footbridges where soldiers can walk. I taught some of those things.

**Kate:** You used in your engineering skills in the army?

**Vahe:** Yeah, engineering skills. First they send me to University of Minnesota to take some graduate courses over there. Train me on this army, pertaining to engineering used in the army.

After six months they did away with that, they sent me back to the base again, where I was training my basic training- having my basic training. It was Fort Deven in Missouri. They sent me to Oregon, not Portland it’s close to Portland Oregon, there’s a camp over there.

**Female:** These stories are so [inaudible 00:55:04].

**Kate:** You were in Oregon, where did you end up during the war?

**Vahe:** When I went to Oregon, there was a port of importation, sent me to Far East but the war getting closer to the end and I was discharged, I went back to New York.

**Kate:** Did any family members ever join you here? Did you ever have your brothers come here?

**Female:** Yes.

**Vahe:** Yes, one of my brothers in Egypt, one brother went to Armenia. He wished he didn’t go because of the stuff over there. The other one who remained in Egypt and later on I helped him to come over here. They both are dead now. I’m the oldest one of the three brothers.

**Kate:** Is your cousin still alive? It was a big adjustment [inaudible 00:56:07] in general here?

**Vahe:** Adjustment, what kind of adjustment?

**Kate:** It’s one of our questions, when you first came here you said you were very happy to be here but it was very challenging for you and the adjustment was rather great?

**Vahe:** Yeah.

**Kate:** In that time was there any family tragedy, anything happen?

**Vahe:** No, my brothers were occupied in Egypt, but the older one went to Armenian, who shouldn’t have gone there. It was a communist place. My son and my wife tried to bring him over here, they came to America.

**Kate:** After the war how did you meet your wife? What happened after?

**Vahe:** It was time that I get married. I behaved myself very well. I saved my money. I went to Armenian Church and people knew that I was a bachelor and available. She came from Istanbul, she has [inaudible 00:57:23] …

**Female:** I went to church and I met him.

**Vahe:** She hasn’t [inaudible 00:57:30], her brother is a dentist, her father was a dentist. She come from a very nice family in Istanbul. They introduce me to her, I said to myself, “She couldn’t be bad girl, comes from a nice family.” We got married.

**Kate:** Like that?

**Vahe:** No.

**Female:** No, that wasn’t that easy, he couldn’t make his mind. I came as a visitor my time was over and still he cannot decide. The lady I was living with said, “What are you afraid of? Why don’t you engage to him Rose, do something.” I said, “No, I’m afraid.” She said, “Why would you …

**Vahe:** Of course …

**Female:** She’s a nice girl or something. The next day he came with a picture of himself to tell me that [inaudible 00:58:34] his picture. I said, “Did you make your mind?” “Yes I did.” He said.

**Kate:** You met in church actually?

**Female:** We met at the church.

**Kate:** How old were you then?

**Vahe:** I was 55 and she was much younger than I was.

**Kate:** You waited quite older to get married.

**Vahe:** Economic conditions, when you get married you’ve got to have a home, you got to have support. It’s not easy, but I saved my money I didn’t do anything mischievous, honest money. Here is our home you can see it, all paid up. I have a lovely wife.

**Kate:** Were you 55 or was that in 1955? When was this year that you met?

**Female:** It was 1958, we got married 1959.

**Kate:** You were 55 years?

**Vahe:** I was 55 yeah.

**Kate:** After that you lived here in this city?

**Vahe:** No we went to Detroit.

**Female:** We were in another house in Detroit.

**Vahe:** The neighborhood’s change so we bought this house.

**Female:** Because we had 17 years there to [inaudible 00:59:57].

**Kate:** In conclusion, are you happy you came to America?

**Vahe:** If I’m happy? What a question, no other place I can think of.

**Kate:** Is there anything else you’d like to say about your life, anything else that you can think of?

**Vahe:** I’m very happy because my health is good, I have a lovely wife and she helps me a lot. Her brother is a dentist, retired now. She has a niece in New Jersey that, she got her PhD in neuro [inaudible 01:00:44].

**Female:** Neuroscience.

**Vahe:** She comes from Istanbul, very bright girl. She graduated high school from here, graduated from [Inaudible 01:00:56] State University, got a scholarship at Rutgers University, got PhD a couple of years ago.

**Female:** One year.

**Vahe:** One year ago. She’s a professor over there. She got married, South American man, they have a little baby and …

**Female:** They are very happy.

**Vahe:** They are very happy.

**Kate:** Did you have children ever?

**Vahe:** No, we didn’t have children.

**Kate:** You have your relatives. You have your family too?

**Vahe:** Her brother is a retired dentist …

**Female:** He has some family [inaudible 01:01:29] …

**Kate:** Yeah, cousin.

**Vahe:** He was a very prominent dentist in Istanbul.

**Kate:** You are Armenian actually?

**Female:** Yes I’m Armenian.

**Kate:** Living in Istanbul.

**Vahe:** One thing, in Istanbul they took all the prominent Armenian male, killed them. They didn’t touch the boys and girls and women, they didn’t touch. That’s [inaudible 01:01:54] happened to these people in Istanbul, but entire cities they completely destroyed.

**Kate:** I’d like to thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to speak with you and come out here.

**Vahe:** I’m very grateful to you, very thankful. You are such a very pleasant very charming lady.

**Female:** Thank you for coming [inaudible 01:02:13].

**Kate:** This is Kate Moore signing off with Vahe Sekdorian on 4th of December 1993 for the Ellis Island Oral History Project.