

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

With
Vahik Satoorian

Conducted By
Shoghig K. Yepremian

November 1996

Today is November 20, 1996. My name is Shoghig Kalaydjian Yepremian. I am conducting audio histories for the City of Glendale as a Planning Division staff member. It's about 10:20 in the morning and we are sitting here with Glendale businessman and resident Vahik Satoorian. This is one of the City's audio history program interviews and we will be talking to Vahik about his experiences in live here in Glendale.

Shoghig Yepremian: Good morning Vahik.

Vahik Satoorian: Good morning.

Shoghig: How are you?

Vahik: Fine, fine.

Shoghig: We are sitting today in your office here in Glendale on Brand Boulevard and I sent you some questions, about a week ago, and maybe we can start by talking about when and where were you born?

Vahik: Ya. I was born in Iran, and...

Shoghig: Which city in Iran?

Vahik: Ya, there is a city on Caspian Sea called Bandar Pahlavi. That's the way it pronounces and I moved from that city when I was too young at the age of 2 to Tehran which is the capital city of Iran, and I grew up there. I went to school there and after high school I went to college and I got my bachelor's degree in the accounting and..

Shoghig: What was the name of the university? Was it a university or?

Vahik: Ya, the university called Iranian Institute of Advanced Accounting, and it took me about 4 years to get the degree and then after completion I went to work and started to work in a company called Whinney Murray which was an audit firm. It was the affiliated company of Ernst & Young in United States. It's one of the big eight, it used to be big eight, now is big six. So I started my work there and I was there right before I immigrated to the United States.

Shoghig: Okay. What year did you come to United States?

Vahik: Ya, that was 19...first part of 1981. But I moved out of Tehran in later part of 1979, right after the Iranian Revolution.

Shoghig: The revolution.

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Vahik: And I stayed in England for about a year and half.

Shoghig: Did you work in England or...?

Vahik: Well, the office which I used to work the Whinney Murray, which I mentioned, that was an English company. It was an English accounting firm so the headquarter was in England.

Shoghig: How do you spell that Whinny Murray?

Vahik: It's kind of...

Shoghig: Because I don't think we heard of it here.

Vahik: Right W H I N N E Y and M U R R A Y.

Shoghig: Okay.

Vahik: So that was the old name and then Whinney Murray got merged with Ernst & Ernst. That was the old name for Ernst & Young. So then the name became Earnest & Whinney. So when I moved from Iran to England I had some unfinished businesses with my clients in Iran, which was all caused by the revolution, and having my clients all moving out of the Iran very fast. So there was a lot of unfinished business which I had to taking care of, and then when I moved to England I had some of those works to be done, finish them, complete it. But mainly I was not working in England because I didn't have to work for them, and that's why I spent lot of my time going to college in order to get my English to be improved. So I just went back again to class, and sat down there. Even though, my English was not bad but I knew that for my future, which was United States, I have to be good at English. So I started going back to English class, and tried to improve my language and that was what I did then.

Shoghig: And from England you came directly to Glendale, or you came to another city in United States?

Vahik: No, during that one and half year I was waiting there to get all my immigration paper work to be completed. So from there I first went to Colorado. There was a little town in Colorado called Colorado Springs which was about 2 hours drive from Denver, I think. And I used to have house down there, but when I went there I only stayed there about month and half. I couldn't live

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there. So even though, it was very nice city, very nice people, very quiet city but...

Shoghig: Did you have relatives in Colorado Springs? That's why you went.

Vahik: Ya, I used to have my sister-in-law living there, and that's why the only place that we could first go was where we knew somebody and that's why we just flew there. And when I saw exactly how the city is, how the community is I realized that probably for a newcomer that was not a right place to be. Even though, people were very nice people. They just talked to me when I was walking in the street hi, how are you? Where are you from? Probably for a tourist it's a very nice place but for somebody who wants to make a living...

Shoghig: Right. Raise a family...

Vahik: And live there, raise a family. But somebody who is new in the country and probably a little black and little dark skin. For all of them it seems very nice but in order to get a job, or to make a living, or to get involve in that community probably I felt that it is too difficult. So that's why I sold my house and in month and half time I just brought a car and I said, "Okay, where is Glendale?"

Shoghig: How did you know about Glendale?

Vahik: By the way, I never asked where is California? I said where is Glendale?

Shoghig: Ya, where is Glendale?

Vahik: Well, back in 1980-81 again, probably the way I put it, that maybe the main reason that every time we're thinking about Glendale because we knew somebody in Glendale?

Shoghig: Right.

Vahik: I mean, for us at that time there was no difference between Glendale or Burbank or Sacramento.

Shoghig: Because you didn't know how it was then.

Vahik: Ya, the whole thing was that for a person who is new in a country, or new in society I think it's important to

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get some sort of help or guidelines. At least, have somebody to talk to us. What am I supposed to do?

Shoghig: Right.

Vahik: So going to San Francisco, or New York, or another city that wasn't the case. So at that time, I think I had one friend only one friend, maybe one or two friends in Glendale which I used to like them, I used to call them over the phone, and they were giving me some information. So apparently I felt that that's the only place I can go because I have some friends there who can show me the way, or tell me exactly what am I supposed to do, or what to start, how to start with things like that. That's why I drove from Colorado Springs. It took me about 2 days to get here, and...

Shoghig: Were you married at the time? Did you have a family?

Vahik: Yes, at that time I was married and I said, "Let's go to Glendale and see." Even though, later on when few years later, maybe 6 or 7 years later, when my parents wanted to come to Glendale, I mean, for them America was just Glendale.

Shoghig: Right.

Vahik: I mean, they used to say that back in Germany where they were station to get their immigration papers to be completed. It was kind of saying that oh, ya all of us are going to Glendale some people were saying, "We are going to Australia", or the others, "We are going to Canada."

shoghig: So they came 8 years later.

Vahik: Ya, when I was ready to settle here. I think they came 7 years later.

Shoghig: So what was your first impression of Glendale when you came?

Vahik: No.

Shoghig: Good or bad, I mean.

Vahik: No, first of all I had a vision that Glendale is a kind of an American city one of those things that you always think about all high rises, freeways..

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Shoghig: Modern city.

Vahik: Something like that. That was the first thing that I felt. I said well, this is a nice city, quiet city, very relaxed city and it isn't one of those kind of New York type cities. Because Glendale before my arrival here it was just a name. I couldn't put another picture saying how does it look like? But when I came here it was more quiet and more relaxed, and more friendly city and it was something that I wasn't scared or...

Shoghig: Right. You felt comfortable.

Vahik: I felt comfortable, yes. But that was from the city itself and the people, but from the other angle which was my angle, it was scary because here I am in Glendale, United States, Okay, what am I gonna do tomorrow? So that's completely another issue, another topic that how a person like me or a new immigrant feels when they first come in new country.

Shoghig: And what difficulties they have to go through to adjust.

Vahik: Of course. But on top of that one thing that was very clear and very obvious for me was that I was so relieved, I was so excited and so happy that at last I am where I wanted to be. I was so proud of myself that now I am here, and I can be whatever that I want to be. That was the most important thing for me. So all those difficulties and all those challenges that I could see that I am gonna face, those were not important at all. I knew that I am gonna have some challenges in my life in the future, and I knew I am gonna see some difficulties, and some problems but those were not the issues. For me was just be here and be in society where I dreamed of and a city where I can feel comfortable.

Shoghig: And did you start working soon after?

Vahik: No, well, that's probably sounds like sound little funny but when I first came here for few months I was just going through my thoughts about what I have to do and what I can do. Even though, at that time I had my bachelor degree in accounting, and I had maybe more than 10 years of experience in accounting and my experience was in a firm which was American and English accounting firm and... I was very confident before my arrival to United States that I will have no problem in finding job

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because I knew that I had all the expertise I need, I had all the experience I need. I mean, the area which I was planning to work was very familiar for me with a very good solid background in that profession. But when I first came here of course the first place where I wanted to get a job was my own company, which was the Ernst & Ernst at that time. And they have given me some indication and some letters they send me that as soon as you come to the United States just come and we will try to give you a job here. That's what I did. I had a friend there which at that time he was one of the managers in the Tax Department of the Ernst & Ernst. He took me, he made an appointment for me with one of the other managers. So I went down there and have an interview but the bottom line was that they told me quote- over qualified- unquote.

Shoghig: Yes.

Vahik: That's what the way they put it. They said that they can not give me a job. And even though, they could see my background and all those tract records that I had but one thing that they said, they said, "Are you a C.P.A.?" and I said, "No, I am not a C.P.A.". That ya, we can see that you have a bachelors degree in accounting and you have all this experiences but because you are not a C.P.A., so it will be almost impossible to give you a job here. So I told them why don't you give me a job as a beginner, just a staff work, I can do those things. But somehow they said that for those kind of jobs you are over qualified and for the job that will fit your kind of person and your position you don't have the degree and that's the C.P.A. degree. And I told them what is the C.P.A.? And they said that C.P.A. is Certified Public Accountant and you have to get one of those licenses and then come back. So I went home that day, I was little depressed and little unhappy that so how am I gonna get my degree? Then I started to look around and of course at that time Glendale didn't have all these Armenians, all the friends, and all that community that now we can see in these days. So I called a couple of colleges, UCLA, USC here and there and they told me how. This is how you have to do. The first thing you have to sit for that exam. To do that I knew that I had to do kind of refresh my academic background because it was a long time passed already that I passed all those years so I had to go to UCLA and to the extension courses which was night time and so I was back to school at the age of 35-36. So I spent

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almost 2-3 years and to get some of the classes which I felt necessary for me to prepare me for the test ----- --

Armenian Ms. Minassian who donated the first million dollar toward purchasing that property. I think that was the best opportunity for us to...

Shoghig: What year was that?

Vahik: That was I think 1985.

Shoghig: 85. Okay. So in 1985 the big church was purchased.

Vahik: That was purchased. So we moved to the central property and the Carlton property was left only for the preschool.

Shoghig: So apparently there is a preschool on Carlton property.

Vahik: There is a preschool down there and it is completely separated. There is no church activities or anything, church nights, etc. At that time you were thinking maybe the church at Central is too large for Armenians. Some people even advised us not to go for that kind of big property but I think all...

Shoghig: But look at it now.

Vahik: I think all future the vision that we had and we prospect that. We could see that the need is there and now you will hear sometime would say even this property is small for our community. But that was a good move and I think church started to become a center of the Armenian community and the school that we have around the church, the preschool and the elementary school for Chamlian that was another too good base which helped the Armenian community to be in an environment which was Armenian and American and so that could be a very good start for them, a safe start that they won't have their kids off sending a public school where they can not communicate with them properly, the language barriers are there and that could have been a very difficult start for young kids with very little knowledge of English and very little knowledge of the school learning system compare to the school that they went in their home countries. So that's I think little bit of my background.

Shoghig: About history of the church, okay. What's the current

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population? The City always gives us the number 25% of the total Glendale population is Armenian about 47,000. But do we have any concrete numbers, or do we have any plans to do a survey in Glendale in terms of the number of Armenians in Glendale?

Vahik: Well, I think we are also using those numbers that comes out of the City's records. The one that I could think of that probably we might come to a number like that. I don't think that we have something more reliable than what we got from the City's records.

Shoghig: Because you haven't done any surveys. You know, we refer customers that call us to ANC or Asbarez or the church sometimes to release those numbers. But there is no concrete official number as to how many Armenians reside in Glendale?

Vahik: The only place which I could see that right now probably will be in position in near future to come up with the number like that is A.N.C. and one thing that we are right now in the process of developing in A.N.C. from the A.N.C.'s angle is to get to all those numbers and extract more reliable numbers. This is one attempt that right now we're trying to encourage first of all Armenians for more participation in the voting process within the City, and that is something new which we are trying to first of all educate Armenian community and let them know that how important it is just to participate. It doesn't matter really whom you wanna vote for or who is your favorite candidate. That's the second step but the first step is to teach and guide and encourage our community members to participate in voting process.