

## Immigrant Experiences: Vozchan Parsegian Hovsepien

### Vozchan Parsegian Hovsepien, an Armenian, emigrated from Turkey to Massachusetts in 1916 at age eight.

I was born in 1908.... My mother and father had been educated in German and American mission schools...as orphans. My mother became a cook at the American hospital. My father had been trained as a carpenter and decided to come to the United States after some of his business partnerships didn't work out. Also, they were drafting Armenian men into the Turkish Army....

I went to kindergarten at the same mission school as my parents did.... But we were soon aware that the Turkish army had arrived. The city was under siege from April through May 1915. I remember walking through the streets... hearing the bullets and seeing people duck....Mother being very busy in the hospital.... The Armenians below would watch for [cannon] balls to fall, grab the fuses out of the balls, and use the powder for fighting back. About the end of May 1915, the Turkish soldiers left... as the Russian army was approaching. The Russian general...issued orders that everyone must leave. He gave us a day's notice.

My sister, my mother, and I started off on a cart, sitting on top of somebody else's furniture. That didn't last long. The rest of the flight had to be on foot. We headed...toward Russian Armenia.... [We walked] two weeks...when my little sister was lost....

We arrived amid spreading disease and crowding. During the first night there, my mother bought a loaf of bread with a gold piece she saved. It was so hard that I couldn't eat it. Another night she gave a small coin for a shawl to cover me. We had hailstones that drew blood. We had to drink the water that we walked in.... But we found my little sister. Russian soldiers were playing with her....

My mother went to the archbishop and offered to cook for the refugees...where [we] stayed for the next year.

In time, she persuaded the archbishop that she wanted to leave to get an American education for

her children.... Eventually we arrived in Sweden... somehow made it to Liverpool...took a crowded ship to America....

I remember the crowding and wondering if we would be admitted. Fortunately we were in fair health. My uncle took us to New York City and then up to...Massachusetts. My mother immediately got work in a shoe factory. She made six dollars a week; we learned to live on that...and that's how we survived....

I was in high school at the time.... So I learned auto repair. One day, while I was repairing a car, a man...explain[ed] that I could study engineering for free at the Lowell Institute, an evening school within MIT....

Eventually I went on to a doctorate in nuclear physics and became director of research of the New York office of the Atomic Energy Commission. In the mid-1950s...[I became] the first Dean of Engineering at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI).... I've been involved with many nuclear issues...hearings with the Joint Committee of Congress on Atomic Energy...and then...organized the Armenian Educational Council Incorporated.

The Armenian communities began to be quite concerned about the fact that so little had been said about the massacres and the {Armenian} genocide. So we decided that there should be a public event... to commemorate.... We began to collect oral histories of those who had lived through the massacres. Then came a young architect from Germany who was worried about the Armenian monuments in Turkey and how they could be preserved.... What has stayed with me throughout my life is what my mother taught us: "Just do your best, just do your best." And the moral code and ethics that we grew up with stayed with me.

Emmy E. Werner, *Passages to America: Oral Histories of Child Immigrants from Ellis Island and Angel Island*, (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2009), 66-70.

## Immigrant Experiences: Esther Blatt

### Esther Blatt emigrated from Poland in 1949 at age three.

**I was born...in Feldafing, a displaced persons' camp south of Munich. My parents... were separated after the Nazis invaded Poland.... They miraculously found each other with the help of the Red Cross.**

We lived in Feldafing until I was three.... The Americans were in charge...which meant that it was...wonderful.... My father had a job, driving a truck for the American Army; we had a pretty place to live...lots of food.

My parents put in papers to come to America... with the sponsorship of the United Jewish Appeal (UJA) and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIA). We have good memories of the things they did for us. We left from...Italy, on an American troop carrier...converted to bring immigrants from Europe to the United States.

At the end of the trip my mother realized that I...needed medicine.... They took us...to Ellis Island...hospital. I was separated...for about a week before we joined my father....

My father hooked up right away with the UJA, and they found us a room in a hotel.... Every day they took my father to help him find a job and gave bus fare to my mother.... My father was a carpenter by trade, so...he worked all day...and took night courses in English and draftsmanship. He was always willing to take a chance...the first among his friends to get a driver's license...confident and curiously optimistic, considering all he had gone through.

We moved to our first apartment in Brooklyn.... Everyone left their doors open.... There [were] sisters on my floor...who became my friends...and taught my parents how to play cards. But my mother had other experiences with people who were not so kind. There was a time when my younger brother picked up a toy truck in a garbage can....one woman came out of the apartment and said, "You immigrants are disgusting...." Unfortunately, my mother knew enough English at that time to understand the remark, and I can remember her crying....

My parents wanted so much to be American... when I came home from school, my mother didn't want me to speak Yiddish, only English, so she could learn from me.... My father read the *New York Times* every night. My mother learned all the American songs and studied hard for the citizenship tests....

My parents had very traditional values about... education, being proud of being Jewish, and maintaining certain traditions. I went to public day school, then to a Hebrew school after.... My father took me to ballet school...to the park and to museums, and when I was a little older...to Broadway, because he felt you ought to broaden your horizon and learn everything. My parents had a very active social life...made many American friends.

But in the night, I could hear my father scream. He had terrible dreams, and to this day...he screams in the night as if he is being chased. There was no time when they sat me down and said, "This is what happened to us." But I do remember coming home...seeing my mother watch the Eichmann trial, and she said, "In the end he will be punished and I want to see...." My father could not...watch the trial, so they had different ways of handling it.

I would never tell them anything that would give them grief.... I wanted them to be happy.... Among my parents' proudest moments in this country were gaining American citizenship and seeing their children and grandchildren graduate from college. I am the first college graduate in my family, and my mother and father think that my being a teacher is almost as good as being president....

The people who survived the Holocaust and who came to America, their memories need to be preserved—not just what they went through, but who they were and how they preserved hope, especially the message that they brought with them about hope.

Emmy E. Werner, *Passages to America: Oral Histories of Child Immigrants from Ellis Island and Angel Island*, (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2009), 113-116.