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Interviewer: Michael Haslip

Interviewee: Dorine Havandjian

Haslip: This is Michael Haslip and I'm interviewing Dorine Havandjian. I'd like to start by asking you where you are from, when you were born and your background.

Havandjian: I am originally from Armenian decent. I was born in Beirut, Lebanon in 1976.

Que: Can you tell me about your family background?

Ans: My parents are both full blooded Armenian, my mom is from Lebanon, my father is from Syria, as are my grandparents. My father went to the University of Beirut, in Lebanon.

Que: What is there/your native language?

Ans: There native Lang. is Armenian, which is spoken at home, and most people also speak Arabic, so my parents are bilingual. In some places, French is also taught in schools so my father speaks both English, French, Arabic and Armenian.

Que: Do you have any siblings?

Ans: Yes, I have two sisters, and a brother. They were all born in the Hague, Holland. I am the oldest of the family.

Que: I wanted to ask you about your memories growing up, I know you lived in three different countries.

Ans: I don't have much memory of me growing up in Lebanon because I was three years old when my parents moved to Holland. Most of what I recollect is my years spent in the Netherlands, up until I was 12 when my parents decided to move to Texas. The last time I was in Lebanon was in 1982, and I haven't been back since, because at that time the war got really bad and it was to dangerous to go back there.

Que: Can you explain what war that was?

Ans: In 1975 the Middle East broke out into a major war between the religions, and the Christian and Muslim sides started bombarding each other. And right before I was born the war escalated, my mom gave birth to me, and they had to go to the

Netherlands to seek political Asylum, unfortunately they couldn't get back into Lebanon so I was stuck there with my grandma for three years, waiting for my paperwork to get done. Afterwards, I was also granted political Asylum and I moved to Holland. The last time I was back in Lebanon was in 1982, and basically the airport blew up as we were taking off.

Que: Are you serious?

Ans: Yea, and that's why my parents (laughing) will not go back there, for a while, that was quite a site.

Que: Do you remember what it was like immigrating to Holland?

Ans: I really don't remember what that was like other than the language complications, plus the fact that I hadn't met my parents until then. I didn't know my parents directly until I was about three and a half. I'd heard of them and they would send audio tapes, which were difficult to send at that time because people would go through the mail, so it was all about who you knew in the government that could deliver stuff. That was the first time I met my parents.

Que: So you spoke Armenian when you met your parents?

Ans: I actually spoke Armenian, Turkish and Arabic all when I was three. My grandma spoke more Turkish than Armenian because back when there was the Armenian genocide she grew up in Turkey. Arabic is the official language in Lebanon.

Que: So when you went to the Netherlands you had to speak...

Ans: I had to learn how to speak Dutch. But, I've lost the Arabic completely, Turkish, I have a pretty good comprehension of it. I still understand Dutch. I also took German in high school which helps with Dutch.

Que: Can you remember some of the difficulties of making that move to Holland?

Ans: I had more difficulty adjusting to my parents.

Que: What year did you move to the United States?

Ans: I moved to the United States in 1988.

Que: What do you remember of making that move from the Netherlands to the US? Did you have to go through immigration?

Ans: My parents got their green cards in 1984 because my dad used to travel a lot,

and it was a lot easier to obtain back then then it is now, so we were granted a green card and we used to make frequent trips to the US.

Que: What did you think about moving here?

Ans: I was not to thrilled about moving here, at all. I was 13 at the time and I wasn't happy because I already had my core of friends in Europe that I didn't want to leave behind and start all over again and plus it was a whole other language that I had to get comfortable with, again.

Que: Did you speak any English before you moved here?

Ans: Yes I did, a lot of my dads business partners spoke English, so in my house it was like open Hotel season, there were lots of people from different countries that used to come in all the time and there were many different languages spoken at our house. Also, in the Netherlands, you grow up with two channels, one is the BBC and the other is the Dutch station. So you grow up learning two languages.

Que: Did they teach language in school?

Ans: In the third grade you are taught both English and Dutch and once you get to the forth and fifth grade you're to choose between French, German and Spanish and once your in high school you are to pick between Greek and Latin plus English and plus the German, Italian or French that your taking, so yes I did speak English before coming here, but its mostly British English, not American English, but I've picked up the American through our trips back and forth. But its gotten me into complications here and there.

Que: What do you mean?

Ans: Certain words, like Lorry or truck, cupboards and drawers, trousers and pants, have all caused me some difficulty. I still have difficulty with some words. People will look at me strangely. Also, the spellings take some getting used to. When I first moved to Texas, I struggled a lot with the southern dialect, a lot of the words seemed like slang to me.

Que: You were talking about your education, could you tell me more about your educational background, and where you were when you went to what grades?

Ans: I started off in a private Catholic school at about four years old. I went through at the end of fifth grade you are required to take an examination which either places you in a school were you are taught math and science as your focus or you go to a school which is based on art or a school which is vocational, where you my be taught to be a mechanic or other things.

Que: What do you think about the differences in education between Europe and the United States in that the US doesn't give those tests and send you in a necessary direction so much as Europe?

Ans: I prefer going to school here because it's much easier. When I sit and talk to my foreign friends it's so much easier for you to go to a university here and make something of yourself then it is to go to school there because it is very very hard. I think it is a little unfair to have to take an exam that depends so much in the fifth grade. It really changes your life, you either vocational or you're the scientist, it's one or the other, whereas here even if you aren't that bright you can still go to Junior College and work your way up and then go on to the University if you are not ready yet.

Que: What grade were you when you moved here and did you notice any big differences between school there and here? Also what was it like in school here?

Ans: About seventh grade when I moved here. I left Holland by myself (going before parents to start school) and arrived in a small town in Texas called Flugerville. I had to go through some immigration stuff.

Que: Any implication going through immigration?

Ans: I was pulled out of one of my classes to make sure that I was not an illegal Alien and to make sure that I had proper documentation to be in school. They did that right in front of the other kids, they came in, pulled me right out of the class and asked me if I was an illegal Alien, where my documentation was, where my parents lived...

Que: And you were only 13 at the time?

Ans: I was only 13 at the time and I thought that "Alien" meant that I was from outer space (laughing), so I thought that they were asking me if I was from Mars, and being the smart ass that I am, I was like, "Do I look like I'm from Mars to you?" But lucky for me I had my green card in order and my passport. One of the important things when you move from anywhere are your immunization records. I had to go to a doctor in Europe, then when you enter the US you do another physical exam, and they go through your records and if there's anything on there that they don't understand, you can't start school. Then they call the embassy and they go from there.

Que: How'd the school in Texas do at accepting you into the classes and community?

Ans: It was a little difficult at first because the culture is different, you are expected to be in style, that was a bit more to adjust to.

Que: Did you notice a big difference between the kids in either country?

Ans: It was really hard making new friends after so many changes because I was tired of having to switch schools and make new friends.

Que: Did you have any experiences of being treated differently because you were not an American?

Ans: Most people didn't realize that I was not an American, I had more difficulty being judged as an American but from the East coast.

Que: So you noticed some hostility just being from a different region?

Ans: Oh yea, absolutely. When I first moved, like I said, my English is very muddled, most people wonder where in the US I am from and a lot of people tend to make the assumption that I am from New York, East coast, area. One of the first things I was called in class was a "Yankee" and I didn't know what it meant or why they were calling me that and it was all because I sounded different. I remember one of my classes, someone asked where I was from and I said the Hague, and they asked me, "would that be the Hague, New York?" And I'd be like "no, the Hague, Netherlands" you know, its a whole other country. It was amazing some of the questions I would get.

Que: So it wasn't necessarily an ethnic or racial difference that people noticed in you but rather just a....

Ans: Yea, that's the funny thing, like, for me, it wasn't "Oh you're from Holland and you are this and this" but rather "Oh you are from the East coast and you're this and this."

Que: What kind of activities did you enjoy as a child in the Netherlands?

Ans: As a child in the Netherlands, you kinda grow up playing on the streets and by that I mean all the neighborhood kids came out and we used to play a lot of field hockey on the streets, soccer was very popular, we used to play marbles a lot or play at school but mostly you are out playing with kids and a lot of cycling of course, which is there number one thing to be doing. Ice skating was very popular, in the winter time there was a park across from our house and in the winter time the water freezes over so we used to go over and play ice hockey. School used to take an hour break everyday and everyone would go skating.

Que: What was it like being the eldest sibling?

Ans: Being in Lebanon, with my grandparents I was a spoiled little kid. In middle eastern cultures the boy is very important because he's going to carry on the family name.

Que: Can you explain your family dynamic?

Ans: As a family we are pretty tight. European families definitely have a closer bond then American families.

Que: Have you taken any college classes?

Ans. Yes, I attended the Univ. of Texas and from there I went to a community college in New York. Then my parents decided to move to CA, so now I'm going to Cal Poly and hopefully I will graduate with my bachelors in a year, its been long struggle but hopefully it will get done.

Que: What are you majoring in?

Ans: I am majoring in Journalism and minoring in German.

Que: Can you tell me about your job history?

Ans: I was a lifeguard in Texas for almost five years and I became a swimming instructor for disabled children as well as for adults. In New York I worked in a chicken restaurant and at a bakery part time and I did some writing for a local magazine there. And when we moved to CA I started working as a scooper at Ben and Jerry's. Then I took over as manager when our previous manager left. I was also a long distance phone operator, placing long distance phone calls. It was fun talking to people from other countries.

Que: What hobbies do you enjoy?

Ans: Mostly reading, I love reading. I do a lot of volunteering, like the Aids Walk, and Special Olympics.

Que: What are your long term goals?

Ans: Ultimately, my goals are to move to New York and work for the United Nations with there documentation.

Que: What have you learned about American society as a result of your experiences?

Ans: Americans are more skeptical of helping your fellow neighbor. People who move to the US tend to become more bitter and self centered. Americans find it odd that people can do something for them just because, without wanting anything in return. And that's something that I really haven't adjusted to and I probably never will adjust to something like that. European kids are a little more well rounded and more aware of what goes on around them. American kids really don't care. Its all about making that quick buck and getting to where you need to get to. Leisure time is more important in Europe, shops close down so that people can have time with their family. People

hang out with their family for endless hours, and it was fun. Americans find it weird that European families sit down and have conversations together for hours on end. Its strange for Americans to visit our house and see us sitting down at the dinner table as a family talking about anything and everything. Its difficult having friends that come over, have dinner in thirty minutes, do there quick chat and then their off. In Europe you sit for hours, here people are in a hurry and it makes it harder for my parents to make close friends. I've realized lately that a lot of my friends are foreigners.

Closing remarks.