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Edited Oral History Interview
with
George A. Churukian
The Ames Library
Illinois Wesleyan University
Bloomington, Illinois
August 2, 2012

Meg Miner: Good morning.

George Churukian: Good morning.

Miner: My name is Meg Miner, and I'm the Archivist here at Illinois Wesleyan University. Today is August 2nd, 2012, and we're in the Ames library to have an oral history interview with Doctor Churukian. If you would start by stating your full name, and your affiliation with Illinois Wesleyan, we'll have our conversation from there.

Churukian: I'm George Churukian. I was the director of teacher education, responsible for all the teacher ed. programs that we provided for students here at Illinois Wesleyan. I came to Wesleyan in 1976. During the interview in June of that year, there was a tornado warning, so we all proceeded to the basement of Holmes hall. I didn't flinch or think too much of it. Those that were interviewing me were very impressed. I said, "Well, I grew up in Paris, Illinois, where tornadoes were not an uncommon event." So I assumed that that was one of the reasons I was hired, because I didn't flinch because of a tornado. The chair of the department at that time was Lucy Klauser. She taught the children's literature class. She originally came out of the English department. I worked with her for a number of years. I came as the director of Secondary Education. At the time, the state just had a state visit, and the institution was under probation for certain standards and criteria. One of my first tasks was to try to rectify those deficiencies as pointed out by the state. They really weren't huge deficiencies, but it was a matter of understanding and putting the program together in such a way that it made sense to state personnel, which I proceeded to do. And we got through. We had two years to rectify things. We went down to Springfield and the State Board of Education approved our programs. We were free and clear for another three years when we have a five-year review, where you had to write the huge document, you did not have a state visit at the five-year period, but a state visit every ten years. That has since changed, now they have a visit by a team to look at your programs every five years, which is separate from the university's accreditation process. There are certain standards and criteria which must be met, criteria for the individual programs and standards for the university as a whole. I spent a lot of time with the state personnel learning what standards and criteria mean. There are times you feel that they are kind of contradictory to each other, but you need to learn how they think. So you write your document in terms of what they want, and what they're looking for. At the five-year-time, we got through with no problem. At the ten-year visitation, when we went to Springfield, it was in winter and the roads were not the greatest in the world, and we sailed through without any citations. Free and clear, all programs and the university. We were one of the few institutions that came through the first time around without citations.

As a result, I used to get calls from other institutions, asking, "What did I do?" Or "How did you do it?" Because, informally, some of the people that I knew at the State Board of Education office, which I got to know quite well had indicated to me said that we had one of the best programs in the state, and that one of the things that they liked about our programs is it had integrity, which I thought was high praise coming from them. They liked the way we did things, and how open we were about it, and that

everything flowed. One of the things that I did was that we looked at the courses we taught and at the sequence of courses. At one time some students they took courses in no particular order, some even doing student teaching before they had the methods class, which I felt didn't make much sense. So we, with the department, sat down and said "Okay let's sequence this. What should come first, which would come second, and so forth," both of the elementary ed. program and the secondary program. And so that one course more or less flowed into another, so we were building, rather than picking cherries off a tree. And it made all the difference in the world.

Miner: That's great.

Churukian: Because there were students who were being hired quite readily here and there, and they were sought after, because of the quality that they were able to exhibit. But I always told them, I said "Don't tell me when you get a job, tell me when you get rehired."

Miner: [Chuckles] that's a great indicator.

Churukian: Because that's a better indicator of what they do.

Miner: It's a wonderful achievement.

Churukian: Yes. So we felt pretty good about it. And our emphasis was teacher education. And so the subtitle of the department was Teacher Education.

Miner: What was the title at that time of the department?

Churukian: It was Department of Education.

Miner: Okay, and then teacher education.

Churukian: Then teacher education. That was our doing, it was not official from the university, but that's what we did. And I became involved with the different associations within the state, the Illinois Association for Teacher Educators, which is the state branch of the American Association of Teacher Educators, as well as the Illinois Association Teacher Education in the Private Colleges. So since our needs and the way we approach things are a little different than the large institutions, we felt that we need to do something different. However, the two associations did meet together at least once a year, sometimes twice a year. We generally met three times a year during the school year. And one time was always in Springfield, so we could bring in the state people to tell us what we were going to have to worry about next time around. It worked out pretty well. The experiences that I brought to the meetings, since I had been a classroom teacher for about eight years, having taught seventh, eighth, and ninth grade junior high school science. The last few years were eighth grade because we had switched to a middle school and it was a six, seven, eight school. I was in charge of the science department at that time. During that time I received my masters from Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York because we were living on Long Island. There were the National Science Foundation grants, which I applied for one at Syracuse University. I was put on the waiting list. There was about two or three people ahead of me, so to hedge my bets I went and enrolled instead.

I enrolled in a master's program originally. And my advisor said, "Why do you want to mess with this, since you already have a master's degree? Let's go for the doctorate." So I put in for the Ed.D.

program, and he said, "What do you want to do this for? Let's go for the Ph.D. instead." I said, "Okay." Which in some ways was easier. It was just more of the dissertation and less of the coursework.

While I was at Syracuse I had an assistantship with the Urban Teacher Preparation Program, which was funded under a Ford grant where we were preparing teachers to teach at inner city schools. This is in the sixties, late sixties, when you had all the riots at schools and so forth. I worked my way up to the Associate Director's position within the program. Which meant that I was in charge of the instructional program. This was a graduate program. We had about twenty elementary and twenty secondary graduate students, which we placed in the inner city schools of Syracuse. The elementary interns taught half day. During the first half of the year half of the students taught in the morning, the second half in the afternoon, then they switch places so each intern, over the course of the school year, had the experience of teaching both mornings and afternoons. During the spring semester, each intern taught all day for a week. The secondary interns taught three classes, which was slightly more than half a full time teacher's load. They were all paid half a first year teacher's salary. At the same time they were taking courses on campus, which was individually determined by their background and what they needed, but there were certain things that they had to have, that was prescribed by the program. We had a weekly seminar. Then for the elementary interns, they had particular reading and math courses. Then there were certain courses that were necessary because of the university requirements. It was a twelve to fourteen month program, where they finished their Master's degree at the end of the time. The difference between twelve- and the fourteen-month was that twelve-month were those who already had an education degree, and who didn't have an education degree, it took a little longer to fill in some of the courses they had to have.

Miner: But they were already coming to the program with a Master's level education. Is that right?

Churukian: They came to the program with a Bachelor's degree. And they were screened before they came into the program. It was a pretty grueling program, at times. We had what we call clinical instructors, which were teachers who were considered master teachers in the public schools, who were assigned to us. We paid the school districts and the school district paid them, so they didn't lose their benefits. Each one supervised seven to eight students each year. But there was only four at any one time because of the morning and afternoon schedules. We had a weekly meeting of the staff to find out where the problems were, and what needed to be done. The person who was the Associate Director before me, and when I became Associate Director, went out to the schools see what the problems were and what needed to be done. Also we received calls, during the week. If there was a problem we took care of it.

We made rounds of the schools, even though the clinical instructors were there. We always went around to see how the intern was performing, talk to the principal, and meet with the clinical instructor. We had a few graduate students who supplemented the clinical instructors, who had been teachers themselves. We were mentoring them as well, as we went. It was quite a program.

Miner: It sounds like you had quite a head for process before you even got here.

Churukian: You had to.

Miner: And making that transition to working with our program here, too.

Churukian: Many of things I learned there, I used here, in trying to provide different kinds of experiences. Because when the program started there, we used to have a six-week summer program. We had our own summer school for children from three through ninth grades.

Miner: And this is still in the east?

Churukian: It's still Syracuse.

Churukian: We had hired teachers who we felt were good mentors to work with our interns. Within five to six weeks you couldn't tell the difference between those who had elementary education background and those who had a liberal arts background in terms of classroom process, getting the children to the playground, and those types of activities. We also provided an art class, which was something for the children to do, which was not part of the program, our interns were not involved in the art classes, which was a plus. It gave the children a break. One of the things that the interns did during that time was to prepare and get ready for their internship in September, when school started, like creating lesson plans and unit plans. We were able to determine what grades the interns were going to be teaching and in which schools they would be assigned before they had finished the summer program. The Assistant Superintendent of the Syracuse School District was also one of our Associate Directors, so we worked closely with him. It was a good program. It was mutually beneficial to everyone.

It was fantastic to see. There were a few of the graduates of the program that went on into higher education and became teacher educators themselves. Others became principals. Others just wished to stay in the classroom. There were a few that obtained a position in a suburban-type school, where they lasted less than a year, maybe a year, because they had to get back into the inner city. They said that it wasn't fun. There was no challenge.

It was a great program. I was with that program for five years. The last year I was there, since I had already completed my degree, I was an Assistant Professor. It was during the time between the fourth year and the fifth year when all the Kent State happenings occurred that I completed my doctorate.

The Syracuse campus was closed down. It was interesting because we were having meetings with faculty and students in one of the dorm's big lounge area. I was sitting in a window seat and I could see out to the entrance of the building. I saw car after car, and taxi after taxi came up the drive to the entrance. Students with their suitcases were leaving. They used the closing of the campus as an excuse to leave school early and not need to take finals.

From Syracuse I went to Virginia Wesleyan in 1971, where I *was* the department. The school was new, four years old, and they had graduated one class. There wasn't a program. There was a conglomeration of some courses. So I had to put together an elementary program and a secondary program. In order to make some sense out of the programs, I sequenced the courses so that the students could progress from one learning experience to another. It was a challenge, because I was teaching the basic courses. I always taught an overload, as well as supervising student teachers.

It worked out pretty well. The way that I did it was I put...seven students at the elementary level, in one building, one in each grade level, kindergarten through sixth grade. And then they had to change halfway through, to get a different experience, from an intermediate to primary or primary to intermediate level so that they had different experiences. They also had to talk to each other, to find out what was going on. And as a result, when I went to supervise, I was able to see seven people in one visit. Which worked out well.

Secondary was similar. I was able to place a number of student teachers in one building, depending on the subject area.

Then we left there and we came here, to Illinois Wesleyan. And...where, as I indicated earlier, where I worked with the secondary ed. program at first, then when Lucy Klauser retired I became the Chair of the Education department.

Miner: And how many faculty were in the department then?

Churukian: Well, when Lucy retired we lost that position. So there were four and then it went down to three.

Miner: Oh.

Churukian: So we had to do some juggling. And we had to get other faculty on campus to teach certain courses, like who was going to teach children's literature.

Miner: Hm.

Churukian: And then we had some adjuncts, a few, not very many, who taught certain courses.

Miner: Hm. Do you recall typically how many Department of Education students you had?

Churukian: Secondary was...sometimes only had six to eight student teachers. But there were others coming up. So there were maybe fifteen...at any one time. That's all the way through, fifteen to twenty. And elementary was about the same. So I'd say maybe twenty of each, maybe forty in the department.

Miner: Well, do you have a recollection of how long it felt like that, that you had to get assistance from other departments or adjuncts?

Churukian: Well, it wasn't too bad, because, at that time, the media librarian was a librarian, was not a technician. And so she taught the media course for the elementary and helped with the secondary students. And we had music, P.E., and art, which were divided into one-third semester. For secondary education, those faculty members who were going to supervise the student teachers also helped in the methods courses. I gave general methods, but they gave, and I indicated to them what they had to do, the specific methodology for that subject area, for instance in the science it was how to deal with labs. I gave the whole overall lesson plans, unit plans, classroom management, and test construction. That was how it worked, the regular faculty members helped out on those things. So from the outside point of view, we hired next to no one. It worked out pretty well. Then I would meet with everybody and see them on campus and—

Miner: All the students?

Churukian: Oh, the students and the faculty. And so we had good dialogue. We had a preschool operation here. We had four, and then five year olds. The four year olds met twice a week, the five year olds met three times a week. The person who was responsible for this program was originally from the home economics department before it was eliminated, but they kept the preschool and she taught the child development class.

Our elementary education students had to do some observations in the preschool. So we had our own setup here, which worked very well.

Miner: Do you think that's unusual? Was it unusual to have that? For students to be exposed to—

Churukian: I don't know. It was just something we did and so basically I was in charge of the preschool. And we had to set a budget each year to determine how much parents would need to pay to have their child in the preschool program.

Miner: And it was for anyone in the community?

Churukian: Yes. And so it worked out quite well. But then we were having state-mandated changes and requirements and we had to make some of those changes.

Miner: So that would be...we would be looking at around the 1980s then?

Churukian: Yes, and in the 1970s. It had already been in operation when I came.

Miner: And then it went away.

Churukian: It went away after I was no longer chair.

In 1981, 1982, I became involved with international teacher education. I was briefly exposed to it before when I was at Virginia Wesleyan College. A few years after we came here, I received a brochure about this group, Teacher Education in the '80s and '90s that was meeting in the Netherlands. There was one person's name listed on the notice I knew from our Syracuse days. So I called him. I asked him, "What's this all about?" So he told me, I said "Is it worthwhile?" He says, "I think so, yes." So I went and presented a paper. I joined the group and became involved in its second year and I attended the annual seminar for over twenty years.

Miner: So the purpose of the international teacher education program then is to educate educators from other countries, or to go to other countries?

Churukian: It is a group of teacher educators who got together to share their research, share their problems, see what everybody else is doing, and we meet other people. A few came here to visit. Fact is there's one who came with his family when he had a sabbatical, and spent a semester here.

Miner: So it was just the faculty themselves that were international.

Churukian: Yes, just faculty, not students. It had to do with the preparation of students. What we were doing was informing each other about our work. We were not working directly with students.

The International Society for Teacher Education (ISfTE), as it is now called, is still in operation. I think this year they met in Brunei and next year in Hong Kong. I'm not sure where they're going after that. It's usually about two years ahead that they plan. It's quite a group, and it was very loosely organized originally. Over the years, the group became more organized. I became more involved with the ISfTE, becoming one of the "older" members. In 1996 I became the founding editor of the journal, which is still being published. I did that for about five years with the result that I fell into the job of being treasurer of the ISfTE because I had to collect money for the journal. This is prior to the ISfTE having dues. I gave that up a few years ago. So, yes I was involved.

Miner: Oh my gosh. Doesn't sound like you go into any position half-heartedly.

Churukian: Well, it was enjoyable. And because of it, I've made friends all over the world.

Miner: That's nice.

Churukian: I'm was a guest lecturer at the Free University in Amsterdam and Bognor Regis in...Bognor Regis—I forget the name of the school now—at Charles University, in Prague and other places, and then because of it, I was able to take students during, at that time called Short Term, because it was in January. And we went to a number of places.

Miner: So for our audio listeners here, can you talk a little bit about Short Term? January term?

Churukian: Okay.

Miner: What its purpose was, and then...

Churukian: Well, the purpose that was to see what teaching, or schooling, was like in other countries. But also it was more cultural. Because to me that's an important aspect, the cultural aspect. Because we talk about multi-culture here but it's not the same.

Miner: As being immersed in another place.

Churukian: For example, I started in 1984, and first trip we went to The Netherlands, Belgium, and England. Belgium was just sort of a weekend. Pass through between The Netherlands and England. We spent about two weeks in each place.

Miner: Whoa.

Churukian: And I was able to place students in the schools, because of the people I knew. Two years later in 1986, it was Netherlands and England. In 1988 it was Austria, Czechoslovakia at that time, East Germany, West Germany, and Netherlands. So we went behind the Iron Curtain.

Miner: Wow. That must've been an experience for everyone.

Churukian: It was quite an experience. Especially when they took me off the train, the students were wondering what was going on. What it was, I had too much Czech money and you can't take the money out of the country.

Miner: Oh dear.

Churukian: So they took me to the exchange window, "Well," she said, "I'm sorry but I don't have any U.S. dollars." And since we were going into Germany, I said, "Do you have Deutschmarks?" And she says "Oh yes." So I got West German Deutschmarks. So I was able to exchange it without having to exchange later.

And crossing the borders, each one got more difficult. Crossing into the present Czech Republic, you felt being watched, but it wasn't uncomfortable. Going to East Germany, you really were being watched.

Miner: Were you assigned to someone from the government to escort you? How did you get permission to do that?

Churukian: Well, we went through, Seminars International. They set up certain parts of the program. They set up Austria, for I didn't know anybody in Austria. And we met an educator who talked to us.

We then visited some of the general monuments and places in Vienna. I managed to get them tram passes so they were on their own to explore.

In Czechoslovakia we went to Prague, where, I knew someone, and she set up some experiences as well as setting up meeting with students.

Miner: So your students got to actually meet students from there.

Churukian: Yes. Oh yes. The Czech students all spoke English. And we did certain different things. Then traveling to East Berlin, we had changed trains in Dresden, and we were met by a, quote, “guide,” our overseer. She was also the banker. She made sure we got to where they wanted us to go and so forth. I ended up with a lot of East German marks, which you can’t use outside East Germany.

Miner: Right, a keepsake.

Churukian: We had given her traveler’s checks, because we had to exchange money with her. But she still had them! So I said “Well, why don’t I just give you these for those,” and it worked.

Miner: Did it?

Churukian: It worked.

Miner: Okay.

Churukian: It was interesting when we were crossing the border. We were at Friedrichstraße Station, where you had to go through customs, passport control, tickets to get to the other side, to get on the platform, and catch the train, to go one stop on the other side, which was the zoo station, was where we got off.

Miner: To go through the wall.

Churukian: We went through the Berlin Wall to West Berlin. It was interesting because when we were in East Berlin we had a bus trip to get know where they are, because we only spent one night there. We drove by the Brandenburg Gate. They could see it and it was dusk. And you could see the guards and the dogs in just this area, because they only let us to go a certain distance away. The next day, when we were in West Berlin, it was very colorful there, whereas the other side was very drab. After dinner I said, “Well, it’s time for your P.E. class. We’ll go for a walk.” So we walked through the park. Saw some of the monuments there in the park. The students asked, “Where are we going? What are we doing?” I said, “You’ll see when we get there.” So we got there, and then it was just deadly silence. They have platforms, where you can get up and you could see over. And so they were clambering up and looking, and you can see these crosses, where people didn’t make it. And it was interesting. One student asked me “Why are there two of these?” I said “Two of what?” “Two of these gates” she replied. I said, “There’s only one.” There was still this puzzled look on her face. And so I said “Well, it’s like if you build a wall between Bloomington and Normal, along Division street, and you had to go one to the other, and you had to go through all of them—we went through—that’s what it is, just looking at the other side.” Then the light bulb went on, you know, “Oh, okay.”

Miner: So the previous day, they had been looking from the east, through all of the barriers, to the gates.

Churukian: Yes. Now they're looking at the gates from the other side. And some of them got it right away. They knew. But the experience, it was something else again. Well, the next day, we had a bus tour. And I said, "Okay, after the bus tour, "Okay, seven o'clock tonight, meet here." Wait no, six o'clock, because we had to have dinner. "Meet here, because we were taking the night train to Amsterdam." After we met we had some time before taking the train. I said, "Okay what'd you do." Nearly everyone went back to Checkpoint Charlie and the museum there. They were explaining all the different things that were happening. So it was quite an experience for them.

Miner: I would imagine the impression.

Churukian: Then we went to Amsterdam. We went to the Anne Frank House. Where they got a little more of the World War Two history.

From Amsterdam we went to Maastricht, which was basically our destination. It was where I had a friend, Toon Dijkstra that I had met through the international group, where he set up a number of experiences for the students. While we were there, we went and visited a number of places. One of the places we visited were the caves, which were actually a quarry that goes back to 700 AD. This is where they had stored a lot of the artifacts from the Rijksmuseum, in Amsterdam. And the Germans were afraid to go in. But they had to make a tour or inspection of the caves. The Germans had no idea where things were. The locals would take them in and then take them around in circles for a half hour or so. They had no idea where they were.

In the caves, they had constructed a kitchen, chapel, eating areas, where people could be housed in case of bombings. These are pretty deep underground.

Miner: And this was for the occupiers, it wasn't for the citizens.

Churukian: It was for the citizens.

Miner: Oh it was! Oh, okay.

Churukian: It was for the citizens, yes. We went to visit a home of my friend, Walter and Tilake. There were about twelve students, where Tilake is an art educator. So she talked a little bit about what they do in art. Walter has an extensive collection of different things, which he showed the students. He had books printed in the 1700s. The students were telling me this afterwards, because Toon said, "Let's go." So we went to visit some place, near the German border. It was his sister's home where his other two sisters were visiting along with all of their husbands. Toon hadn't seen them for a while.

Back at the house Walter pulled out copies of *Stars and Stripes*, when the war was over. Maastricht is only twenty minutes from Aachen, just across the border in Germany. Walter had relatives in Aachen. He was able to borrow a U.S. uniform and go over it to see his relatives. Tilake was telling the students that during this time the Germans had occupied her home, using it as a headquarters. Tilake had kept a diary, so she read to the students from her diary about what was happening.

The next day we went to Aachen and you could see the Maginot Line.

Miner: Hm. Incredible, incredible experiences for the students.

Churukian: Then we went to the Belgium cemetery. We also went to the cemetery in the Netherlands, the American cemeteries, the two American military cemeteries for people who had died in those areas.

We had many experiences. On one of the trips while we were in Maastricht, we were on our walk with my friend, Toon, and we were at one of the three walls, I think this was the second wall, and

the houses are built right into the old wall of the city. Toon goes up, and he said, “Well, this is an interesting house here.” He goes up, knocks on the door, I said, “What are you doing?” The door opens and the person said, “Come on in!” Toon sister was living there. She served us some refreshment there. Then she took them through the house, because it goes up about three stories.

Miner: Steep stairs?

Churukian: Steep stairs, oh yes.

Those were the European trips, and then I did two to Australia and New Zealand in 1990 and in 1995. The second one was after I retired.

Miner: So were you instrumental in starting the Short Term travel programs? Or had they been going on a while?

Churukian: They had been going on a while.

Miner: Okay.

Churukian: They were different, but even in Australia and New Zealand I had friends there.

Miner: [chuckles] from your international teacher education group?

Churukian: My international—

Miner: Oh, how wonderful.

Churukian: And I’m still in contact with them.

Miner: That’s great.

Churukian: And they provide experiences for the students. It is hard to believe what they would do.

Miner: It’s a great tool, great learning tool.

Churukian: Students learned a lot. There was one incident, on the first trip we went to Fiji, we stayed not near the capital, but one of the other cities that’s close to the airport. The students had free time, and so some of them went into town. Now the population of Fiji is about forty percent Fiji, about forty percent Indian, and twenty percent other. After asking the students how their trip to town was, they said somebody there tried to sell them something on the street and was following them and pushing them and they didn’t want any part of it. They were uncomfortable, but they managed to get away since there was a group of them they were okay. There was no idea of assault, but it was just a matter of trying to sell something. And then she said, “You know what, now I know what it feels like to be a minority.” Again, another learning experience.

Miner: Very good experience. Being the other.

Churukian: These were great experiences for the students. Every once in a while I see someone that went on one of the trip and they said they still remember some of the things that they did.

Miner: It'd be a defining moment. Well, what are some of the biggest changes you think you've seen in your association worth listing? I would take that change on any level, in any way.

Churukian: It's hard to say. Because I was working with a select group which were those who were wanting to teach, and that doesn't change much. Though one of the things I did find is that there was more and more "What do I have to do to get the A." Rather than, "What do I have to do to learn something"? So the grade became important, not the learning. And why that change came about I don't know, could be any number of reasons.

Miner: Do you think you've heard that from others that you know? With teachers at other institutions, or have you not had that discussion really?

Churukian: Yes, I think it's just a product of the times. But I guess one of the best experiences I ever had was when I had a Fulbright.

Miner: What did you do?

Churukian: I went to Kuwait.

Miner: Did you! When was this?

Churukian: One year after Desert Storm.

Miner: Really.

Churukian: I spent five months there. They were anxious to get things going. And it was quite an experience. I was the first faculty member to have a Fulbright in Wesleyan's history.

Miner: Wow—

Churukian: There were others who had to have Fulbright's before they came here. But I was the first one, as a faculty member, to go.

It was quiet an experience, when I got there, the library was bare, because everything had been stripped and taken out, and a lot of activity. There was new furniture in the offices. Any books that I wanted to use as a reference I had to take with me. The idea was to take the books and then leave them there. I forget how many boxes of books I took with me.

Miner: Hm. So you were setting up a school, or setting up—

Churukian: No, I was—

Miner: —a teacher education program?

Churukian: No, I was working with those who were setting things up, trying to re-establish their programs. So like I was like a consultant.

I presented maybe four or five papers, which were open ended. These are things that are happening and what would you do? Or would like to do? Research there is a big thing because you have to have so many papers published before you can get promoted. And so I was acting as a consultant to various faculty members.

The majority of faculty had their education either in England, Egypt, or the U.S. I worked with some who had their degrees from here.

Miner: From Illinois Wesleyan?

Churukian: No, from universities in the U.S. One was from Pittsburgh, one from Kansas State, and I forget from where some of the others graduated. That's about twenty years ago. But it was an exciting experience.

Miner: That certainly sounds like it would be.

Churukian: And the main destruction that was there was to government buildings and some of the hotels. They were telling the story about how stupid they were. The construction is mostly cement block and the only wood there is, is maybe around doorframes and windows. Well, there was this one hotel, one wing of the hotel, which was set on fire. But where did they set the fire? Up on the top floor, so no damage going down. They were able to put it out easily. But it was still a shell, because there was an argument between the insurance companies and whoever were the owner who was going to pay for it and so forth.

There were marvelous restaurant though.

Miner: [chuckles] good food in Kuwait.

Churukian: Good food in Kuwait. That was a good experience. I made some good friends there.

Miner: Did you observe changes in the makeup of campus as far as international students go? We've talked about that a lot on campus in recent years. What is your recollection of the time that you were at Wesleyan? I mean, I completely agree and it's still strong value today, to send students into other cultures, but there's an equal emphasis I think now on bringing faculty and students and staff from other countries.

Churukian: That was just getting started about two years, three years, before I left.

Miner: Okay.

Churukian: On a big push, so I really don't know.

Miner: Okay, just really wasn't sure what the time frame was on that.

Miner: As far as you can remember, yes. Do you want to talk a little bit about your other activities in our community? You certainly can share, if you'd like to, observations of changes you've seen, you know, in your department's relationship with the community and the teaching the students do, or the work that you've personally done in the community?

Churukian: Well, let's see—

Miner: Associations that you've had?

Churukian: A major association I'm involved with is College Alumni Club, which was founded in 1890. I joined in 1982. The way the group meets monthly during the school year. Each member will present a paper of some kind, of their choice, and you never know what it is going to be, and usually titles are kind of cryptic. You don't know what it is going to be about. But sometimes that was because they had to give a title and they didn't know what they were going to talk about. It ended up being that way. It is kind of fun trying to guess what it's all about. It started out because communication was not as rampant as it is now.

Miner: In the 1800s, yes.

Churukian: It was started by people from Wesleyan, some from ISNU, as it was called at that time, and the community. It used to be that one meeting of the year would be a debate between two sides or a discussion, however you want to put it, bringing out certain points. And some of the papers in the past had to do with what was going on in the world or in the government and so forth. But since things are a little different today, it's morphed into what you're interested in or what you'd think others would be interested in. I became president in 1986. The original constitution was restricted to men only. So I pushed to change that. After being voted down at least twice, maybe three times, it finally passed in 1998. And the ones that were forcing the members to vote it down were the wives.

Miner: Really! Interesting.

Churukian: In many cases because they thought that they would have to become members and present a paper.

Miner: Oh, ha!

Churukian: And nobody made it clear. So finally I pushed it again in 1998. I said "Let's do it, try it again," and so and I said, "When you get your changes, let me look at it." And so they had these numbers of changes. I went through it, I said, "Actually all you have to do is change one word, from men to people." We got that through.

Miner: Simple.

Churukian: It was simple.

Miner: Elegant. Ha-ha.

Churukian: Which didn't change anything! And made it understandable. So it worked.

Miner: Congratulations.

Churukian: And now I have a new position, which was created a couple years ago, of Historian. I've become the Historian, and try to present a snapshot of the history each month, of what happened in the club during the past century.

Miner: And that's how we met—

Churukian: That's why we met.

Miner: —because the University Archives holds the records of the organization.

Churukian: That's right. So we got to get a few more records in there. [Chuckles] I think Lew (Detweiler) has them.

Miner: You guys do a great job of taking care of your history. It's a fascinating organization.

Churukian: It is, it is.

Miner: —that has lived so long, and that anyone can join who has any college degree. It doesn't have to be from here.

Churukian: That's right. Originally they had what they called associate members, which were those that did not have a college degree because there were a lot of people at that time who did not have degrees. But the only restriction was that they couldn't hold office. And we eliminated that category because it was superfluous. But I think we could still bring someone in if we wanted to, without being an honorary member or some such thing. We're pretty loose.

Miner: Well it's always struck me as a model for lifelong learning. People who are just interested in hearing other people's experiences and passions.

Churukian: You get some interesting, presentations and you never know where it's going to go.

It's a group that you get together once a month and generally, it's people that you don't normally associate with, not that you're unfriendly, but you go different ways. And it makes for a nice meal once a month. Good discussion and talks and enjoyable evening and we're finished by nine o'clock.

Miner: [chuckles] perfect. Well, are there other recollections you have of life in the community? You've been here for a good long time, are there other things you want to talk to us about?

Churukian: No, can't think of anything at this point...it was a good run. I enjoyed it while I did it. I don't miss it anymore. I'm enjoying what I'm doing now.

Miner: Good for you. And still traveling?

Churukian: Still traveling.

Miner: Still doing quite a bit of that.

Churukian: Yes, and still trying to do a little family history.

Miner: Great. Okay, well thank you so much for talking with us today. I really appreciate it.

Churukian: You're quite welcome.