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Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

California Wine Industry Oral History Project

A. SETRAKIAN,

A LEADER OF THE SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY GRAPE INDUSTRY

A. Setrakian *Reminiscences, 1885-1922*

Bruno T. Bisceglia *Recollections of A. Setrakian*

Robert Setrakian *Recollections of A. Setrakian*

With an Introduction by
Harry R. Wellman

Interviews Conducted by
Ruth Teiser

Copy No. 1



A. SETRAKIAN

ca. 1964

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PREFACE

The California Wine Industry Oral History Series, a project of the Regional Oral History Office, was initiated in 1969, the year noted as the bicentenary of continuous wine making in this state. It was undertaken through the action and with the financing of the Wine Advisory Board, and under the direction of University of California faculty and staff advisors at Berkeley and Davis.

The purpose of the series is to record and preserve information on California grape growing and wine making that has existed only in the memories of wine men. In some cases their recollections go back to the early years of this century, before Prohibition. These recollections are of particular value because the Prohibition period saw the disruption of not only the industry itself but also the orderly recording and preservation of records of its activities. Little has been written about the industry from late in the last century until Repeal. There is a real paucity of information on the Prohibition years (1920-1933), although some wine making did continue under supervision of the Prohibition Department. The material in this series on that period, as well as the discussion of the remarkable development of the wine industry in subsequent years (as yet treated analytically in few writings) will be of aid to historians. Of particular value is the fact that frequently several individuals have discussed the same subjects and events or expressed opinions on the same ideas, each from his own point of view.

Research underlying the interviews has been conducted principally in the University libraries at Berkeley and Davis, the California State Library, and in the library of the Wine Institute, which has made its collection of in many cases unique materials readily available for the purpose.

Three master indices for the entire series are being prepared, one of general subjects, one of wines, one of grapes by variety. These will be available to researchers at the conclusion of the series in the Regional Oral History Office and at the library of the Wine Institute.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons who have contributed significantly to recent California history. The office is headed by Willa K. Baum and is under the administrative supervision of James D. Hart, the Director of The Bancroft Library.

Ruth Teiser
Project Director
California Wine Industry
Oral History Series

1 March 1971
Regional Oral History Office
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University of California, Berkeley

INTRODUCTION

I remember A. Setrakian (Sox as he was widely known) as a dynamic leader of the California raisin industry and a good friend.

Where and when Sox and I first met I don't recall. It may have been in Washington, D.C. in 1934 in connection with the development of the first Federal Marketing Agreement for California Raisins. That year I was serving as Chief of the General Crops Section of the AAA. Or our first meeting may have occurred after I returned to California.

During the years before World War II Sox was taking an active part in grape industry problems and had become widely and favorably known especially among producers of raisins.

After the war with all three segments of the grape industry, wine, raisin, and table grape, in serious financial difficulty, and none in greater financial difficulty than the raisin segment, Sox emerged as the acknowledged leader of that segment.

I well remember the hearing in Washington, D.C. in the spring of 1949 on a proposed federal marketing agreement for raisins. Sox was the official representative of raisin growers at that hearing, and what an effective spokesman he was. I attended the hearing at the request of the AAA and presented a brief replete with facts, figures and economic-statistical analyses. Sox spoke for thirty or forty minutes aided by only a page of notes. He described the plight of the raisin growers, high costs, low prices, heavy losses and reduced standard of living. He predicted that, if nothing was done in the coming marketing season to bolster prices, many small growers would lose their vineyards and the economy of the San Joaquin Valley would be impaired.

I was much impressed by Sox's presentation. He was an orator of the old school with a good voice and expressive gestures. He combined facts, logic and pathos and appealed to emotions as well as to intellect. If he had stayed with the law, instead of going into farming, he might well have become a famous trial lawyer.

Between 1949 and 1952 Sox and I met rather frequently, sometimes in Washington, D.C., and sometimes in Fresno, but more often in San Francisco. Sox, Jesse W. Tapp, at that time Vice President of the Bank of America in charge of its agricultural operation, and I met every two or three months for luncheon,

almost always on a Saturday at the Palace Hotel. And after I became Vice President - Agricultural Sciences for the University and Tapp became Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Bank of America with his headquarters in Los Angeles we continued to meet Sox for luncheon at the Palace Hotel two or three times a year.

The luncheons were leisurely, lasting about two hours. The conversation centered on the grape industry, particularly on the raisin segment, the current situation and outlook, operations under the federal marketing order for raisins, what needed to be done to improve the situation, how to get better cooperation from the AAA, and so on. During all of those years Sox was chairman of the Raisin Advisory Board and Administrative Committee. One time in the early 1960's, I don't remember the exact year, Jesse Tapp and I suggested to Sox that he should step down as chairman of the Board and Committee. He was getting along in years and we felt that from the standpoint of his health as well as from the operation of the raisin program, a change in active leadership would be beneficial. He didn't take our advice.

Sometimes Sox would reminisce about his early experiences as a boy caught up in the conflict between the Armenians and the Turks (Sox was an Armenian), about his work in San Francisco before and during his student days in Hastings College of the Law, and about his early years as a grape grower in Fresno County. Too bad we didn't have a tape recorder to preserve the many interesting accounts he related.

Sox obviously enjoyed the prestige which the chairmanship of the Raisin Advisory Board and Administrative Committee brought him. But that alone cannot explain the time, energy and ability which he devoted to the California raisin industry. My own impression, based upon our many conversations, is that the driving force was his deep love for his adopted land and his desire that his neighbors should share in the benefits which it had given him.

Harry R. Wellman
Professor of Agricultural Economics
Emeritus
Vice President of the University Emeritus

Services Held for Arpaxat Setrakian

(died 1 July 1974)

Arpaxat Setrakian, Fresno grape and wine industry leader who almost single-handedly revolutionized the marketing of California's raisin crop, died in San Francisco Monday of a heart ailment at the age of 88.

Private funeral services were held yesterday at Halsted and Co., and his ashes will be deposited in Mount Ararat Cemetery, Fresno.

Mr. Setrakian was one of the most controversial, colorful and vigorous spokesman of the raisin industry. He led delegates to Washington during the New Deal days to set up a raisin marketing program, and he was the first chairman of the Federal Raisin Advisory Board serving 22 years until his retirement in 1971.

He did not confine his efforts to the United States. He arranged the largest international sale of raisins in history - 166,000 tons to the United Kingdom.

In 1964 he served as Chairman of the World Raisin Conference in Munich, Germany. He also participated in European and United Nations raisin activities.

He provided effective and highly emotional leadership in his fights with raisin packers to provide higher prices for Central Valley farmers.

"I cry easily," Mr. Setrakian said once, "but why blame me? The tears that I have shed have brought dividends."

One of the most effective displays of mass weeping came in the course of a trial in which Mr. Setrakian, a graduate of Hastings College of the Law, represented a fellow Armenian.

In the course of describing atrocities committed on Armenians in his native community of Bitlis, Turkey, Mr. Setrakian burst into tears. So did the judge. And so, too, did the entire jury, whose members then voted to acquit Mr. Setrakian's client.

Mr. Setrakian came to San Francisco from the Middle East in 1905 and worked on the old United Railways street car system while getting his law degree. Then he moved to Fresno.

He owned vineyards in Fresno, Tulare and Kern counties and was one of the founders of the California Growers Winery in Cutler (Tulare county). He helped organize the California Wine Advisory Board and served as president or chairman of many industry groups, including the California Grape and Tree Fruit League.

Few knew his first name. The family firm, with headquarters in Fresno and an office on Montgomery street, is known simply as A. Setrakian and Co. Socially, he preferred to be called "Sox" Setrakian.

He is survived by his wife, Roxanna; a son, Robert; a daughter, Arline O'Neill, and seven grandchildren.



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May 6, 1977

Mrs. Willa Baum
Department Head
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California
Berkeley, California 94720

Dear Mrs. Baum,

It is not possible, even in 1977, to write of Sox Setrakian with real detachment. He was in his own way - in many own ways in fact - a great and good man. He left behind him works that few men could achieve. He was first of all, I think, a poet and a good one. Then perhaps roughly in this order he was orator, husband and father, friend and enemy, diplomat, scholar, politician, vineyardist and vintner, bon vivant, expert economist, merchant, capitalist and attorney. On matters of import he was generous and forgiving. On small matters he was irascible, petulant and in small ways, he was ruthless.

Sox Setrakian was totally American, Californian and San Franciscan. And yet he was beautifully Armenian also. Years ago he told me of the terrors of his childhood - of the wanton cruelty of those who oppressed his people and of the equally cruel and wanton reprisals upon the oppressors. He never forgot his origins, nor did he ever fail to help those in his native region - be they descended from the oppressed or the oppressor. He came to California as not much more than a child. He swept out cable cars, and sometimes slept in them. Sox was proud that his California law degree came to him at the hands of Theodore Roosevelt.

I said that he was poet and orator. It would be better to write poet-orator. From anger to affection, from the grave to the inconsequential, from major business treaty to major political action - always and even in petulance and downright nastiness, his voice was elegant music. His writing was his voice put on paper.

Not all men know how wholly to give or receive love in living each day with family and friends. I have seen Sox so many times loosen voice and charm in seeking his own way

and most often getting his own way with both. But I have also seen Sox far more often sacrifice his goals to those of friends and family. He gave, helped, yielded and stood by graciously and with unstinted loyalty whenever grace and kindness and loyalty were needed.

I said that Sox was friend and enemy - and he was. There was, I think, a small number of men who over the decades could have done no real wrong in the eyes of Sox Setrakian. Jesse Tapp, Harry Wellman and I were among that small and favored band. We knew always that anything Sox could give us, in need or not in need, was ours without asking. We knew also that there would be days when any one of us would happily have boxed his ears in response to impulsive and even irrational, sometimes petty and spiteful act or word. American men are not permitted to speak of deep affection until death has taken friends away.

There was a second and far larger group of men who were sometimes friend and sometimes enemy of Sox. The men who built the Valley, who made the grape and wine and raisin industry and who built the finance and enterprise and research and education that guided those institutions were themselves poets. Perhaps they were of lesser order than Sox, but they were men of flame and vision and music. They were hard and cold. They were generous and tolerant when the chips were down. They were eminently decent men. They were sharp and deeply honest. They were competent. They were not often tranquil. They liked conflict, bitter and vocal battle. Unspoken and unwritten, it seemed clear that battle should not inhibit achievement, or even over the long pull of time should it impair friendship and cooperation.

And so there were alignments and realignments and shifts from enmity to friendship as the issues under controversy changed. Yet even in protracted periods of non-recognition, they were friends and they worked together.

Sox was not unopinionated. There was a very small group of people who were forever and without hope of redemption in the outright and eternal enemy class. To my eye there seemed to be little if any reason for the damnation of these few people. But they were doomed in Sox's eye, not mine.

Sox was a diplomat. To serve so long as spokesman for the brilliant and fiery and competitive and combative people of the grape industry - to be elected and stay elected - was token to highest order diplomatic skill. Those men held large and small holdings. Their interests were often diverse. They descended from the cultures of Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, and eastern Mediterranean, Germany, Scotland and England. They treasured their cultural differences, fiercely

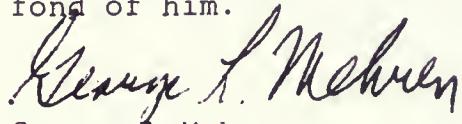
refused to compromise them and seemed somehow to enjoy the consequent turbulence so long as it did not really forestall achievement. Sox was regarded as leader, at least most of the time by most of his colleagues, in dealing with domestic and foreign agencies of all types.

I have worked with Sox in political representation. I have weathered, at least fairly well, the political pressures that Sox has put upon me. He was master politician. And yet, I can honestly say that he was also master statesman. He sought and usually achieved his ends. He did so smoothly or harshly, gently or with clout - but always with an innate propriety. He played hard ball and soft ball. But he saw and always respected interests and obligations that transcended his own.

This man knew the joy of being alive. He knew how to read; to eat and to drink; to partake of human concourse; to study and to think. He built for himself and for his community of interest. It was a broad community that ultimately touched many nations, many interests, many people. In his own way, Sox made the world at least a little different, and I think at least a little better.

I said he could be and was often vindictive and ruthless about little things that irritated his sometimes silly sensitivities. I could write of many such little offenses. They were few and small against the good that this man did in his time. One horror suffices. Once in Washington I refused to accomodate a flatly nonsensical request. Sox indicated he might well plaster me in the press and even on television. I knew he would not. He also indicated he might tell my mother that I had become afflicted with the big head and with Potomac fever. I thought he wouldn't, but he did. My mother called and asked me how I could possibly have been so mean to a man so wonderful as Mr. Setrakian. She hoped also that I would guard against the big head or the fever.

Physically Sox was a small man. He was as beguiling as a leprechaun when he chose to be beguiling. He was also what the Germans call a schlemiel when he chose to be a schlemiel. He started with very little beside mind and soul and drive that not all men have. He did some damage, as all of us do damage. He did much good that not all of us could do. Above all else he had in high measure the poetry, the discipline, the diligence and courage of the people who made the West. I cannot really judge Sox or his work or his life. He was very close to me. I was very fond of him.



George L. Mehren

This letter from William Saroyan to Robert Setrakian, reproduced just as it was written, discusses not only the author's recollection of Arpaxat Setrakian but also a meeting at Robert Setrakian's office a few days earlier.

By way of explanation: Scott and Rob are sons of Robert Setrakian who had recently stayed at William Saroyan's Paris flat. Mark and Mary are also Robert Setrakian's children. Robert Damir, a San Francisco attorney who has known William Saroyan for many years and is related to Robert Setrakian, is one of the founders of the Bridgemont High School in San Francisco, and William Saroyan agreed to speak to its English and journalism classes some time in the future. And, finally, Armenian Fog is the suggested name of a beverage.

Ruth Teiser

2729 West Griffith Way Fresno California 93705 Sunday May 29 1977
 Robert Setrakian 601 Montgomery Street San Francisco CA 94111 Dear Bob: I met Ruth Teiser at the Bancroft Library and the next day she dropped me a line about Arpoxot (phonetically), or Sox Setrakian, your father, and invites me to pass along any recollections I may have of him: I am about to fly to Sofia, Bulgaria to an International Writers Conference, and then on to 74 Rue Taitbout 75009 Paris France in case you want to jot that down, and since I owe you thanks for the champagne at your place, perhaps at the same time I can say this, at any rate: Arpoxot Setrakian was to me selling The Fresno Evening Herald at the Republican Building corner in Fresno in 1916, 1917, 1918, and 1919 a legendary character, along with a number of other men born in Bitlis, notably my mother Takoohi's kid brother Aram, who worked with Setrakian in San Francisco in watermelons, so to put it, in carload lots, and told all manner of high spirited stories of their adventures and even disputes every time Aram visited our house at 2226 San Benito Avenue: Aram Joseph (or Hovsepian) a big burly loud open-faced wrestler and all-around character who one day surprised me sometime in the middle 1940s by saying, Your father Armenak was my teacher in Bitlis---he was the finest man I have ever met. Dikran Yezdan, about whom there were always joyous stories of speed and wit in resolving difficult problems. Najari Levon, a huge man, who had been a masseur in San Francisco, and once worked without sleep for a week, apparently collapsed, and was astonished to awaken in a funeral parlor---or so he said in a little story that needed an hour in the telling, thank God. There were other legendary characters in Fresno of course, but these stand out, and Setrakian's eminence and lore connected with his very swift transformation from a recent-arrival in America to a well-earned and deserved place of importance in the whole life of the people of Fresno, City and County, and indeed of the entire San Joaquin Valley, for Setrakian worked diligently and effectively on behalf of vineyardists and raisins. He was equal to a great deal of hard work. He was an excellent public speaker, both in Armenian and in English. I enjoyed seeing and hearing him as he passed my corner, and once on a train to Chicago for attendance at a Democratic Presidential Convention we had a number of chats---but for me he was beyond chats, he was a man from Bitlis larger than life, the same as the others mentioned. ---I seem to have a

feeling that Scott and Rob may have had tough going at my Paris flat, but I hope it was not too tough. I was delighted to meet Mark, a fine lad entirely, and to hear how well Mary sang in Fiddler on the Roof. And to meet the intelligent and sweet young lady who fetched the second bottle of champagne---my best to her... And it was great that Robert Damir came and joined us: I shall visit his school and meet some of the students, and indeed I shall one day invite him to look into a New York legal matter for me. Now, though, I am moving, but before I say so long, this: I have been thinking about Armenian Fog. If I heard you right, as the saying is, it is meant to go on a "flavored" drink: a liquer perhaps. (Never mind please the misspelling). Some alternate names, then, to consider: Hai Helk (Armenian Intelligence, actually khelk but no use burdening anybody with a kh sound): Armenian Intelligence can't be described, it must be experienced... A kind of running slogan on the label, given her only to suggest that the name should be unique, unknown so far, and appealing to those who imbibe, as the saying is. Instead of helk, there are words for Word (the same word is for Dance) or Hai Bar, Armenian Word, or Armenian Dance, or Armenian Word and Dance. Hoki, spirit. Arev, Sun. Lusnak, Moon. Jur, water. Hai Hope---hope is an exclamation made by celebrants and dancers, but it is useless here because of its meaning in English. Hai Aram, or Hahram, an Arabic word used by Armenians meaning something like Sacred to Honor. Back to Hai Helk: "Armenian Intelligence can't be described, it must be experienced. Everything is something like it, nothing is exactly the same." Or words to that effect. Again, it was a very happy time up at your office that afternoon, so many thanks:

Bill

INTERVIEW HISTORY

As early as 1962, suggestions that Arpaxat Setrakian be interviewed began coming in to the Regional Oral History Office (then the Regional Cultural History Project) from agricultural economists who pointed out his importance in the development of the San Joaquin Valley grape industry and also his advancing age. By 1969, when the California wine industry interview project was started, efforts were still being made to arrange an interview with Mr. Setrakian who, in his eighties, was still active. Since wine was only one aspect of his grape industry activities, he was not originally included in the series, but in January 1971 the Wine Advisory Board concluded arrangements for a special appropriation for an interview with Mr. Setrakian.

In anticipation, research for the interview had started, and a preliminary discussion had been held with Mr. Setrakian in his San Francisco office. However, during much of that year he was concerned with finishing his various industry activities and retiring from the Raisin Administrative Committee and other boards on which he served, so it was not until after his retirement that what was assumed to be the initial interview in the series was held. It had been preceded by numerous discussions by telephone and in person at his home and office. An outline of suggested subjects had been sent to him, and on October 27, 1971, the interview included in this volume took place. It covers briefly the period from his birth to 1922.

Although more discussions and correspondence followed, with the interviewer urging continuation of his reminiscences, Mr. Setrakian delayed and in the end no more sessions were held.

Meanwhile, this office had attended the January 1972 dinner in his honor and taped his talk. The transcript, included here, contains recollections of some of his work as an industry leader. Because of the less-than-ideal acoustics and Mr. Setrakian's individual style of speaking and pronunciation (he retained something of his Armenian accent throughout his life) his words were not always clear. He himself did not check the transcript of this talk or that of his interview. Mr. Sloan Coats, a member of Mr. Setrakian's staff, kindly checked the dinner speech tape against the transcript and made some corrections and additions.

Following Mr. Setrakian's death on July 1, 1974, his son Robert Setrakian agreed to add to his father's recollections. Born in 1924, he had been active

in his father's business enterprises since 1949, as he related in his interview, and he had also undertaken other business and organization activities. (An excellent brief biography of Robert Setrakian appeared in the January 1976 issue of the magazine Wines & Vines.)

At the suggestion of Mr. John A. De Luca, president of the Wine Institute, Bruno T. Bisceglia, a close friend of A. Setrakian, was asked to add his recollections, and he gave an appraisal of the man and his work as well.

In addition to these three interviews and the texts of A. Setrakian's testimonial dinner speech and his statement upon his retirement from the Raisin Administrative Committee, one of his many reports to a government body has been included in this volume as an example of the type of work he did and the kind of presentation he made.

These are, in effect, fragments toward a biography. Other fragments abound; they exist in the public press and the trade press, the records of the various committees upon which Mr. Setrakian served, in government documents, books and periodical articles concerning table grapes, raisins and wine. Perhaps the only mystery that remains incapable of solution is exactly how he came to be nicknamed "Sox."

Ruth Teiser
Interviewer-Editor

16 May 1977
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A. SETRAKIAN: REMINISCENCES, 1885-1922

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Early Life in Armenia

[Date of Interview: October 27, 1971]

[Place: Office of A. Setrakian in San Francisco]

Teiser: Tell me where you were born...

Setrakian: Well, I was born in Bitlis. It's a city in Asia Minor which originally was one of the principal cities of Armenia. Later when the Ottoman Empire invaded Armenia and occupied Armenia, it became one of the Turkish cities. My father was one of the outstanding citizens of Bitlis, and he was the man who supplied the Turkish Army and institutions with food and fiber which was required. During the massacres of 1895, he was one of the victims, and he was 34 years old. He left my mother with six children.

My first name is Arpaxat, and I'm told that Arpaxat is the earliest name in the world--I don't know. But, the story is that my grandfather was a very, very religious person. He had just joined the Protestant faith and had left our mother church. When I was born he said, "Give me the Bible," and he opened the Bible and closed his eyes and said, "Whatever name comes under my thumb, that will be the name of my grandchild." He happened to be in Genesis and the name under his thumb was Arpaxat, which was the son of Shem, who was the son of Noah, and that's where the name Arpaxat started.

When the massacres were over, my brother, who was six years older than I was*, left to go to _____ **and then he went to Izmir to try to make a living, and from there to support us.

*Probably Abkar Setrakian, who later came to California

**The place name could not be understood from the tape.

Setrakian: At that time in Germany they created a move to have people adopt children and send them to get an education. I was adopted by some man in Germany and sent to international college for education. By that time my sister, Sophie*, had been sent to another school to be educated, in Izmir, in Smyrna. My youngest brother and my youngest sister died in Izmir of malnutrition. My mother** gathered us all up and she went to Izmir, and she was working at whatever work she could get as maid or doing a little sewing.

I would like to say a word or two about my mother. In my opinion she was the greatest woman in the world--well, one of the greatest. She came to this country of ours two years prior to when I did. When I came she was working in some packing plant. She died at 78. She came from Izmir to Fresno in 1903. She died in '28. And when she died she could read and write English quite well. She was kind, considerate, and I don't know of any woman whom I've read of or know that could measure the loyalty and love which Mother had for those who were in need.

Just for an example, from 1918 on to 1922, I was rather successful in business and made a lot of money. I had the latest model car, the most expensive one. I had a Stutz car. Every Saturday we would load the car up with groceries and take them to her friends. But she would never, never go to the door to deliver. We would stay about a block away and walk down.

I used to call her Ma, and I said, "Ma, why do you make us work so hard?" She said, "Listen, my boy, if we go to their house they will envy us, and that's not good." She was a great woman.

California: Work and Education, 1905-1914

Setrakian: When I came to Fresno I could not get any job, so I came to San Francisco, and fortunately I was able to get a job as a street-car cleaner from 1905 up to 1906.

Teiser: How old were you then?

Setrakian: I was born in 1886,*** so--

*Later Mrs. Levon Hagopian; also called "Sophia."

**Salvi Setrakian

***The notice at the time of his death gave A. Setrakian's birth date as 15 August 1885.

Teiser: You were about 19.

Setrakian: Nineteen, yes, and I used to get \$54 a month and work nights. My shift was seven o'clock in the evening to seven o'clock in the morning. We used to work for what was called the United Railway Company.* The name of my boss was Strauss. He was a very kind-hearted German. And the way I got to be a streetcar cleaner was that my first job was in the wholesale district unloading and selling watermelons. The place where we had rented part of the place was owned by a woman named Sophie Strauss. She liked me very much and told me to go and see her father, who at that time was the head guy of the car house which was located at Tenth and Fillmore streets. And I went to him and he put me on a shift--the night shift.

So when in 1906**they went on a strike, naturally I joined the strikers, and that's where I made my baptism in the union work. We had our first meeting in the Labor Temple somewhere near Bryant Street in the Mission District, and I went there to attend the meeting. On the way going down a couple of fellows held me up. I looked at them and I said, "What do you want?" They said, "We want what you've got." "Well," I said, "I haven't got anything. I'm a striker." And I put up such a good story they handed me 50 cents and told me to go have a cup of coffee. [Laughter]

So, I went to the hall and they were making speeches, rather mediocre, not very good. So I asked the chairman, who was Chamberlain, if I could say a few words. He said, "Brother, come up here," so I went up there and made a speech and apparently it took very well. After I got through they were on their chairs yelling and hollering and before I knew they took me up on their shoulders and carried me around. To tell you the truth, I didn't know what the hell it was all about--I had only made a speech. But right then and there I was put on the executive committee, made chairman of the speaker's committee, and then went around to make speeches and gather money for those who were on the strike.

The strike lasted quite a few months, as you know, and as soon as the watermelon season started I went back to the watermelon business. The strike finally came to an end in great defeat and Calhoun***who was at that time the head of the United Railway Company

*"United Railroads of San Francisco" was the name of the organization

**1907 was the actual date of the strike.

***Patrick Calhoun

Setrakian: came out victoriously. But nobody knew that Calhoun, Abe Ruef, and Schmitz, who was mayor at that time, was all a combination which represented the most sordid kind of combination in the history of San Francisco.

I never went back to the streetcars again. I stayed right there and tried to carry on my living as best as I could. I started to go to a private school in Berkeley which was called at that time White's Preparatory College. White was the principal. He took care of people like me to educate them and make them qualified to enter the University. I took my diploma from White's College in 1910 and then enrolled as a student in Hastings College of Law.

The professor in charge was Dr. [Edward] Robeson Taylor, who was also an outstanding physician and an outstanding poet. He was for one term the mayor of San Francisco. For some reason Taylor was very sympathetic toward me, so one year I went to him and told him that my affairs were in such shape that I could not attend. He said, "That's all right. Skip this year and come back next." Finally, to make the story short, I graduated in 1914 from Hastings College of Law.

I was surely not the best student, and I might say I was not the worst, either. I was quite good, especially in crime and tort and branches of law of that kind. So when the time came to give the diplomas, we gathered in the Greek Theater of the University of California to get our diplomas. The one who was going to give the diplomas was our former president, Theodore Roosevelt. And the one who handed the diplomas to the former president was Mrs. Phoebe Hearst. It was quite a gathering, and I had rented the gown and the cap and, being short, the gown was almost near the ground. I fell down once. I stopped the whole parade. I got up and dusted it off and continued on. So when it came to the turn of getting the diploma, the President looked at me and said, "Haven't I met you before?" I said, "Yes, Mr. President. I had the honor of meeting with you with our Congressman Carson[?] in 1907." I said, "At that time, Mr. President, my aunt was held in Marseille, a very deformed person, and Carson made it possible to allow my aunt to enter this country and also was the one who brought me to your office and introduced me to you." He said, "That's what I thought. By the way, if I remember correctly, you asked me for something. What was it?" I said, "Some of the Armenian patriots who were American citizens in the Turkish jails, I asked you if it was possible to help them." He said, "They were

Setrakian: not citizens, were they?" I said, "No, Mr. President; we said they were." He said, "What were you doing?" I said, "Well, I was a member of the Armenian revolutionary movement." He said, "Now you're a graduate and ready to practice law." He said, "I'm so happy to give you the diploma."

In the meantime about two or three minutes have passed by and the whole parade is standing there. So I got my diploma and thanked the President and thanked Mrs. Hearst and went to where my mother was sitting. She was crying like hell. I said, "Ma, what are you crying about?" She said, "Well, why did they hold you up? They didn't want to give you the diploma?" [Laughter] "No," I said, "that wasn't it."

The Law and the Land, 1915-1922

Setrakian: So I became a lawyer and wanted to practice law in Fresno. I had my first case, and, by the way, the only case. The son of a friend of ours, or he claimed to be a friend of my father, a fellow named Peters§ was being tried for manslaughter. The facts were that he was going down in his car and he hit this poor woman, Mrs. Breckenridge, who fell in the sewer, and when they picked her up and pulled her out she was dead. Of course the father insisted that I should be the lawyer of Peters. I didn't know the ins and outs, so I hired three good lawyers, Williams and Bonestell** and someone else, and they sat down and they defended Peters quite well--charts and drawings--an unintentional accident, and so forth.

I said, "When it comes to speak to the jury, I will do the speaking." They said, "Well, if you want to send your client to San Quentin, you go ahead and speak." I said, "Yes, I will speak." So I got before the jury and I told them that this was my first case. I didn't know anything about it much except what I learned from the district attorney, my good friend Mr. McCormick***, and my lawyers. "But I'll talk to you about life. I'll talk to you about Mrs. Breckenridge. My heart goes to her because nobody knows what the loss of life is anywhere near what an Armenian does. As you gentlemen know, I am of the Armenian race. We know what it means. My father was killed, and at this moment that I am speaking, this fellow's mother is sick in bed because her entire family is uprooted, and God knows where they are, what despairing, whether they're living or whether they're dead. And by this time I began

*The father was possibly Arshag B. Peters

**Probably Edward A. Williams, Jr. and Chesley K. Bonestell

***M.F. McCormick

Setrakian: to cry, and eventually the members of the jury started to cry. But there was one fellow, he wouldn't cry, and I said to myself, "I'll make you cry."

So I stood before him, and he had a big mustache. I cried and pretty soon he let out a big voice and he cried, and the case ended. Then the jury went out.

I was sitting down there and the bailiff came in and said, "Give me a cigar right away!" I said, "A cigar, I'll give it to you, but why are you so apparently enthused about the whole thing? Did they have to convict him right away, couldn't they take a little time?" He said, "Convict what? They decided in the hallway when they were going down, they said, 'Not guilty!'" So they came back and Peters was exonerated, and the judge called me in his chambers, and he said, "Listen," (Judge Austin*; he was a very kind man, a very fine man) "I let you continue your speech because I think it hypnotized me too! But don't do it again, because when we come into a court for trial, we are not coming in to hear about Armenian massacres. So don't do it again, will you? But I want to tell you that you did a good job." [Laughter] So that was my first and last case.

Teiser: You were living in Fresno then, were you?

Setrakian: I was living in Fresno when I started, then I came back to San Francisco in 1914. See, when the World's Fair started--1914**was the World's Fair--I had all the concessions of dried fruit and fresh fruit at the World's Fair.

Teiser: You did?

Setrakian: Yes, and that's where I made quite a bit of money--about \$25,000.

Teiser: For heaven's sake! That was after you'd got your law degree, but you were still in the produce business.

Setrakian: Yes.

Teiser: I think you mentioned to me earlier that A.P. Giannini had given you your first job in the produce business. Is that right?

*H.Z. Austin

**The Panama Pacific International Exposition opened in 1915.

Setrakian: No, that was before--very much before--yes, yes. He was a very good friend of mine. I'm coming to A.P. Giannini afterwards.

Teiser: Fine. So you happened to be in Fresno conducting this case just for the moment, is that right?

Setrakian: No, the folks were living there. My mother and my sister were living there, and Fresno was really my home.

Teiser: I see.

Setrakian: It was 303 on J Street. When we came down to the Fair, of course, I lived here, and still 1915, '16, '17 I was there, and '18 I was there and in '18 I got married. We were back and forth, you know.

Teiser: I see. Is your wife*also of Armenian heritage?

Setrakian: Oh, yes.

Teiser: Did you meet her here in California, though?

Setrakian: She was my next door neighbor.

Teiser: She was? In San Francisco or Fresno.

Setrakian: In Fresno.

Teiser: I see. So you were married in 1918. By that time what were you doing?

Setrakian: Well, when I married her, we were quite heavy in the [fruit] shipping business and land business and everything else, you know.

Teiser: When did you make your first investment in land?

Setrakian: 1916.

Teiser: How did you happen to do that?

Setrakian: My brother [Abkar] was always known as one of the best farmers in the country, you know, and there was a fellow named Prescott, and he had an acreage of vineyards and farms to sell and my brother thought it was a very good vineyard and we bought it--there were four of us who bought the property. This fellow Peters was one of them. My brother-in-law--

*Born Roxanna Yezdan

Teiser: Who was your brother-in-law?

Setrakian: The one who married my sister, Hagopian*-myself and my brother. Four of us. So Prescott said, "Your property starts from here and goes from there." It was supposed to be 120 acres. We bought it and it was a very attractive price. I think the whole thing was about \$48,000, \$12,000 down. That's where I made my first loan from A.P. Giannini, \$6,000 to put our share. This fellow Peters, who was one of the partners, he was very skeptical, not trustworthy, and a man who thought that everybody was rather bad.

I had high regard for Prescott because he was a very fine man, a very high class gentleman. So I went to him and told him that there was a little bit of dissatisfaction about this property and they didn't know whether they got enough acreage or not. "I will have someone go and survey it and give it to you, exactly 148 acres, that's our understanding." We lost 20 acres in good plum orchard. He had given us 160 acres. That is the fruit of not trusting people.

Teiser: Where was it located, this acreage?

Setrakian: This was in Centerville, they call it, about 12 miles east of Fresno. From there on we started to buy more properties. One purchase was rather interesting, and I think I should tell you about it because there's some humor in it.

When I came to Fresno in 1905, finally I got a job at what was called at that time the Godchaux Department Store, and I was getting 50 cents a day. I'm just wondering if it was 50 cents a day or 50 cents an hour; it couldn't have been 50 cents an hour, that would be too much for that time. I think it was \$5 a week. So I went to the guy who had given me the job downstairs, and it was a back-breaking job. My job was to open all the cases that had bicycles and toys, and separate them, or put them aside and clean them up, and gather the containers and put them away, break them up and wrap them up. The time was eight o'clock in the morning to six o'clock at night. So I told the gentleman that I thought he should give me a little more money. He said, "I will, you're fired. Get out." So he threw me out and I surely was depressed when I got home.

Then time passed, and a fellow came in and wanted to know if I was interested in a good piece of what they called the Wilson vineyard. For 190 acres, the price \$96,000. I said, "What have you got on that land?" He said, "Forty acres of Emperors, 40 acres

*Levon Hagopian

Setrakian: of Malagas, and 40 acres of peaches." The varieties were good, and I said, "Pretty good vineyards? And orchards?" He said, "The best. And by the way there's a house that Mr. Wilson paid \$42,000 to build because he was living there." So I looked at him and I said, "By the way, have I seen you before?" He said, "I don't think so." I said, "I don't know, I think I've seen you before. Did you ever work for Godchaux?" He said, "Yes, I was the hiring manager," or whatever it was. I said, "Were you the hiring manager in 1905 around Thanksgiving and Christmas?" He said, "Oh, yes." I said, "I'll buy the vineyard." I said, "You fired me, and if you hadn't done it maybe I'd be right there now in the basement." [Laughter] So we bought the vineyard and it happened to be a very fine purchase and we made a lot of money out of it. Then we bought one property after another, and by 1922 we had in round figures 2200 acres. And in 1922 when the bottom fell out we had a lot of land, a lot of mortgages, and all our cash melted away. It was clear we had to start all over again and see what would happen.

Teiser: The bottom fell out of the grape market or--

Setrakian: Oh, everything.

Teiser: All agriculture?

Setrakian: All agriculture. Land that used to sell for \$2500 an acre in 1921--in 1922 you couldn't give it away for \$200. It just completely wiped us out.

Teiser: My word!

Setrakian: And that's where we started all over again.

[End of tape]

RAISIN ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE ANNOUNCEMENT OF RETIREMENT
OF A. SETRAKIAN, AND SPEECH BY A. SETRAKIAN, JULY 1, 1971

The speech is a prepared text; he is said to have
departed somewhat from it when he addressed the
committee.

RAISIN ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE

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POST OFFICE BOX 2229

FRESNO, CALIFORNIA 93720

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RAICOM, FRESNO
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ADMINISTERING THE FEDERAL MARKETING
AGREEMENT AND ORDER REGULATING THE
HANDLING OF CALIFORNIA RAISINS

PRESS RELEASE

(For Immediate Release)

At a meeting of the Federal Raisin Advisory Board held on July 1, 1971, Mr. A. (Sox) Setrakian announced his retirement from the Board.

Mr. Setrakian was one of the chief proponents of the Federal Marketing Order and has served as the Chairman of the Board since the Order was established in 1949. He has long been recognized as a leader in the California grape industry and a champion of the cause of the grape grower.

Mr. Setrakian has been active in the International Dried Fruits field, having served as Chairman of the International Sultana (Raisin) Agreement Conferences for seven years. He is recognized by raisin producers, raisin packers, grape producers, vintners, U. S. government leaders, financial representatives, foreign government representatives and people from many other walks of life for his efforts to improve the welfare of his fellow grape grower.

Following is the statement read by Mr. Setrakian in announcing his retirement:

"My friends, for several months I had been seriously considering to retire from the Federal Raisin Advisory Board as soon as my term expired. However, early in 1971 disturbing reports indicated that the life of International Sultana Raisin Agreement was in jeopardy. Moreover, these reports indicated that there was a slight chance of saving the Agreement provided an American Delegation attended the June 7, 1971 London Conference. I gave up the idea of retiring and was elected as a member of the Federal Raisin Advisory Board.

"You recall that when we met last time I said, 'It is anyone's guess whether we will witness the establishment of a new Agreement or the burial of an instrumentality which had improved the return of sultana and raisin producers all over the world.' Well we know what happened to the Agreement in the June London Conference.

"There are many members serving on the Federal Raisin Advisory Board who can discharge the duties and responsibilities of Chairman as well as I can and better. Therefore, my friends, I have decided to retire from the Board as of today.

"I was ushered into grower service by the most distinguished leader and loyal servant of California's raisin industry, Mr. Wylie M. Giffen, in 1923. I extend my profound gratitude to California grape growers for having given me the opportunity to serve them for almost 50 years. I thank my constituents who for 22 consecutive years elected me to serve on the Federal Raisin Advisory Board. I extend my heartfelt thanks to the United States Department of Agriculture in Washington and Fresno, and the California Department of Agriculture who, at all times, have helped us and guided us to achieve the objectives designed to protect the economic welfare of the California raisin industry. The list is long -- very long. I shall not mention any name for fear that I may inadvertently omit some names.

"I extend my sincere thanks to our manager, Mr. Clyde E. Nef, his assistant, Harold Schneider, and to the hard-working and experienced staff who have made it possible for RAC to operate smoothly and efficiently.

"I extend my thanks to the President, Board of Directors and Management of the Raisin Bargaining Association, Sun-Maid Raisin Growers of California, California Raisin Advisory Board and Packers' Association, who have continuously supported FRAB and RAC.

"I extend my deep appreciation and profound gratitude to John Gordon and his colleagues of Australia, Hasan Guven and his colleagues of Turkey, Theodore Pyriias and his colleagues of Greece, and Abraham Van Zyl and his colleagues of South Africa for the faith and trust they placed in me in choosing me to preside over all the Advisory and Annual Conferences of International Sultana (Raisin) Agreement since 1965. I extend my sincere thanks to that lion-hearted Australian, Sir Eugene Gorman, who founded the International Sultana (Raisin) Agreement and presided over the Annual Conferences held in Athens in 1963 and in Munich in 1964. I extend my thanks to every segment of the grape industry.

"Table grape growers, packers and shippers have used valiant efforts to establish stability and create good demand for table grapes. Their sensible approach for the disposition of table grapes has proven enormously helpful and productive under the trying times and circumstances in the past five years.

"I extend my profound gratitude to the wine industry. The dramatic and impressive increase of California wine shipments has progressed at a remarkable rate -- from 145 million gallons in 1966 to over 196 million gallons in the 12 months of 1970. Wine is becoming a part of American life. The dramatic increase has taken place because of vintners, blessed with boundless imagination,

who approached the selling of California wines courageously and aggressively in the United States and the wine drinking world at large. Their bold, daring and sensible approach for sales of California wines and the expenditure of many, many millions of dollars for the promotional efforts has transformed the shipments of such huge gallonage from a dream to a reality.

"What would have happened to the Raisin Industry if the wine sales had not increased in such an impressive way is not hard to imagine. We all owe to these vintners for this exciting increase a debt of real gratitude.

"In 1940 at a meeting of the grape growers held in Lodi, I said 'The day is not far away when the consumption of our wines may reach 100,000,000 gallons.' They said I was a false prophet and did not know what I was talking about. In 1971 California wine shipments will exceed 200,000,000 gallons What a change of times.

"My friends, generally speaking, I do not experience any difficulty in expressing my views. Now I find it difficult to find words to properly express and extend to you (in fact to all those who have served on the Federal Raisin Advisory Board since its creation in 1949) my sincere thanks, appreciation and gratitude adequately.

"Impartial study of the meetings of FRAB and RAC will prove that the spirit of tolerance has at all times been manifested most generously, members and alternates truly deserve the thanks of every grower and packer in our valley.

"My friends, you who serve on the Board, who take time out of your crowded responsibilities so that you can help someone who needs your help, enjoy a thrill which no amount of money can buy. I pity anyone who has not experienced the thrill of helping someone who needed his help.

"My parting appeal to you is: keep up the good work.

"Now for a word or two about myself The Preacher, Son of David, King of Jerusalem had this to say: (Ecclesiastes Chapter III, Verses I and IV) 'There is a time to weep. There is a time to laugh.' There is no need to weep. I have served on the FRAB and RAC some 22 years. Gigantic strides have been made to bring about orderly distribution, stability and reasonably fair returns to the raisin producer. 'There is a time to laugh' I laugh because the raisin industry is in sound, healthy condition. I laugh with a heart full of joy when I witness how growers, packers and all related interests labor in the vineyard of harmony and friendly understanding.

"I have enjoyed working with the members of FRAB and RAC for 22 years. They have been glorious years. I part wishing all of you and your dear ones good health, good fortune and good luck.

"God bless you all goodbye."

RAISIN ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE

C. E. Nef, Manager

STATEMENT OF A. SETRAKIAN, PRESIDENT OF CALIFORNIA GRAPE
GROWERS COUNCIL, FRESNO, CALIFORNIA, BEFORE WAYS AND MEANS
COMMITTEE, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, WASHINGTON, D. C.,
MARCH 12, 1951, REGARDING THE PROPOSED EXCISE TAX OF 1951

This is illustrative of the kind of work he did
in behalf of the grape and raisin growers, and it
also gives something of the history of the industry.

We are very appreciative and grateful that we have been given the privilege of appearing before the Ways and Means Committee to present our case for your consideration.

May I say a word or two about myself? I spent the early part of my life in Armenia, where I suffered great fear and want and I say, with all the sincerity I possess, that no price is too dear to pay to preserve our way of life - the best in the world.

We know that there is immediate need for increased government revenues. The grape growers of California want to do their part. All we ask is that wine taxes be not increased to such a level that will result in disaster to the grape grower.

The business of producing, assembling, packing, processing, and selling grapes and grape products, represents one of the most important agricultural enterprises in California. The livelihood of some 40,000 grape growers, their families, and tens of thousands of workers employed in packing houses and processing plants solely depends upon grapes and grape products selling at fair prices.

California produces annually some 2,800,000 tons of grapes. Grapes are marketed through three outlets, i.e., grapes sold for table use, grapes converted into raisins, and grapes crushed for table and sweet wine. The economic interests of these three outlets - through which the annual grape crop is marketed - are interdependent and inseparable.

It is our humble, considered judgment that if the proposed excise taxes become effective, the consumption of wine will drop sharply. The utilization of the grape crop will be drastically dislocated and the income of grape growers will be disastrously low.

During World War II, our government requested that grape growers produce the maximum tonnage of raisins. At heavy financial sacrifice to themselves, growers responded to this request. Ample production of raisins was made for the domestic market and for the use of our Allies. This shorted the wine market and disrupted the normal distribution of grapes between the customary outlets.

After the war, grape growers were faced with a war-created surplus of raisins and a broken raisin market. As a result the wine market was flooded with grapes in 1946 and grape growers' income fell 60% in 1947.

The growers of raisin variety grapes were again faced with the same surpluses which bankrupted thousands of grape growers during the 1920's and 1930's.

It was only through six government control programs and large expenditures by the U. S. Department of Agriculture, in diverting huge tonnages of raisins into non-competitive domestic and foreign relief channels, that a repetition of the bankruptcy of grape growers was avoided.

It was not until the 1950 season that a balanced use of the grape crop was again reached in the post war period without the assistance of large expenditures by the Federal Government.

Now, the proposed excise tax increase threatens the recovery which has so painfully been achieved. The high tax proposed would sharply curtail the sale of wine. Producers of raisin grapes who have normally sold their crops to the wineries would be forced to seek other outlets. Both the fresh market and the raisin market would be flooded. Prices to growers would fall far below the cost of production.

As I have said before, the growers are willing to bear their fair share of the necessary increase in taxes but let us be sure that we do not reduce the price of grapes and the consumption of wine to the point where tax revenues will be actually reduced.

Let us not take the grape growers off the income tax rolls and again place them in the position where they will be asking heavy expenditures by the U. S. Department of Agriculture to remove surplus grapes.

With experience as a grower extending over a third of a century, I believe, I am qualified to say that prices and incomes in all parts of the grape and wine industry are inseparable and closely interlocked.

The proposed taxes will strangle the winery outlet and cut tax revenues at the same time. Growers of all grapes, as well as vintners, will lose income and their capacity to contribute to the economy of the nation.

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A. SETRAKIAN SPEECH OF JANUARY 20, 1972

On January 20, 1972, following Mr. Setrakian's retirement, a dinner in his honor was given in Fresno. It was attended by more than 450 people, ranging from grape and wine industry leaders to small growers. Following the testimonials, Mr. Setrakian responded with a speech in which he reminisced about aspects of his almost half a century of activity in behalf of California grape-growers. That speech was tape-recorded and transcribed. The text as given here is slightly edited for the sake of clarity.

[Reproduction of testimonial dinner program follows]

A. "SOX" SETRAKIAN
TESTIMONIAL
DINNER

.....for a lifetime of services dedicated
to the Raisin and Grape Industry.....



Del Webb's Towne House
Champagne Ballroom
Fresno, California

Dinner 8:00 p.m.

January 20, 1972

* * * M E N U * * *

Chiffonade Salad in Lettuce Leaf
Choice of Dressings

Assorted
Iced Relishes

Assorted
Dinner Rolls

Prime Rib of Beef
au jus lie'

Baked Potato
Sour Cream and Chives

French Cut
Green Beans Almondine

Brandy Raisin Jubilee

California Wines

Coffee, Tea or Milk

PROGRAM

WELCOME

D. R. Hoak, Master of Ceremonies

INVOCATION

Clyde E. Nef, Manager
Raisin Administrative Committee

ERNEST BEDROSIAN

Chairman, Federal Raisin Advisory Board

ALLEN MATHER

Chairman, Raisin Administrative Committee
President, Sun-Maid Raisin Growers of California

HENRY C. KLEIN, JR.

President, Raisin Bargaining Association

ERNEST GALLO

Chairman, E. & J. Gallo Winery

M. SUGIMURA

Japan Dried Fruits Importers Association, Tokyo

NED LANDRAM

Retired Manager, Dried Fruits Department
Del Monte Corporation

FLOYD HEDLUND

Director, Fruit & Vegetable Division, C&MS, USDA

ERNEST MOBLEY

California Assemblyman, 33rd District

Speech by A. "Sox" Setrakian at Testimonial Dinner

[1 Tape, 2 sides]

[Begin, side 1]

Setrakian: These nice things said about me reminded me of a sketch that I saw some years ago on television, and it's like this. It was a testimonial dinner for one of the executives. One speaker after the other, they said how nice a guy he was, so the guy sitting next to him, he says, "Say, Tom, are you that good?"

And he said, "My friend, this is one time I'm not going to argue with them at all." [Laughter]

I will say that anybody who thinks retirement is good, it's a bad sign. Retirement is for the birds! [Laughter] I do have a few things to say, and I hope I don't tire you. And if I do, I am justified in doing so if I am as good as they said. [Interrupted by laughter, applause]

First, I want to tell you that I'm a lucky guy. Lucky, I have a fine son, fine daughter, a daughter-in-law that I love as much as my own daughter, seven wonderful kids, grandchildren, a wonderful son-in-law, and best of all, my wife*. Everything that I am I owe to her [applause]. She has said so many things about my socks, about my trousers [laughter], and "I don't know, where did you get those things."

"Oh, I don't know." I dress like a bed. [Laughter]

*A. Setrakian's son and daughter are Robert Setrakian and Arline Setrakian (Mrs. John) O'Neill.

Setrakian: Now, there have been questions that are asked of me, many questions, and I'm going to answer some of them because I really think you people have gone to such trouble, bother and everything else, and were kind to come here, I owe you that much.

First, they have said, "Sox, how did you get involved in this, serving the growers?" Well, to tell you the truth, it wasn't my choice. 1922 was a very bad year, and my brother and I in six short years had gathered together about 2200 acres of land, and we thought we owned it. But after 1922 was over, we began to think the other way. Property, selling for 2000 was being sold for 200--nobody wanted it.

So anyway, I went here and there to get some business to continue our shop, you know. And I was in Cincinnati. I'll never forget that day. And as I entered the hotel, somebody was massacring my name, and I got a hold of the bellboy, I said, "Who do you want?"

He says, "I don't know," he says, "It's a screwy name, I don't know." [Laughter]

I said, "That's me."

He said, "Come on, they want to talk to you."

I said, "Uh-oh." I went and Bill Sumner [of the bank] was on the phone. But before I got saying--I said, "Now, Bill, I'm doing well. I'm getting money to finance it and this and that."

He said, "Who the hell is talking about your money? I want you to come home."

I said, "Why, are you going to foreclose it or something?"

He said, "No, hell no. Come home. I'll take care of your needs all together."

I said, "Well, what do you want me home for?"

He says, "We got a job for you and I want you home."

Well, I said, "You going to take care of my requirements?"

"Yes."

Setrakian: I said, "I'm on the train tonight."

So I got a berth and came home. I went to the bank. Mr. Giffen* was there, some others were there, and I said, "Well, what do you want?"

"Well," they said, "We got a program, and we're agreed on you to take hold of it and see that you put it over."

So I said, "Why me?"

"Well," they said, "Your people are the ones that are staying out of it. They won't sign."

"What do you mean by 'my people'?"

He said, "Well, we have to draw up this with Armenians."
[Laughter]

"Well," I said, "I'll do what I can."

So they said, "That's not all."

"Well, what else is there?"

They said, "Get out here tomorrow. We're going to have a mass meeting in the park, and we want you to speak."

I'll never forget that night. That was one of the beautiful Fresno nights--a nice little breeze, and the park was just packed. I was sitting there, and a couple of fellows passed by with a big rope in their hands, and one said to the other, "You know," he said, "It's a hell of a good night to hang an Armenian." [Prolonged laughter]

I didn't want to fight, you know, so I said, "Mr. Giffen," I said, "You know, they're thinking of hanging an Armenian?" And I'm an attorney, and I said, "I would really rather leave if that sort of a thing [is going on] tonight."

"Oh," he said, "don't get frightened. They won't do it to you."

*Wylie M. Giffen, president and a founder of the California Associated Raisin Company, later Sunmaid Raisin Growers, a cooperative.

Setrakian: I said, "Yes, but it's not your neck. It's going to be mine."

Anyway, he said, "Come on with me to the platform."

I said, "Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no, no." I said, "I'll sit here." So I sat there and they went down, and there were quite a few preachers and singers and this and that. And everybody got a hell of an applause, you know. Well, then they put me on after the introduction. They pushed me up, and I fell down from that stand, you know. Finally, I got up, and I looked at them, and they looked at me, and I looked at 'em, and not a word said. Complete silence. [Laughter] Well, I'll have to confess, that in things like that, you know, I have a pretty good sense and skill to meet the emergency. And there was a big American flag. I went out, wrapped the flag around me, I said, "Look, fellas, you don't want to cheer me--cheer the American flag." [Laughter] And the house came down. The ice was melted. And I spoke. And I know I finished that anyone that doesn't sign this contract, there is a place reserved for him in a bottomless hell.

Well, the following morning, Walker, who was the editor of Republican publishing at that time*, came up and said, "We heard a very fresh, rather inspiring voice, but we didn't like his profanity. He used you-know-what--H--the other words."

Well, H and 1-1, or 1, you know, we have made a hell of a wonderful progress since then, I'll tell you right now! [Laughter]

I want, first, to thank you, Mr. Master of Ceremonies, and then I want to thank [Clyde E.] Nef and Ernest Bedrosian, Allen Mather and Henry Klein and Ernest Gallo, [M.] Sugimura, [Ned] Landrum and Floyd Hedlund for the nice things that they said, and I want to thank the honorable mayor for this wonderful thing [plaque] that I'm going to put in my office.

Now, 1923, we finished it. I am proud to say that the Armenians voted [for] the agreement to the tune of ninety-eight per cent. We may hesitate, but when we go at it, we shoot to kill. And I was the cause. 1923 was a year of humor and tragedy and everything that you can say. And I was the head of the volunteer army. So, when I got on the phone, I said, "Get the contract." So then, I'm afraid it probably gave them a little bit of trouble.

So, following day, I also was serving on grand jury. I established a procedure that if any grower had any complaint, to come into grand jury and make it. So one of the growers came in,

*Benjamin R. Walker was an editor of the Fresno Republican

Setrakian: and he made a very fine presentation of his case, clear cut in two sides, and after he finished, he turned to the foreman and bailiff and he said, "Say, well, what's this man doing here?"

He [the foreman] said, "Oh, he's one of our grand jurors."

He said, "Mister, at night, he ran to make me sign the agreement. Daytime, he says he's here to see justice done. There is no justice." [Laughter]

Economic difficulties are terrible, but there is one that that we must say in this valley of ours which, when we met, the Pope called it "the breadbasket of the world. In this valley, we have courage. In this valley, we stick to it, and I know when I say this, and I say it sincerely, that which has made the people of the Fresno county and Madera county and all this raisin producing country outstanding is because they love each other, and they want to work with each other. There is no one that can testify as truly about that as your humble servant, speaking to you now.

And then there were a lot of programs, one after another. Everybody, on Saturday morning, I bet, in the valley had another program. And each program did pretty good, I will say that. Then came 1943. In 1943, on January 6, the government issued an order that maximum production of raisins was necessary for ourselves and for our allies*. And, of course, I was chosen as the leader. You know, whenever there is a committee, although I don't understand any of these rules and regulations, I'm always the chairman, and I've met more growers than anybody else in the world, but I still am the chairman.

So we organized to start raisins, and we started laying the ground floor for making raisins. And when that announcement came, hell broke loose. Those who had not made any money, those who were buried in a mire of adversity, those who helped people create in 1933 the California Grape Growers and Shippers Association, in 1943, they came to me and they said, "You either quit asking maximum production of raisins or we're going to fire you."

I said, "I've got news for you. I'm calling an emergency meeting." I called the emergency meeting, and I read the words of President Roosevelt, where he said, on April 2, 1943, "We are only beginning to feel the hard effect of total war. Men who have been with their families must give up their good and paying jobs and become soldiers at six hundred dollars a year. We who remain in the front in civil life must not quarrel."

*In World War II

Setrakian: I told the members of the shipping association that that's what we should do, and one fellow said, "We don't need any speeches."

I said, "I'll quit before you fire me," and I walked out. In 1943, the government wanted us to make 400,000 tons of raisins. We failed our government. We made 401,000. [Laughter] And I want to tell you, the greatest satisfaction that any human being had, it was the satisfaction that I had that we had played a little part in that terrible war and helped our allies and our boys in our domestic requirements.

They have often asked me, when has been my lowest moment of disappointment. I sat in the lowest ebb for involvement in discussion in 1943, when four thousand growers, well, they all signed a petition against me. I thought that perhaps the time had come for me to quit, get out. So I wrote a letter to my friend Jesse Tapp, who had always been my closest friend until the end of [his] days. And he was appointed by President Roosevelt as associate administrator for War Food Administration. I told him I wanted to resign and get out, and here is what he wrote to me, June 21, 1943:

"...And we all should be big enough to realize that in any event, the best that we can do in our part of the war effort here at home can not compare favorably, in most cases, with the effort we are expecting and receiving from those of our boys and men who are fighting in the far corners of the world."

I wrote him a letter and I said, "Forget about my letter. I will continue to work and do the best I can."

Then, they have said, what is the strongest language that I have used? Floyd [Hedlund] was right. I have yelled and I have hollered and everything else, but there has never been a single person working for USDA with whom I have come in contact that I haven't met and liked well. And Floyd is one of them, and I want to thank Floyd that he has taken the time to come from Washington and say those things which he did.

The toughest statement that I ever made was before the OPA.* You see, the [raisin] growers, for 1943, they only had received \$155 a ton. And every other [grape grower's] grapes got shipped [and] they made fortune after fortune. The raisin growers were the only ones that went out and worked and worked and produced. And I have said before, and I will say again, they opened the most brilliant chapter of patriotism in the history of American agriculture.

*Office of Price Administration

Setrakian: So I was before OPA. They wanted to keep the same price. I said, "Gentlemen, the raisin growers in '43 did their job magnificently. They opened a brilliant chapter of sacrifice in the history of American agriculture." I said, "I'm telling you, beware. Don't drive your poison dagger of low prices in the hearts of raisin growers."

The chairman said, "Meeting adjourned." He says, "I want to talk to you in my office." So I went in. His name was Bateman [?]. He said, "What made you talk that tough?"

I said, "You. You know what we went through, and now you're trying to keep the price [down]."

He said, "Can you be my friend?" And we have been friends ever since.

Now, there is another point that I want to take your time a little bit. They have talked about this United Kingdom sales. It is true, I was a negotiator in '51, '52, and '53. We'll take '51 first.

We had been working on the side for quite a while, and Jack Thompson, who was in London, kept me furnished with the information, what was going on, and then for Thanksgiving, I got a cable to be in London, the day after Thanksgiving. Well, in our home, like many other homes, Thanksgiving is a very important holiday. I flew to Washington on Thanksgiving day, had dinner in Sy[?] Smith's home--he was the director, having the same job which Hedlund has now, with Irwin Graham. And we discussed this thing. The following day I got in London.

Believe it or not, Sunday night, when I was a dinner guest of Steadman's, we talked several hours, and just before parting he said, "Sox, I want you to be in my office at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. I think we're going to close that deal of yours." Well, I was very happy, of course. At ten o'clock sharp I was there. And he said, "What's your price?"

I said, "I've got a cable. At \$155 a ton, F.A.S."

He said, "We'll give you a hundred and fifty."

I said, "Split the difference. A hundred fifty-two and a half."

Setrakian: He said, "That may go, but what's going to happen to you?"

I said, "I think they'll fire me." And I said, "If they do, I'll get one zero less. So don't worry about me."

We closed that deal in five minutes. The following day on 27th, they had a luncheon, at which time Banyon, Steadman, Schuyler, they said, "California raisin growers and packers are our friends, and we appreciate the way they handled this deal."

Then came 1952. (Now, in '52, Steadman was not there any more. Floyd [?] was there.) You know how short I am. He was really shorter than I am. [Laughter] And that always brings a great deal of comfort to a short, fat fellow, that somebody else is shorter than him. So he said, "Come and sit down, Mr. Setrakian."

I said, "Everybody call me 'Sox.' Why don't you?"

"Well," he said, "we're not that acquainted that much yet."

"Well," I said, "that's good." [Laughter]

He said, "My government has given me a rubber [stamp]. I'm going to stretch it as far as I can to buy some raisins, and what is your deal?"

So I told him what the deal was. I said, "You buy 50,000 tons, it's \$130. If you buy 35,000 tons, it's \$140. If you buy 60,000 tons, it's \$127."

He said, "What proof have I that you can do all these things?"

"Well," I said, "no proof." I said, "My word."

"Well," he said, "do you think I could trust a man's word that is throwing \$500,000 just like a football?"

I said, "You can mine, but," I said, "never mind. Let's close this conference," and I said, "Tomorrow morning I'll come in with a cable. Then I think you'll believe me."

Setrakian: So I went out, and I got [Irving] Graham on the phone at his home in Arlington. I explained the situation, and this is the cable that I got--21, 22 years ago. It said, "RAC only agency making sale. 50,000 tons, \$130. 60,000 tons, \$127, \$127.50. And 35,000 tons, \$140."

"Well," he said, "apparently, that's the government's last price."

I said, "You bet your life it's the government's last price. And if I don't follow it," I said, "I get fired."

"Well," he said, "now, we're going to let you know in couple of days."

So I sent a wire to Irving Graham, and I said, "[confirming] memorandum for sale 50,000 tons. Will be in Germany Wednesday."

Wednesday I was in Germany trying to sell some more raisins, and I was in my friend's office. I'm not going to tell the name of the city, nor the fellow's name or title. He came in and laughed.

I said, "What's the matter?"

He said, "I've got a cable. I'll read it to you."

The cable was from our country [?], in German. And the translation was that the Armenian peddler [laughter] has sold 50,000 tons; we are caught short; see if you can do anything with him.

So we filled out that 50,000 tons. But had it not been for the government's faith, I could have never put that deal over. I want to say this, and I say it sincerely. Had it not been for the trust and confidence that I enjoyed from USDA, from our congressmen and since then, the charming wife here today, I would have never accomplished the things that [I have]. The real credit for the sales of the raisins in U.K., involving some 160,000 tons, goes first to our government, not to Setrakian. I was merely a negotiator.

But I was able to do one thing, to establish bonds of friendship, with trade right along. In '55 we went out there, and lifted the embargo. In '56 we went out there, when the English economy was sunk in its worst condition and they even began the subsidies on bread. They haven't got enough money [for us] to sell raisins to them.

Setrakian: I want to say to everyone, to everyone here and everywhere else, those of you who have been born here, you are fortunate. And those of us who have become citizens after we have arrived here, especially speaking for myself, where I have traveled most of the world, here and there. I can say this--that the United States of America is the best country in the world, and God bless the United States. [Applause]

Next, came the Fall of '53. I got there the first week in September, and I found one difficulty after another. I was trying to do everything I could. It had its moments of a little humor and excitement, too. One night I was sound asleep at three o'clock in the morning. My telephone rang, [I] tried to get up and dumped the water pitcher on the nightstand, lamp and everything else. It was a hell of a mess. [Laughter] I got on the telephone, I said, "Who is this?"

He said, "This is Leroy Giannini."

I said, "Leroy, why do you call me at three o'clock in the morning?"

He said, "In your time there it's three?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "That isn't the same time in California." [Laughter]

And the only thing Leroy wanted me to do was to come back home.

We worked very hard on that, '53. I'm not going to go into details. It would take a long time. Finally, I was able to get an appointment with Sir Henry Hancock. He was the minister of food. I went in and he met me at the door. And all night I had prepared a speech, and I couldn't sleep, and I was just a mess. So he said, "Everybody calls you 'Sox.' May I call you 'Sox'?"

I said, "Sir Henry, you want to call me 'Sox'?" I had a big, big, long speech ready. "Ptah!" I said, "Now you and I talk man-to-man." And there were two undersecretaries. And we talked. And I told him our needs were the same.

I said, "I know you have rejected, but I'm asking you like a big man to reconsider and permit us to sell you raisins. Remember what we done for you. Remember the words of Lloyd George (who was

Setrakian: [earlier] the minister of food), and he said, "Please, take my best wishes for prosperity and health to the growers and the packers." And I said, "Remember the words of Lafayette, where he said he was our friend, and of Lloyd George." And he said, "We all need all the good California raisin growers and packers."

There was one thing that came to my credit at times. I open a faucet, you know, and start to--tears were rolling down, and I was crying like hell, you know. And the undersecretaries were crying worse. And Hancock was trying to put a valiant effort not to cry, and the atmosphere was charged with emotion and everything else, and he got up and I knew the time had come to put in words--you know, it was pretty well in the bag. [Laughter] So I walked to the door. He put his arm around my shoulder and he said, "Please don't worry. Tomorrow morning you're going to get good news."

The following morning we sold them 23,000 long tons of raisins. [Laughter] And I gave him a party, and Sir Hancock made a beautiful speech, and he said, "Please take my best regards to--" In fact, I will read it to you, the exact words, "to your growers and packers."

Sir Hancock walked to the door and said, "Please don't worry. We are appreciating and grateful what the United States has done for us. For what they have done for us, we are happy, and we are happy that we have purchased these raisins. Mr. Setrakian, extend to your growers and packers our best wishes for good health, prosperity, and come back soon." I sure did. [Laughter]

Now, the years passed, my friends. 1943, '44 and '45, we made a lot of raisins. 1946, the prices went sky-high; it was time to pay, when we sobered up. In '48 they dove again. We had to get together and get a program, otherwise, we couldn't expect any help.

Now, when I sit all day, and see now Wine Institute, Federal Raisin Advisory Board, Federal Raisin Administrative Committee.

[End, side 1]

[Interruption]

[Begin side 2]

Setrakian:

We're happy to see the day where the wine industry, raisin industry, all the industries extend to each other compassion, extend to each other understanding, and more than anything else, extend to each other [trust]. Those of you who attended some of the meetings, remember when I said, "We owe a debt of gratitude to those who have, through expenditures of millions of dollars, they have made the consumption and usage of wine an American [?]."

I remember in 1940 in Lodi, when I spoke to some growers and told them that day will come when we sell 100 million gallons. They said, "He's a false prophet." In 1971, our consumption has, I think, exceeded 200 million. And I must say this, to those who have contributed millions of dollars promoting their sales, we owe them a debt of gratitude. And as I said before, and I believe, we are fortunate that the economy of our raisins, our grapes and everything else is in the hands of those people that think about the growers, and I salute them for that.

I was going through my papers, trying to see what would be more or less interesting to tell you, and I'm sorry to have kept you so late. I came to a letter, written by Mrs. Emma Walters, from India, and she says--this was in '66, when we gave them some raisins for the drought sufferers--"I wish to thank the board for the kind gift of raisins. I am diabetic, and can eat them, as they are clean and shiny. They must be specially clean for diabetic people. I am afraid I am not much of a letter writer, but what I say, I mean. Thank you very much. Yours faithfully."

Now if raisin is good for diabetics, I hope that end result, people will know about that and then say to those of you who have had diabetes to use it. I know in my home, my doctor said that's no good for diabetics [laughter]. That's my experience, and I tried, too.

I was going through my papers. I came across a letter that I had written to Reverend Doctor Draper in '40. He was a very dear friend of mine, the minister of the First Congregational Church, and the letter was that you are working too hard, and slow down a little bit, and so forth, and I answered him and told him the story of the widow and her three children. This is the story.

Setrakian: In 1941, things looked terribly dark. Ernest [Gallo] is right when he was saying that the price of grapes would be \$15, \$16.* At this time, it was rumored that it wouldn't exceed \$10 a ton for a long time. Raisins, nobody wanted. Well, of course, the only place that we could go for help would be our government. And I will say, I have never, never knocked the door of our government and got no reply. They may not give all we want. They are pretty hard at times, but eventually they readily give what we ask for. And it reminds me, when my friend Jesse Tapp was appointed, he called me and he said, "Now, I'm going to Washington. What are you going to ask?"

I said, "Jesse, we're going to ask for the sun, for the moon, for the stars, and we'll be satisfied what you give to us." And ~~an~~, that's what we have done. Now the story of the widow.

In this committee--and George said, and he was right, "Sometimes it's small, sometimes big"--this time we had a big one, 25 growers [who went to Washington]. I really don't remember how we got that much money together, but anyway, we got it. So anyhow, we sat in one large room, 25 of us anyway, and my speech was well-prepared.

However, a day before we left, a lady came to my office, with three children. They were ill-clad, undernourished, and she had the saddest face that you could ever have imagined. And I said, "Lady, what can I do for you?"

She said, "I came down here to tell you that my husband has passed away. We are in very, very bad shape, and we pray to God that your mission meets success." She said, "That's all I came to tell you."

So she and the three children, I walked with them together, and then I went to Washington. Now, in Washington I had a speech that was prepared by experts. J. Walter Thompson** had prepared a speech 32 pages long, with a lot of charts up and down, and this and that, you know, and words that I couldn't even pronounce. And I read all night on the plane, and Bill Childers was with me. We got up in the morning, he said, "Sox, you kind of worried?" I didn't go to bed at all.

*The full text of Ernest Gallo's informative tribute to A. Setrakian was printed in Wines and Vines, March 1977, pp. 20-22.

**The advertising company

Setrakian: I said, "What do you think I should do? This speech is terribly dry."

"Well," he said, "I think so too, but I guess you have to read it."

So anyway, to make the story short, we appeared before Mr. Milo Perkins on July 2. He said, "Who's your spokesman?"

Bill Childers said, "Mr. Setrakian."

"Mr. Sebastian? Tell your story."

[Laughter] I said, "My name is not Sebastian, it's Setrakian."

He said, "I don't like Setrakian."

"What are you going to do about it?"

He said, "I'm going to use Sebastian."

"Well," I said, "I've got one better than that. If you are going to call me 'Sebastian,' why don't you call me 'Sox?' Everybody does."

"Oh," he said, "That's easy. Go ahead, Sox. What you got to say?"

Well, I read a paragraph, but he said, "Just a minute, Sox. Just a minute. How long is it going to take you to read it?"

I said, "Mr. Perkins, at least an hour. Let me tell you the truth. I don't understand what it's all about, with all the charts, and this and that," I said, "Wonderful, fancy paper."

He said, "Throw it aside. Talk to me man-to-man. I understand English, and you can talk pretty good."

So I said, "Thank you. Some people say that my pronunciation is not very good."

He said, "I know, I know. Go ahead."

Setrakian: So then I lost myself. I'm telling you the God's truth. For about ten or fifteen seconds I was just hypnotized, or something. At that time, I saw the widow and the three children, and they said, "Why do you read? Just tell our story."

I said, "Mr. Perkins, I am ready to talk." And I told my experience with the widow and the three children. And I said, "There are thousands of widows. There are thousands of women, women and children that are looking to you for help, and for God's sake, please help us."

He said, "What do you want, Sox?"

I said, "\$70 on Thompson, and \$70 on Muscat." [Laughter] And before that, we had agreed if we got \$60 we were doing good, you know.

He said, "I'll tell you what I'm going to do."

So we went up there. He said, "Gentlemen, you don't have to sit down. I'll tell you what I'm going to do. We have decided to accept your recommendation. \$75 on Thompsons, \$70 on Muscats, and Sultanans."

Bill cheered, so I almost yelled. It was something that we really didn't expect, and we were full of joy. So I went and thanked Perkins, and Perkins said, "Look, Sox, I don't know whether it's real or it's not real, but you thank that widow and those three children." [Laughter]

Now, my friends, I have been very happy for the time and energy I have given for the salvation of our [industry]. I don't know how much could I have done, but I will say this--they have been years of satisfaction, and a philosopher has said the greatest reward a guy can achieve is satisfaction. And I'm satisfied. I'm satisfied that the opportunity was given to me to serve. I am satisfied for the army of friends that I have, not only in California, but all over the world. And I will say this to you--all that I can say is I am happy that I have been able to serve, and I want to tell you all, from the bottom of my heart, thank you, and God bless you all.

BRUNO T. BISCEGLIA: RECOLLECTIONS OF A. SETRAKIAN

Photograph by Catherine Harroun

Bruno T. Bisceglia being interviewed, 6 Aug. 1976



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Industry Leadership

[Date of Interview: 6 August 1976]

[Place: Bisceglia Brothers Winery, near Madera]

[1 tape, 1 1/3 sides]

[Begin side 1]

Teiser: When did you first know Mr. Setrakian?

Bisceglia: 1936, '37.

Teiser: How did you come to know him?

Bisceglia: We were both living at the Hotel Californian in Fresno and we got to be very friendly. He had his suite up at the hotel. There was a group of us who lived at the hotel, three or four of us. We got very close and very friendly. Oh, for years it went on.

Teiser: Did your family buy a winery that Mr. Setrakian and his group owned?

Bisceglia: No. It happened when the California Growers Wineries was established in 1936 they leased the Wahtoke winery from the Rusconi family, in the Reedley area. Then they built their own winery at Cutler. When they gave up their lease we took over the winery that the California Growers had been operating. We leased it because at the time our main headquarters was in San Jose and this was a winery that we needed here in the valley.

Teiser: Was that your first winery in the valley then, the first time that your family had come into the Central Valley?

Bisceglia: No. Years ago we leased what is now the Italian Swiss Colony winery in Clovis. At that time it was known as the Tarpey winery. This goes back to the 1920s. So we've been in here quite a while.

Teiser: When you first knew Mr. Setrakian it was more social than business then?

Bisceglia: No. We were close and we discussed business. We were both in the wine business. He was heavily in the raisin business and the fresh shipping business. As far as doing business with each other, no, we did not. It was more on a social basis, but actually we discussed a lot of wine and grape business.

Teiser: I regret so that I didn't get an opportunity to ask him about a lot of things. At that time, outside of his personal and family interests in wine and grapes and raisins and shipping, what were his industry activities?

Bisceglia: He was one of the founders of the California Wine Advisory Board. He was instrumental in getting it organized. He was one of the people involved very heavily in the Wine Institute.

In 1938, for example, the wine business and the grape business was in very serious condition and he helped set up a brandy prorate for which he was primarily responsible.

Teiser: He was? You'd give him that much credit?

Bisceglia: Yes, he was. And in any grower activity to do with grapes he was probably the outstanding man in the state. This was a remarkable person you're talking about. They broke the mold after they made him. He had boundless energy. He had tremendous intelligence. He had a wonderful sense of humor. And he was probably one of the sharpest people you'd ever want to know. Unquestionably, his contribution to the grape industry, during the time that it needed it, was tremendous. He was really the man that kept this valley going during the time when things were really rough.

In 1940, when the war started, he was very, very instrumental in maintaining the raisin crop to go for food.

Teiser: Keeping it out of wine?

Bisceglia: Keeping it out of the wineries and keeping it for food rather than into the wineries. As a result they made the largest amount of raisins they've ever made in the history of the state. During that time for two or three years during the war period he was constantly working with the government to do the best he could for the growers and at the same time supply raisins as food for the people.

Mr. Setrakian was one of the few people from this valley who could go to Washington and be heard. When he went to Washington, when he had to call there, if something had to be done, Sox carried the ball. He was known. He could walk in and out of that Department of Agriculture. Where most people, it would take them a month just to find the door, he'd be in and out and do what he had to do in a matter of days.

After the war, I think it was in 1948 or 1949 (the wine and the grape industry had gone through a period of tremendous prosperity during the war time, there's no question about it--but then the bottom fell out in 1947) he was the guiding light and actually the man that put through and organized the present Raisin Marketing Order. He was the man who did it and, believe me, he did it almost single-handedly. He was the guy who directed and pushed it through. It was his drive and his stick-to-it-iveness and his ability to get these things done that got them done.

Teiser: He became the first chairman of two of those boards.

Bisceglia: In 1949 he set up the Raisin Administrative Board and the Raisin Administrative Committee. That handled the raisin segment of the grape industry. Then in 1961 he was also the guiding light and really the man who put together and set up a Federal Grape Crush Advisory Board. He set that up and he was the chairman of that.

That in itself was quite a feat because of the opposition. At that time I had the privilege of working with him. I saw him working and how he did things.

Teiser: Harry Baccigaluppi was on that board wasn't he?

Bisceglia: Baccigaluppi was on it, yes.* There was a bunch of people on it. But he did the actual work to put it through--you know, it's easy to say you're on the board, but to get the program approved by the growers and get it approved by the government--that's where the work comes in.

Teiser: What did that board do actually?

*See Harry Baccigaluppi, California Grape Products and Other Wine Enterprises: Part II, a 1971 interview of The Regional Oral History Office.

Bisceglia: That board, the Federal Grape Crush Advisory Board, actually what it did, it stabilized the price of grapes for the winery and growers. It did two things. It permitted the grape growers to set aside a certain percentage of their inventory in surplus in order to bring about stability in the wine business. By doing that, it stabilized the price of grapes to the grower.

Teiser: How did they set this up physically?

Bisceglia: The wineries stored the set-aside wines for the grower. This was in 1961 that this occurred.

Teiser: There was a later attempt at a set-aside wasn't there?

Bisceglia: The order failed in '64. The growers voted it out.

Teiser: This Federal Grape Crush Advisory Board?

Bisceglia: That's correct.

Teiser: I guess there were some people who wanted to keep it on.

Bisceglia: Some people wanted to keep it on, more people wanted it off. I think it lost by a hundred votes or something like that.

Teiser: Some people were quite bitter afterwards.

Bisceglia: Yes. A lot of us were bitter about it. We worked hard to keep it going. And the industry suffered because of its being put out of existence.

There were certain elements in the wine industry that didn't want it to go and they marshalled enough support to kick it out.

Teiser: Why did they want it out?

Bisceglia: It didn't suit their needs apparently, and they wanted it out.

Teiser: Would it in effect hold prices up so that it kept them from buying grapes as low as they could?

Bisceglia: That could be. That was part of it. I think that, and the fact that the cooperative operations couldn't make the return to the growers that they should make--that the commercial people were making.

Teiser: I suppose there's some contrast here to the canning industry which absorbs its own carryovers. Of course canned goods are easy to carry over.

Bisceglia: The canning business is a little different because in the canning industry raw material represents possibly only 25 percent of the cost, whereas in the wine business it will represent maybe 80 percent. So fluctuation in the basic raw material in the wine industry is far more serious--although it's serious in the canning business, don't misunderstand me. We used to be in the canning business and I can tell you that it's not the easiest thing in the world. But as far as the wine business is concerned, a violent fluctuation in the price of your raw material can be a disaster, whereas it's serious enough but not that serious as far as the canning business is concerned.

In the wine business you have two things. You have grapes and you have production. In the canning business you have your canning fruit, you have your cans, you have your sugar, and then you have your production. You have four segments compared with two. So the cost of your product in the grape business is your basic cost by far.

Teiser: I'm always interested in the fact that wine, of course, carries over fine, except it costs a lot to carry.

Bisceglia: That's right.

Controversies and Characteristics

Teiser: Let me go back to Mr. Setrakian. Let me first ask you a question about conflict that I heard, that you probably know more about than anyone. Some people, of course, didn't like him because he fought with them. I guess he was a real fighter. I understand not many people ended by disliking him, but they disliked him during periods when they tangled with him.

Bisceglia: Let me put it this way: they disliked him, but they all respected him.

Teiser: I have heard from some people that they felt he sacrificed the wine industry for the sake of fresh grapes and raisins.

Bisceglia: That's not so at all--not at all. That's pure garbage. I don't think he had any ulterior motive for his own personal gain at all. I think Sox was a dedicated individual that wanted all segments of the industry to do well. I think he was one of the few people that realized that if one segment didn't do well the others, too, were going to suffer. Those people who say that he sacrificed one for the other just don't know what they're talking about because they didn't know the man, they don't know what his motives were. They didn't know what an unselfish person he was and the time that he devoted free of charge to this industry and the work that he did for this industry without any compensation. Anybody that makes that kind of a statement should be ashamed of themselves.

Teiser: I gave you a quite wrong impression. I don't believe that I've ever heard anyone say that he was in it for self-advantage.

Bisceglia: I know, but you must understand that Sox was also in the raisin business and he was also in the fresh fruit business. They're implying that by sacrificing the wine business he improved the condition of those two segments in the industry which automatically would improve his position, which was not the case at all, not at all. I knew the man intimately and I knew him very, very closely. I can tell you that his whole thing was to make everybody try to do a good job for the entire grape industry. He was not partial to any segment of this industry, because he was involved in all three of them. So, it just didn't make sense to sacrifice one to the other. He was equally involved financially in all three segments.

As a matter of fact, he was least involved in the raisin industry personally, and he spent more time for the raisin industry than he did with any of the other two. So how can they say that?

Teiser: We went to the testimonial dinner for him in January 1972, in Fresno after he retired from the Federal Raisin Advisory Board, and we were sitting next to a woman who came from Turlock and had to leave very early to get back home. She said that she came just to be there to pay tribute to him because of what he had done for small growers like herself.

Bisceglia: Well, Sox was tough and hard-minded and he could be as nasty and as mean if he had to be as anybody in this world. But he was the most chicken-hearted individual you ever met in your life. If somebody came up to him that had a problem, there's nothing that he wouldn't do for these people.

Bisceglia: Definitely, one of the things in his life was that he came up the hard way and he wanted the small man to make a good living. He was thankful that he came to this country from Armenia when he did. As a matter of fact, he was thankful that he was alive because he had come through those massacres. He loved this country, he loved the grape industry. He wasn't about to see anybody take advantage of the little man if he could help it. This was the whole thing. I heard him say time and again that, "These people that think that survival of the fittest is going to work in the grape industry--not as long as I live." He said, "Not if I can help it," and he did.

Any program that he went along with was a program where the little man was taken care of in this industry. This was his basic philosophy. He always thought that way and was very honest and sincere about it. No question about it.

Many were the small people he helped. The smallest people would call on him for help, and he'd take the time and if he couldn't do it he'd see that somebody else would do it.

He was that way. As I say, he was a pushover. When somebody had a tough time, even the people that were against him, if they got into trouble, Sox would be the guy that'd go in there and help them if they were really down and out.

I've seen it happen. Not mentioning names, some individual that fought him for years suddenly passed away. Sox helped his widow. This is the kind of individual he was. The man had a heart as big as a lion. He was a tremendous individual. That's why I say they broke the mold when he died. He was an unusual character. And smart--

I sat time and again in conversation with the man when we'd be having a meeting or something and one of these people, so-called people who bucked him would come in and they'd get in an argument and have a bitch of an argument, a violent argument. Then after the meeting we would sit down and he'd discuss this thing, and I heard him say, "Well, the son of a bitch, in some cases he's right." This is the way he'd come off of it. This is the way he was. He wanted things done his way. If they weren't right you could convince him, but he was the type of man that was looking out for the little guy.

Bisceglia: If he was looking out for the big guy--he was a pretty big operator himself, he could have run everybody else out of business. But that wasn't his nature. That's why that lady was at the testimonial, for that simple reason. She probably had had a frost up there, she called him, and he sent somebody out to give her money. It wouldn't surprise me.

Teiser: Would he change his mind?

Bisceglia: Oh, sure. Sure he'd change his mind. If you could point out to him where he was wrong--it wasn't easy, don't misunderstand, it wasn't easy, and he wasn't that flexible, but he was intelligent enough and smart enough to know when the cards were stacked against him that things were wrong and to bend. He wasn't just whoom--like that. No way.

Teiser: He was such a strong character that all kinds of legends gathered around him. One of them was also that anything he was in he wanted to run. He wanted to be the top man or he didn't want to be in it. His career doesn't read that way exactly.*

Bisceglia: Well, let me put it this way: anything that he was involved in, he was involved in. He was going to be involved and know what's going on. What he had to run, he ran. Nobody was going to get away with anything that he didn't know about when he was in any kind of an organization.

You know, to handle government people is an art. Without question he had a way about him and his ability to write and ability to take government people to task in a nice way was remarkable. I don't know whether you've been through his files or not, been able to see some of the letters that the man wrote, but they were just unbelievable.

Here's a man who came over and got himself self-educated. He would write things that were just out of this world.

Teiser: You could tell that he had had a legal education because his mind worked that way.

Bisceglia: Yes. He was a great reader. He used to read everything, anything. His pet hobbies were reading and smoking cigars. Sox was probably one of the best read men that I knew. He read everything. He

*See p. 55

Bisceglia: was an admirer of certain people that were his idols and that he believed in, and that was it.

Teiser: I think he once told me that Abraham Lincoln was a favorite.

Bisceglia: Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson was another one of his idols. You had to know the man to really appreciate him and you had to know him intimately. On the surface he put on a pretty good front. And he was--he was tough. But he was also a very, very reasonable and a very, very practical individual.

Teiser: He told us that he was a "wily Armenian."

Bisceglia: Well, I'll tell you, his ability--let me give you an example. When we worked on that Grape Crush marketing order, we started on that around the twelfth or fourteenth of February, early February. That order became effective early in August. Now to do what he did (and he did it) to put the timing through, to have these hearings, and have these briefs filed, and this and the other thing, and all the red tape, the necessary paperwork, the organization, the setting up of committees--to do what he did was really remarkable. We happened to be in Washington at the time and as an example, the turkey egg people, whoever that was, wanted to put through a marketing order. They'd been at it three years and as yet hadn't completed it. We did it in six months. We did it--he did it, because he was the guy who managed the whole thing.

We had to go through a campaign, a certain time period for voting, a certain amount of wait period, a filing of briefs, and this and the other thing, but it went through. He did it from February to early August in time for the 1961 crush, which was in itself a remarkable feat. A remarkable feat. The Department of Agriculture couldn't believe that he did it. He ran things like a train schedule. Bang, bang, bang, everything went through.

Teiser: His other ability was to persuade large groups. I think he told me about it and I've heard it from others. Have you been at any of those meetings, mass meetings?

Bisceglia: Sure. Some were good, some were bad. But he generally, by the time he got through talking, would have everybody pretty much on his side.

Bisceglia: Sox was a very, very passionate speaker when he got wound up. I think it was off the cuff. He very, very seldom had a prepared text. He could stand there and talk for an hour and do a fantastic job.

One incident that I remember also during that 1961 thing: he had a prepared speech that he was giving to go on television in favor of his marketing order that we were trying to put through. We went down to tape it at the local television station in Fresno and this television station had a new manager that didn't know him very well. So Sox gets on and starts making his speech and he starts the speech, "My friends, tonight we're going to talk about this thing quietly, dispassionately," and blah, blah, blah. Well, he wasn't in that speech about three minutes where he ripped his collar open and he really lammed into everything. This is the way he was. The speech was over, and I had heard the speech before and I was just looking around. I happened to be standing next to the station manager who was in the background listening to the speech and the man was there with his eyes popping out at the way that Sox was orating. His name was Joe Tone. After it was all over Sox comes up to us, and he said, "Joe, how did you like the speech?" He just shook his head and said, "Mr. Setrakian, you're the most passionate dispassionate man I've ever met in my life." [Laughter] This was his way. He was just unusual. The guy was unbelievable.

Teiser: There was some sort of a mass meeting in Fresno in 1947.

Bisceglia: That was the start of the organization of the raisins. The price of raisins went to nothing. That was the start of the Federal Raisin Advisory Board. It became the Raisin Board. He was addressing the raisin growers at that time.

Teiser: Were you there?

Bisceglia: Gee, I don't remember. I probably was, yes. I know that he was having mass meetings all the time during that time. He would always go from area to area and bring people in on this raisin situation.

Teiser: I heard of some astounding meetings. In fact he told me, but not on the tape, about some in the twenties.

Bisceglia: I can't tell you about those. But I know that he was very heavily involved in the twenties in the organization of Sunmaid Raisin Growers. He was one of the people who wanted to get some kind of an organization, and he was heavily involved in that.

Teiser: I wish there was someone around who could remember those years.

Bisceglia: I think they're dead. I can't tell you anybody to see for those years. Those people are pretty well gone by now. They're of Sox's vintage, and that was quite a vintage.

California Growers Wineries

Teiser: In the California Growers Wineries, there were a couple of other fellows with him.

Bisceglia: Yes, Charlie Clapp and Dutch Leonard.*

Teiser: I don't know anything about them, but it seems an unlikely alliance just from their names.

Bisceglia: The common denominator was that they were all substantial fresh grape shippers. Each had a lot of respect for each other. Dutch used to be a big league baseball pitcher and Charlie Clapp was just a farmer around here who held quite a bit of acreage. They decided to get together and set up the California Growers Wineries with a few other growers in order to take care of the grapes they had. They were all substantial grape growers. I guess that was it. It became at the time an alliance of necessity because they needed each other and they had enough tonnage to put together a substantial cooperative. As a result Cal Growers was set up.

Teiser: It was established as a cooperative?

Bisceglia: Yes.

Teiser: Kellas in Fresno was also involved?

Bisceglia: He is a retired judge. Ed Kellas was the attorney for the cooperative. He was a retired judge.

Teiser: I guess that was the first time that Mr. Setrakian had been involved in actual wine production.

Bisceglia: Yes. He had never been in it before. As a matter of fact he didn't know anything about the production of wine at that time. Sox became the chief cook, the bottle washer, the salesman. He ran the show.

*H.B. Leonard

Teiser: He did?

Bisceglia: Oh, sure. He ran the whole California Growers Wineries. Not physically. He wasn't there, he had a manager there, but he was the chief salesman. He was a hell of a salesman. He sold a lot of products for the company--mostly in bulk. He did a big job, kept them alive.

Teiser: Through those Depression years?

Bisceglia: That's right. As a matter of fact, he kept the grape industry alive through those years, through his programs and his work and his dedication. He was the man who kept this thing going for a good long time. We were faced with disaster many times in those years, the '30s, '40s and the early '50s. Even in the early '60s we were in trouble.

Stabilizing the Grape Industry

Teiser: His son said to me that he wished his father could see the condition of the raisin industry today, the stability of it.

Bisceglia: Yes, and he was responsible for it.

Before this order went through, the grower had no control over his product at all. He was at the mercy of the packer. He'd go in to sell to the packer, and the packer would set the price.

Today, the way the order is, the growers decide before how much tonnage they want to go to market, of course with the approval of the Secretary of Agriculture. They can't short it too much. They decide how much of their tonnage they want to put into reserve and set aside, so that at least they can get enough money out of that product to make a living.

It's through the control of supply and demand that they are able to make a living. The fresh fruit business is like a roller coaster, it goes up and down. Basically no one has any control over it. The only one who controls it is nature. One year there'll be an abundant crop and the next year it'll be short. So you're like this [gesturing] all the time.

Bisceglia: By more or less trying to get rid of those peaks and valleys through this marketing order where if you're short one year you can theoretically take from your reserves to fill out and the price doesn't go up, and at the same time, it doesn't dive either--this is basically the principle of the marketing order.

Teiser: It's so complicated because you have these three things you deal with.

Bisceglia: The three segments of the grape industry, yes, that's true. But they're all interrelated and the condition of one definitely affects the condition of the others.

For example, particularly when it comes to the raisin and the wine industry, if they don't make enough raisins and the grapes come into the wine industry then we get into trouble. If they make too many raisins and there are not enough grapes for wine, then the raisin people get into trouble. So there's a very delicate balance in there and I think this is where Sox devoted most of his time and his attention, to bring about that balance.

Teiser: So he understood the balance!

Bisceglia: Sure. He was brought up in it and was completely aware of it.

Teiser: The prorate that you mentioned* went into brandy, didn't it?

Bisceglia: Yes, brandy and high-proof.

Teiser: It's never been repeated in that same pattern?

Bisceglia: No.

Teiser: Is it something that should be kept on the shelf to pull out again, or was it an emergency thing?

Bisceglia: This was more of an emergency thing. It was a hurry-up deal to get it through because in 1938, '39 the grape business was in a disaster. We were down to \$7, \$8, \$10 a ton for grapes. They had to do something with the surplus. They weren't consuming the wine, the raisin industry wasn't doing well, the fresh grape

*See p. 42.

Bisceglia: business wasn't doing well. They had to do something with the excess product, so they turned it into a brandy program and made brandy out of it.

Then after that, actually the grower made money on that because the brandy was sold at a good price because the war came along. It sold at a good price and the grower got a pretty good return on that product. The order was dismantled and given up after that.

Teiser: Was there anyone who was against it?

Bisceglia: Sure, there's always people against those things.

Teiser: Why would they be against it then?

Bisceglia: It didn't suit their needs. Some people wanted to buy fruit for nothing. A lot of people fought it.

Teiser: How did Mr. Setrakian get around them?

Bisceglia: Beat their brains out, what else? [Laughter] He just went to the growers. The growers had a lot of confidence in Sox. That was his strength, that he could go to the growers and in spite of the fact that some of the growers didn't like him, the majority of them by far had complete trust in him and they believed in him. He could go to the growers and get these things put through.

And then Sox had an uncanny way of handling politicians, too. They knew that he had this grower strength behind him and particularly in these rural areas, these rural politicians had a lot of respect for him. He was the type of man who could present himself to these politicians and put his point across. If he had a point he could get it over to them and swing them over--in most cases, of course.

Teiser: I have it in my notes that at one point there was a possibility that he would run for public office.*

*He considered running for Congress on the Democratic ticket in 1952. See Fresno Bee March 11, 1952, "Setrakian Will Not Be Candidate in Congress Race."

Bisceglia: Yes, he thought about it for about ten minutes.

Teiser: [Laughter] Somebody had suggested it to him?

Bisceglia: Yes, probably.

Committees and Marketing Orders

Teiser: I'm looking at the list of what he was doing in the 1940s. He was president of California Grape Growers and Shippers Association. What was that?

Bisceglia: It was an organization that they had in the fresh business. He was the head of that.

Teiser: That was not such an unusual organization compared to some of these others then.

Bisceglia: No. It was kind of a trade organization.

Teiser: He was president of the California Grape Advisory Council.

Bisceglia: That's another one of those things.

Teiser: And he was director of the Wine Advisory Board. He was on a lot of boards where he wasn't chairman.

Bisceglia: Yes.

Teiser: That's what I think I was indicating when I said he didn't really run everything he was on.

Bisceglia: No, but he made himself heard. They knew he was around at the Wine Institute. They knew he was around at the California Wine Advisory Board.

Teiser: Were you at any of those meetings?

Bisceglia: I was on the board with him, yes. I was on the Wine Institute board and I was on the California Wine Advisory Board.

Teiser: Was he interested in everything, or would he get upset about just certain things that they did, or did he watch-dog everything that those boards did?

Bisceglia: Well, he wouldn't bother with the trivial, but on any important issues Sox was there to vote. He'd raise his voice and scream around a little bit. He let them know he was there. But when it came to trivia, he didn't bother with it. He knew how to separate the garbage from the important stuff. That is one of his rare abilities that you find.

Teiser: I read a report of a committee meeting where he was chairman and somebody made a motion in the middle of it that he be asked to resign. Do you remember that?

Bisceglia: That could probably have been one of the Raisin Administrative Committee meetings. There were several people there at the time, particularly in the packing end of it, who were dead set against it, just violently against it, because it changed their entire method of doing business.

I'm sure many times people asked him to resign and I'm sure on each occasion they were kicked over. Sox could be, when he had to be, pretty definite about what he wanted to do and what he didn't want to do.

Teiser: You say, "It changed their entire method of doing business." Let me try to interpret: Somebody who had a lot of capital and could finance his own ups and downs--

Bisceglia: That's correct. For example there used to be a large organization here in the raisin business. They had a man there who was a genius in speculating. They had the capital to buy raisins when they were cheap. Then nature would take care of them in a couple of years. There'd be a short crop, and they'd turn around and cash it in and make a lot of money on it. Basically their business was selling raisins in bulk to bakers, and people who used bulk raisins--overseas, for example. When the raisin order came in it took all the speculation out of the raisin business because there was no more speculating. It was cut and dried, and they had no brand. Because of the fact that they had no brand, like Sunmaid and some of the other small packers, they had to go to the retail trade, and they suffered tremendous losses. They were the largest, by far, of the independents. They were the largest independent buyer of raisins in the industry. Well, they're out of business today.

That was one phase, and one group of people that fought him.

Teiser: How about a large cooperative like Sunmaid?

Bisceglia: Sunmaid supported him because it was in Sunmaid's interest to support him. The Sunmaid people backed him. Any cooperative organization like this--it was good for coops, and they backed him. And it was good for all the packers. It was good for the small packers. They all made a lot of money. These packers were all broke around here in the mid-forties, right after the war. If it had not been for this order that came through, they would have been in real dire straits.

[End tape 1, side 1]

[Begin tape 1, side 2]

Teiser: You were mentioning Sunmaid and I've often wondered how in the world Ralph Merritt, who figured largely in Sunmaid, and Mr. Setrakian could have got along because he also was a very strong-minded man.

Bisceglia: Well, Merritt was out of the picture at my time. He was not in the picture at all. Ralph Merritt was more involved in Sunmaid in the '20s. In the '30s there was a new regime in there.

Labor, Government and International Markets

Teiser: There were labor troubles off and on, and I haven't been able to figure out where Mr. Setrakian stood.

Bisceglia: Sox was not anti-labor. He wasn't anti-labor at all. Within reason he went along with it. In the early days when they started organizing that Winery Workers' union* in '37 and '38, at that time everybody took a stand against them because unionization was something new. No one knew what was going on. We all did it. But Sox was not an unreasonable man on unions. As a matter of fact I think he signed very quickly with them--after they reached an agreement. He was on the negotiating committee with them for some time.

*A.F. of L. See Stanley W. Bennett, Collective Bargaining in the Wine Industry of the Central San Joaquin Valley. Thesis, Fresno State College, 1953.

Teiser: Was he good at negotiating?

Bisceglia: Oh! He told you he was a wily Armenian, didn't he? No, Sox could hold his own in anything.

Teiser: I understand that one of the things in negotiating is to sit and talk endlessly.

Bisceglia: He could do that. He'd talk you to death if he had to.

But he was a remarkable person, particularly where these government programs were involved. He was just an unusual man in getting things done, in cutting red tape in these meetings and everything. This was really his strong suit in my opinion. He just knew where to go to get a thing done in the minimum amount of time. This where I think he was just brilliant.

Teiser: When I first heard about him I was told he was head of a international raisin cartel. As I understand he was only an ex-officio member, but he was chairman of the International Sultana Agreement conference.

Bisceglia: Yes, the United States wouldn't join it, but they made him chairman because they figured he'd take the neutral position. But he always negotiated and negotiated well for our people. He did a good job--excellent--and sold one hell of a lot of raisins, which had to be sold at the time, and he did it himself.

Teiser: There was the story, I guess it's pretty well documented, about his big sale to England during the war.

Bisceglia: Not only that. Then there was Japan. He's the one who opened the Japanese market.

Teiser: Himself?

Bisceglia: Yes, he's the guy who opened the Japanese market. He was the man who went over there and got it going and negotiated with them and made the first sale. Doggone, I had a letter around here that he wrote to Joe Gimsky. It's a masterpiece. He's the one who was the guiding light in the Japanese market.

Eastern Interests and Western Wineries

Teiser: I find that early in the '40s the National Distillers, and others, came in to buy wineries. I gather he tried to keep them from taking advantage of the grape and wine people.

Bisceglia: He was in it with both feet. Always was.

Teiser: Do you remember anything special about that?

Bisceglia: Do you mean about their coming into the industry? I don't think he had much influence one way or another. He probably spoke out against it.

Teiser: I think he spoke out against their taking advantage--

Bisceglia: Yes, he probably did that. He probably warned them not to think that they were going to come in here and take advantage of the grape growers. That was Sox's nature.

Teiser: Did he know Lewis Rosenstiel well?

Bisceglia: Yes. They were very close.

Teiser: They were friends?

Bisceglia: They were friends and they did a lot of business with Rosenstiel. Bob*can give you more detail on that, but I know that Rosenstiel thought a great deal of Sox. Actually, he depended on Sox a great deal for advice on the operation of his California properties. He had a great deal of confidence in him and was one of his supporters. Particularly through this marketing order business, he was back of him 100 percent.

Teiser: Rosenstiel did something about contracts with growers that sent prices up one year.

Bisceglia: 1946.

Teiser: I never understood that. Was that something he did out of ignorance; he really didn't know what the effect was going to be?

Bisceglia: I would say that's a good description of it, yes. I don't think he knew enough about the wine business--I don't think he put in enough time in the wine business. It was just a toy as far as he

*Robert Setrakian

Bisceglia: was concerned, at that time. He didn't understand it and he just went off half-cocked and thought he had to account for the world and made a very serious mistake.

Teiser: Apparently he was never allowed to forget it.

Bisceglia: No. I've never forgotten it, and his company never recovered from it.

Teiser: Was it after that that Mr. Setrakian took to advising him more?

Bisceglia: I would say so, yes. I would say that it was after that that they became rather close.

A. Setrakian Characterized

Teiser: During the Second World War, I see that Mr. Setrakian, I guess because of one of his government abilities, got the War Food Administration to buy a lot of raisins.

Bisceglia: Sure. They were the big users of raisins during World War II. Well, let me tell you. I happened to be in the service at the time. He was in Washington and I happened to be in Washington at the same time. I was stationed in Washington, getting my war training. That man hadn't left his hotel in almost three weeks. Three weeks! He hadn't been out of his room in three weeks. He was having breakfast meetings, luncheon meetings, dinner meetings, after-dinner meetings, during this whole time with the War Food Administration people to keep this thing rolling. For three solid weeks he hadn't been out of that hotel.

He was a dedicated individual. He'd do all these things by himself--foot most of the bills, and do them on his time. A lot of people didn't understand that. A lot of people thought that Sox had an axe to grind and he was on the take, that he was dishonest. It's not true at all. The man never took a dime. For every dollar--let me put it this way: he spent more money of his own than he gained on these trips by far.

Teiser: I never have heard anyone say that he was self-seeking.

Bisceglia: Well, you always hear somebody say, "This is for his own good. Sure he's doing it, but he's doing it for his own good." His detractors. Naturally, if he benefits, everybody benefits. It's

Bisceglia: only natural. But I don't think that was in his mind at all. When he did something he did it for the good of the industry in hopes that everybody would get something out of it.

Teiser: His brother Abkar died in '48. Was the brother important in--?

Bisceglia: I didn't know his brother very well. His brother was more or less in the growing of grapes, that phase of it, to my knowledge. He wasn't anywhere near the forceful man that Sox was.

Teiser: By the time that Mr. Setrakian retired from the chairmanship of the federal board and so forth, I think he felt that he wasn't appreciated. He felt disenfranchised. I gather that he hadn't really wanted to retire from the chairmanships of those boards.

Bisceglia: I think that that's probably true, that he didn't want to retire. I think Sox was eighty-four or eighty-five years old, and I don't think he realized that physically he had slipped as much as he had. Five years earlier he'd wear out a man fifty years younger than he was with his vitality. I don't think it was so much that they didn't appreciate him; I think they felt that he just physically couldn't take the gaff anymore.

It was a very, very strenuous thing that he was up against. He was up against the government and he was up against opposition within the board itself. I don't think it was a matter of not being appreciated. I think that today, Sox is appreciated more than ever for what he did for the industry.

People talk about Sox today and they realize what the man did. You know, you usually don't get to smell your roses while you're alive. It's after you're dead you get the flowers.

He did so much for the industry and he did it in such a way that he made it look so damn easy that people really didn't appreciate the time and effort that he put in. And he did. For example, putting that marketing order through in a matter of six or seven months. Gee, nothing to it! They don't realize that the man used to put in 18 hours a day, seven days a week. He made it look easy. This was the problem.

Generally when you're as gifted as Sox was and as versatile as he was--he was a good speaker, he was a good reader, he had a good mind, he could adapt to any situation--when you're that sort of person, things come easy to you and you make them look easy.

Bisceglia: But they aren't. This is, I think, the main reason why they didn't appreciate him. They didn't realize what effort and what priming and what initiative it took to put through these programs that he did work out.

I was associated with Mr. Setrakian and was very close to him--as a matter of fact, we were very, very close. I think that next to Bob [Setrakian] and his family of course, there wasn't anyone closer to Sox than I was, and I'm very proud to say that. I knew his idiosyncrasies. I knew him well. I knew how he bawled you out (and I got bawled out by him many times). But it was in a way constructive to try and do things better. If you needed help the man was there, no question about it. If he could help anybody, friend or foe, he was there to help him--and gladly, without any hesitation, without any hard feelings. He was right there.

I don't know what to say about the man except that he was just a very, very unusual man that comes once in a lifetime. I've known a lot of people, but my association with Mr. Setrakian was probably one of the pleasant highlights of my life. I learned a great deal from the man just being around him. I think that he wasn't an easy man to get close to. He was very choosy. The man was suspicious of a lot of people that he didn't trust. But if you were his friend, or if you helped him, or if he could help you, or if you were willing to work with him--not necessarily bow to him, don't misunderstand me--Sox was a good man on your side. A very, very good, valuable friend. A very dear friend. I have nothing but respect for the guy, and I was fortunate to see the results of his work. I've lived through that and I'm very thankful for it. I could see where his contributions to the industry, at the time it needed it, were just unusual. He kept this business and the whole industry afloat--and mainly through his personal effort.

[End of recording]

[End of interview]

Transcriber: Gretchen Wolfe

ROBERT SETRAKIAN: RECOLLECTIONS OF A. SETRAKIAN



Robert Setrakian at interview, 22 Jan. 1977 (studying his notes)

Photograph by Catherine Harroun

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Background of a Remarkable Man

[Date of Interview: 27 January 1977]

[Place: Office of Robert Setrakian in San Francisco]

[Side 1, tape 1]

- Teiser: I just came across notes made some years ago about the origin of the interview with your father. Three different people from the University of California suggested it. One was George L. Mehren (who had left the University by then), another was Sidney S. Hoos, and the other was Harry R. Wellman. These suggestions all come to our office independently, which I think is interesting.
- Setrakian: I'm not aware of a Mr. Hoos.
- Teiser: He's an agricultural economist, like the others. He was with the Giannini Foundation for many years and is now retired. He may or he may not have been an associate of your father's, but he knew of him.
- Setrakian: My dad's regard for Dr. Wellman and Mehren was astronomical. He thought they were incredible human beings, both of them.*
- Teiser: It's interesting that your father's association should have been so close with academic people.
- Setrakian: Isn't that interesting? That's very true. He had a tremendous regard for people that had certain kinds of qualities. One is those that had guts, and those that were intellectual, and those that had a high degree of honesty and integrity. Those I think really would capsulize his interest in his friendships--which I could think about myself, [laughs] but I don't think it's the case.

*See also pp. 77-78

Teiser: Just from your family recollections, do you remember anything you can add to your father's own interview about his early background?

Setrakian: Only to a degree, Miss Teiser. My father was a comparatively closed-mouth family person. We didn't--I'm just thinking with you--we didn't dwell on [things] such as "what I did in the past," the image of the father trying to expound to his son what a great guy he was, first-string anything. He didn't have that syndrome at all. He was a terribly loving man, and showed it in various forms to his children and his wife and his brothers and sisters, their offspring.

I have heard more than once the story of--it wasn't told directly to me, but rather nostalgia going on between two Armenians in a small hotel room in New York. I had the benefit of being the small son sitting there in this cigar-filled room, and listening. But not all during that time they spoke English. Regrettably, much of it was in pure, unadulterated Armenian, and I [had] lost my ability to speak the language after age six.

My dad used to meet with some of his cronies in New York. These were obviously men that he knew from age 10, 11 through 17 in the old country, and it was all during that period of strife with the Turks, and [they recalled] how they organized their own revolutionary society in order to protect their house and home, and how his father--my paternal grandfather--was killed at age 32, I believe, and how they in retribution--described to me in detail--how they killed off some of the hierarchy of the Turkish military. By virtue of all of that, the absolute necessity of finding a way out of then-Armenia, and over to the United States.

It was interesting, because when you think about it you realize that even at that early age, they (my dad, his siblings, and his "old country" friends) were all tremendously attuned to higher education. Whether that was because of their family upbringing, whether it was my grandmother and grandfather that felt that they needed this kind of education, or whether it was prevalent in the whole school system over there, I have no idea.

I know this, that there's only one living relative now that's still in California, my father's sister Vergie*, who resides in Fresno. It's interesting--I just mentioned this last night to some dear friends after we left the symphony--I guess it was in conjunction, thinking about our meeting today, I have definitely decided that I'm going to take a sabbatical and go to Armenia. There's just no question in my mind about it. To start so that I might be able to

*See p. 67

Setrakian: retrace some of this for my own ego, or interest in my history. I've got to get together with Aunt Vergie and hope that she has some recollection as to where it all may lead me.

Teiser: What's her whole name?

Setrakian: Isn't that terrible? I've been trying to think of it since last night, and I will have it for you, from my mother. I guess it's V-E-R-G-I-E. He had two sisters, Vergie and my aunt Hagopian.* She passed away about ten years ago. His brother Abkar passed away in 1949. So she is the sole living person that did come over from the old country.

Teiser: Did you ever hear how it happened that his mother and another brother and a sister, I think, came first and then your father came later?

Setrakian: I'm not sure, but I think it was probably a financial burden, and that he had the capability of taking care of himself, and after the family was established over here he came at a later date. That's my assumption, at least.

Teiser: I see. Did they have relatives in Fresno? Or did all Armenians go to Fresno?

Setrakian: I think that the latter is probably the most likely, that the Armenians had come from a fairly rural atmosphere, having had the wherewithal of utilizing their plans in mind of crop production of all types. It just didn't take more than one or two Armenians to do well in a given area, and all of a sudden the flood dykes opened up.

You know, it's interesting. My mother's brother was in here the other day. He showed me a telephone book, a Fresno telephone book dated 1902. We thumbed through it--the thing was about the size of a TV Guide magazine. In thumbing through it, we found my maternal grandfather's name.

Teiser: Who was he?

*"Aunt Vergie" is Verkeen Kazian, widow of Mitchel Kazian. "Aunt Hagopian" was Sophia, who was married to Levon Hagopian.

Setrakian: Dikran Yezdan. He was an accomplished tailor in town. Other than his name and two other Armenian names, there were none in that phone book. So at some point in time, it went from virtually no Armenians to this massive inroad. Hence, in my judgment, the tremendous dislike towards the so-called "Fresno Indian" as they, in effect, really took over the entire community. [Laughs] It just appeared that there was no gradualness to it. It was almost instantaneous Armenian.

Early Years in California and Family Life

Teiser: By 1905, your father was here.

Setrakian: When he came, he came directly to San Francisco. At that time, he was attempting to continue his education. I think I recall in reading some of his notes [in his interview] here that he worked in the San Francisco car barns as a streetcar washer to support his education at the University of California Hastings law school. He told me on more than one occasion that he wasn't the best student in the world, but that his professors all loved him. If it weren't for his oratorical skills that he was developing at that age, and the liking of various professors at the University, he really questioned whether he would have graduated. [Laughs]

Upon graduation, he became a trial attorney and a thoroughly successful one, if one wants to measure it in terms of cases won and lost, and very unsuccessful in terms of profit. He then started supplementing his law practice with his brother in terms of produce. They were in the watermelon business and other types of melons here in San Francisco. They first worked for others, and then they established their own little wholesale outlet here on Washington Street. It was through that that they parlayed it if you will into getting into the actual production end in the San Joaquin Valley.

My dad was not the farmer. My dad was the innovator. The agriculturalist of the family, and probably the only one through my generation and beyond, was my uncle, Abkar Setrakian. He loved it, he was good at it, he was self-taught in the field. He became one of the finer grape-growers in California. It's just regrettable that neither his sons nor I ever had that same trait.

Setrakian: Subsequently, after he got out of school and the San Francisco thing, we moved to Fresno, or he and my mother moved to Fresno, where I was born. I have a sister*15 months older than I. As I recall having heard, we moved to San Francisco when I was about age four. I'm guessing--four or five. I think it was a combination of things. My mother, although her family was in Fresno, didn't like the climate. If I were to bet, she probably didn't like the atmosphere either. So we feel that we have been historically San Franciscans. I really don't remember Fresno at all, regrettably, other than the summers I spent with my grandmother there.

Teiser: Your father's mother or your mother's mother?

Setrakian: My mother's mother** I remember my father's mother very slightly. I remember the day she died and just a few smatterings prior to that. She died, I think I said, when I was five. My mother's mother is still alive and well and kicking at the age of 97 in Fresno. She puts away about a half a bottle of our brandy a day. [Laughter]

Teiser: No wonder she's well!

Setrakian: Medicinally utilized, of course.

So that became our life-style. It was kind of a strange one, but a good one. We were very poor in San Francisco. I recall that vividly. We lived in a small apartment house in the Marina. It was an overcrowded apartment, I remember that. I recall that we either were doing fairly well or we'd pinch pennies. My recollection was penny-pinching by virtue of our clothes. We ate like kings. There was never, ever any question as to the quality of the food that we served on our table--breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I think that my mother and dad's philosophy was that it really didn't matter what you look like, it's the quality of the health that counts. I mean that. We just absolutely at all times were blessed with proper nutrition.

But as far as clothing--I can remember days when I used to feign sickness so I wouldn't have to go to school in the stuff I was wearing. That's how vain, I guess, I was. My dad used to go to work taking the streetcar. It only cost a nickle. Things were really tough.

Teiser: This was in the '30s?

*Arline Setrakian O'Neill

**Eva Vezdan (Mrs. Dikran)

Setrakian: Yes, this was in the '30s --'29, '30, '31, '32, in that period. Then we moved up in class. We went from this little apartment to a flat on Green Street. Things must have been better. We then owned a Franklin automobile. I went to a very nice public school. My sister went to a private school, Sacred Heart. But all during this time, my dad was one that spent time with us on weekends, but every Monday he'd have to take a train down to Fresno because he maintained offices down there the whole time. He had no office in San Francisco. The office, as I recall, was at the Rowell Building in Fresno. So he was a weekend father, but we probably saw as much of him as a lot of other youngsters of the same age saw their fathers, because when he was with us, he spent virtually all day with us.

That was our format for darn close to forever! We didn't have an office in San Francisco until 1957. We got used to that schedule of his. It gave him the kind of freedom, I guess, that he felt he needed to build his own involvement in business, coupled with those weekdays away during the formative stages of the company. He did all of the sales, which entailed taking trips east by train. He used to be gone for virtually months at a time.

I can remember that when he returned, we'd know about it about a week ahead of time. My sister and I used to practically nightly determine where the train was, and when he was going to be home. My mom would drive us down to the pier here in San Francisco, because the train would arrive in Oakland, and from that point they'd come over on the ferry boat. Before all the passengers would get off the ferry boat, I remember all these redcaps bringing huge loads of luggage. It was really one of the big things for us, to see my dad.

Personal Characteristics

Setrakian: I can remember how one could determine how long he was away, because when he returned he was always at least 20 or 25 pounds heavier. And being a short man--you know, my father was about five feet five and a half or something like that--20 or 25 pounds was just incredible. Which points up some of his personal habits. He ate very well. He loved cigars. Up until two days before he died, he smoked no less than five a day. During these particular years that I speak of, I'm sure he smoked 15 a day. In terms of personal habits, he really was remarkable. He didn't drink at all, although on a very rare occasion he'd take a half a glass of wine in a water glass tumbler and put ice in it and fill the rest of it up with water. That was his idea of a drink.

Setrakian: The only other time that I can recall him drinking at all, other than on a very rare occasion--when my sister was married, or something similar--were his most enjoyable days with Jesse Tapp, who at one time was chairman of the board of Bank of America, but prior to that time had a long involvement with agriculture within and outside government. Jesse could handle bourbon probably better than any man I ever met in my life. They could sit in my dad's den and during an evening's recollection of interesting things past, Mr. Tapp could put away exactly one fifth of Old Taylor, all by himself, and not miss one syllable. He was really a remarkable guy. He claimed it was hereditary from his father in Kentucky, who as I recall, died at age ninety-something.

I think that's probably one of the things that related to my dad's longevity. Hopefully, it's hereditary. He didn't drink. He smoked cigars; he didn't inhale. He ate extremely well, and his favorite foods, in descending order, were fresh fruit and cheese and lamb and rice. He could have survived on that, and probably did.

I get a bit of humor out of listening to some of these specialists in terms of how one maintains longevity. One is a proper amount of exercise. Well, I can tell you that my dad--the most I have ever seen him exercise is either getting in and out of a taxi, or walking from where we sit right here to Jack's Restaurant, which is exactly a block and a half away. That's all the exercise he ever got, because in our house we had a elevator, so he didn't climb stairs. The distance from his den to the bathroom or to his bedroom was something like 14 paces. Here he was, in absolutely the perfection of health until two days prior to his death, which was two months prior to his 89th year, I think.

I guess that's enough on the personal side.

Teiser: You told me earlier that he had only one hat--something about how he dressed.

Setrakian: Isn't that funny? I made a note of that right here. You're right. He was probably the most fastidious man, in terms of hygienic cleanliness. I mean just absolutely incredible. But when it came to what he looked like in public, I think it finally became almost his trademark. It was his hat particularly. He wore the same hat until he lost it. He usually was able to hang on to a hat for at least 30 years. [Laughter] The same hat! And his shoes--he wore the same pair of shoes. Edmund Clapp shoes. He wore them and had

Setrakian: them soled and re-soled until the top piece just virtually crumbled. He was not a tonsorial stylist at all. He wore clothes only because he had to. But they were clean.

It kind of reminds me, when I mentioned that I'd like to go to Armenia--I got to know Bill Saroyan. The first time I met him was at my uncle's funeral in Fresno about six or seven years ago. I knew him by sight. I was standing next to him. I was really amazed at him too. He was a very clean man, but his clothes were right out of the Goodwill bag. [Laughs] I often kind of thought that about my dad. He just really didn't care.

Teiser: I was reading over the transcript of our tape of the speech he gave at the dinner honoring him;* it's hard to understand unless you know a lot about him. He said he dressed like a bed. It must have been an unmade bed. [Laughs]

Setrakian: Yes. Another thing that was disturbing, certainly to my mother and possibly to other people too--this cigar of his was just incredible to have to live with.

Teiser: I sat in this room, didn't I, with it?

Setrakian: Yes. Oh God, I tell you! He used to take a cigar and he'd chew a third of it, and then he relit the balance of it more than once. I tell you, the odor was just beyond belief. [Laughter] We used to spend virtually months trying to make new determinations as to how we could trap all of that air just in his den and then put exhaust fans out, and having various methods of sealing up the doors so that he'd have to live with it all by himself. [Laughter]

That kind of reminds me of another thing too about him. In later years, when I first started doing some traveling, I recall one particular trip. I had been out on the road for about ten days. It was just by chance that I was in Boston. I wasn't planning on being there at all. I heard my name being paged in the lobby of the Statler Hotel, and soon found out that it wasn't me that they were paging, it was my father.

At this point, I was exhausted. I'd been traveling, and it's just totally enervating for me. It was absolutely the opposite for my dad. I got up into his room--he had a suite of rooms--he must have had about eight men up there. You could hardly see anybody in there, because they were all smoking cigars. Here was my dad in the middle of all of this, with his coat off and his tie off trying

*In Fresno on January 20, 1972. See p. 24.

Setrakian: to make the biggest point, going through his orations. I never saw him look better in terms of health. That's what always happened to him when he went out on the road. He always came back with more vigor than when he left. Why that is is beyond me! [Laughter]

He was one of those rare people--rare to me--that had that wherewithal of having a number of pressing problems on one's mind, but as soon as he got horizontal, he went immediately to sleep. He could sleep for ten minutes and come snap back as if he'd been in bed for all day. It was really a remarkable thing.

Private Interests and Industry Organizations

Teiser: The Mid-State Horticultural Company--I suppose you know something about its early history.

Setrakian: The Mid-State Horticultural Company was incorporated in 1922. There were probably a number of predecessors to the company, most of which I'm sure I'm not cognizant of. There have been subsidiaries of that: Setrakian and Company, Setrakian Brothers Company, Delkar [spells it] Vineyards Company.* Mid-State was organized as a California corporation to, in its origin, develop funds through other investors who, as I recall it, didn't have a stock position, but they did own bonds. This was the vehicle that my dad and his brother used to start acquiring land for the production of table grapes. Keep it well in mind--my father had, at that point in time, made and lost a couple of fortunes, if you will. I don't know what the definition of that word "fortunes" is, but he did have money and then he went flat broke.

The one surviving vehicle was Mid-State. It's been a traumatic history, and it's still going through growing pains. But with it all, it seems to have survived all of the bad times, and those bad times were held together by the few good years that it had. He and my uncle, his brother, were a very good team. They had a tremendous respect for each other, and there was a delineation as

*The name is a combination of syllables from "Delano" and "Abkar."

Setrakian: to each one's involvement in the company. Rarely did they cross paths. In fact, as far as I know, they never did. They each did their own thing, and they must have been real gamblers at one point to parlay nothing into something. I'm sure, as is the case with a lot of people, you get up to a certain point and then you don't want to gamble any more. So, historically, Mid-State had a very good growth period and then it reached some sort of a plateau. That plateau, I think, was caused by this particular success and then not the willingness to risk any more, because of the responsibility that one has to family.

In 1949 my dad's brother died. I was just getting out of college. That caused a serious problem between 1949 and 1957 because of my uncle's will and how he divided up his assets among his children, and the traumatic legal involvements that ensued, which was very detrimental to the company. There was no growth involved.

I think of all the things that my dad went through--that was really one of the more critical ones. I'll just briefly tell you about it, and then I want to touch on a very salient point with regards to the company. It wasn't until 1957 that the thing was finally worked out through the courts, inasmuch as my dad and his family owned exactly 50 percent of the corporation, and the other family owned the other 50 percent. So we had to eventually make acquisition of the whole thing through court directives. From 1957, the ownership of the company has been my father's family only. The others took funds and went on their merry way doing something else.

One thing my dad had was absolute unequivocal trust in his family. By that I mean not only my mother but my sister and I, the only two children. This is probably best illustrated by the fact that he, from that point on, made a gift each year of stock in the company to his children and grandchildren. Eventually, many years prior to his passing, he didn't own any of the company at all. He had absolutely given it all away. That is rare. I mean, it's an absolute rare thing for one to have that kind of understanding of what he thinks the quality of his children are, right or wrong. Hopefully he was right.

In any event, all during this time, and as long as I can remember, our business was second, if not third, fourth or fifth, to his total energies in behalf of the industry. I say that not with pride. I say that with real regret--regret because I think it was something biological with him. I think it was something that was pre-ordained with him. I think it was something that--

Setrakian: I went to the symphony last night, and they had a cellist there. It reminded me, watching him, the way he was sitting up front, of my having read something of a prodigy violinist many years ago who said that playing his violin six or eight hours a day was a much of a necessity for him as eating and breathing, that he couldn't survive without doing all three.

There's some sort of a comparison here in terms of my dad's destiny in terms of where he had to put his effort. Hence his being away five days a week and hence his lack of total involvement in corporate profit. I mean, that was all really secondary. It was almost like that's maybe why he wore the same hat for 30 years, for all I know. He just wasn't interested in that. When I came into the company, it was kind of an interesting situation which I may want to make mention of later.

In this area, I speak with regret--with regret for several reasons. One, purely in terms of profit. Maybe everybody's life would be easier if the company had done what I know he could have made it do if he felt like it. Maybe we would have seen more of him than less of him, because he was such an outstanding individual human being. Maybe it's with regret because I saw him in his final years, and the lack of personal patronage that maybe he felt he should have received and didn't--by "patronage" I mean honorary whatever. You know what I'm saying?

Yet, on the other hand, that was unfair of him, because he had this wherewithal that insisted on him continuing past age 65, past age 70, 75, 80, 85. I mean, it got to the point where, well, where in the hell do you stop? When do you let others come in and have a crack at running the industry? I don't think that he ran it dictatorially. I think his problem was that he thought that he could just do it a hell of a lot better than anybody else. The regrettable thing was that he was right, in my regard, at that particular point in time.

Right up until that point, one or two years before his retirement from the Raisin Advisory Board, etcetera, there was a lot of chaos. All of a sudden now everybody's enjoying the fruits of all the traumatics that everybody went through for what, 25 years? I don't just mean my dad, I mean everybody--everybody! And everybody has contributed to the success of that [San Joaquin] Valley, there's no question about it. No one man has ever done anything, in my judgment.

Setrakian: But those last years in this area were a real agonizing period for my father. They were agonizing because even I was attempting to figure out some way of getting him less involved. He couldn't walk as well to get on a plane to do down to head the [California] Raisin Advisory Board and the Raisin Administrative Committee meetings. He refused to go in a wheelchair. He used every scheme in the book, where everybody in the airport would help him to do this and that. All of this unknown to me, because he just couldn't find himself out of this thing. It meant that much to him. I can't believe it meant that much to him to be just chairman of the advisory board of the raisin thing. I'm sure that there are other as gratifying things that he's done in the past. At this point in life, it was he against the world. There were a lot of guys on that board, some of these young turks that wanted to come in and have their opportunity. There was this confrontation coming on.

It was just terribly fundamental that he wasn't going to win, so how do you win and lose? I tell you, talk about people going through a psychological change of life--that was his. It wasn't anything that I've ever seen in any one man. I mean, the emotions with the tears and the "no one appreciates me down in the valley" kind of thing. It was a very, very difficult period for him.

But when the adjustment came around--and it eventually did--age is one of the great cure-alls, if you can hang in there long enough to enjoy it. All during this period, he started phasing out of that portion of it [the industry affairs], and he started phasing back into the company. He never phased out of the company, but during this period he was working here nine hours a day. He took on all of our railroad claims, and took worthless claims with the Southern Pacific Railroad and on an annual basis made something between \$30,000 and \$50,000--on claims that were totally worthless! He was just an unbelievable guy!

Friends and Industry Campaigns

Setrakian: I think the one area that I'd like to talk about is some of the people that he knew and his feelings for them. That's one of the things I wanted to do, have enough time to make a list of some of them. I hope I remember most.

Teiser: We're coming to the end of a side.

[End side 1]

[Begin side 2]

Teiser: Your father's friends--you've spoken of one of them, Mr. Tapp.*

Setrakian: Who? Tapp? Jesse, yes. Well, when I think of Jesse Tapp, that friendship was a very deep one. They had a tremendous regard for each other. The regard, I'm confident, related to Mr. Tapp's integrity and desire to involve himself in the goodness that my dad, I think, had a feeling for. I know that of the many speeches that my father gave, the oratorical kinds, let alone those that he used to involve himself in in Washington, D.C.--whenever he could, and virtually every time, he would attempt to get together with Jesse and ask him to assist him in proofreading. Jesse did, and he did it in such a way that the words were always my father's, but he had a certain polish about it that he felt was affirmative, particularly in the Washington, D.C. syndrome. It was through Jesse Tapp, I think, that my father met George Mehren, because George and Jesse Tapp were very, very good friends. I don't know how that came about. Maybe you do--the association between Tapp and Mehren. George Mehren, when I first met him, was I think with the University of California?

Teiser: The Giannini Foundation there.

Setrakian: Yes. He was one of their young, bright statisticians, if you will. I don't know, [laughs] all I can remember of George, in seeing him in some meetings, was a myriad of charts all over everything, proving some point that had to do with raisins. He and my dad became very, very close. They all seemed to me on the same wavelength--Mehren, Tapp, Dr. Wellman--but Dr. Wellman didn't have the involvement with my father that Mehren and Tapp did. They would sit around and attempt to develop means of the best types of presentations when they went to Washington, who were the important people in the Department of Agriculture, how they tried to get assistance from elective legislators whether they be senators or congressmen. When they went back there they probably were better prepared in terms of

*See p. 71.

Setrakian: a delegation than any delegation that ever went to Washington, without question. They did their homework so that there couldn't be a single nuance that would occur that they wouldn't have some responsiveness towards.

That, coupled with my dad's warm oratorical ease, proved to be a winning combination, not only in Washington but in Japan, in England--wherever they went in terms of making dispositions of surplus crops.

Teiser: These men were theoreticians. They were academics, people who had little or no practical experience in the buying and selling of land and commodities.

Setrakian: That's right.

Teiser: It's curious that they and your father should have all arrived at a meeting of minds.

Setrakian: It really is a curiosity, because there were a number of my father's friends that just didn't fit into that mold at all, that had all of the basic qualities that my father had. I remember a guy named John Arena. John was one of those that was not only a very good friend of my father's, but he and Bruno Bisceglia and my father were kind of a Three Musketeers group in the Californian Hotel. John was a businessman. He knew what you had to know about growing crops and marketing them. He and my dad looked alike, their education background was probably somewhat comparable.

My father was Armenian and John was Italian, but John's interest was pure and simple in the area of making profit and being family-oriented. He didn't get into this industry stuff at all. As I think I read in Bruno's [interview]* text, virtually all of the industry organizations that have evolved through the years, my dad either founded them or was in on their original construction. He's right. That included the California Grape and Tree Fruit League that's still existent, the Wine Institute that is still existent, the Wine Advisory Board that was terminated only a year ago--the Wine Advisory Board that he conceived. God, there was a number of them. There was a bulk wine order that he conceived, another one

*See p. 40.

Setrakian: relating to brandy. The only one that I'm really cognizant of that we were associated with that he at one time I think was president of and a director of that was probably developed prior to his time was the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association, which is an all-encompassing thing.

That was a portion of his whole life, this so-called industry organizational involvement. But as time went on, he became best known for his acting as spokesman for the small grape grower. He did it with a passion. He did it against a lot of odds and a great deal of animosity--animosity developing from various industries, many vintners that were looking for a cheaper raw material, many raisin packers that were looking for a cheaper raw material. Many of them, in later years, during the very formative periods (when I say "later years," I'm thinking probably through the '40s and even the World War II years) they kowtowed to my dad's personality with the hope that they could sway his interests towards theirs.

During the war, there were many grape growers and raisin processors that, as the war developed, saw an absolute windfall developing their way. My dad received a call from none other than Jesse Tapp. The two of them got together one evening and decided that this was going to be something that they had to do for our country while everybody else was over there getting themselves killed in the war, and their contribution was to develop as much food and fiber at the cheapest price that they possibly could. This was the tack that they took.

Literally scores of guys in that San Joaquin Valley hated their guts because of it, and that's not to say that there weren't many other industries that made millions upon millions of dollars for people that were in production, whether it be food or ships or coal or paper or anything else. But they put a price ceiling on it, and this was foodstuff that was packed and shipped out to all the battlefields of the world. This was my dad's contribution. He really felt strongly about it, and he felt strongly about sacrificing. He always did.

You know, when you think in terms of his bank account, he was probably the lousiest businessman around. There's just no question about it.

Setrakian: He had an involvement at the winery--by winery I'm talking about a cooperative winery, California Growers Wineries* in Cutler. He and three others in 1935, '36 were able to put together this co-op, because at that time they were all fresh table grape and raisin producers. Those were some of the tough years, so in order to inventory fresh grapes, if you will, that were unsalable, they put together this winery and started producing bulk dessert wine and bulk brandy.

That winery had its ups and downs. During the war years you were selective, because everybody wanted products. During those years they were producing products for government too. Alcohol--for whatever the use, I don't recall. He kind of ran that thing out of his hip pocket. It was one of producing bulk [wine] and then making disposition of it. Through that association with the winery, he got involved with some other very interesting people, one of which was a gentleman named Lewis Rosenstiel. At that time--about 1946 or so through about 1968, I would guess--he became friendly with Rosenstiel, who was then major stockholder and president and chairman of the board of Schenley Industries.

Mr. Rosenstiel had a tremendous regard for my father and his capability. I think this is kind of one of those areas where it's hard for me to determine where my dad was used by a Rosenstiel, and where there really was some form of friendship. I say "used," because at that time, Schenley Industries was the second-largest bottler of brandy, second only to Christian Brothers, and at that time they owned probably the largest winery in California, or combination of wineries--the Roma Wine Company of Fresno, the Cresta Blanca, they owned a myriad of them.

Their position was a rather big one in the industry, and whatever that grape price was, or whatever the raisin price was, meant a great deal to them. I can recall Rosenstiel having my dad go back east almost as if it was a directive. They would spend several days together in Mr. Rosenstiel's home in Connecticut, and they would talk about the survival of the grape industry in California, and where Mr. Rosenstiel was indicating his support and help of my father, which I think was really true.

*See also page 85-87

Setrakian: Through it all, there was a thread of some kind of suspicion in my mind, at least. Maybe it was telegraphed to me through my father. When the winery was in trouble and had to make disposition of brandy, God, my father was back there trying to sell bulk brandy to everybody in the book. I can remember more than one occasion where Rosenstiel would suggest that he might be buying 10,000 barrels' worth, and sometimes the sale came around immediately and sometimes it just sat around for months and months and months, particularly when Mr. Rosenstiel wanted my dad as a friend there, just to talk to him about his love life and his divorce and "will you be a witness in my behalf at my divorce?" and all that kind of stuff.

I think I'm being a little catty, and possibly even a little cruel to people of the stature of Rosenstiel, but sometimes I feel that there are those who have truly used my dad to their vested interest, and that isn't limited to people on the east coast. There are many in California that have been very successful and that have thrown accolades to my father. In looking at it--and as I say, this might not be very proper--but some of those accolades have come through in the same ratio as to the net worth of the individual and what he had compiled through the years* in this specific industry that we're talking about.

A rare guy is a person like a Bruno Bisceglia. If there was ever one like him in California that should be the largest winery, it should be Bruno Bisceglia's winery, because Alphonse Bisceglia, Sr.--his father, was the eminent vintner in California at one time. I don't know, maybe that winery was bigger than Roma at one time.

There were two sons, Bruno and his brother, so they had continuity. They had everything. Why they didn't make it, God only knows. I don't know. I do know that Bruno was--and is--one of these guys, and his feeling of righteousness is probably stronger than anybody I know that's still in the industry. I love him for it. He's a hell of a guy.

I think my father saw that in him when they met in those early days, because they must have had a difference in age of 25 years, 30 years, I'd guess. It was kind of like a father-son relationship.

*With the help of A. Setrakian.

Setrakian: In regards to politics, my dad has always been a staunch Democrat and a comparatively active one, active at least in the San Joaquin Valley where he was involved, had the ear of a given group of people, whether they were Armenians or grape growers or raisin people or whoever. I wouldn't even know how to define it. But the fact is that he did have listeners. He was oratorically unbelievable.

I recall the first time I ever heard my dad speak. It was at a mass meeting. They had had a one-page ad in the Fresno Bee three times running, and there was an auditorium there that must have held 10 to 20,000. It was more people than I'd ever seen in my entire life. I had never seen my dad other than in our apartment, my sitting on his lap and his blowing smoke rings for me, and giving me a hug and a wet kiss. That was my father to me.

Then all of a sudden one day to be in this auditorium with this absolute mass of people, no loudspeaker systems at all. To see this very short man come onto this stage and within a matter of one sentence having that large group of people absolutely silent--you couldn't hear anything other than my dad. I remember while he spoke he walked a little. You could hear his footsteps in this huge place, with all of these people.

I remember when he was at the peak of this speech, having all of his five-foot-five or six inches standing up on his tiptoes with his arms above his head. He had a beautiful tenor voice, and he was projecting this thing almost melodically, if you understand what I'm saying. He was articulating--not singing, but when he reached the peak, my God, it was like Caruso speaking out loud, you know. He had this emotional thing about him, which I just can't do. Boy, when I start breaking down and crying, I cry, and I can't say a word.

But there he was with tears coming out of his eyes, with enough that everyone knew the emotion that was in his body, and yet being able to speak clearly and sharply and with all of his body movement. It was in the summertime, and everybody had white shirts on, and everybody was sweating because there wasn't any air conditioning in that building. I am telling you, I thought I was looking at someone--I didn't know him at all. I was almost frightened, it was so incredible.

After that was over, I remember we all went back to the Californian Hotel, and I sat there with people like John Arena and so on and so on and so on. There was just a little restaurant in there, right off the coffee shop. They called it the Bamboo Room.

Setrakian: They all sat in this big booth, and all the waiters knew him, and all the waitresses knew him. He was joking with all the guys at the table and kept asking everybody, "How did I do? What do you think of that?" [Laughs] He was just so proud of himself.

He had these people--you know, if he was in a different time and a different place, if instead of being Armenian in that community--it just would have been interesting to see where his emotions and his brilliance in that area would have taken him. I think, as I said at the very outset of this thing, [laughs] it probably wouldn't have taken him anywhere. He probably would have found his way into Fresno and just done exactly what he did, because it was all preordained. Really amazing.

Politics

Setrakian: But politically, as I say, he was a staunch Democrat, a liberal Democrat. He was of the Roosevelt era. The only time that I recall his getting off of that was when (and maybe it was Jesse Tapp, I don't know; Jesse Tapp was a Democrat too) he was asked to speak at the Scottish Rite Hall here in San Francisco, in behalf of Wendell Willkie. He did an awful lot of research. As I say, he was always very well prepared.

Mary Pickford was on the same stage with him, and she spoke before my dad did. Her concept was to tear down and put into shreds President Roosevelt.* She was just absolutely vicious. My dad threw his script away and got up there. He absolutely brought the house down. He not only said wonderful things about Willkie [laughs], he said wonderful things about Roosevelt. It was really quite a speech. The name 'Mary Pickford' never meant much to him again after that. [Laughter]

I think that if my dad was not Armenian in Fresno, he truly would have given some consideration to run for elective office. I recall him mentioning that one day when I was a young man. I think that his desire to run was primarily due to his being then able to do even more than he was doing in behalf of the growers, because he had a very strong understanding of politics and the strength of it, both within the state and in the country.

Teiser: He was mentioned as a candidate once, I think, in the public press.

*Franklin D. Roosevelt

Setrakian: Was he, in the press?

Teiser: In 1952. For Congress.*

Setrakian: He had no qualms about taking on anybody, including congressmen and senators or anybody. He'd just take them on if he thought they were lying, cheating, or being unfair. He had absolutely no qualms in getting there. He got on the radio once. Congressman Oakley Hunter. He annihilated him, and he lost the election. [Laughter] He absolutely annihilated him.

As I know others have mentioned, he was an avid reader. His depth in the understanding of intellectuals through the years was incredible. His library that's still in his den at home was one of the finest as it relates to some of his favorites--Roosevelt and Jefferson and Winston Churchill, Disraeli. It was an interesting gamut, but mostly relating to those that were in the public governmental domain much more than, say, an Albert Schweitzer. He obviously would have a tremendous respect and regard and admiration for those that were in the arts, in medicine. He probably was astute in a broad knowledge of all of those people. But his real liking was getting to know a man as deeply as one could ever know the recesses of a great human being that comes along maybe every hundred years.

That's what his total love was. It was reading, and reading history and biography. He had no interest in fiction. He would read it if someone gave him a book that was supposed to be a best-seller. He would skim through it and most of his books of that caliber are just covered throughout with numbers, because while he's reading something he's thinking about something else, you know, the price of raisins. [Laughter] That's the kind of faculty he had. He'd be able to read, listen to the radio, and watch TV, and with all of that be piddling along on something else that was of interest to him.

In his later years, he had all of the wonderful bodily functions that one should have at that age, and I really hope that I have even a portion of what he was enjoying at that time. You know, he slept well. Most of his friends were gone, regrettably, at least those that he would want to associate with. But he had a good life. He ate well. His wife--my mother--took very, very good care of him at all times. I think that was part of his ability to live as long as he did. He knew how to enjoy things. He could laugh. He enjoyed his children and his grandchildren. I think with it all, if he had everything to do over again, I can't think of very

*See p. 54

Setrakian: much that he would probably change. There are things that I would probably want to change for him, but maybe that would be a selfish motivation.

Maybe you might be able to lead me into a different area here.

California Growers Wineries

Teiser: Yes. I will ask you a little more about the California Growers Wineries,* which I know that you're familiar with first-hand. You say it started as a cooperative. Did you know his associates in that? Leonard, Hitzl?

Setrakian: I did not know the name Hitzl. In fact, that name I haven't even heard of before.

Teiser: Harry Hitzl.

Setrakian: Harry Hitzl--I don't know him.

Teiser: Edward L. Kellas?

Setrakian: The names that I recall, in terms of the early formative stages of that winery, were Dutch Leonard, the former big-league baseball player; Carl Olsen, who I think was a founding member, now deceased; and Charles F. Clapp, who was a grape and orange grower. That was the organizing group of the cooperative. They had a comparatively small membership in the co-op. The largest probably, in terms of deliveries, was Mid-State.** The second largest was Dutch Leonard. The third largest was Mr. Clapp. It was managed by a man named Earl Cobb. Earl was a graduate of the business school at Stanford, and he was in effect chief operating officer and bottle-washer. He was the managerial head of that winery. During the time that my dad was up here, he would come to San Francisco once every two weeks. There was not one detail that he did not usually go through with my dad. My dad made unilateral decisions on most of it.

*See p. 80. It was originally a cooperative. In August 1973 it became California Growers Winery, Inc., a corporation.

**See p. 73.

Teiser: This is in the later years of your father's life?

Setrakian: These are the years that I recall exactly.

Teiser: You said that when your father was in San Francisco--you said that he had an office here from 1957 on?

Setrakian: In this very room.

Teiser: Did he then spend more time up here after that?

Setrakian: Yes. He spent more of his time than he had in the past up here, but he didn't spend more of his time here than he did in Fresno. During that period, and as long as I can remember, he had a suite of rooms in the Californian Hotel. It was a very modest thing, and had it on an annual basis. I don't think he gave it up until--again, I'm guessing--1965. As his age progressed and as we closed the office in Fresno and opened the office here, it became more logical for him to be spending more time here.

It proved to be kind of a traumatic family experience. It's one thing having a man smoke 15 vile cigars a day in the house two days a week, and it's another thing to have it seven days a week. [Laughter] I mean, it was a real problem.

Teiser: My father smoked this terrible pipe. I know what you mean! [Laughs]

Setrakian: I tell you, we had some real serious family problems, to the point that he'd try and not smoke there at all. He'd wait until he'd come down here. God, we've lost more than one employee in this office. They just couldn't handle it.

Then Calgro, as I say, was interesting. Of course, it's not fair for me to say that Calgro could have been a great winery if my dad spent all of his time at it, or that Mid-State would have been a great company if my dad had spent more time with it rather than all of these other activities. You know, the fact is, here we are. We had a wonderful base on which to get that company started. It ran into some serious problems through 1970. But we're in business, and a lot of other wineries are not.

Teiser: How do you think the problems occurred? It was not specifically managerial?

Setrakian: Well, I think it is specifically managerial. I'm saying that even though it was judgmental, managerial judgments that put it where it was, at least it didn't put it to the point of total oblivion

Setrakian: vis-a-vis a man named Pete Divizitch. I don't know if you know that name. Mr. Divizitch came over to the United States and immigrated to Delano, California. He started out as a laborer and he compounded that 90 cents a day that he was making into a ten-million-dollar corporation of, at that time, 5000 acres. But he extended himself beyond belief, to the point where he went into bankruptcy. Mr. Divizitch now, at age 85 or however old he is, is broke.

Now, as I say, I'm not really being fair when I say if my dad had spent all his time at it, maybe we'd be ten times the size. If he spent all of his time at it, maybe we'd be broke too. I don't know. [Laughter] They both had some kind of a built-in time bomb working when they had to get everything done. In the case of my dad, he had to reorganize the valley. In the case of Divizitch, he had to buy 5000 acres of land; he wanted to have land from his home to some county line. To do it--it was about four miles long--he just kept buying and buying and buying. You know, he went broke, broke, broke.

These kinds of people are so darn rare, whether Divizitch or Setrakian, that come over with nothing but an imagination and a willing desire to work and do things. I guess I compare our operation to other wineries, or I compare our farming operation to other farms. What I'm trying to suggest, I think, is that my dad's total capability was such that if it wasn't diluted by these other activities, he may have gotten a hell of a degree of satisfaction out of a profit-motivated success. I say that only as it relates to--you know, two years prior to his passing--those were tough years for my dad to overcome. He wouldn't have had to go through that if he had created an economic success--he could just sit back and be the patriarch head of a very successful corporate kind of a thing.

Am I making my point on that? Do you understand?

Teiser: Yes. I want to say that the fact that he was able to clear up claims, freight claims, indicates that he could have done normal business management.

Setrakian: Oh, the guy was an absolute genius. His tenacity in terms of a problem was like I have never seen. (Regrettably, it isn't hereditary. I just can't handle that.) He would not accept defeat. He would not accept the premise that Southern Pacific would come up with on a given claim. He just wouldn't accept it.

Teiser: Was that partly his legal training?

Setrakian: I think, partially. But more than anything it was his ability to spend hours upon hours upon hours, and being so much better prepared than his adversary. That's where it is. His longest suit was his ability to be absolutely, unequivocally prepared, no matter what he got into.

Teiser: That is interesting in a way because of the stories about his throwing away the prepared texts of his speeches. I think you told about one. On the other hand, I just read a prepared report to a senate committee that was so closely reasoned!

Setrakian: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. Even some of his theatrical stuff, you know, was also well prepared.

International Raisin Agreements

Teiser: As I think I mentioned, your father told me one day that he was a "wily Turk"--no, I mean a "wily Armenian."

Setrakian: You know, the interesting thing. You mentioned the Turks--of course, the Turks and the Armenians just absolutely hate each others' guts. But he was--as this whole Federal raisin-marketing thing came into being, they tried to develop this international Sultana committee,* which included the United States, Australia, Turkey, Greece, South Africa, I think France, but I'm not sure, and the U.K. There were six countries.

The original organizing chairman was from Australia, who has subsequently passed away, Sir Eugene Gorman. He and my dad became devoted friends, and some of the letters that they wrote each other were really handsome prose. One year, the then-chairman requested my dad to take over the chairmanship of the international group, because of some political problem he was having with one of the countries. They really--I think it was Greece--were just at each others' throats having to do with some tariff that they were both trying to involve themselves in in Japan, whatever it was. It was really an amazing thing.

When they would meet, they would have to meet with earphones, because everybody didn't speak the same language, and they had a translator in the background for all of this stuff. I think one

*International Sultana (Raisin) Agreement

Setrakian: of the great accolades to my father was from the Turkish representative, that here he was, an Armenian, heading this whole thing where they could converse, and that he, my father, would not have an ill regard for this ambassador from Turkey, and that they could talk in terms of men rather than antagonists. That's the kind of guy he was. His emotions were strong, and he certainly had--in his opinion and certainly mine--reason to be anti-Turkish, but yet he had this facility to not let it interfere with things that were of great importance to himself, the industry, and the country.

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Teiser: This brings up a point. Your father spoke Armenian, I suppose. Did he know any other languages?

Setrakian: I think that the answer to that is no. He had a smattering, probably, of languages that he didn't speak, whether they be Turkish-- He gave the impression to me that he understood a little Italian, but he didn't profess to be a linguist at all.

Teiser: I know that he was highly regarded by people in other nations, and perhaps in a sense, by the time that everyone here among his contemporaries had died, those were the people who, in a way, felt more supporting of him.

Setrakian: That's very well said. It's an interesting circumstance, isn't it? The support and the admiration that came out of Japan and England and Greece, Australia--

Teiser: He was given an honor by the Greek government, was he not?

Setrakian: Yes, he was. You know, it's an interesting phenomenon, I think, that a man that had the wherewithal of representing America in a totally foreign kind of a land (and to me, Japan is very foreign in terms of their whole ethnic wherewithal), for him to represent 180 million people--or whatever the number was at that time--and that he be their concept of an American is--isn't that incredible? And yet you place him within the confines of his daily activities--in the San Joaquin Valley he was a "Fresno Indian," he was a minority, of an unliked minority race.

Setrakian: The same was certainly true in Australia and the same was true in England. I can't speak for Greece. I presume it was true there too, but I really don't know. He did not want to go to Turkey. To my knowledge, he didn't go, because he felt that there could still be, even at that late stage in life, something on the books that would politically detain him there.

Armenians

Teiser: I remember in his interview he said that he had been a member of a group that had gone to the President of the United States to release some Armenians in Turkey, so I suppose there may have been something to it.

Setrakian: Could be. He did not spend as much time in Armenian involvement as I'm sure the Armenian community would have liked. He had a total dislike for those Armenians that used their position in other areas for their own self-aggrandizement. I can think of one Armenian as an example that very candidly my dad thought was a hypocritical phony, because he just continually used this baloney about coming over after killing a bunch of Turks and getting into this wonderful country, you know, and carrying that theme on to promote his business to a very profitable end.

My dad had a very serious dislike towards that, and yet on the other hand, there were those Armenians that were virtually invisible that contributed and donated their time and moneys toward the Armenian cause, the Armenian cause being funds to go back to the old country to get basic food to a lot of starving people. That's not to say, however, that my dad didn't do a lot. On one particular trip, he and two other Armenians prior to going over spent enough time to put together about \$100,000. They took it over to Lebanon and started a small university there for Armenian youth.

There were times when people would come to him to assist on various fund-raising devices. This was one of them. Not only was he a big financial contributor himself, but I can recall lots of times he called up virtually every grape shipper in the valley and had each one of them contribute, I don't know, 50 to 100 lugs of grapes. He'd put together four or five carloads of grapes that were sent back to New York and sold on the auction block. Just that one little idea of his made something like \$70,000. In the old days, that was a hell of a lot of money.

Teiser: This was for Armenian relief?

Setrakian: Yes.

Teiser: Was he a religious man?

Setrakian: He was probably as proficient in the knowledge of the Bible of any man I know. He has spoken from the pulpit probably more than any lay person that I know of. He, through Bruno Bisceglia, had a private meeting with the then-Pope in Rome. Through that meeting, he met and became very close with then-Cardinal Agajanian, who was one of three people that were destined to possibly be Pope. Through that meeting, he casually invited Cardinal Agajanian to California, who eight months later sent a telegram and came over with his entourage.

He had a very strong facility in his memory for pulling out of the Bible any utilization he might want in using it in his oratory. But with all of that, he never went to church.

Teiser: You're not saying he was Roman Catholic?

Setrakian: No, no. He was a Protestant.

Teiser: Not Greek Orthodox?

Setrakian: No, he was a Protestant. When I say never went to church, he didn't on a weekly basis go to a Sunday ceremony or service. On occasion, we would go. You know, strange as it sounds too, although he was a strong believer in the democratic system, his voting record--or actually, the number of times that he voted, even though he was out there campaigning like hell for everybody [laughs], I don't think he made one election out of ten, because he was always in the wrong place at the wrong time. [Laughter] Casting his ballot was not as important to him as getting out there and getting the people to vote for the things that he was involved in.

California Growers Wineries, and Mid-State Horticultural Company

Teiser: To go back to the winery, his grapes per se were more important to him than wine--is that right?

Setrakian: I think that's probably true. It was such a three-edged sword, really, in that there was our own business, the table grape business on one side, the winery on another side, and raisins on the third.

Teiser: Were you in the raisin business then? Did your father make raisins?

Setrakian: We were in the raisin business I guess in a reasonable way as raisin growers, never in terms of packing and that sort of thing. When my uncle died, the success of this company making raisins was zero. The only raisins that we produced was enough to be commercially a raisin grower. Otherwise, if we didn't grow it his activity would have been curtailed. He'd have to be a raisin grower to be on the Raisin Administrative Committee. We were not successful raisin producers.

Teiser: You were not members of Sunmaid?

Setrakian: We were never a member of Sunmaid. We sold our raisins on the open market.

Teiser: You're speaking of "we" as Mid-State?

Setrakian: "We" as Mid-State. In the case of the winery, there really wasn't that much of a conflict. The winery was a cooperative, a winery where all of the members were in effect stockholders and holders of revolving-fund certificates. We were table grape growers, so it was just another outlet for our surplus product.

Teiser: Did you ever have to buy grapes to keep your winery sufficiently supplied?

Setrakian: Yes, they did indeed. Oftentimes they bought up to , but no more than 50 percent of the total tonnage. Those were times when there was a disaster in the industry, when there was a hell of a freeze or when a rain came along or when grapes were down at such a low point that the only cost to the winery would be the cost of picking and harvesting such a token amount per ton, with the belief that

Setrakian: first of all, it could be funded through a bank with the belief that there's no place for that product to go but up. It may very well have been some of those moves that kept the winery current and liquid.

Teiser: Did it always make brandy?

Setrakian: Did it always make brandy? Yes, to my knowledge.

Teiser: That's the stablest final product of all, I guess.

Setrakian: Yes, it is. Now it's becoming a real problem, because in those days you could produce brandy for a very minimal cost, both in terms of labor and power and raw material and interest rates. Today you've got everything going against you. Grape prices are up. They just turned our gas off at the distillery.

Teiser: Because of energy conservation measures?

Setrakian: Yes. We now have to go to oil, which is going to kill us. Interest rates are as high as they're going to be, hopefully. Our labor is going out of sight. You can't sell brandy unless it's a couple of years old, as far as putting it in a bottle. It's a very, very costly situation.

Teiser: But once you've got it, it's a good investment?

Setrakian: Yes, right, if you have some method of making disposition, it is.
[Laughter]

Teiser: I mean, it holds well.

Setrakian: Exactly. But even that up to a point; you get to a point where brandy, if it isn't sold in the third year, look out! Because from that point you get shrinkage and evaporation. We have some barrels in storage right now that are half empty from evaporation. At a given point, the age gets such that it doesn't increase in value. It actually decreases.

Teiser: When you came into your organization, your father's business, after your uncle's death, what was your job?

Setrakian: Well, you have to understand my relationship with my father. It was probably different from some other father-son relationships. We had as close a personal non-business relationship that one could

Setrakian: ever imagine. It may be illustrated by the fact that I mentioned earlier in terms of the gift of the disposition of all of his stock through the years. And yet, I'd had a very difficult time working for him or with him. He was dictatorial. He was one-dimensional. These are all the things that went through my mind in those years, you see.

Teiser: This is not your father and you; it's every successful father and every son.

Setrakian: That's comforting to know. And he was--he was a success, and I don't think anyone likes to be in someone else's image. I had my own personal problems, you know. I haven't told you about the traumatic experiences that my mother and my father and my sister went through when I had a rather long bout with polio. I mean, that was tough on them. How they ever survived it is beyond me. But they did, and they all sacrificed a great deal. Maybe it gave me an area of emotional problems of my own, as to where all of this was going to take me. That's coupled with my dad's involvement.

As it turned out, when I graduated from Stanford, that very year my uncle died.* I didn't have any thought of going to work with my father. He didn't ask me. He just sort of very casually advised me to please come down to Fresno and help out this summer. So I did. It was during that time that I realized that we didn't have the greatest fit together. [Laughs] But I hung in there with it, but I had to have outside activity. I had to be able to prove to myself my own personal capability, whatever it was or wasn't.

I worked with my dad, but I kept trying to find ways where I was here if he was there, and if he was here, I was someplace else. [Laughs] We carried on that existence for a long time. Through it, I got involved with other companies and other interests. My dad--maybe through my mother or through himself--they understood all this. They let me do what I wanted to do, which a lot of guys can't say about their families. They were very supportive of whatever I did, and I did a lot of crazy things. Never did he later deny me the right. He used to deny me the right, and that's why I walked away from him--he denied me the right to do certain things in the company, and justifiably so. It was his company. So I got involved in other things. It was probably the best thing that could ever happen to a son. It was a very growing thing for me. Maybe to some extent it was to him too.

*See p. 74.

Teiser: But you gradually became more and more involved in the winery?

Setrakian: No, that didn't happen at all. Let me tell you that story. Although I was, I think, either an officer or a director of the winery, it was purely in name only. They needed somebody on there. Hell, I didn't get down to that winery once every three years, because he didn't want me. He made that very clear. He did not want me fooling around with his winery. So I didn't.

Teiser: What did he want you to do?

Setrakian: Well, I'm really not quite sure. He didn't want me to get into any growth in Mid-State, which was the farming end of the company. I tried to turn it around, because as of 1957 that company was virtually bankrupt. I spent a lot of time in financial reorganization. I was finally able to get a new bank before this other bank put us in bankruptcy, as they did Divizitch. The best thing I've ever done in my entire life was to get my mother and father-- This fellow sitting in that other office, Sloan Coats, I tell you, he and I almost cried about it when we got the job done. It took a year and a half to get my mom and dad off of the personal guarantee with our company absolutely "broke." If Mid-State was declared bankrupt, the whole asset was down the tubes: my family's residence, everything. That was the one big highlight of my life, [laughs] in terms of that business activity.

Anyway, in 1970 my dad must have been what, 85? Eight-four? Can you imagine an 84-year-old man being as dictatorial about this winery and then coming to his son at age--what--I was 40-something, practically an old man at this point!--and asking me to get involved in the winery? I subsequently, within a matter of days, found out that the winery was just this side of bankruptcy itself.

So we had a fairly good understanding that I was going to step in as president and start running the thing as a winery*. Well, it's interesting to note that the then-manager, Earl Cobb, was still there. He was coming along in age too. There was all the little power-plays that was in the structure of this co-op. I lasted exactly two weeks, at which point, I called a meeting of the board of the winery at the airport in Fresno and I told them what I felt, and I told them what to do with their winery. After a very emotional three minutes, I left.

Two weeks later they came back, as did my father, and said, "We would like it very much if you would reconsider." It was about a year or so before--I can't remember how many years--that I

*An announcement of Robert Setrakian's election to the presidency appeared in Wines and Vines November 1970; it stated that he had previously been executive vice president.

Setrakian: read a very interesting similarity with President DeGaulle. France wanted him back after they voted him out of the presidency, and he gave them about a one-page dictatorial position paper. So I did the same. I thought that was nifty, so I did the same thing. [Laughs] And they bought it! I had them all--we set up a series of board resolutions and all this and that. The next day I fired Mr. Cobb. I didn't fire him, I asked him to retire. He was 'way past age 65.

From that point to this, my dad was very proud of our new relationship. It was terrific, and I'm just sorry it started at age 84 or whatever it was, because all of a sudden we had a different understanding and respect for each other, over and above pure family. We had a respect for each other in terms of business acumen. I'm glad that we had enough years subsequent to that date to realize that it worked.

Teiser: In this period, then, you dissolved the cooperative and formed the new corporation. Over that period, wasn't there a general trend away from cooperatives, perhaps because of some of the same factors that had caused problems for California Growers?

Setrakian: I'm really not sure that's true, Miss Teiser. The only other cooperative that I know in wine that moved from that posture to a corporate one was the California Wine Association. They, in effect, were really bought out by one person or the family of [Antonio] Perelli-Minetti. Many other wineries, or some other wineries, maybe I should say, had gone from the corporate to a cooperative posture, as example the DiGiorgio winery went from that to the Bear Mountain, a co-op. Other co-ops got a hell of a lot bigger. Guild, as example. That acquired a lot of the Schenley properties and enfolded it into their co-op. So I think there's a fairly equal balance of co-op and corporate.

Our particular case was somewhat unique: one of the problems with that winery was that in 1970 all they had delivered there was 4000 tons. The following year, when I took it over, we were still a co-op but we were acting as a "corporation." With all full intent, as soon as the paper work was done, we would be one, but it took two and a half years to do it. We now crush around 95,000 tons a year.

Our opportunity to do that cooperatively was meaningless, because my intent is profit-motivated. I don't think that that really is true of winery co-ops per se. I think it is in the case

Setrakian: of the grower-member, but the grower-member is not intellectually in tune to wine profit. He's a grower, and I have tremendous suspicion about co-op management in wineries. Those are the only ones I know. I think that during the next ten years our wine industry would be a hell of a lot further along if those co-ops were not co-ops but were corporate.

Teiser: Are you attempting to balance out your land holdings and your winery, then? Be your own supplier?

Setrakian: The one brilliant thing that our company has ever done, and if anybody has the right to say it's because of me it would be my father--and that is, we are still agriculturalists, and we grow one thing, grapes. The reason we grow only grapes is because it's the only crop we know.

Grape Growing and Wine Making

Setrakian: The toughest thing in business today is management, and to find a guy that can grow Thompson seedles is one thing. To find a guy that can grow Thompson seedless and Emperors and Ribiers is another thing. To find a guy who can do all that and make raisins is a third thing. The tough thing is to get a guy who can do all that and also grow oranges and apples and pistachio nuts and almonds and all of these crazy things that all of these farming companies are trying to do. It's beyond me! We're having such a tough time just growing grapes. I would venture to say that at some point in my career at an early stage, I must have said to my dad, "Why don't you grow some citrus?" I remember I wanted to grow cotton. I wanted to put a cotton company together, and subsequent to that everybody made a fortune in cotton and then everybody went broke in cotton, you know. [Laughs] Citrus went from \$500 an acre to \$7000 an acre. Then people started buying citrus at \$7000 an acre and now they're trying to sell it at \$1500! [Laughs]

Through all of that, we just kind of kept doing our own thing. I've been able to take our acreage from about 1500 acres to 3000, which is a good round number. I hope that we never plant more, although I think there's a tremendous opportunity today for those that want to, if they know what they're doing and how to make disposition of crops. I think that our industry has all the basic, rudimentary structure now to be an industry, a good strong solid

Setrakian: industry. It's going to happen, but while it happens, there's going to be those that aren't going to make it, both in terms of the agricultural end, viticulture, as well as the wine end of it.

A case in point right now--there are the Gallos that are profitable and the Wentes that are profitable and the Sebastianis that are profitable. During that period of profitability, there's the Sonoma Vineyards that have gone broke twice. Montcalm winery went bankrupt for the second time three months ago. Another one is just about ready to go down the tubes; that's a \$31 million operation. Right now this is all happening. While it's happening it's having a very adverse effect on others like us, because they're not selling their wine. They're making wholesale disposition of it at a tremendous loss. We have to maintain some form of liquidity and profit, if possible, in that period in time. But it isn't easy, and the banks are nervous, and rightfully so.

The happiness of our industry is based on what I hope is going to be in the next five years, not necessarily what existed in the past five years.

You know, everybody--by everybody I mean those that are in the dilemma that we're all in, whether they be distributors or whoever-- Part of the problem they lay to Bank America's projections on wine consumption during the ten years,* and hence this massive planting throughout the entire San Joaquin Valley. Well, the fact is that because of that, and a comparable one that Wells Fargo came out with, it's now given us an industry. Prior to that, what in the hell did we have? We had some little boutique operations up in the north coast, where a Louis Martini or a whoever--they didn't have the financial acumen to go out and plant 300,000 acres. All they could do was their own little thing. And they were doing it terribly well. I'm not taking anything away from them. I mean, they're the great successes of the industry.

I might add just quickly, on that point, I think it's criminal for vintners like myself (I'm totally against it) to try and infringe on the image that has been built in Napa. That's what's happening right now, the big movement of new methods of appellation and vintage, origin, and so on, on your labels. Everybody's trying to

*As given in the Bank of America's pamphlet of September 1976,
California Wine Outlook.

Setrakian: get into the act--all the majors in the San Joaquin Valley are wanting to put on their label "vintage" and this "appellation." I think that not only is it unfair, I think it is economic suicide for us to dilute Napa for no good purpose.

I think that every industry needs a Cadillac. I think every industry needs a Bordeaux, because you know, there's enough room for everybody. Do you know why France and England and all the international wine-drinking market now has come to the fore and said, "God! You know, California really does have some good wine!" You know why we are able to enter competitions, and why we won the first three places out of ten in Paris among all of the great wines of the world? It isn't because of Gallo's wine or our wine. It's because of this fantastic stuff that takes three years to age and everything in Napa. I think the whole thing is so ludicrous.

I'm now a member of the executive committee of Wine Institute. I was never asked to be on it, but our growth has been such that we have to be on now because our position is such in the industry that we qualify to be on it. I am listening to some stuff up there that I cannot believe! For me to be down in the valley and taking sides with Robert Mondavi and totally antagonistic towards these other so-called entrepreneurs that are, in my judgment, hurting us by hurting Napa! You know, no one's heard of Cutler, California for God's sake, over in Paris. They're not going to for one hell of a long time. [Laughs] That's one sore point with me.

In terms of industry, we now have an industry because we've got raw material. We've got raw material because everybody was trying to get in and make a quick buck. But you get so involved in it in terms of investment that there's no easy way of getting out, which is great. Now we have a source, and now we can go from 2.4 gallons per capita to ten.* Given ten years from now, everybody's going to be hooked--not hooked in terms of the addictive form of an alcoholic beverage, but hooked on it in terms of getting away from distilled spirits and getting into something that makes you feel good as well as being good for you.

With all of this potential, the majority of it has to be down where we are. I'm going to tell you a quick funny thing about California Growers Winery. It was conceived in 1936. They built

*Average United States consumption.

Setrakian: the plant in Cutler, California. I did a little research. Hell, there wasn't a vineyard within 50 miles of that damn place. I couldn't understand, why would anybody put a winery in Cutler, California?

It turned out that Dutch Leonard owned this piece of property down there and didn't know what in the hell to do with it. So he conned them into buying it, which is really what it amounted to. But talk about an interesting aside in that regard! California Growers Winery now sits in the absolute epicenter of all of the grape growers in California. Fifty percent of it is to the south--Kern County, Tulare County, all of those huge plantings that Tejon has. The other 50 percent is to the north. So in terms of availability of raw materials, we draw from about a hundred mile distance, 50 miles in each direction.

Teiser: You're surrounded by grapes, then.

Setrakian: Yes, we're totally surrounded, yes, which is a tremendous advantage to us in terms of being able to take a plant and do [i.e., crush] 100,000 tons, because we can do it sequentially in a chronological period of time.

Teiser: You're on a railroad?

Setrakian: Yes. It's the main line of Santa Fe, as a matter of fact.

Teiser: It wasn't such a bad--?

Setrakian: No. If I had my choice of picking out any winery along the lines of our operation in the state, I would most likely pick this one. Even environmentally, we're in pretty good shape, opposed to say Roma or Gallo that's virtually within the city limits of Fresno.

Teiser: Another factor is the trend to so-called "valley varietals" which I don't think existed in your father's day.

Setrakian: Not a bit. Twenty, 25 years ago the grapes in which to choose one's wine production were limited. Technique in wine production was virtually unknown in terms of what we're doing today, because what we're doing down in the San Joaquin Valley, spearheaded by the brilliance of the Gallos--that technique in wine production was unknown, totally unknown. So we're benefiting from the compounding influx of knowledge. It's a compounding kind of a thing. I don't know why it's happening that way, but it sure is.

Setrakian: Through the brilliance coming out of the University, plus the practical experience of enology, plus the production facility that's being invented all over the world but primarily in California, plus the brilliance of guys like [M.A.] Amerine and [H.P.] Olmo and those who are utilizing new strains that grow in all of these impossible areas. I mean, you start adding that up and it is a compounding thing. We're finding out in terms of at least white wines--hell, I think we're going to be able to compete on the white wine basis with any place in the state, if not the world. It's astounding, isn't it?

Teiser: Yes, it really is. Well, I think you've told a good story.

Three Generations

Teiser: Is there anything you want to add?

Setrakian: No, not really. I sure miss my dad a lot, I'll tell you that.

Teiser: You have photographs of four children here on the wall. What are their names?

Setrakian: Well, this is Scott and he just graduated from Stanford. He's going to go to law school next year. He's taking a year off and he's doing some writing. Robbie* just finished his second year at Stanford. He's going to work for me for a year now. Scott's extremely bright. Robbie is very bright. Mary started her first year at Stanford in September. She's all A's. She's going to be on Broadway, she thinks. Her whole interest is music. They're all musically well put together. And Mark is absolutely--he's brilliant. He's absolutely brilliant, and just the sweetest, fabulous guy. His given middle name is Sox. [Laughter] That's one of the great blessings, those four children. They're super human beings. They loved their grandfather, too.

Teiser: Let me just finish by putting down the origin of the name "Sox."

Setrakian: Well, I'm really not sure of it. I have never heard a proper explanation of it. One was that some party that everybody was at many years ago--somebody just had a very difficult time with Setrakian and whoever she was, they were trying various ways of saying it, and out of it popped the word Sox, and it just stuck with him forever.

*Robert A.

Teiser: I heard somewhere, and I don't remember where it was, something about a landlady.

Setrakian: Could very well be. I just don't know. In my case, when I was a little boy, the closest they could get to my name was just Subtraction. [Laughter] I've been known as "Subby" to all of my grammar school friends. No one knows that any more, other than those that I see occasionally. Every once in a while, I see some dear old lady walking down the street and she'll stop me and call me Subby. [Laughter] That really puts me back about 50 years.

[End of interview]

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Ruth Teiser

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