ZAVEN HAGOP CHAKMAKJIAN, MD: a conversation with the editor

Zaven H. Chakmakjian, MD, and William C. Roberts, MD

Zaven Chakmakjian (*Figure 1*) was born and raised in Aleppo, Syria. He attended Aleppo College and then the American University of Beirut in Beirut, Lebanon, receiving his bachelor of science degree in 1959. He entered the American University of Beirut School of Medicine, where he graduated in 1963. After a 1-year rotating internship at the University Hospital in Beirut, he came to Baylor University Medical Center (BUMC) in Dallas in July 1963 and completed a 2-year residency in internal medicine. In July 1965, he moved to Los Angeles, California, where he did a 2-year fellowship in endocrinology at the University of Southern California School of Medicine. Zaven returned to BUMC as head of the Section of Endocrinology and Metabolism and remained in that position until 1985. He directed the Weinberger Endocrine Laboratory at BUMC from 1967 to 1988. Since 1996, he has been a clinical professor of internal medicine at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. Dr. Chakmakjian has published over 30 articles in peer-reviewed medical journals and has been a major contributor to the teaching programs of both residents and staff at BUMC. He is married to the former Vivianne Ekman, and they are the proud parents of three successful offspring. Dr. Chakmakjian is a very interesting person, and it was a pleasure having the opportunity to visit with him for 3 hours during the recording of this interview.

Figure 1. Dr. Zaven Chakmakjian during the interview.

William Clifford Roberts, MD (hereafter, Roberts): *Zaven, I appreciate very much your willingness to talk to me and therefore the readers of BUMC Proceedings. We are in my home on July 21, 2006. To start, could you discuss your early life and some of your earliest memories of your family—mother, father, and siblings?*

Zaven Hagop Chakmakjian, MD (hereafter, Chakmakjian): I was born on July 16, 1938 (*Figure 2*), in Aleppo, Syria, a sizeable city in the northern part of that country (*Figure 3*). My parents were Armenians, born in Aintab, Turkey. They were only small children when they were deported with their

families to Aleppo. (Of the 2 million Armenians in the eastern part of Turkey known as Anatolia, about 1½ million perished between 1915 and 1923.) Aintab, now called Gaziantep, is known for its pistachio groves. My maternal grandfather told me how he worked hard, spending all he earned to buy another pistachio grove. He accumulated 29 groves but had to abandon them all when the family had to flee to Syria. My maternal grandparents lived with us in Aleppo during my childhood and youth. My maternal grandfather sent all his children to be educated.

My paternal grandparents were also well-to-do in Aintab, but when they were forced to relocate to Aleppo, my paternal grandfather, Hagop, became angry with the world and with God and stopped working. He said, "If there is a God, he should

Figure 2. At 1½ years.

Figure 3. Syria, Turkey, and surrounding countries.

From the Division of Endocrinology and Metabolism, Department of Internal Medicine (Chakmakjian) and the Baylor Heart and Vascular Institute (Roberts), Baylor University Medical Center, Dallas, Texas.

Corresponding author: Zaven H. Chakmakjian, MD, 910 North Central Expressway, Dallas, Texas 75204.

not have allowed this to have happened to the Christian Armenians.”

My father was an intelligent man, although he had only an elementary education. Because of his limited education and lack of financial resources, he felt that the future in Aleppo was dim. So when he was 16 years old, he and his brother traveled to Argentina. They learned to speak Spanish and lived there for 7 years, during which time he became a good carpenter. He studied the Bible, participated in home Bible studies, and decided to become a Protestant. He had been raised as an Apostolic Armenian. (Armenia was the first nation to accept Christianity as its national religion in AD 300.) Following his conversion, he applied to the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago to study theology. He did not learn of his acceptance until after his return to Syria. His parents persuaded him to stay in Syria. He married my mother and started a trucking business. After World War II, he started selling auto spare parts.

My father was a worldwide traveler. He made several trips to Italy and Egypt where he bought auto parts left from the war, brought them back to Syria, and sold them in his shop. Soon he became well-to-do and had three shops. As a young boy, I helped in the shop on weekends and after school. Some merchants even came from Northern Iraq (Mosul and Kirkuk). They would say, “Mr. George, load up our truck, and you just tell us how much you want us to pay you.” They knew they could trust him.

He was a good father. Every morning he would line up his three sons and give us smelly cod liver oil, followed by candy. My mother and her sister knitted beautiful sweaters for us. We were loved and well cared for (*Figure 4*).

At the age of 6 or 7, I started learning English and Arabic at school. Armenian was spoken at home, as well as Turkish, since that was the only way we could communicate with our grandparents. My two brothers and I were some of the first Armenian students to learn Arabic. Consequently, I speak four languages, and I’m still fluent in Arabic. We attended a private American school founded by American missionaries. Our teachers were Arabs, Armenians, and Americans.

Roberts: *What was your father’s name?*

Chakmakjian: Kevork Chakmakjian. Kevork is the Armenian version of “George.” Chak-mak means flint-stone in Turkish. Most Armenian names have “ian or yan” on the end, which means “son.”

Roberts: *When was he born?*

Chakmakjian: In 1909.

Roberts: *When did he die?*

Chakmakjian: In 1985, in California. He followed me there in 1967. He bought apartment buildings in Fresno, sold them, and unfortunately lost all his money in the stock market. That was a blow to a proud man.

Roberts: *How did your family get out of Turkey?*

Chakmakjian: They gave money to some Turkish friends, which helped them get smuggled out on a train so they would not be massacred.

Figure 4. The Chakmakjian family in 1947: Papa Kevork, Zaven, George, Souren, Mama Ephronia.

Roberts: *How did you and your father get along?*

Chakmakjian: He was not an easy person to deal with because he was so opinionated. Still we respected him for being so energetic, hardworking, and family-oriented.

Roberts: *Describe your two brothers.*

Chakmakjian: I am the oldest. My brother Souren is 3 years younger, born in 1941. He too became a physician. He is a pediatric cardiologist. He did his residency at Tulane and his pediatric cardiology fellowship at the University of Washington in Seattle. The faculty wanted him to stay in Seattle, but my brother opted to come to Dallas because we were here. His wife is my wife’s twin sister, so our children are double cousins. He retired 2 years ago.

My youngest brother is named George. He was born in 1945, so he is 7 years younger. He is a dentist, a graduate of Southern Methodist University and Case Western Reserve in Cleveland, Ohio. He practices in Whittier, California.

Roberts: *What year did you and your family come to the USA?*

Chakmakjian: I was the first one to come, one day after I graduated from medical school. I started my residency at Baylor Hospital in Dallas on July 2, 1963. My brother George came next in 1964 to attend Southern Methodist University. Then Souren came after he finished medical school at the American University of Beirut in 1966. Our parents immigrated in 1967 while I was in California, the same year I got married.

Roberts: *What was it like growing up in Aleppo?*

Chakmakjian: I enjoyed living in Aleppo (*Figure 5*). The Arab people and the Armenians were friendly, hospitable, and generous. Armenians had the best restaurants and were the best mechanics! We had a great home, and my father provided well for us. He financed all of our education. I applied for a scholarship to college and received it. When he found out, he said, “Don’t take the money. Somebody else needs it more.” He made me return the money.

Aleppo College was a very interesting school. American missionaries, mainly Presbyterians, first established the school in Aintab. The Christian school was relocated to Aleppo after

World War I when the remaining Armenian populace left Turkey. The majority of students were Arabs and Armenians.

Roberts: *What was your home like?*

Chakmakjian: Our first home was spacious, and we had a view of the citadel from our balcony. It was downtown in the old section of town. Our next home was a large flat in the new section of town, across from the Turkish consulate and a lovely park. Our bathrooms had pink marble imported from Italy. My dad was away a great deal, busy with his work.

Roberts: *What was school like?*

Chakmakjian: The school in Aleppo was wonderful. Aleppo College (which included both high school and junior college) was on the outskirts of town overlooking the city. Twice a week during summer we enjoyed swimming at the college pool. We were frequently invited to our American teachers' homes. We still have a yearly reunion in the USA or Canada and I attend if possible.

Roberts: *How many people live in Aleppo?*

Chakmakjian: It is the second largest city in Syria. When I was growing up, it had a population of approximately half a million. Its buildings are all stone or cement. The citadel in Aleppo dates from biblical times and has underground passages to different parts of the city. From a distance, one sees stones and few trees in the city. It is about a 3-hour drive southwest of Haran where Abraham (of the Bible) lived.

Roberts: *What was your mother's name?*

Chakmakjian: Ephronia Aposhian.

Roberts: *When was she born?*

Chakmakjian: In 1905. She was 4 years older than my dad.

Roberts: *And when did she die?*

Chakmakjian: She died in California in 1998 at the age of 93. After my father died, she gradually developed dementia, which was sad.

Roberts: *What was she like?*

Chakmakjian: She had two sisters and one brother. She was short with big brown eyes and thick, naturally curly dark hair, which never turned completely gray. She carried herself with dignity and was reserved, intelligent, frugal, and content. She did beautiful needlework, played the piano, and spoke English well. My aunt Mary, her sister who lived with us, was a music teacher at Aleppo College for girls. She had a beautiful soprano voice and used to sing solos for the church and school choir programs.

Roberts: *Your mother finished college?*

Chakmakjian: Yes, junior college, a 2-year program. It was not common for young ladies to be educated at that time, but her father doted on his daughters.

Roberts: *Were you and your mother close?*

Figure 5. At 11 years.

Chakmakjian: Yes, we were. My mother was so easy to get along with and very diplomatic. I admired her for her ability to get along with my dad because he was quite difficult to live with. She always used to say, "Papa knows!" She had a gentle spirit, radiating the love of Christ, which was good for the family. When she forgot our names near the end, she still remembered the words of a lot of old hymns.

Roberts: *When you were growing up, were there servants in the house? Did your mother do the cooking in your house?*

Chakmakjian: We did not have servants. My aunt Mary and my grandparents helped. My mother was an excellent cook, as was my father. He also worked in the kitchen, helping my mother with the cleaning. (My wife probably wishes I had picked up those traits!) When my parents arrived in the USA after the Six-Day War, they stayed with us for 3 months. During that period, my mother taught my wife how to cook Armenian food.

Roberts: *What did you do on your vacations?*

Chakmakjian: We went to different parts of Syria or to Lebanon, frequently in the mountains. We would rent a house in one of the villages for the summer. My father would come and visit on weekends and then go back to work. In the mountains of Lebanon, the weather is beautiful. We went donkey riding and picked fruits, especially figs and grapes.

Roberts: *Did any teachers in school have a considerable impact on you?*

Chakmakjian: They were all good and encouraged me to study science. I had a very nice algebra teacher named Dr. Kanaan in high school. Later when I moved to Beirut, he was there teaching engineering and living in the same building. I enjoyed playing with his kids.

Roberts: *Getting back to your father, his education was only up to the sixth grade?*

Chakmakjian: Yes, but he was self-educated far beyond his school years. He was bright and aggressive, lecturing at Armenian clubs and churches. He was fluent, using few notes when he spoke.

Roberts: *What did he lecture about?*

Chakmakjian: He loved controversy: politics and religion! My father liked to talk about Christianity, having read his Bible many times. He had a photographic memory. If he had been born at a different time under different circumstances, he could have done even better. He actually wrote a book.

Roberts: *What did he write?*

Chakmakjian: He lived in Dallas for 2 years (1973–1975), during which time I suggested he write a book. He wrote one called *The Great Babylon* in Armenian and had it translated into English. The Armenian version is excellent, but unfortunately, the English translation was not as good.

Roberts: *Is it an autobiography?*

Chakmakjian: Yes, but he also discussed what he believed the Bible predicted about the future. It is well done, especially considering his level of education.

Roberts: *When you were in school, did you participate in extracurricular activities? Were you an athlete?*

Chakmakjian: I was expected first to excel in my studies. I liked to play soccer, basketball, volleyball, and table ten-

nis. I collected stamps, played chess, and enjoyed the glee club. I have a good voice, but I never had formal training. I even play the harmonica. (Our daughter, Lisa, is an excellent singer, and our son, Chris, is an excellent piano player.) First, I was supposed to make good grades. Then I was expected to help my dad in the shop. Extracurricular activities came last.

Roberts: *Did you enjoy studying and learning?*

Chakmakjian: Yes, I did. My father expected his three sons to bring home A's.

Roberts: *You didn't have a choice then?*

Chakmakjian: I would have studied hard even if it wasn't expected of me.

Roberts: *If you brought home a B, what would he say?*

Chakmakjian: That hardly ever happened. He would have told me to come to the shop less and to study more.

Roberts: *Was there alcohol in your home when you were growing up?*

Chakmakjian: No.

Roberts: *Neither of your parents drank alcohol?*

Chakmakjian: No alcohol and no cigarettes!

Roberts: *Do you have a drink of alcohol now and then?*

Chakmakjian: Occasionally when I go to meetings. I do not think a little wine hurts, but although I like the taste, I never buy it. My wife never drinks. We have never smoked either.

Roberts: *How did you decide to become a physician?*

Chakmakjian: As I was finishing high school, I had to make a decision whether to major in science or business. My father said, "I have a successful business. You need to get a business degree from the American University and then come and help me." I agreed and registered for the business section at Aleppo College. You should have seen all my teachers' faces. They were dismayed that I had signed up for business because in Aleppo, if you have good grades, you go into the sciences, either medicine or engineering. I told my dad that the teachers were not happy with my decision. He asked me if I wanted to change and I said no. The teachers started calling to see when they could meet my father. I told them, "He is either at work or at church." They showed up at church, cornered him, and said, "It is your right to do what you wish for your son, but he should go into science, not business." My mother only smiled. Finally, he decided not to interfere and told me I was free to do as I wanted. He had been unable to sleep and went with me Monday morning to change my major. He informed the teachers, "He's yours. You can guide him in the direction you think he should take." They felt that either engineering or medicine would be good.

After 6 months, I decided I really liked chemistry and biology more than the engineering courses, so that is how I ended up being a physician. In the old country, there is a lot of respect for physicians, and they were well treated. It was not a matter of earning money, but a matter of helping people. I had learned how to earn money and be a businessman from my

Figure 6. Receiving his bachelor's degree, 1959.

dad. When I chose medicine, I lost all my interest in being a businessman. All during medical school and for the first 20 years of practice, I never thought about whether or not I could make money. When I was recruited to Baylor full-time, there were meager financial rewards. That didn't bother me. I promised my wife, "We'll never be poor. We will have enough money to live. I don't care about the money."

Roberts: *After high school, you went to Aleppo College?*

Chakmakjian: Yes, my first 2 years were at Aleppo College. For my junior year, I transferred to the American University of Beirut, since that was a requirement for entering medical school (*Figure 6*). Hundreds of students competed for a limited number

of positions. Only 40 students were accepted that year. I also had to take and pass an English entrance examination. Some students who had not made it the first time got their master's degree and then would try again for medical school.

Roberts: *How many students were at the American University of Beirut?*

Chakmakjian: Over 2000.

Roberts: *When you went there for your junior year, was that the first time you lived away from home?*

Chakmakjian: Yes.

Roberts: *How did it work out?*

Chakmakjian: It was fine. That first year I lived in the University Christian Center. My roommate, Warren Smith, was an American spending his junior year abroad. He never studied. He never made his bed and let his friends jump on my bed. That was upsetting. Back at home, we used to have to make our bed. He was pleasant and respectful, but I wanted to study to get into medical school. So the second semester I moved to another room. It was a nice environment. Supervisors were assigned to us. The evening supervisor, Lee Theodore, used to come and sing to us. He had a beautiful tenor voice.

Years later, when I was in California doing my fellowship in endocrinology in Los Angeles, I saw Mr. Theodore while I was out walking. He said, "Zaven, what are you doing here?" I told him about my fellowship. He replied, "I'm married now to a beautiful German-American girl. Come have dinner with us. We live around the block." I went and some friends of Lee and June invited me to their Scandinavian church, which is where I met my future wife, Vivianne. The Theodores sang at our wedding.

Roberts: *Your father paid for all your schooling including medical school so you did not have to work?*

Chakmakjian: Correct.

Roberts: *How did medical school strike you? Did you like it? What were some surprises?*

Chakmakjian: There were no surprises. The teachers were good. I worked hard, made good grades, and had no problems (*Figure 7*). I was always in the top 10% of my class. None of

the students had to work to support themselves because all came from families who could afford the tuition. If you were poor, you needed to have a scholarship, or you couldn't make it. If you didn't make it you just dropped out.

Roberts: *Was that the only medical school in Lebanon?*

Chakmakjian: No, there was also a French medical school, but I was brought up with an English education, so the French school was not an option for me. (Lebanon and Syria were under French mandate through World War II, so there were lots of French influences.) There were few American schools. Because I learned English, my destination was the American University of Beirut. The American University is chartered by the State of New York. The chief of surgery was John Wilson, whom I respected highly. He later became the dean at Stanford University in California. When I was doing my surgery rotation, he told me that if I wanted to do a surgery residency he would accept me. I told him that I thought I was going to do internal medicine. My father had always given me the impression that I was better with my head than my hands. Dr. Wilson told me to tell my father that I was just as good with my hands as I was with my head.

Roberts: *Was it easy for you to choose internal medicine? When you rotated through pediatrics, obstetrics-gynecology, and surgery, it sounds like you liked them all.*

Chakmakjian: I did like them all. The students with the better grades generally chose internal medicine. All the top people in the class went into internal medicine.

Roberts: *Your medical school was 4 years?*

Chakmakjian: Yes, but we were required to do an internship there. The Lebanese government had a rule that students could not get their diploma unless they did a rotating internship. It took 3 years of college, 4 years of medical school, and 1 year of rotating internship to receive the diploma.

Roberts: *You finished your rotating internship in June 1963?*

Chakmakjian: Yes. Only 22 of the 40 freshmen in my class graduated. Eleven were dumped after the freshman year. There was no mercy. When I was an intern, I had to be on call every other day for 12 months. We drew all the blood. On surgery, our day started on Friday morning and ended on Tuesday evening. We never went home. We lived at the hospital and were not paid. They gave us food and a room. It was tough. I applied to the British council, and they accepted me, so that is where I lived.

Roberts: *Did they have hotel-type rooms?*

Chakmakjian: No, it was a dorm, a room plus meals.

Roberts: *Did you have a car?*

Chakmakjian: No, I did not need a car in Beirut.

Roberts: *During your rotating internship, you decided to come to the States?*

Chakmakjian: I decided that even before then. I took the medical examination for foreign medical graduates during my

Figure 7. Receiving his medical degree, 1963.

fourth year of medical school. I had to pass it before I could apply to US institutions. It was given at the university.

Roberts: *Why did you want to come to the States?*

Chakmakjian: My father encouraged all three of his sons to leave Syria because of the country's political instability.

Roberts: *How did you come to Baylor Hospital?*

Chakmakjian: I applied to four places: the University of Miami, Northwestern University in Chicago, the University of Maryland in Baltimore, and Baylor. I was accepted at all four. Most of my colleagues ended up in the East Coast, but I wanted to be different. Choosing was a challenge. I consulted my dad because he had been to the USA several

times. He said he had heard that there were cowboys in Dallas! In the meantime, I saw a movie called *State Fair* starring Pat Boone and Ann-Margret. That may have tipped the scales!

I received a cable from Dr. Ralph Tompsett, who was the director of medical education, telling me that he had one position but two applicants for it. He needed a prompt reply, so I answered in the affirmative.

Roberts: *How did Baylor Hospital hit you when you came in 1963? Were you impressed with it? Were you pleased with the training? Did you like Dallas?*

Chakmakjian: Dr. Tompsett was like a second father. He said, "If there is anything you need, I'll help you." He was a genuinely fine person. (I was honored to be one of the ushers at his funeral years later.) I really liked Baylor.

Within a few days, I had a room at the Washington Apartments on Junius Street. The rent was only \$30 a month. I received \$120 a month as my residency stipend. I called my dad and told him I needed a car. He sent me the money on the spot, and I bought a new Volkswagen. There was a welcome get-together for all the new residents. Those from abroad were assigned a host family. My host family was the Harris family; Dr. William Harris was an ophthalmologist.

Roberts: *You were pleased with your experience at Baylor?*

Chakmakjian: I loved Baylor. I felt that the training was very good. Communicating with the black patients was a new experience because their terminology for things was different than what I was used to. I was surprised that I had to use a different bathroom than the black man. This was 1963.

Within a few months of my coming here, President Kennedy was shot. I was in the Veal Building (Texas Baptist Memorial Sanitarium) seeing patients. Bob Hill, who was the chief surgery resident, came in and said, "President Kennedy is coming to Dallas today, and they might kill him." We all laughed it off. Two hours later President Kennedy was fatally shot. I went to the cafeteria and saw Bob Hill. "Zaven," he said, "What did I tell you? They did it!" That was a shocking experience. I got a letter from my father in Syria who said, "I told you not to go to Dallas."

Roberts: *You were at Baylor Hospital for 2 years?*

Chakmakjian: Yes. At first, I didn't feel I was part of the community. However, nice families invited me to their homes, and I was impressed by the friendliness of folks here. A nice older woman, Frances Royall, gave me a room the second year I was at Baylor. She had a beautiful house and servants. She was very sad when I left Dallas.

Roberts: *How did you decide that you wanted to be an endocrinologist? Where did you do your fellowship? How did it all work out for you?*

Chakmakjian: After the first 3 months of residency, Dr. Tompsett called me into his office to tell me that he was very pleased with my performance and wanted me to complete my residency at Baylor. After the end of the first year, he said, "I want you to be the chief resident for your third year." While I was thinking about it, an Armenian friend, Dr. Jack Silah, who was an endocrine fellow at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, suggested that I consider endocrinology. Dr. Harold Varon, who was in charge of Baylor's endocrine laboratory, also encouraged me to consider endocrinology. He asked if I would like to go to the West Coast. I told Dr. Tompsett that I wouldn't mind being the chief resident if I were going to stay in Dallas and practice internal medicine, but I really wanted to get into a subspecialty. He was willing to help me any way he could.

I liked the idea of going to the West Coast because there were lots of Armenians there. In 1964, in one of the issues of *The New England Journal of Medicine*, the lead article was on the hyponatremia of hypopituitarism by Drs. Don Nelson and Jack Bethune from the Los Angeles County Hospital. Dr. Varon suggested that I write to Don Nelson, and he wrote to Dr. Nelson about me. I received a reply saying that Dr. Nelson would love to offer me a position but, unfortunately, he did not have money allocated for the particular year I applied. I wrote to McGill Hospital in Montreal, Canada, and was accepted. I had a feeling that the answer I received from Dr. Nelson was not right, so my brother George and I drove to Los Angeles during the Christmas vacation. I told Don Nelson that I would be visiting friends in the area and would like to meet him. We drove 26 hours straight. I visited with Don Nelson, a very nice man, and he then offered me the job. He indicated that he still did not have money but that he did have an institutional grant from the National Institutes of Health. I accepted.

I knew nothing about research. During the first year as a fellow under Dr. Nelson, I developed the radioimmunoassay technique for growth hormone. Dr. Nelson then set me up with Jack Bethune, his number two man, who subsequently became the chief of endocrinology at Los Angeles County Hospital after Don Nelson was recruited to Salt Lake City the second year I was there.

Dr. Bethune was working on a bioassay of parathyroid hormone (PTH) and wanted me to help him. They were injecting PTH into mice at increasing doses and then chopping off their heads and measuring calcium. He wanted me to do that. I told him I could not chop off the heads of hundreds of mice every day. He offered a technician who would do the chopping, and I

would do the testing. I told him I did not want to get involved with bioassays.

He was okay with that and suggested another project. We started giving sodium sulfate to hypercalcemic patients to normalize their serum calcium. Since calcium excretion is a function of sodium excretion and the sodium sulfate solutions are isotonic, it worked well. We used to give 2 liters of sodium sulfate intravenously. The pharmacy prepared it for us. This made hypercalcemic patients normocalcemic. When the study was successfully completed, we submitted the manuscript to *The New England Journal of Medicine*. It was accepted and published as a lead article in 1967.

As soon as that article came out, Dr. Tompsett called me from Dallas and said he had talked with Boone Powell, Sr., and they wanted to interview me if I had any interest in returning to Dallas to set up an endocrine division in the Department of Internal Medicine. I visited Dallas, and Dr. Tompsett and Boone Powell, Sr., were very persistent that I come to Baylor and promised that they would help me sort everything out any way they could. I went back to Los Angeles, talked to Jack Bethune, and told him that Baylor wanted me. We discussed my staying in California and joining his staff. About this time, I met my future wife, Vivianne.

In addition, about this time Don Nelson told me that Sol Berson and Rosalyn Yalow from the Bronx were coming to spend 2 weeks in Los Angeles at the Wadsworth Veterans Administration Hospital to help Ernie Gold, head of endocrinology, set up an adrenocorticotrophic hormone assay. Don Nelson wanted me to spend a week with them. I did and was very impressed watching them do the chromatography. They were excellent researchers and taught me a lot. At the end of the week, Berson asked me what I was doing the next year; he suggested that I take another year of fellowship and come to the Bronx. I appreciated his invitation but told him that I had accepted a position to be the head of endocrinology at Baylor Hospital.

I had a good working relationship with Dr. Bethune. I spent about 80% of my time in clinical research and developing hormone assays in the laboratory. About 20% of my time was spent with residents teaching and consulting on endocrine cases at the Los Angeles County Hospital. As a result, I believe I had a good exposure to the ever-changing field of basic and clinical endocrinology.

Many years later, Southwestern and BUMC invited Sol Berson to Dallas to give medical grand rounds. At BUMC, he asked me how things were going. I told him I felt somewhat isolated. Baylor had given me a laboratory and I had done some research, but I did not know whom to ask to review my research. He offered to review my work on growth hormone in the urine of neonates. He edited my manuscript, and it was accepted and published.

Roberts: *When did you return to Baylor Hospital?*

Chakmakjian: After 2 years in Los Angeles, I returned to Dallas in September 1967. I got married on February 4, 1967, 6 months before leaving California.

Roberts: *What were Vivianne's features that attracted you to her?*

Figure 8. With his wife, Vivianne, on an Alaskan cruise in 1996.

Chakmakjian: She was 5 feet 7 inches tall, my height, and a brunette with blue-gray eyes. She was a senior in college majoring in both English and elementary education. She also worked 20 hours a week in a preschool. I liked her quiet, humble personality and her family. She was at California State University. Her twin sister was at the University of California, Los Angeles. She lived with her parents, and I was impressed by how helpful she was. We shared the same religious beliefs even though we came from different cultures. I'm an Indo-European and she is Northern European, born in Sweden. We respect each other and in February 2007 will celebrate our 40th anniversary (*Figure 8*). She wants me to take her to Costa Rica. She works hard taking care of our home in Dallas as well as at the ranch. You can tell by looking at me that I enjoy her cooking!

Roberts: *How did Dallas hit her?*

Chakmakjian: She really missed her family a lot, although they visited each other. My brother Souren and his wife (Vivianne's twin sister) moved to Dallas about 3 years later. Her parents followed us to Dallas about 10 years after we came. She has made good friends here and has learned to like Dallas.

Roberts: *How did your brother meet your wife's twin sister?*

Chakmakjian: He was the best man at our wedding; she was the maid of honor. I was hesitant to encourage their relationship in case things did not go well. My brother does not take chances. He observed us for a while, just as he watched my going to medical school, coming to the States, and moving to Dallas. He is more like our mother—very careful with his decisions and choices but hardworking and very bright. They have been married 37 years and live close to us. My wife and her sister, Kerstin, travel to Sweden regularly. Their family has an old family home in Northern Sweden. Twenty-one years ago their mother died, and their father remarried 2 years later to a fine Swedish lady whose family he had known for a long time. He will be 90 years old at the end of October. They spend the winters in Dallas and summers in Sweden. I have only been to Sweden twice. The trip means stopping in three airports. Vivianne and Kerstin were only 6 years old when their parents immigrated to the USA (California) because her father did not like Sweden's

Figure 9. Current office near downtown Dallas.

Figure 10. Partners: Drs. Brian Welch, Neil Breslau, Zaven Chakmakjian, Raphaelle Vallera, and Howard Heller.

socialized system and they had relatives in America. Her father is distinguished looking. They still speak Swedish fluently with all the aunts, uncles, and cousins over there. They were born in the most northern city on the Baltic Sea, Luleå.

Roberts: *When you came back to Baylor as head of endocrinology, you were on salary?*

Chakmakjian: Yes, I was guaranteed \$17,500 the first year. I had no contract, only a verbal agreement and a handshake. I had applied for permanent residency before leaving Los Angeles since I had come on an exchange visitor's visa. Less than 2 months after I returned to Baylor, the lawyer from Los Angeles called to tell me my application had been approved. Within 3 months I was classified 1A, making me eligible to be drafted. Boone Powell, Sr., called a Texas senator in Washington and explained that BUMC had spent time and money recruiting me for the past year and they needed me to stay here. Within 2 months, I received an "education deferment."

In Dallas, I established assay techniques at the Weinberger Endocrinology Laboratory. I published some papers. Then Dr. George Race approached me to head the division of endocrinology in the pathology department. I took the new position and for 15 years gave the endocrine conferences twice a month for medicine residents. I enjoyed the laboratory because George Race was very good to me and gave me total freedom. A PhD, Dr. N. Y. Zachariah, and eight technicians provided full endocrine laboratory service for BUMC. I did some research on the side. However, after 15 years running the lab, I left BUMC for private practice but continued teaching at BUMC.

Roberts: *Where is your office now?*

Chakmakjian: The address is 910 N. Central Expressway by Texas Street and the expressway's service road (*Figure 9*). I needed additional space because Dr. Neil Breslau from South-

Figure 11. At the ranch. (a) In his Jeep. (b) With Vivianne, after a Texas snowstorm.

western and Dr. Raphaelle Valleria from Duke University joined me 10 years ago. As of July 1, 2006, Dr. Brian Welch came on board after completing 3 years of fellowship at Southwestern. On September 1, 2006, our practice will have the addition of Dr. Howard Heller, also from Southwestern (*Figure 10*). Our physicians see patients in Plano and Arlington in addition to our Dallas location. On Friday afternoons I head out to our ranch in East Texas.

Roberts: *Where in East Texas is your ranch?*

Chakmakjian: It is in the Alba-Golden area, 10 minutes west from Mineola (*Figure 11*). Golden is called the sweet potato capital.

Roberts: *How many miles is that from Dallas?*

Chakmakjian: It is close to 90 miles and takes us 1½ hours to reach it. The ranch is lovely. We have 110 acres around a nice house with several barns and a cottage. We own an additional 370 acres of farmland 6 miles north of the ranch.

Roberts: *What are some of your nonmedical interests?*

Chakmakjian: I enjoy making new friends. I am very much interested in Middle Eastern politics. I am not a Bible scholar, but I read the Bible and so much of what is happening over there is predicted in the Bible. That convinces me that it truly is the Word of God. My beliefs are important. I grew up in a Christian home, with my dad's family being Apostolic and my mother's side being Armenian Evangelical. As complex as our world is, there has to be a Creator. I believe the Bible verse, John

Figure 12. At the ranch with son Chris and his twin boys.

3:16: "For God so loved the world that he sent his only Begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." That is what I choose. If I am wrong, I haven't lost anything, but if I am right, I gain everything.

Roberts: *Where do you go to church?*

Chakmakjian: We raised our children at First Assembly of God in Dallas. They learned scripture and apply it to their lives.

Roberts: *What do you do when you go to your ranch?*

Chakmakjian: These days I have been doing a lot of watering! Our land is subleased to a local rancher, Phil Sadler, who keeps about 50 head of cattle and four pretty horses there. I own three donkeys. (The baby was born on my birthday!) It is interesting looking after the animals. We work and we visit with our friends. There is a blackberry farm close by, so we pick berries during June and July. It's a quiet, peaceful place to read and relax. Sometimes our children and grandchildren visit (*Figure 12*). They like to catch fish in the ponds. The largest one is about 3 acres and has a nice dock. They can ride the paddleboat. Our son-in-law rides his four-wheeler.

Roberts: *Do you read a lot?*

Chakmakjian: Yes, I do. I have collected many medical articles through the years. I enjoy nonfiction. Right now, I'm reading the autobiography of Tommy Franks. I like to keep up-to-date about news here and the world, especially Armenia!

Roberts: *How much sleep do you require to feel good the next day?*

Chakmakjian: I like to get 7 hours, but I can get by with 6.

Roberts: *What is your day like now? What time do you get to your office?*

Chakmakjian: We stay up late at our house. On Mondays, I arrive at the office between 8:30 and 9:00. On Tuesday mornings, I try to make medical grand rounds. I usually finish my work between 6:00 and 8:00 PM. On Fridays, I do not see

Figure 13. Daughter Lisa with her husband, Troy Reimer, and their boys, Tristan and Brendan.

patients, but then I spend some time on Sunday afternoon cleaning up my desk.

Roberts: *How much time do you take off a year?*

Chakmakjian: Nothing on a regular basis. This year I took a week off to go to California. I'm going to Galveston from August 11 to 13 for an endocrine meeting. We've traveled quite a bit: Scandinavia, Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, England, Spain, Morocco, Mexico, and Canada. Three years ago we took a wonderful tour of Armenia. I really enjoyed that. There's so much history, beautiful scenery, good food, and very reasonable prices.

Roberts: *You have three children. What are their names, and how are they doing?*

Chakmakjian: My oldest is Lisa Christine Reimer, born in 1968. She graduated from Baylor University and has been our office manager for 14 years. She was "Miss Central Texas" while she was at Baylor University. She is not only pretty but is an excellent singer. Her husband, Troy Reimer, is a family law attorney, a graduate of Southern Methodist University. They have two boys, Tristan Allen (8 years old) and Brendan Carl (almost 6) (*Figure 13*). Another baby boy is expected August 28th. They will name him Landon Jacob.

Our son, Zaven Christopher, was born in October 1970. We call him Chris. He is a dentist, a graduate of Baylor College of Dentistry. Chris met his wife, Sara (Jones), at Baylor University. They have twin boys, Ward and Harris (almost 4 years old) (*Figure 14*). They are expecting a baby girl around August 16th.

Figure 14. Son Chris with his wife, Sara, and their twins, Ward and Harris.

Figure 15. Son Carl with his wife, Christina, and their girls, Lexie and Elle.

Her name will be Addie Hope. Sara taught school in Heath. Now Chris' practice is on Ridge Road in Rockwall.

Our youngest is Carl Gustav, born in 1973 with the same name as the king of Sweden! (Vivianne's Dad's name is Gustav.) He is married to the former Christina Guy, whose family lives in Houston. They have two beautiful blonde little girls, Alexis ("Lexie") Victoria, who is 4½, and Elle Elisabeth, who will be 2 in October (*Figure 15*). Christina was also a schoolteacher. Carl is an oncologist practicing in Waco with Texas Oncology.

Roberts: *You have six grandchildren and two on the way.*

Chakmakjian: Yes, and of course, we think they are all lovely. We enjoy seeing them often. Fortunately, none of them live too far away. They call me "Metz Papa" (Grandpa in Armenian).

Roberts: *What's your house like?*

Chakmakjian: We have lived in the Cloisters by White Rock Lake for 33 years. We have approximately 4000 square feet with a playroom for the children and a pool. I love oriental rugs, and Vivianne loves pictures. She makes picture albums of all our family and our travels. It is a one-story house, so everything is spread out.

Roberts: *What do you do when you get home at night?*

Chakmakjian: I look forward to seeing my wife and eating her good cooking! I watch the 10:00 news and *Nightline*. I dictate patient charts, do some reading, pay bills, etc. I read Armenian magazines and check out what's going on with Middle Eastern politics.

Roberts: *What's going to happen over there?*

Chakmakjian: It is a bad situation. I know Arabs because I was born and raised with them. President Bush genuinely desires to bring democracy to places such as Iraq, but I do not think it is possible. The reason it is not possible is that there are three factions who do not like each other and are not willing to work together. A possible solution for Iraq is to consider dividing into three autonomous sections: Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish. Otherwise, civil war is waiting to happen. I have Iranian friends, but I worry about Iran. Of course, it made me sad to hear of the bombing of Beirut, a beautiful city. Unfortunately, the Hezbollah are strong there and bent on the destruction of Israel. Of course, Israel must defend itself. According to the Bible, there will be one last final battle, the Battle of Armageddon. We appear to be heading in that direction.

Roberts: *I gather that the most common patients you see in your practice are diabetics?*

Chakmakjian: Diabetes is probably about 50% of my practice now. Since I've been around a long time and due to my background, I see all types of endocrine conditions. I see thyroid problems, as well as pituitary, adrenal, and female-related problems. At this stage, I'm a general endocrinologist with 40 years of clinical experience.

Roberts: *What is your age?*

Chakmakjian: I was 68 on July 16.

Roberts: *Are you going to work forever? What are you planning to do from here?*

Figure 16. The Chakmakjian family at the 90th birthday celebration of Vivianne's father, Gustav Ekman (seated next to Vivianne, the fourth from the left), in October 2006. This photo includes all of the grandchildren, including the two newborns.

Chakmakjian: I haven't decided yet. I am now officially working 4 days a week. Eventually I will probably limit my practice to 2 or 3 days a week, especially since Dr. Welch and Dr. Heller are joining us.

Roberts: *Is there anything that we have not discussed that you would like to talk about?*

Chakmakjian: Not really, Bill. I enjoyed our visit and have opened my heart to you. I have love and respect for my culture, but most of all I am glad to be an American.

Roberts: *Zaven, I want to thank you for pouring your soul out, so to speak. On behalf of BUMC Proceedings, I want to thank you very much for doing this.*

Chakmakjian: Thank you for inviting me, Bill.

• • •

Postscript. *After the interview, a family photo was taken that included all the children and grandchildren (Figure 16).*