



City of Alexandria
Office of Historic Alexandria
Alexandria Legacies
Oral History Program



Project Name: *Immigrant Alexandria: Past, Present and Future*

Title: *Interview with Serdar Basegmez*

Date of Interview: *May 18, 2015*

Location of Interview: *Mr. Serdar's house in Alexandria, Virginia*

Interviewer: *Elaine T. Schwartz*

Audio and Video Recording: *John Reibling*

Transcriber: *Bryan Cockrell*

Abstract: Serdar Basegmez was born in Ankara, Turkey, but raised in Istanbul. He came to the United States to study. Although he went to high school and college in Ankara, he always knew that he wanted to live in the United States to learn English, travel, attend concerts, etc. He enrolled in Montgomery College in Maryland and took part-time jobs to make ends meet. He moved to Houston, Texas, to set up a business. It was there he began the process of naturalization, which he completed in 1987. After being in Houston a while he decided to move back to the Washington, D.C., area. Since returning to the D.C. area, Mr. Basegmez has owned a variety of small businesses. He currently owns a catering company and two dry cleaners. Serdar says he has a positive outlook on life in general, and that's made his immigration experience a positive one.

This transcript has been edited by the interviewee and may not reflect the audio-recording exactly.

Table of Contents/Index

Counter	Minute	Page	Topic
00:00:01	<i>Information not available</i>	3	Introductions
00:01:32		3	Starting Life in the Washington, D.C., Area
00:04:19		4	Life in Turkey
00:06:49		5	Inspirations for Immigrating
00:07:55		6	Family
00:10:33		7	Businesses
00:12:33		8	Early Jobs
00:16:16		10	Life In Alexandria
00:21:15		12	Recreation
00:24:23		13	New Projects and Travels
00:25:53		13	Thoughts on Daily Life

Introductions	
Elaine Schwartz:	Good morning. My name is Elaine Schwartz. I am with the Alexandria Archaeology Museum, and I'm doing an oral history interview with Serdar Basegmez.
Serdar Basegmez:	That is correct.
E.S.:	Thank you very much. And our terrific videographer is John Reibling. So we're just gonna start right in and, I hope this will be more of a conversation than a question-and-answer kind of thing.
Serdar Basegmez:	Great.
E.S.:	So, Serdar is from Turkey, so I guess maybe we should start out about when did you emigrate?
Serdar Basegmez:	I came into United States in early [19]80s as a student, and I've been here since, for—.
E.S.:	Where were you a student?
Serdar Basegmez:	I came to Maryland. I went to Montgomery College—.
E.S.:	Okay.
Serdar Basegmez:	And took probably almost two years of classes such as—I had to take English classes because I didn't speak English when I came in here, and my high school and college education back home in Turkey, I studied German—.
E.S.:	Hmm.
Serdar Basegmez:	So therefore I needed to take English classes and the whole idea was stay in the United States a few years and learn the language and possibly go to school or finish another major and move back. But then life happened [Elaine laughs] and after thirty-five years, I'm still here.
Starting Life in the Washington, D.C. Area	
E.S.:	How old were you when you came?
Serdar Basegmez:	I was about twenty-one.
E.S.:	Okay. And do you want to tell us what you mean by what life happened?
Serdar Basegmez:	Well, I start going to school and I start working and, I think it was right around back in [19]83 summer I was living in Bethesda,

	Maryland, and I was looking for an extra job and I saw this sign on a window. It said: “Bagel Bakery: Hiring Employees.” And I walked in there, filled up an application and they asked me if I made bagels, if I knew how to make bagels. [Elaine laughs] I told them I had no idea.
E.S.:	Did you know what a bagel was?
Serdar Basegmez:	I knew what a bagel was because we have something very similar back home. It’s a little different but a very similar idea. So I start working there and I worked there a year and then I got in a management position and then after that job I worked in Georgetown in a couple of restaurants and I think a year or two later I got an offer from Houston, Texas, two attorneys, or one or two attorneys, I don’t remember, it’s a long time ago. They wanted to open a bagel bakery in Houston and they offered me partnership. So it was right around—
E.S.:	How did they know about you?
Serdar Basegmez:	I think they did some research back here because they knew that the bagel bakery in Maryland was a very successful one, and I think they had some connections in Maryland. So I moved to Houston—must’ve been [19]85—and opened a bagel bakery and we had a real successful business. However, a year later, a little over a year later, I just couldn’t take the humidity and heat in Houston, so I decided to move back to the D.C. area, and—.
E.S.:	For its lovely, balmy climate in the summer. [laughs]
Serdar Basegmez:	Well, it’s here only a few months.
E.S.:	Right, right.
Serdar Basegmez:	And if you’re in Houston, it’s half of the year is like that. And there on I start doing my own business. I loved small businesses all my life, so I’ve been in restaurant business, I had a café, been dry cleaning business, been convenience stores. And—since then, that’s what I’ve been doing. Small business. I own and operate small businesses.
E.S.:	Okay, I wanna come back to that.
Serdar Basegmez:	Okay.
Life in Turkey	
E.S.:	But let’s back up a little bit to since you were you said twenty or twenty-one—?
Serdar Basegmez:	Um-hm.

E.S.:	When you came here. Tell us about Turkey, where you were born, your family.
Serdar Basegmez:	I was—my father worked for government, so when I was born even though we are from Istanbul, Turkey, they were in Ankara, which is the capital of Turkey, and that’s where I was born. I spent back and forth my about first seven, eight years of my life back and forth Ankara and Istanbul. And if we were in Ankara I would spend all my summers and holidays back in Istanbul because my, our families or my parents’ families, they were there. And then I finished high school in Istanbul and I went to Istanbul University for hotel management and then I moved here [19]81. After, yeah after, Istanbul I moved to D.C. metro area and that’s how—.
E.S.:	Did you have siblings in Turkey?
Serdar Basegmez:	Well, no, I’m the only child.
E.S.:	[Overlapping] Only child.
Serdar Basegmez:	Because my mother had—she was the oldest of seven. I don’t think she wanted to have another child.
E.S.:	So when you came to the states, did your family stay behind?
Serdar Basegmez:	Yeah, everybody was behind, everybody’s still behind. Everybody meaning my father just passed away about a month ago and my mother passed a number of years ago in a traffic accident.
E.S.:	Oh my.
Serdar Basegmez:	But in the United States I only have a cousin who lives in Massachusetts. We’re the only black sheep in the family in the U.S., so that’s what we have. And I have a son who lives here—.
E.S.:	So let me stay in Turkey for a little while. So you went to high school, you graduated—.
Serdar Basegmez:	[overlapping] I went to high school, I went to college, and then in school I went to—we had two, three, or four-years programs and even though I was eligible for certain programs—rather, certifications or diplomas—I always knew I wanted to come here and it wasn’t—I decided it wasn’t really what I wanted to do. So, I never got an official diploma, and then I came here and—.
Inspirations for Immigrating	
E.S.:	Why did you decide to come here?
Serdar Basegmez:	It was just always a dream. It was a dream to come to U.S., travel,

	and maybe see great concerts, great music venues, and—.
E.S.:	What kind of music did you—?
Serdar Basegmez:	Ah, I like rock and roll and jazz.
E.S.:	Ah, okay, cause I was gonna say there's a lot of music in Europe too.
Serdar Basegmez:	[Overlapping] Oh, yeah, there's music everywhere.
E.S.:	[Overlapping] Maybe not as much rock and roll.
Serdar Basegmez:	Whatever it was that age—being a teenager, or what have you—that was really exciting, and I always wanted to go to California, I always wanted to go to New York, Chicago, such cities, so that was a dream—.
E.S.:	Did you do all that?
Serdar Basegmez:	I did. I traveled a lot. I didn't even, I didn't live in any of those cities, but I've been probably gone to, I would easily say over forty plus city—not cities—.
E.S.:	States.
Serdar Basegmez:	States, rather, thank you. And traveled or gotten lost in probably over, God knows, a hundred cities.
Family	
E.S.:	So it sounds to me like you were kind of an adventurous young man.
Serdar Basegmez:	I was, I was. Traveling like everyone else, when they're in their teens or twenties. And then of course after I had a child back in 1993, I was a lot more settled and—.
E.S.:	Were you married then?
Serdar Basegmez:	I was married and I was married to a French lady, and so, we were married about ten years, and—.
E.S.:	And you met her here?
Serdar Basegmez:	I met her here. Yes.
E.S.:	In the D.C. area?
Serdar Basegmez:	In the metro area. Yes. And then she got an assignment after we got divorced in Nairobi, Kenya. That's where my son went to middle school.
E.S.:	Okay, let me back up a second. So you got married, you remember what year it was?

Serdar Basegmez:	It was 1990, 1990, one, 1991.
E.S.:	So you were about thirty-ish, thirty-one?
Serdar Basegmez:	About.
E.S.:	Okay, and then you had the son?
Serdar Basegmez:	I had the son back in 1993.
E.S.:	And where did you live as a family?
Serdar Basegmez:	We lived a couple years in Chevy Chase [Maryland], rest of the time in McLean [Virginia].
E.S.:	Okay, you've really been around the Metropolitan area.
Serdar Basegmez:	Yeah. [Elaine laughs] When you're here thirty-five years, yes. And then after she got her assignment in Kenya, so my son and—.
E.S.:	So you were divorced by that time?
Serdar Basegmez:	We were divorced. Yes.
E.S.:	And your son was how old?
Serdar Basegmez:	He was middle-school-age, eleven, twelve. And they lived there three years, and they moved to France because of her job.
E.S.:	What was her job?
Serdar Basegmez:	She worked for the French Embassy. And my son went first two years of high school in France and then he wanted to move back here and finish high school here with his friends because he was born here, he went to elementary school here, all his friends were here. And when he decided to come back. I figured it's a good idea to move back to McLean area so he'll be with his friends. So, even though I kept my place here in Old Town [Alexandria], I got a place in Falls Church [Virginia], so he went to [George C.] Marshall High School and graduated from there. And then after he finished high school I had no reason to be in Falls Church area, so I came back to Old Town again and—.
E.S.:	Always in this apartment?
Businesses	
Serdar Basegmez:	No. My first business was in 1993 in Alexandria.
E.S.:	In Old Town?
Serdar Basegmez:	It was, no, it wasn't Old Town. It was right on Jefferson Davis Highway, right outside of Beltway.

E.S.:	Outside of—?
Serdar Basegmez:	Beltway. [Interstate] 495.
E.S.:	Oh the Beltway, uh-huh.
Serdar Basegmez:	And then I had a coffee shop on Queen Street, which I opened in 1996. And that's where I've lived most of my time in Old Town Alexandria, near Queen Street and South Washington Street, and I have been in this apartment the last two years.
E.S.:	Okay, so you have opened a lot of businesses.
Serdar Basegmez:	I have, I have—.
E.S.:	So how did you get started? One needs capital, doesn't one?
Serdar Basegmez:	I think, well, if you wanna do something, you can always find resources. It's all up to you how much you wanna do things, how big your dream is. So as I said before, I've loved small businesses; it's always exciting for me.
E.S.:	Because you like being the boss?
Serdar Basegmez:	It's more like being independent. And growing up, my father always wore a two-piece suit and a tie. Maybe that was something to do with it. I really didn't ever wanna be wearing suit and a tie all my life.
E.S.:	Did not want to?
Serdar Basegmez:	No, did not, and I never have.
E.S.:	[Laughs] A mark of distinction—.
Serdar Basegmez:	So, therefore, it's like I would find a place; I would find a location. Or I would come out with an idea, and then I would just turn it into a business and—.
Early Jobs	
E.S.:	Okay, I wanna back up a little bit because your first job was the bagel maker.
Serdar Basegmez:	Well, no, not really. When I came to the United States, I worked in a hamburger joint because I didn't speak any English and I had no skills to get a job being a twenty-one year old. And I worked in a—that was my first job.
E.S.:	Like a McDonalds? A fast food—?
Serdar Basegmez:	It was Gino's [Restaurant] by then. I don't know if you remember Gino's.

E.S.:	[Overlapping] I do.
Serdar Basegmez:	Not many people do.
E.S.:	Yes, well, I'm old enough to remember.
Serdar Basegmez:	Yeah, a few months, but that was a little—I don't want to say difficult but really pushy job by the company and their management team, so I really didn't wanna have anything to do with them.
E.S.:	You were behind the counter, serving, or making?
Serdar Basegmez:	Well, everything, everything. We worked there by then they will tell you what to do and you do it. So I worked at Gino's. One summer I worked as a landscaper. And, as I said, I worked in a bagel bakery.
E.S.:	Now these were all pretty low-paying jobs?
Serdar Basegmez:	Well, by then, especially.
E.S.:	Yeah, so where were you living?
Serdar Basegmez:	The first few years I was in Rockville, Maryland, and sharing a house. And when you work a couple jobs, putting sixty, seventy hours a week you could make a living. And by then I didn't have a lot of needs.
E.S.:	Was it a group house?
Serdar Basegmez:	It was like four, five people. You rent rooms. It's just most of them are students. But after that, I always made decent amount of money.
E.S.:	But the bagel maker—that part fascinates me—because don't you have to get up in the middle of the night?
Serdar Basegmez:	Well, it depends. The first couple of weeks I just learned how to do things. And I guess I wanted to do more management, so I never really had to get up in the middle of the night.
E.S.:	But how did you impress someone that you should be a manager?
Serdar Basegmez:	I don't know, I don't know. By then, really, they're the ones who offered me the position, and that's what I went after. But then after that I worked as a bartender, then as a waiter in the fine restaurants. So pay was always good. There was a never a problem with the pay. And then once I started doing my own business—.
E.S.:	So again with—to get the capital to start your own business, did you take out, what, a kind of small business loan?
Serdar Basegmez:	Well, my first business venture was in Houston, Texas. I didn't have to put any money. The partners put the money; I put the business.

	And then, the business after that, I borrowed money from an individual, and I've known him for years. An older gentleman. And banks wouldn't give me money, and then I ask him one day: this is what I want to do and I need this much money. I'll pay you back. And he trusted me and gave me the money, and after that, you build your credit, and you get to know people, and whenever you start a business, if you really need a lot of investments, there's always sources. Again, it just depends how much you want and how big your dream is. There's always a source.
E.S.:	And you are a confident person and an adventurous one.
Serdar Basegmez:	You could say that, I guess.
Life in Alexandria	
E.S.:	Yes, I could say that, I will say that. So, okay, now we're catching up to—well, let me back up a little bit. So, you visited many states?
Serdar Basegmez:	Traveled, just like, week there, week there, ten days—.
E.S.:	So you've seen many interesting places to live, of course. Why did you choose the Alexandria area?
Serdar Basegmez:	Well, again, it's just life happened that way. When I start doing businesses and then I get to know people. Then you get to know people, you get to know your banker, you get to know your neighbors, and then you make friends. And each time I've come with an idea to move to a different state maybe, or a different city, and then I said to myself, well, I have to restart again. And then it was, I guess, comfort levels just keep me going. And other than that, it's such a beautiful town. Right on the river, everything is available. You're a few minutes from the D.C. area. You get all the arts and music and everything else.
E.S.:	You take advantage of all those?
Serdar Basegmez:	Absolutely, absolutely. But in between back in 2003 I think I was overworked, and I wanted to take a break. And so what I did by then, I sold whatever I had, and I took two years off, moved back to Istanbul.
E.S.:	Oh, yeah.
Serdar Basegmez:	And visited my family, visited all my friends.
E.S.:	And when was this again?
Serdar Basegmez:	Two thousand and three.
E.S.:	Okay.

Serdar Basegmez:	And then I got that out of my system.
E.S.:	Had you been back before?
Serdar Basegmez:	Oh, yeah—.
E.S.:	Visits.
Serdar Basegmez:	I always go like once or twice a year. In 2005, I said to myself it's time to get going and get busy again, and came back to this area, in Old Town, and started my catering company.
E.S.:	A catering company! I'm having trouble keeping up!
Serdar Basegmez:	I still have it, I still own the catering company.
E.S.:	What's it called?
Serdar Basegmez:	Red Poppy Catering.
E.S.:	Red Poppy.
Serdar Basegmez:	Like the flower.
E.S.:	Yes.
Serdar Basegmez:	We do corporate catering, and all our business is online. It's a different—a lot of people think you own a catering company, you know your customers day in, day out, but a lot corporate customers we don't even know who they are, we don't even know when they are going to order next. We get all our orders online and receive our orders via email, and—.
E.S.:	And who does the cooking?
Serdar Basegmez:	One of my businesses I mentioned earlier was a restaurant, and two of my employees purchased that restaurant from me, and when they purchased it, we had a deal. With my catering, they will do the—not they will do the cooking for free, cooking will be done on the premises, and we work it out that way.
E.S.:	And they are the cooks?
Serdar Basegmez:	They are the cooks. They provide the food.
E.S.:	Or chefs, I should say.
Serdar Basegmez:	Chefs, cooks, they have everybody.
E.S.:	So that's one that you have currently. You've got the dry cleaners?
Serdar Basegmez:	I have two dry cleaners and the catering company.
E.S.:	Okay. And you're the manager of course of all those?

Serdar Basegmez:	Yes, I manage all those operations.
E.S.:	Anything else in the works? [Laughs]
Serdar Basegmez:	Nothing right now. A few years back—until last year—I was busy with teaching food safety and sanitation. But my time is very limited, so I can't do that as much as—.
E.S.:	Where were you teaching that?
Serdar Basegmez:	I was hired by private companies because every food operation needs a food service manager and that's—I would give them a class, train them, and then they had to take a test. And then they'd go to whatever state they're in and get their certificate. But unfortunately I don't have enough time or maybe I'm getting older, I just don't want to do all of that, so—.
E.S.:	Okay, I see that you belong to a couple of organizations. What is DRBA?
Serdar Basegmez:	DRBA is Del Ray Business Association—We are the strongest business association in the area.
E.S.:	And are you active in those?
Serdar Basegmez:	I'm a board member on that.
Recreation	
E.S.:	I'm getting tired just talking to you. What do you do for recreation?
Serdar Basegmez:	I play golf and I do hot yoga.
E.S.:	Hot yoga? I tried that once. Once.
Serdar Basegmez:	It's great. I'm doing it at four o'clock today.
E.S.:	[Laughs] We won't be that long. Are you the only man in that class?
Serdar Basegmez:	No, actually there are a number of men, and you'll be surprised. The age groups—.
E.S.:	Where do you take it?
Serdar Basegmez:	I take my class at Tysons Bikram Yoga, which is owned by a very good and old friend of mine. He's one of the best in Bikram Yoga, so he owns the studio; that's where I take my class.
E.S.:	Does he by any chance also do Tai Chi? I'm looking for a Tai Chi class.
Serdar Basegmez:	No, no, he does Bikram Yoga. But I highly recommend—if you take his class you'll get addicted, so he's great.

New Projects and Travels	
E.S.:	Um, let's see. What are your—what's your next move?
Serdar Basegmez:	Right now, there's no next move. I'm happy where I am right now. So I have a couple of personal projects, nothing to do with business.
E.S.:	Anything you want to talk about?
Serdar Basegmez:	I'm looking at a house to buy, and probably do work inside and that sort of thing. I get to travel a lot, and not necessarily long travels, but some weekends here, some weekends there, and things like that.
E.S.:	Where do you like to go?
Serdar Basegmez:	Well, if it's local, I like to go around Chesapeake area, by the water, and then I like to go like Virginia, wine country, travel around, and other than that, it's going up in New England. Maine is my favorite state.
E.S.:	One of mine, too.
Serdar Basegmez:	I love it there.
E.S.:	Especially in the summer.
Serdar Basegmez:	Unfortunately, winters are too cold.
E.S.:	Right.
Serdar Basegmez:	But I love traveling in Maine. Or actually any part of New England is really, really nice. I really enjoy it.
E.S.:	Yes, I agree. [overlapping]
Serdar Basegmez:	And New York is another place, whenever I have time, I'd like to go.
E.S.:	Is the house that you're thinking about on the water?
Serdar Basegmez:	No, no, it's a house right, right, you know, in the neighborhood, in Alexandria, it's a regular old house—probably a lot of work.
E.S.:	But a lot of work for you to tackle, which makes you happy.
Serdar Basegmez:	Yeah, which—of course.
Thoughts on Daily Life	
E.S.:	Do you sleep?
Serdar Basegmez:	I sleep. But I like to keep myself busy.
E.S.:	That's great. Usually you know, I ask people well what was difficult about immigrating. And, you know, they tell me all these sad stories. But you don't seem to have any!

Serdar Basegmez:	I never really honestly had a sad story.
E.S.:	I don't mean sad. [overlapping]
Serdar Basegmez:	I understand.
E.S.:	But obstacles, difficulties. You learned English very quickly, apparently?
Serdar Basegmez:	Well, I didn't really have—actually it's a funny story. Yesterday I was playing golf with a good friend of mine and we were talking about obstacles in life and all that. We both thought of the same kind of reaction: I never really had difficult things in my life. I mean, of course, people died, some things happened, difficulties happened, but I never took it, like, 'Oh my God, what am I gonna do now?' you know? This is the worst thing that can happen to a human being. I'm miserable, I'm crazy. It's just—this is life, you gotta go on with it, you gotta take it as is and enjoy the moment. And things are gonna happen because you can't be happy all the time. It's gonna be different day to day, moment to moment. So you gotta keep your head up and keep going, you know. And my thing is: enjoy the moment; you don't know what's gonna happen.
E.S.:	That's for sure, that's for sure. And would that be the advice you would give to anyone who's thinking of leaving their country of birth and coming here?
Serdar Basegmez:	I don't know if it's advice that I would give to anybody, but I would definitely tell people—do whatever your heart is telling you to do. Just follow your heart. And be smart, too, it's not like—don't do stupid things, but just, if it's something you wanna do, do it, because tomorrow might be too late. Just, when you have time, just do it. That's what I believe.
E.S.:	Great. Anything else that you want to add?
Serdar Basegmez:	That's pretty much it. Do you have any other questions? I'll be happy to answer. But this is—.
E.S.:	You know, I'm gonna check, because I feel like, well what do we got, forty-five minutes? That's what we usually do. But you're just such an optimistic guy, and—.
Serdar Basegmez:	I try.
E.S.:	You know, I think people are—you have the gene, right? You have the "full glass" gene.
Serdar Basegmez:	Yeah, that's true.

E.S.:	Yeah, yeah, so, I don't know if I said the date when I said we were all here. So I should do that: May 18, 2015. And we've been talking for about forty minutes, I think. And I wish, Serdar, every continued great life.
Serdar Basegmez:	Thank you; same to you.
E.S.:	And I guess that's it.