

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Maronites in Youngstown

Lebanese Culture

O. H. 259

NABEH JOSEPH ROUHANA

Interviewed

by

Marilyn Rudawsky

on

November 13, 1978

NABEH JOSEPH ROUHANA

Nabeh Joseph Rouhana was born in the village of Bijji, in southern Lebanon on February 7, 1907. He was educated in that country at a convent school, where he spent four years learning.

Mr. Rouhana came to the United States in 1927, joining his father who had emigrated several years earlier.

After living in the United States several years, Mr. Rouhana opened the Rouhana Food Market in Youngstown, Ohio. He operated this store from the year 1936 until his retirement in 1975.

Mr. Rouhana and his wife Frances have three children: Joesph, John, and Anne Marie. They are members of St. Maron's Church. Mr. Rouhana's special interest is writing Arabic poetry.

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INTERVIEWEE: NABEH JOSEPH ROUHANA

INTERVIEWER: Marilyn Rudawsky

SUBJECT: Lebanese Culture

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MR: This is an interview with Mr. Nabeh Rouhana for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. It is taking place at 2303 Coronada Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio, on Monday, November 13, 1978, at 8:35 p.m.

Mr. Rouhana, how long have you lived in the United States?

NR: I have been in this country since 1927 when I came to Youngstown.

MR: How old were you?

NR: I was about twenty-one. I was born in 1907, so you can figure it out. I came in the last part of 1927.

MR: Did you come directly to Youngstown or did you go somewhere else first?

NR: No, I came directly to Youngstown. Of course, we stopped at Providence, Rhode Island. Then we came to New York and then to here.

MR: Why did you come to Youngstown?

NR: My dad was here.

MR: Your father was here already? What was he doing here?

NR: He had a store on East Federal Street, a dry goods store downtown.

MR: How long had he been here?

NR: He came in 1910.

MR: What made him decide to move out here?

NR: He came up here to stay a couple years to see if some money would grow up here. Things weren't so good in Lebanon. We used to be under Turkish control. The economy wasn't so good up there. Our people were noted for going from one country to another. We are merchants, we take that from all our people, the Phoenicians. They used to go to Africa to go all over to peddle their stuff. I came up here to make my home here.

MR: Where originally was your family from in Lebanon?

NR: From Bijji.

MR: Thank you. Is that near Beirut or is that near . . .

NR: No, it is north of Beirut. I'd say about forty miles north of Beirut.

MR: Is it a small village?

NR: It is a small village, yes. It has about a thousand people in it. We were not far from that historical city, the oldest city in the world, Damascus. It used to be the capital of the Phoenicians.

MR: What did most of the people in your town do? Were they farmers? Were they merchants?

NR: They were farmers. Lots of them came to this country. A lot of them came here. They came to stay, not to make here their permanent home. They came to make some money and go back, but the First World War, when they started fighting, they could not go back again. After the war a lot of them changed their minds and stayed here.

MR: They had been here so long that this was like home?

NR: That's right.

MR: Was your mother here with your father as well, or did she stay in Lebanon?

NR: No, she stayed in Lebanon.

MR: Did she come with you when you came?

NR: No, she never came here.

MR: Did you have brothers and sisters?

NR: Yes, I have a sister here. You're going to interview her husband, Benjamin Hayek.

MR: Oh, I'm going to see him next.

NR: Yes.

MR: Is that your sister?

NR: My sister and I have a brother who passed away in 1967. I've been up there about several times in Lebanon. After that problem now, that Civil War up there, I never went back. I can't go back.

MR: Maybe they'll settle down and you'll be able to do that. You came here in your early twenties then?

NR: Yes, I was about twenty years old, twenty or twenty-one years old.

MR: What can you tell me about the schools that you had in Lebanon? What's the typical schooling that somebody would have?

NR: I went to a French school. I stayed up there about three years and then I went to a convent school we have on the mountain not far from my village. I stayed four years up there. That's all the schooling I had.

MR: You stayed at the convent school?

NR: Yes, for four years.

MR: Was it a typical thing? Did most people do this?

NR: Yes, they still have that school now. The monks, it's a religious order and they opened up the school there. You can stay in the school and eat and sleep up there or you can go and live like you do here and each time you come back home. But your home, it was far away from way up there. The buildings were far from one another. The people go to the school and sleep up there, but their food is from their populi, people, parents.

- MR: Did you have to pay tuition to go? If I had a child and sent him to a Catholic school here, I would have to pay.
- NR: Sure, you had to pay.
- MR: What did they teach at this school? Do you remember some of the subjects?
- NR: They teach Arabic and French. English wasn't . . . well now they have to learn American in school, but back then it was Arabic and French.
- MR: So you speak French then, and you speak Arabic?
- NR: I speak Arabic. I speak French. It has been a long time, about fifty years. I'm talking about more than fifty years. My hobby is making poetry in Arabic.
- MR: Oh really?
- NR: I can show you pictures when we were in Lebanon, I'd say about 1972 or 1973. They had a convention up there for emigrants. In this picture, see, that's me here, that's the president of the country, that's the Minister of the Interior, that's our Bishop, who is now the Bishop of the Maronite here in this country. We were all up there and they asked me to speak. I spoke in Arabic and the president was thrilled. He said, "How long have you been in America?" At that time I said, "Forty-five years." He could not believe it. I say it, recite it, without reading it. He told his security people, "Don't let him go. Have him write it for you and all the papers print that." As a matter of fact, do you remember that king of Jordan, King Hussein, his wife Allya? She was a good woman. She went from one camp to another, fed their hungry and took care of the needy. In one of her mercy missions, the helicopter fell and she was killed. She was so young and I saw her picture in the Vindicator. It came to me, some poem. She was a nice girl like that and she died. I made some poetry and I liked it so much that I said, "I'm going to send this to her husband." I sent it to him and he sent me a letter thanking me.
- MR: How nice.
- NR: Would you like to see these?

MR: Yes, I would. You were saying that you sent Mrs. Kennedy a poem when the President was assassinated?

NR: That's right. You know, we moved, we used to have a grocery store on the east side for thirty-seven years. We moved up here and I had that with my papers. I can't find it and I was going to show it to you. She sent me a card thanking me and she told me that they would keep it with his papers in the new library.

In 1946, when Palestine was under the British control, Athens had a small war. The British government wanted to be good friends with all people in the Near East. They came out with competition in poetry, for North, South, and Central America, including Canada. I won that competition. I came second and they sent me some money. I think it was fifty dollars. I gave it to the church, the old country's church. I hope Father Eid doesn't hear me and get mad at me. (Laughter)

MR: So did you then keep contact with the church that you attended in Lebanon?

NR: Oh yes.

MR: I've read that a lot of people did keep in touch with their villages.

NR: As a matter of fact, we had a club here, Bijji Club. You know that village I told you the name? We meet every month. We try to make a hospital up there in that village. It is like a clinic, not a hospital, a small clinic. Our people here, they're wonderful people. They're like your family, the family is very close. Our people--the father is the boss and the children listen to him.

MR: They have strict discipline?

NR: Yes.

MR: Back in Lebanon when you were a young guy, what did you do for recreation? Were you so busy that you didn't have time for recreation?

NR: Up there we go to school, I came from school to here.

MR: So you just got out of school and then you came here?

NR: I came out of school and I was looking for a job up there. I tried to come to this country when I got out of school. The American Consulate in Beirut told

me I had to be under eighteen. I was then twenty. He said, "We booked you into first account." That means in Lebanon at that time, fifty people a year in my category could come into this country. It's a special privilege. There were 350 booked. That means I had to wait seven years to come. I left and I was looking for a job. I had a job for eleven sterling a month.

MR: How much would that be, like in American currency?

NR: It is about thirty dollars. At that time, the sterling was three dollars. Now it is about one hundred dollars.

MR: So it would have been about thirty-three dollars a month?

NR: Something like that. When I came to take over the job, I had received a letter from the consulate that said that they changed the law. You have to be under twenty-one, under twenty-one they can take you. So I left my job and came up here.

MR: To join your father?

NR: Yes. I came during the Depression. You know, (Laughter) this I would like you to know, when I came to this country everybody was scared of the Depression. I saw a lot of things, enough to eat, the people dress up nice and everything. I say, "What are they talking about?" Where I come from, you know that village I come from, I remember during the First World War, but half of that village died hungry, from hunger.

MR: There was a famine there?

NR: That's right. Because the Turks . . . if it wasn't for the Red Cross and some religious communities, you would see no Lebanese. I laughed here when they said there was a Depression and I saw everything, there was plenty.

MR: There was such a difference. It was so poor in Lebanon that in comparison we were well-off.

NR: Yes, sure. That's right.

MR: Did your father have a car when you got here?

NR: Car? Yes.



MR: He had a car? He was able to drive?

NR: Yes, he had a car, he had a car. He can't drive though.

MR: He couldn't drive but he had a car?

NR: That's right.

MR: How did he get around?

NR: Well, he didn't drive that much. He drove from the store to the house. He had somebody drive the car for him.

I want to tell you something. I have been all over, and nothing matches America. God bless America. This is the best country in the world to be in and raise a family in and make a home.

MR: Have you had more advantages here and more opportunities?

NR: Oh yes, that's right. you can't compare this country with any country.

MR: What type of job did you get when you first came here? Did you work for your father who had a store?

NR: My father had a store, then the Depression came and the store was no good. I had the car. I took the car. I learned how to drive. I took some bits of bread, some socks, and some coal. There's plenty of coal to sell in Minerva, they had a brickyard out there. People stayed in company houses. I used to go every day, they bought some of that stuff off of me.

MR: In Minerva?

NR: In Minerva, in McDonald, and Warren, in Newton Falls; I go all over.

MR: You did this on your own then? This was just a way to make money and to survive?

NR: That's right. After that, when I made enough money, I opened up a store.

MR: What was the name of the store?

NR: Rouhana Food Market, 901 Shehy Street. Thank God everything was all right.

MR: Then you were able to do very well in your store?

NR: I did all right, thank God. I raised a family and I had my two sons and a daughter, she goes to St. Edward's School. The boys, they're married. One of them is still with me here until he finds a house. The other one is with a machine company in Columbus.

MR: Were the children very in touch with the Lebanese culture or the Maronite district? Did they feel close to that, do you think?

NR: Yes, I took the oldest one, Joe, I took him with me to Lebanon in 1962. He likes it up there. My other son, John, I took him four times up there, two times with me and two times with his mother.

MR: He liked it then and he felt close to that?

NR: That's right, because the people up there are noted for their hospitality. Our people, you go up there and you are not a stranger among them, it's like you're one of the family. In the old history, that French poet Lamartine, you read about him?

MR: I know of him, yes.

NR: He went with his daughter, Julia, to visit in Lebanon. When the boat docked in Beirut Harbor, it was in the evening and the reflection of the sun cast up high peaks, the mountains with snow on it, and gave you a rainbow, gave you a million colors. He told his daughter, "We've got to go up there." He went up there and there's the Cedars of Lebanon, it's noted Solomon built a temple in Jerusalem. His daughter, Julia, she engraved her name on one of those trees. She died up there if I'm not mistaken, I'm sure she died up there. She was buried in Lebanon. Oh, our people up there--when he came to France and he started to write--he says, you think these people, they are very simple. They dress like peasants, but you talk to them and you look at them and you feel that you're in front of a people of kings. They act like kings, not like a farmer.

MR: Did they treat you very well then?

NR: Oh yes. Have you heard of Saint Serba, he was canonized. Father Aschar and Father Eid will tell you more about him. I've been to his grave; it was about five or six miles from my house to that convent, St. Maron. I wish you could see up there the miracles.

You go to one place and you see all the people with canes. People come up there crippled and leave up there and walk out.

MR: People go there who are sick or who aren't well and pray to Saint Maron or to Saint . . .

NR: It's Saint Maron's convent, but his name is Serba.

MR: When you first came here, was there a Maronite church already here?

NR: There was a Maronite church on Wilson Avenue. Then we moved from Wilson Avenue and my brother-in-law, Monsignor Hayek, Benjamin Hayek's brother is Monsignor Hayek. He was pastor of that church and he passed on in the late 1940's, then Father Eid came. Father Eid, whom you met yesterday, he did well. He bought Shehy School. He spent a lot of money and fixed it up and we moved from Wilson Avenue to Shehy. Then after that he bought that site on Meridian Road, where our present church is. Father Eid bought that site, bought that land up there. Then came Father Ashcar. I don't have to tell you about him. He's a wonderful man; he's just wonderful. He works day and night. You can't give him a cup of coffee. I don't have words to describe him, so God bless him. God bless them all.

MR: Do you think the community has changed any over the years that you've been here? What do you remember most about the community when you first got here? That it was close?

NR: That it was close together, there was a lot of people.

MR: Did they live near each other?

NR: Yes. Most of them lived on the east side. May I tell you something about our people? In 1930, 1935, 1936, we made a centennial celebration for the constitution of the Maronite Right in Detroit, Michigan, and every parish had to take two, one to speak in Arabic and one to speak in English. Monsignor Hayek . . .

MR: Is this your brother?

NR: It's my brother-in-law's brother. He took Joe Bryant. You know Joe Bryant? You know Tony Bryant?

MR: No, I don't.

- NR: It's his father. He was a good talker. They used to call him from one place to another to make a speech. He took him and he took me. We went up there for just a couple of days to see how our people talk up there. The Bishop of Detroit, the Archbishop, Bishop Gallagher was there. Our people came from all over up there because it's like a national holiday. When this Bishop Gallagher got up to speak, he says this word: "I'm an Irish and the Irish are noted for their ties with the Catholic, with the Christianity. Our people were persecuted for their religion, but they stand firm in their belief. But if God now gave me a choice to choose what I want to be, I will tell him Lebanese Maronite." These words he said. I still remember it.
- MR: You mentioned about the Irish being persecuted, do you remember any problems with the Klan in regard to this church, in Niles?
- NR: Up here, no. In the south, yes. I read about it in the paper, in the south. Nothing here.
- MR: With the Maronites, Lebanese, they didn't bother you at all?
- NR: No.
- MR: I know, I've read some of the East European people experienced some problems, Catholic people.
- NR: Yes. I'll tell you, in Florida it was bad.
- MR: The Maronites had problems in Florida?
- NR: There wasn't too many of them down there. There were hardly any.
- MR: It wasn't much of a problem then?
- NR: One time we heard news on the air. One time a Lebanese had a store in Florida, a store selling vegetables. The man was working at some other place and the wife took care of the store until he came from work and took over. He had some boxes of oranges on the sidewalk. Then the chief of police, he was Ku Klux Klan, he came up there and he told that woman to move that stuff. She said, "I can't lift them now, not until my husband comes from work." He got some kind of gas or poison or something and he sprayed all over that. The woman tried to stop him and he hit her. When her husband came, she complained to him and told him what happened. He took the telephone and he called that chief of police. He said, "You fight with the woman,

I'm here now. You come and fight with me." The chief of police told him, "I'm coming right now." He came up there and he started hitting him in the head with a blackjack and he took him and he died in jail.

MR: The man died?

NR: The man died in jail.

MR: This was in Florida?

NR: In Florida. Our people started to pay money to send to that article we heard, to go up there and hire a lawyer. Our people . . .

MR: From around here?

NR: From all over.

MR: All over the country?

NR: All over the country.

MR: To try to help the man?

NR: To try to hire a lawyer.

MR: That really says that the Lebanese community is really very close.

NR: Oh yes.

MR: Even throughout the United States and the rest of the world.

NR: I'll tell you something else, one of our people, he was a peddler. I don't remember his name. It was in America, in the Vindicator. He went to Westbend, Indiana where Notre Dame is. He was hungry and he didn't have anything to eat and it was snowing. One of the monks up there, a priest, let him in and fed him and gave him shelter for the night. After that they received two hundred thousand dollars, a donation from that man. He told them, "I was hungry and you fed me." (Laughter)

MR: (Laughter) Part of a paraphrase again, "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat."

Is there anything that you would like to go into that I haven't touched upon? I asked you about Lebanon and I asked you about your job. What would you like to talk about, anything in particular? How about some of the organizations that you might belong to in the

church? Do you belong to any?

NR: I belong to St. Maron's Church. I belong to that Bijji Club. By the way, the World Lebanese Union, they made a chapter in Youngstown.

MR: The World Lebanese Union?

NR: Yes.

MR: Yes. Oh, you're president? You were president?

NR: Yes. Temporary, until they made an election.

MR: What did the World Lebanese Union do? Is this the clinic you set up, is it through this?

NR: No. The World Lebanese Union, see, we had a lot of our people scattered all over. You go anyplace and you'll find Lebanese. They want to make some kind of tie between them, culture. They go to Lebanon. They used to go every summer; now they don't go to Lebanon, they meet in some place in Central America or Brazil or here in this country.

MR: They have been meeting elsewhere to solve the problem?

NR: Yes, in Detroit, this year the meeting is up in Detroit. In Florida, I've never been in Florida, but they had a meeting up there.

MR: When was the last time you were in Lebanon?

NR: The last time was in 1973.

MR: 1973. So you haven't been back since the war there?

NR: No!

MR: Could you get into the country if you wanted to?

NR: Yes, I could get in there.

MR: You probably wouldn't want to.

NR: That's right. My daughter-in-law, she was up there last year. She stayed about sixty days. She went to the mountains up there.

MR: If you would go there, do you stay with family or friends or do you go to a hotel?

NR: We have a house up there.

- MR: Oh, you still have a home there?
- NR: That's right.
- MR: Do people live in it all year?
- NR: My sister-in-law . . . my mother, she passed on about six years ago, she was keeping the house with my sister-in-law.
- MR: How old was your mother when she passed away?
- NR: 86.
- MR: 86. So you still maintain your home there? It is a family residence more or less?
- NR: That's right. Up there the home is different from here; it's made out of stone. You never make it out of stone here. The roof, they make cement roofs.
- MR: How many rooms does it have?
- NR: About seven rooms.
- MR: Are they all on one floor?
- NR: All on one floor.
- MR: Do you have a basement?
- NR: Yes. We have a basement, but we don't use it much except for a lot of oil up there, olive oil, and figs, and stuff I used to take down to the cellar.
- MR: Did you have much land, or was this in the city?
- NR: Oh no. We had land up there; there's land up there.
- MR: Did you farm? Did you grow your own vegetables or have fruit trees?
- NR: Yes, we have a lot of fruit trees. We have figs, apples, pears, grapes. It is nice country up there, very nice.
- MR: About how far is it from Beirut?
- NR: It is about forty or thirty-five miles north of Beirut.
- MR: Are there good roads between Beirut and your home, or is it difficult to get there?

NR: When you come from Beirut to Bijji, it is a good road, but from Jebeil to Bijji it is very bad, but it's passable.

MR: I understand. Are there heavy rains in the winter? Does that make it difficult in that the roads get muddy?

NR: No, the road is asphalt.

MR: It's not a great road, but it's paved?

NR: That's right. Still, it wouldn't rain for about five months during the summertime, it never would.

MR: Do they have any problem with water? Does it get hot and difficult?

NR: Water comes from rivers far and some spring water comes from the ground. We have a lot of nice water up there, running water like here.

MR: Is there anything else you would like to say?

NR: That's it.

MR: Are you sure there's nothing you would like to add?

NR: No. I can't add anything.

MR: Thank you very much.

NR: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW