

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Maronites in Youngstown

History of the Maronites

O. H. 324

JOSEPH NOHRA

Interviewed

by

Marilyn Rudawsky

on

November 14, 1978

JOSEPH SIMON NOHRA

Joseph Simon Nohra was born on November 18, 1935, at 116 North Lane Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio, in the home of his maternal grandmother. He is the son of Rizel and Mary Galip Nohra who came to the United States from their home in Lebanon in the 1920's.

After graduating from Ursuline High School, Mr. Nohra studied Business Administration at Youngstown State University, receiving his B.S. degree from that institution in 1957. During his college days, Mr. Nohra was listed in Who's Who in American Colleges.

He married Betty C. Barnum in October, 1960. The couple has eight children; Mary Ann, Tabita Christine, Jacquelyn Susan, Rebecca Rose, Jude Joseph, Joanne Marie, Joseph Simon, Jr., and Elizabeth Julie.

Mr. Nohra, who became a Certified Public Accountant in 1967, is now employed as the Financial Vice President and Treasurer of the Cafaro Company. He is a member of St. Maron's Church, serving on the Parish Council, the American Institute of C.P.A.'s, and the Ohio Society of C.P.A.'s.

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INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH NOHRA
INTERVIEWER: Marilyn Rudawsky
SUBJECT: History of the Maronites
DATE: November 14, 1978

R: This is an interview with Mr. Joseph Nohra for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program at the Cafaro Building on Belmont Avenue in Youngstown, Ohio, on Tuesday, November 14, 1978, at 12:00 p.m.

Mr. Nohra, I thought we would start with a very brief personal biography of you. Before we go into the wonderful Lebanese people, tell me a little bit about yourself. Where were you educated? Where were you born?

N: I was born on the East Side of Youngstown at my grandmother's house, 116 North Lane Avenue, on the kitchen table. My dad's name was Rizek. There is no real English translation. His middle name was Simon, which was his father's name. The last name that we used in this country was Nohra, which was my grandfather's name.

R: Your grandfather's first name?

N: Right. The family name is really what my dad's first name is, Rizek. He comes from the family of Rizek, and the heritage or the roots go back to Lebanon to a village called Toula, which is in the region of Batroun of Northern Lebanon. My father was born in the United States. He was born here in January of 1901. I can't recall the date, but I think he might have been born on January 27, 1901. My mother was born on April 20, 1910. My mother was born in Canada, but I'll tell you about her later. I'll tell you first about my dad.

He was born here in 1901. He was baptized in Saint Columba's, but it wasn't a cathedral then. Youngstown wasn't a diocesan seat, it was just a church. You got baptized there because there wasn't a Maronite church. My dad lived here until he was one and a half years old, when his parents took him back to Lebanon. He remained there until he was almost twenty-seven years old. He came back to this country in the latter part of 1927. I'm not sure of the exact date; it was just before he turned 27.

He spent his boyhood, his teen years, and his young adulthood in Lebanon. In some ways, he has very fond memories of that, but in many ways he felt that it handicapped him as far as having had an opportunity to succeed in this country. My father came here like an immigrant. He could not read, write, or speak English. He used to regret that. He would say, "I was born in the United States and I wasn't provided the opportunity to learn the language. I can't read, write, or speak English." He could never read or write English, except to sign his name. He spoke fluent Arabic, wrote little Arabic, and read Arabic. He used to have an Arabic newspaper sent to the house. It was published about four or five times a week. He read every Arabic printed newspaper that was sent and if we had nothing to read, we would come down and read with him.

He worked at the first job he ever got in this country, which was the only job he ever got in this country for all of the time that he was here. He worked at the Truscon Steel Division of Republic Steel Corporation. He first went to work for Truscon when it was just the Truscon Steel Company, before it was owned by Republic. My mother was pregnant and about to have a baby almost any day. He didn't have employment; he had never had employment in this country. He went to Truscon and they sent him to the supervisor, Mr. Williams. I can remember because my dad would always talk about Mr. Williams. Mr. Williams gave him a job and gave him the chance. My dad used to pray for Mr. Williams because of this. To get the job my dad got down on his hands and knees and begged for the job because his wife was about to have a baby. My dad did pretty good work all the years he worked at Truscon Steel.

R: What year was this?

N: My dad and mom got married in 1932 and my sister was born in 1934. I was born in 1935. It would have been 1934 when my dad started to work for Truscon.

R: Right in the middle of the Depression?

N: Yes. It was toward the end of the Depression, but things were pretty rough then. In 1934, you couldn't find a job. That's why from the time my dad came here, in 1927, he stay unemployed. He did little odd jobs and little things, but he didn't have a job all that time.

R: How did they live?

N: My parents got married in 1932, but prior to that my dad lived with his mother and a brother. My grandfather, my dad's father, died in the meantime. In fact, my dad's father died in Lebanon when he was 27 years old. He reputedly had a very bad temper. He became angry one day when a door was locked, which he didn't want locked, so he kicked his foot through the door. Gangrene set in and he died of blood poisoning. They couldn't treat him medically because they didn't know what to do. They put on hot compresses or something for blood poisoning. My grandfather died very young because of himself.

My grandmother returned to this country before my dad arrived. He came at another time. She came back to Youngstown and her son, my Uncle Richard, went to work. I don't remember . . . he worked so many different places. My dad made his home with his brother and mother. It was nothing if somebody didn't work in the family. It was all right as long as somebody worked. Their work supported the whole family. People really did take care of each other.

R: When your father came over, he didn't come with his mother or his brother?

N: No. His mother and brother were here. They were here and had been here for several years. After that, my dad came. He followed them, arriving in 1927. He came here and met my mother here.

My father was really born in the United States, so he was a United States citizen. He was the child of immigrant parents, but was raised in Lebanon. My mother was also a child of immigrant parents. Her parents came to this country. I'm not sure when they came, but when they first came here, they came to Youngstown. My grandfather could not find employment, so he went up to Canada. He had

a chance in Canada for employment in Sydney Mines, Nova Scotia, Canada in a candy store.

My mother was born in Sydney Mines and then came to this country. I don't know when her parents came to this country. I know that she was a little girl. She wasn't more than four or five years old. They came in mid-1910 or 1915. It was somewhere around there that they came back to Youngstown. Mom, because she was not born in this country and her parents hadn't been born in this country, had to become a naturalized citizen. Dad was born a citizen. We teased him because mom spoke fluent English and she was educated here in the United States. Mom could handle the English language; it was her native tongue. Dad's native tongue was Arabic, so we used to tease him because the role was reversed: He was born in the United States and she was born out of the United States.

R: It didn't seem quite fair.

N: No. We used to tease him. We used to tease him about the fact that dad was born in the United States and mom wasn't. She was naturalized.

R: Yet he had the problem.

N: She was the real foreigner and he wasn't. We used to tease him a lot about that. They met when he came here.

R: The second time? Obviously the second time. (Laughter)

N: The first time he came here he was born. The second time he came here was in 1927. He first met her during that year, when she was just a young girl. She was around seventeen years of age. They started seeing and courting each other probably at the beginning of the 1930's, maybe 1931. When my dad was about twenty-nine years old, he used to be known as a gay blade. He had quite a few girlfriends in his day. He was a very handsome young man. It was expected that he would get married; there were several he was going to marry, but he changed his mind. He finally married my mother. Before she married my dad, her maiden name was Galip. Mary Galip was her full name. Neither one of them is alive today. They are both deceased.

R: When did they pass away?

N: On December 7, 1959, my dad suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage. He was in a coma for thirty-five days. During the time he was in the coma, we felt mostly that his condition was very bad. They never anticipated that he would survive. The doctors said he would never wake up from the coma, and he would die. If he did come out of the coma, he would be a vegetable. My dad came out of the coma after thirty-five days. He had a couple of years where he was reasonably lucide, although he was paralyzed on his left side. He had a couple of good years, but then he started to slip and died June of 1969. We kept him at home all of the time and took care of him. In the last few years, we had to take care of him like he was a baby. He wasn't able to communicate very well during his last few years. Dad died in June of 1969; mom died in October of 1973. She died of massive heart attack.

I've always made my home with my parents. To begin with, I made my home with them at 24 North Lane Avenue, which is the same street I was born on, except we lived up the street from my grandparents. We lived on North Lane until I was twenty-four. I was born in 1935. In 1959, in fact a month before my dad became ill, we moved to the North Side of Youngstown on Lora Avenue. I bought the house on Lora Avenue. In fact, my uncle that I mentioned, my dad's brother, was living with us when we first moved there. He (my uncle) was taking care of my dad. They made their home together, too. Even after my dad was married, he continued to live with his mother and brother.

R: So you were born in your grandmother's home?

N: My maternal grandmother's home. It was down the street at 116 North Lane. I was raised in my paternal grandmother's home. It was her home and my uncle's. My dad and mom lived with them. My paternal grandmother died, probably, when I was around the age of seven or eight. I think she died in 1942. We lived in that house, which was then my uncle's house. He was the only living brother that my dad had; several brothers and sisters in between them died at a very young age in Lebanon. A flu epidemic wiped out a couple of them; I don't even know what their names were. I think, I'm not sure, there were four children between my uncle, who was the oldest, and my dad, who was the youngest.

R: You probably didn't hear too much about them so it would be difficult.

N: No. My dad didn't even know them. My dad was the youngest and they all died at very young ages. We moved, as I said, in 1959, to the north side of Youngstown to Lora Avenue. A month afterward, my dad had a cerebral hemorrhage. I bought that house on Lora Avenue. My parents, my uncle, and my sisters moved with me; I wasn't married at the time.

I met my wife through dad's illness. My dad became ill; he was seriously ill and we brought on private duty nurses. My wife happened to be one of the private duty nurses who we employed for my dad.

R: What's her name?

N: Betty.

R: What's her maiden name?

N: Barnum. She came from Boardman. She was raised on the south side of Youngstown. She attended various elementary schools on the south side and she went to Boardman High School. After high school, she attended nursing at the Youngstown Hospital of Nursing. She worked for the Youngstown Hospital Association. She completed her nurses' training in 1957.

After she completed her training in Youngstown, she went to New York where she received specialized cancer training at New York University and Memorial Hospital in New York. After two years in New York, she came back to Youngstown and intended only to work with cancer patients since that is who she was trained to take care of. She wanted to take care of people who were terminally ill. When she first came back to Youngstown, she took care of my cousin Eli Alexander's wife, Louise Alexander. She had been in the hospital to have her gallbladder removed. After Louise, my wife got her first cancer case. It was during this cancer case that my dad became terminally ill and we needed private duty nurses. My cousin, Eli Alexander, was very persuasive in getting her to come on my dad's case. He knew about her. He would talk about this great private duty nurse; he had even gotten to know her as a friend. He persuaded her to come on my dad's case and that's how I got to meet her. After my dad's coma, we got him home to Lora Avenue. My mom, my sisters, my wife and myself all took care of him for ten years.

R: Did you have children?

N: I have eight children.

R: That's a lot of children by today's standards. Did your children know your father?

N: When my dad died, we had five children. The first four children were all girls. My fifth, a boy, was born in October of 1968 and my died in June of 1969. My first daughter was born in March of 1962. She was seven years old when her grandfather died. She remembers him, but I'm not sure how clearly; she was only seven. The one behind her was about a year and a half younger. She wasn't quite six years old when he died. She also might remember a little bit of him. I don't think the others would remember very much.

R: Probably not. The older children probably have some memory of him.

N: Most of my children have vivid memories of their grandmother. She was pretty close to them before she died. They used to call her Titha. It was just like a nickname for grandmother. The word in Arabic for grandmother is sittoo titha. It means a nanny or something like that. My children still talk about Titha; they remember. All of my children were born before she died. The baby, Elizabeth, was about ten months old. My mother died in October and Elizabeth turned one year old in December of 1973. I don't think Elizabeth remembers titha, but the other kids still do. She died at home. The day she died the older ones were in school, but the younger ones were at home with us. They were there when she collapsed. It was a terrible, frightening experience for them. They can still remember that.

R: Why do you think your grandfather originally came to this area? Why do you think Lebanese people came to Youngstown?

N: I think for opportunity. My grandfather originally came to Youngstown to seek opportunity; things weren't good in Lebanon. They only lived on what they were able to grow themselves. There was a lot of poverty and starvation. Lebanon was never an industrial country; there wasn't any work. They would go to some of the more heavily populated areas and do work that was too hard for them. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the United States was the land of opportunity.

Those things put together represented opportunity.

The main reason that my grandfather came to Youngstown rather than going somewhere else was because, there was a man who came to Youngstown--why he came I don't know--from my grandfather's village. He was a man named Mr. Lahoud Yazbek. He was successful in the dry goods business; he sold dry goods. He was a very successful man and a very influential man. He was a very well-liked man among the local business people and the politicians. He was able to help people get jobs. He could find ways of making money and earning a livelihood. That man was here and had established himself. Naturally, he wrote to his friends in Lebanon that there were opportunities and there were jobs here. That's why my grandfather came to Youngstown; Mr. Yazbek, who was in fact related to him, helped him with an opportunity here.

When my grandfather came here . . . As I said, my father was born here in 1901. I am not sure of the year that my grandfather came, although it had to be in late 1890 or 1900. It couldn't be earlier because my uncle was born in 1895 in Lebanon and they left him there. They didn't bring his brother. They didn't bring any of their children. They wanted to get themselves started here and then they would bring the children over. My grandfather was not very happy here and returned to Lebanon when my dad was one and a half years old. My grandfather never returned; he died in Lebanon. It was not too long after he returned to Lebanon that he put his foot through the door which resulted in his death.

R: Because of gangrene?

N: Yes. It wasn't long after his death that my grandmother came back to try again. This time she brought my Uncle Richard with her, who was born in 1895. I think they probably came about 1910. My Uncle Richard was about fifteen years old when they came to this country. My dad was only nine years old, and was left behind to be raised by my grandmother's sister. My dad always talked about his aunt, whom he loved very much. My dad joined his mother in this country in 1927. He spent about seventeen years away from his mother. My grandmother was a widow and wasn't able to raise the children. She decided to come over here to get something going and then bring the children.

R: There was more opportunity here and they would have better lives?

N: Yes.

- R: Do you think there was a very large Lebanese community here at the time that your father came? Were the people living near each other?
- N: Yes. There were quite a few. I can't tell you how many families, but there were a lot of families. They lived mostly in the downtown area around East Federal Street, before they had a church. They lived in buildings and sometimes there would be two or three families that lived together.
- R: Most of them probably rented homes. They wouldn't be able to buy them right away, would they?
- N: No. They rented apartments, two or three rooms, or whatever they could find available. They would live with two or three families together. They didn't have their own homes, but they got jobs and were able to save a little money; they gathered it together to buy a home. They would buy homes in close vicinity of the church.

The first permanent Maronite church we had was on Wilson Avenue on the east side. The building still exists. Once the church had been established, many of the Lebanese families chose to buy homes as close as they could to the church; this was part of their culture. Their lives centered around the church. The main part of their lives was the church. I've never been to Lebanon, but this is the way the villages of Lebanon have always been described to me. The focal point of the village is the church; I've seen this in many pictures of villages in the mountains. I would see a picture of a village in a mountain and the thing that stands out is the church, the highest point in the village. The homes would encircle the church. We still have this today.

The church was a means of communicating in Lebanon. For instance, if there was a birth they would ring bells a certain way; if there was a death they would ring bells a certain way; if there was a wedding they would ring them a certain way. The bells were the church's way of sending out news. With each church ringing its bells in turn, they passed messages from village to village. Whatever was happening, if one village had something to announce, they would ring the bells in a certain way. The next village would pick it up and it would ring its bells. It would pass the message through the mountains of Lebanon by the ringing of the bells. It was a very primitive way of communicating news, but that's how they did it. The churches played an important role in their lives. It was the one place where they all gathered together,

no matter what it was--joy, sorrow, or whatever.
the main part of their lives.

R: Even in this country, I imagine, it was a lot handier for them to live near the church. A lot of them probably didn't have cars or transportation.

N: It was a problem. That's why they bought homes close to the church, as close as they could get to it. Then they just walked to church, and didn't have to worry about transportation.

R: Some of the people I've talked to mentioned that even now they go to daily mass. I imagine it might have been even more frequent then.

N: My dad used to go to daily mass and he used to take me. I had a direct contact of the relation between the church and their lives. It was the most important part of their lives. Now, take my generation: The church is an important part of my life, but I also have many other parts of my life too, like my family and my work. There are other activities besides the church. In the generation of my parents and grandparents, the church was everything. It was their friends and relatives. The church was the most important part of their lives, other than their immediate families. They were so close; their immediate families and the churches were all synonymous. The church was their family. My connection was with that generation.

R: I understand you're now a deacon?

N: I'm an ordained subdeacon in the church. I am supposed to be completing my studies to become a permanent deacon, but my obligations of family, of working, and of other things has kept me away from it. But, I am ordained and I do assist on the altar every Sunday. I now distribute communion. If I complete my studies and become a permanent deacon, I will be able to baptize and perform marriage ceremonies.

R: Is this related to the Maronites?

N: Oh, yes. In fact, the Roman rite of the Western church, and this is in recent times, has begun to have permanent deacons. The diocese of Youngstown has permanent deacons.

R: Were there any nonChristian Lebanese or nonCatholic Lebanese?

N: Yes.

R: Did they associate at all with the Christian Lebanese?

N: No. Even though all the Lebanese wouldn't stay together, it depended. If you were Lebanese Catholic, you would stay with the Lebanese Catholic. The other Lebanese people of other faiths weren't quite as close as the Lebanese Christian community, like the Lebanese Maronite community. The Lebanese Maronite community had its own church. The areas where there weren't enough of them for them to have their own church, the Orthodox became part of the other Orthodox faiths. Next to the Maronite churches were the Orthodox churches. They alone, as the Orthodox community, became part of the Greek Orthodox community. Most communities number quite a few Lebanese and ancestors. A small part of the Lebanese community is in Youngstown. There are some Lebanese Catholics, Lebanese Christians, Maronites, who for some reason don't become a part of or stick with their community after they come to the country. I don't know their reasons; maybe they want to break away from their people and take on the culture of this country, rather than continue with the culture of the old country. As I said, there are right up to this day, a lot of people who are Lebanese, or who are born of Lebanese parents. When you ask them, "Who are your parents, your grandparents? Did you ever go to St. Maron's?" They will answer, "No, my grandfather never took us to St. Maron's." It's surprising. Their grandfathers may have come over from Lebanon and really didn't continue to associate with the other Lebanese people who were here. They went on to find their own land. I don't know what their reasons were.

R: Do you think there was any discrimination against Lebanese and mideastern people? I know some of the European Catholics felt some discrimination. Do you think that may have played a role?

N: Yes. That may be the answer. Of course, there is discrimination. There's always discrimination against people who are considered foreigners or immigrants. It is a label. I don't care whether it was Italian, Irish, or what, if you were a foreigner or an immigrant, there was discrimination by people in the United States who felt that they were blue blood. This is their country; they were true Americans. And I'm not saying it wasn't.

R: What about church celebrations? I was told that, in Lebanon, a wedding would go on for a whole week. Did they carry that type of thing through here?

N: My mother and father had a four-day wedding. Four days! It was Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

R: That's some party!

N: Four days! In fact, I think my sister, my older sister Rose, and her husband had the last two-day wedding. Now, I can remember very vividly a two-day wedding.

END OF INTERVIEW