This is an interview with Fred Alexander at the Center for Working-Class Studies at YSU in Youngstown, Ohio on the thirteenth of July 2009. I'm Sherry Linkon.

S – So I want to start with some family history. When did the first members of your family come to the U.S.?

F – Well, I don't know exactly. I know that my, my mother's parents came in 1921. My father's father was born around 1880 and he probably came here, ah, right at the turn of the century, maybe shortly thereafter. Did I say 1880?

S – Uh, huh.

F – Let's see, well my father's born in 1913, that would have made him 33. 1890.

S – 1890.

F – Right. And my father's mother was born 1893.

S – Okay. And when your, well let's start with your father's father 'cause they came first. You said they came somewhere around 1900.

F – Right.

S – Do you know, was it the whole family who came? Was it just your grandfather?

F – My grandfather and my grandmother came. They met there and then they came together here.

S- Okay.

F – As far as I know. I don't have any documentation of that but she died early on. She died in 1918, uh, my grandmother on that side. And my grandfather remarried a woman back in Lebanon. A marriage, remarriage. So…

S – Did he go back to Lebanon?

F – He went to back to Lebanon.

S – Was this someone he had known before?

F – This… she was a widow who had been married to a friend of his. I'm sorry but he didn't go. He went back but he met her here.

S – Oh, okay.

F – He'd gone back but he came back here and she and her husband had come here.

S – Okay.

F – He got shot.

S – There or here?

F – Here. And I…

S – Her husband, wait, her husband got shot here and got killed, not your grandfather.

F – Right.

S – Okay.

F – Right, yeah. My grandfather's second wife's husband. So she was widowed. She had a child back in Lebanon who was raised, uh, by, uh relatives there and she started a new family here with my grandfather.

S – But in between the time your grandfather had first come, his, his wife died, he went back to Lebanon. Am I following that right?

F – Right.

S – Okay. And when your mother's family came, they came, was it the whole family who came or, again, was it…?

F – Oh well, three people. Grandfather, grandmother and my mother. Uh, they came because of the wars still going on. The Ottoman Empire was still intact there and there was constant battles and the, the oppression from the Turks and so they, um, they decided to come to America. At that point, the village they were, the… all these folks are from two villages that are within a few miles of each other. They knew people here and so, ahh, "let's go to America and go to Youngstown, Ohio."

S – You, you had said something about this earlier and then reading some other interviews of people, I, I've been hearing about these couple of villages in Lebanon that most people came from. What do you know about what those villages were like?

F – Well, that was there and they were just, uh, subsistence agriculture. They raised, uh, they grew wheat, grew their own tobacco, uh, had um, a few animals, uh, sheep primarily, they're pretty much into lamb. And uh, there weren't many jobs outside of there and I, I think after the Second World War there were probably started going out away from the village and getting jobs but pretty much, uh, an agrarian existence.

S – You said for your mother's family coming to the U.S. was a way, in part of getting away from the war that was…

F – Right.

S - …going on there. What about for your father's family? What brought them here?

F – Well, I'm not sure exactly. Some of the old timers talk about, uh, one person and then came back to visit and said how great things were here and you know, opportunities, jobs. And, uh, so there wasn't a lot there again. It was a subsistence culture so they said, "well, let's go, see what's going on."

S – So with, for your father's family, what did they do when they arrived here to make a living?

F – My father's family, my grandfather, uh, was a peddler. He would, he would go out in the country and the, in, during the summer and, spring, summer and fall and buy produce and bring it back to town and sell it off the back of a truck. And, uh, just odd jobs, whatever, whatever could be done. And then they started in, he had a dry goods store which was just, you know, just a little storefront on East Federal Street and, he was doing that in combination with these other things in the summer. And then later on, he and one or two of his bro…, I think just one of his brothers, started a, and opened this ice cream shop in Niles. They came originally to Youngstown. They moved to Niles for some period of time and I don't know what the years were. Uh, my father was born in Youngstown but he lived in Niles at some point and then they moved back to Youngstown, I think in the 20s, sometime in the 20s.

S – Do you know how long they had the ice cream shop? Ice cream store?

F – I don't. I think I'll be able to get that information but I don't know right now.

S – Yeah. And after the ice cream store, what did they do?

F – Umm, well, my grandfather, again, just did whatever there was, you know. He, I don't remember him ever working at any specific, uh, place of employment. He was always, you know, an itinerant merchant, whatever was going on. And, uh, my father, uh, I'm told so my father getting into the a, the vending business through his employment, like then he helped myself. . . .

S – Your father, by this time, is getting to be a teenager and you were telling me earlier…

F – Right.

S - …that he went to work for the whiffle board company. Tell me about that.

F – Well, he gra…, he graduated from high school in 1931. Uh, the whiffle board company was right around the corner from where they lived. It was one, one and a half blocks from there. So he got a job there, uh, not too long, I think he may have been, it may have been less than a year. And the company went, went under as part of the Depression closings.

S – And, and, before we go any further, tell me about what, what exactly it is that the whiffle board company made.

F – The whiffle board company made pinball machines and the unique aspect those pinball machines, uh, was that they were the first, uh, of that type of machine that took coins and released the balls to roll out and play. Up to that, the machine was that, the pinball machine that was actually invented, I think in France in the late 1800s. But it was always manually operated and you, you'd pay someone to, or didn't, whatever. So that was a unique feature of the whiffle board, though.

S – Okay, so then the company is going out of business…

F – The company's going out of business.

S - …and your family gets involved.

F – My grandfather goes to whoever and makes a deal to get some of these whiffle boards, uh, and they go into the business. They place them in the locations and on a percentage basis, for the proprietors of various businesses, and that was the start of the family business. Uh, in 1931.

S – And how long did that business operate?

F – Well, it's still in business. Still in business. Uh, I have a, uh, small part of it. My cousins are involved with it, my father and my two uncles operated that business until all their deaths and the kids eventually inherited, so they, so did some cousins.

S – And is the family still dealing in pinball machines?

F – We are. (laughing)

S – I assume as well as other types of vending.

F – Somewhat, somewhat different now.

S – I would imagine. (laughing) Umm, what about your mother's side of the family? What were they doing when they got here?

F – Well, my grandfather, my mother's father, went to work for a tool and dye company in Warren. And I can't remember, I think it might have been Taylor, but, the name of the company, but I really don't remember now. And he worked there all his life and he died. He died in his, uh, I think he was seventy when he died.

S – And did your mother's family come from the same villages?

F – Yes.

S – Did the families know each other before they got here?

F – Yeah, ‘cause they were related.

S –‘Cause there’s been some distance.

F – They were related so they knew each other.

S – How were they related?

F – Well, I have one great-great grandfather.

S – Okay.

F – So he covers both sides of the family.

S – Okay.

F – So my mother and father were second cousins. And my mother’s side of the family, umm, my father’s side of the family is from a village called Baije. About walking distance, I don’t know, four or five miles away, was another village, Toula. And my mother’s side of the family left Baije at some point and went to Toula.

S – So they were related but they were from different towns.

F – They were and I’m sure there was contact between those two villages.

S – Apparently (laughing).

F – Although my mother and father actually met in this country. Not… my father was born here, and so he…

S – Right. Do you know, did they meet when your mother’s family came? Was that part of the connection that brought them here?

F – I don’t know that.

S – Okay. What part of town did two families settle in? I know they came at different times, but, but, where did they live when they arrived here?

F - My mother’s family went directly to Warren. They never lived in Youngstown. And there were, they had family there and I don’t know who came here first. But my grandfather had brothers in Warren and, uh, brothers and sisters, and so, but I don’t know who got here first. But that’s where end up.

S – Right.

F – My father’s family, as we said earlier, started in Youngstown and moved to Niles, shortly, for a short time, and went back to Youngstown.

S – And where in Youngstown?

F – On the east side. Himrod Ave.

S – Uh hmm. Did you hear stories when you were growing up about what it was like for them? For your father, growing up on the east side of Youngstown?

F – Ah, mostly it was about, you know, they were Depression, uh, parents.

S – Yeah.

F - …parents, and, you know, walked to school in the snow, up hill both ways, that kind of stuff.

S – Of course. (laughing) And when did your parents marry?

F – 1938.

S – And, we said there was this prior connection but how did they actually meet in Youngstown, do you know?

F – I don’t know but I’m guessing it was through the church because all those folks were, uh, Maronite Catholics and the church had been established here I think before the turn of the century. Although, uh, I don’t know that they had an actual church building of their own. I think they, well, it’s….

S – And was there one Maronite church for both Youngstown and Warren so everybody came to the one church.

F – Yes.

S – And where was the church located?

F – On the east side. Well, it, I, I think it even started out on the east side but ultimately the, the church ended up at the corner of Shehy Street and Forest Avenue. And they bought, and I’m not sure of this, St. Anthony’s and uh, refurbished it and then eventually built a new church there and uh, were there until they … the seventies, sixties, seventies and they bought a site out in Austintown, on Meridian Road and built a new church.

S – And the church, as you say, was, was to a large extent, the center of the, of community life in the Lebanese community. Was it still that way when you were growing up?

F – Yes.

S – So what kinds of things would happen at the church? You… obviously mass, but what else?

F – Well, in the mid-fifties, excuse me, the, the parish priest who was very enterprising, he was the one who originally purchased the land on Meridian Road for ultimately a new church site. He also purchased the lake on Halleck Young Road in Austintown. It was named Cedar Lake and it was established as a church entity for the parishioners. The church paid for it, supported it through, of course, through the, uh, church members, and, but it was open, it was free access to everybody that belonged to the church. And so people would spend all summer out there, you know, Sunday, Sunday afternoons at Cedar Lake is just where you went.

S – And what would you do on Sunday afternoon at Cedar Lake?

F – Swim. The… uh, one of the most interesting uh, events… They used, uh, the women used a mortar and pestle to make *kibbee*, which is a ground lamb, but they, at that point, they didn't grind it. They put it in this large stoned mortar and beat it with the pestle so the original *kibbee* was just shredded. The meat was just shredded and beaten to a pulp rather than ground.

S – Was that the way they would have done it back in Lebanon?

F – Yes.

S – So that was, that's sort of the original *kibbee*.

F – The original *kibbee*, right. So they would have these, there would always be one of these large uh, mortars and I think weighed, I would, whatever, like a cubic foot of stone granite weighed, with a hollowed out center where the meat was put in. And someone would take a length broom handle that would be the length of the diameter of that hole and cut it to fit and pound it in so it wedged into the hole. And then the men would all take turns grabbing that as a handle and flipping it up in the air, and lifting it up as a feat of strength. (laughing) I mean it was just, you know, of those events that…

S – Right (laughing).

F - …let us do, some of the guys were always lined up, you know, to do that.

S – Right, to show off their…

F – Right.

S – …their muscles. That's great.

F – That was amusing.

S – (laughing) I, I had never heard of that.

F – That just occurred to me … I hadn't thought of that in years.

S – So, so people were, would be doing cooking out there as well as socializing and…

F – Right.

S - …swimming and just hanging out?

F – Cook the lamb. Yeah, that it. Socializing, swimming, you just went out, took the kids out. The kids all ran, you know, wherever, wild and…

S – Yeah.

F – Back then, discipline was not particularly a problem, you know. When we grew up, I, you would be in a room with a friends or relatives, go to visit someone, and someone would offer you something, uh, to eat or drink, and you never accepted without a, you looked over to your mother and she would make then, or do this slight nod of her head, yes or no. And you proceeded from there.

S – That's right. You followed the rules. How many siblings do you have?

F – Two brothers and a sister. My sister's deceased now, fifteen years.

S – Okay. And where was your family living when you grew up?

F – Well, I was born at the house on the east side and then my father built a house on Colonial Drive in 1941. And we moved there in nine…, so I was really, I was born on the east side but I was a year old when we moved to Colonial Drive which is far north side of Liberty.

S – And where did you go to school?

F – I went to school at St. Edwards, grade school, Liberty Middle School and Ursuline High School.

S – Were there other kids of Lebanese descent when you were going through school or were, you, you and your siblings, it?

F – At St. Ed's, there were other kids 'cause there was, there were, the Lebanese, some of the Lebanese families that were originally from the east side then moved to the north side. And so there were half a dozen or so families that I remember on the north side that had kids in school. Liberty, there were none that I remember, at least in my age group. And, uh, Ursuline, there were kids from all over the city. So that…

S – During that period when you were spending time out at Cedar Lake, about how large was the community at that point? About how many people would be out there?

F – Well, it's hard to remember but I'm guessing, you know, a couple hundred people. But that's just, you know, a vague guess. I don't, you know, I can't remember that.

S – Yeah. It, it seems like with the church and with Cedar Lake, there was a fairly strong sense of community, among the Lebanese community, would you…

F – Yeah.

S – Is that true?

F – There, there was and still is, you know. Though I'm not part of the church anymore, the family's still listed there as one of the…there're four hundred and twenty five families that belong to the, uh, St.Maron's Church currently. That's today's figures. And although I don't go and my brothers don't go there, the family's still listed because they're… I have two cousins that are there so the Alexander family is…

S – Right.

F - …you know, one. So when they say four hundred and twenty five families, that could be, oh, twenty people to a family or two people to a family so I don't, I really don't know what the, the …the population is.

S – Right. But that's a pretty good number. You were saying, you know, for you and for your brothers, the church itself is not, is no longer, much a part of your life.

F – Right.

S – Was it a central part of your family's life when you were growing up. Was that an important part of being Lebanese was also being part of that church?

F – Ah, that's hard to… I have to think about that for a moment. We went to, well my family went to Sunday mass there and it was as much to go to a church service for the religious aspect as it was to get the news of what was going on in the community which would take place after the sermon. There would be announcements and whatever. The priest would kind of update everyone with what they should know and what they should be doing, should not be doing. Um, just as an aside to this, when my parents and grandparents came here, they were Syrians, not Lebanese because there was no Lebanon. And I remember at some point in the forties, an official declaration of the church that we were now all Lebanese, (laughing) and from henceforth, begin referring to ourselves as Lebanese.

S – Right. So the name changed but nothing else changed, right?

F – Right.

S – But some… but that identity is still important.

F – Right.

S- You just get a different label with it.

F – And since we're all from the Mount Lebanon area…

S – Right.

F - …of the Middle East, then it's, well, it's natural.

S – Right. That makes sense. Um, if church is no longer central and Cedar Lake essentially exists, it, the lake may still be there but the place doesn't exist as a place to connect, how do you today maintain your sense of connection with the Lebanese community?

F – I don't too much. I mean, I don't have any particular connections except through family, friends that have been established over the years. I don't usually go to uh, church events except for the card games and uh, but the, for the community, that's, there's still, there's St. Mary's church, there's Antioch Hall which is a banquet hall and there's a large facility behind with a pavilion and playground and a picnicking area that people utilize throughout the summer. So then… and then the banquet hall through over… throughout the year.

S – Uh hum. Before I forget, tell me about the card games 'cause they're… that you were saying, we were talking before that were, there's this regular card game among the men in the community?

F – Um, back in the 80s and 90s and before that, I mean, cards were a part of growing up. I mean, everybody played cards. Back in the 80s we started the, the late 70s, early 80s, we started the Lebanese Men's Club. In, that is a small building in Austintown. It was in existence for about ten years and people would come and just hang out and play cards. Men would play cards. I don't know whether women were excluded or they just didn't come.

S – Right, but that was an active thing or a passive thing (laughing).

F – Right. So, but, that was an organized kind of organization, kind of place. And then after that, uh, there were regular, like, Las Vegas nights at the church hall. And of course, they had bingo, a Catholic church, of course they had bingo. (laughing)

S – Of course.

F – Ah, so just that.

S – Yeah, yeah. So did…you were talking about that sense of connection to other Lebanese people. For you, in your life, at this point, is that part of your identity important to you? Does it matter to you and if so, why?

F – It really doesn't. It doesn't, you know. It, uh… and I don't know that it ever did. I left home when I was seventeen, went to college and…

S – Did you go to college here or did you go away?

F – Kent. Yeah, I think did a little bit of time here, but mostly Kent. I was a, I finished a year early, got a Bachelor's degree a year earlier than the "decade program." It only took me nine years to get through (laughing). And, uh, then, uh, I left the area for a couple of years then came back, got involved in business here, left again for a short time and ultimately ended up back here.

S – Was that different for your parents? Did they have a different sense of that connection?

F – My parents always stayed connected to the church. My dad was a contributor to the church and could probably see his name in there. He was on the church council at one point early on. They weren't, my father's not particularly religious, uh huh. In fact, I don't even know if he was a believer, but yeah. The church was the church and he was always supportive of, of you know, helping out, bringing the priest here and my grandfather and Father Eid who's really the activist priest that built everything were very close. As they were with uh, uh, President Shamoun, Kameel Shamoun who was a good friend of Father Eid's and my grandfather's, and he would, and he had come here.

S- I want to go back to the point when your family members were first arriving on… and you may or may not know anything about this but I'm wondering about language and what languages they spoke when they arrived and how they learned English. Do you know?

F – I know that on my mother's side, my mother knew no English. She only spoke Arabic, uh, when they came here, as did her parents. I don't know how they learned English. Um, my father's side of them, I don't know either. My father spoke English, learned English and Arabic simultaneously here. He was fluent in Arabic, but, again, I don't know how his parents learned. They, later, people that came, after the Second World War, were generally tri-lingual because they, they were two…French was, the French were in control after the war and so French was taught in schools, English was taught and of course, native Arabic to a lesser extent. But they knew the Arabic through the family but English and French were taught. So people came tri-lingual.

S – So the…

F – Or, with at least Arabic and French and then English.

S – Right. Did you learn any Arabic when you were a kid?

F – Only what I could glean from my parents. They wouldn't speak to us in Arabic. They, you know, "learn English," you know, "we're in America."

S – That's right.

F – "Be Americans."

S - And was Arabic used at all in the church service?

F – The, the mass in the Maronite Church, the mass, the language of the mass is Aramaic and the sermon was generally in Arabic and then in later years, probably when I wasn't there, but in, in the, by the seventies and eighties, they were doing it in English. But I remember as a kid going there, it was almost always in Arabic.

S – Uh hmm, my impression is, and I wonder what you think about this, that while, that church remains a central part of the Lebanese community here, most people of Lebanese descent have assimilated pretty fully into American culture, that there's not a strong sense of a kind of separate identity. Would you agree with that? Is that, am I reading that right?

F – Well, that's hard to say. There's some big divisions. Now there isn't, there's also a Lebanese Muslim community here…

S – Yeah.

F - … which I know very little about and I think they probably are more based, more strong identify themselves as Lebanese rather than being assimilated.

S – And, there mostly people who came later.

F – Came later.

S – Is that true?

F – Yes. But, but I don't know that, I just, uh, I'm not even sure I know who any of the families are. I probably do but I, but I can't bring them to mind right now.

S – Yeah. Hmmm. Is there anything of that I'm not thinking to ask you about that we should be sure to talk about?

F – Well, not that I can think of either.

S – Okay. I feel like I'm getting a pretty good sense of the family history. Did you… when you were growing up listening to stories from your parents about their childhoods, did you get any sense that people were having a particular struggles when they came here? Did they face discrimination? Did they face any particular difficulties?

F – Well, you know I know they probably did but they never talked about that. But even as a kid, uh, I did. Not in grade school but the, the four years that I was at Liberty Middle School was uh, you know, it was a shock for me because the uh, there were two basic communities in Liberty Township at that time. Uh, I guess south of Route 304, Churchill Road, was the influx of uh, the white, Protestant community that built and revolved around the Youngstown Country

Club. And those kids were in… wanted to go away to school, were in Liberty school. And north of 304 which the people south of 304 referred to as Dog Patch, were the poor white settlers in, in northern Trumbull County, Liberty Township and came to school there. And neither one of them had much use for these dark skinned immigrants. So.

S – And you lived in the south part of that, right? So…

F- Well, we lived, actually, yeah, we were right on… uh, we were the first street outside of the city limits…

S – Right.

F - …and it was like north side of Youngstown as much as it was uh, Liberty Township, but yeah, we were in the south part.

S – And was it different for you when you from there back to the Catholic school, and to Ursuline where there was, not only were there more Lebanese kids but…

F – Yeah, there were a lot of Italians. It was much more… there were black kids and, not many, but yes, some African Americans at Ursuline, even at that time.

S – Yeah.

F – But an interesting uh… Our, where our house was built on Colonial Drive, that property originally belonged to Jefferson Mining Company which was a Wick entity and the original properties were deeded, uh, that you…they couldn't be owned by African Americans. Uh, and that was like 1940 or, and before that and I remember seeing one of the original deeds and then, of course that was all wiped out at some point.

S – Right. That's interesting.

F – Should have been.

S – Yes. (laughing) It's a good thing.

F – But uh, yes so that, that's, that's what I felt in terms of discrimination. But my parents, uh, interesting that I remember a conversation with my mother, we were filling out some forms and it asked for nationality. And she said "American. You're American. Just write that in. That's what your nationality is."

S – Uh hmm.

F – So there was no… and getting back to, you know, you're going to learn the language, you're Americanized, this is your country.

S – Which suggests that there was, was not a sense, at least for your parents, it might have been different for their parents, no sense of coming here with the intention of going back.

F – Well, I've been told that people came here, uh, before the First World War and, with the intention of going back. And then the war broke out and they got used to being here and didn't hear, but I don't know if that was my grandfather's case 'cause I know he was here before the war so that may well have been the case.

S – Uh hmm.

F – But I don't know that, you know first hand.

S – Yeah. I think that's all I have.

F – Okay.