

EI -1424

EVELYN KASSUF

BIRTHDATE: OCTOBER 19, 1928

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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MESOPOTAMIA, 1930

AGE 2

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RESIDENCES

MESOPOTAMIA: MOSUL

US: QUEENS, NY; MANHATTAN, NY; MIDDLESEX, NJ

HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mrs. Kassuf's niece Jean POTTERS is also present

LEVINE: Today is July the twenty-fifth, the year 2006. I'm here in the oral history studio at Ellis Island with Evelyn Kassuf who came here as a two-year-old child leaving with her family from Mesopotamia, which is now Iraq, in 1930. They came on "the Sinai," which is the first to have that ship mentioned in our collection and with us today is Mrs. Kassuf's niece, Jean Potters. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. OK, please would you start by saying your birth date and where you were born.

KASSUF: My birth date was October 19th, according – actually, that's not the birth date, that's the baptismal date that was written in the Bible – in the church Bible –

'cause they didn't issue birth certificates. So, October 19th is my recorded birth date, for – in 1928.

LEVINE: And how close in time was the baptism to the birth, do you know?

KASSUF: About two weeks.

LEVINE: [superposed] Oh, uh-huh.

KASSUF: [superposed] Yeah, so, for all intents and purposes, 19 – October 19, 1928 is my birthday.

LEVINE: OK. And where were you born?

KASSUF: I was born in Mosul, Mesopotamia.

LEVINE: And what was your father's name?

KASSUF: Abdullahad.

LEVINE: Could you spell it?

KASSUF: A-B-D-U-L-L-A-H-A-D. And—

LEVINE: And your maiden name—his last name?

KASSUF: Well, in – in Mesopotamia it was Abdullahad Betashulo [ph] and somewhere down the line it got changed, I think a lot of immigrant names were changed because at that time people weren't familiar with foreign names, so it was easier, I think, for registrars to Americanize them. So, it became Albert Sheredos.

LEVINE: OK. And your mother. Her name.

KASSUF: My mother's name is Dola, her maiden was Jacob. Do – Dola Jacob.

LEVINE: Dola, are you saying?

KASSUF: D-O-L-A Dola--

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KASSUF: Jacob.

LEVINE: Do you know about each side of your family—your maternal and paternal side—whether they had been around Mosul for generations? Or not?

KASSUF: I think so. I think they were there for—I know both my maternal and paternal, uh, grandparents were there, and how far back our family goes is Mosul, I think it was for a long time. Because a lot of other families came over and we were friends with all those families in our early years. So.

LEVINE: [superposed] Mhm. But you never heard stories that, you know, great-great grandparents or something had come from elsewhere.

KASSUF: [superposed] No -- no, no.

LEVINE: OK. And when you were there—do you have any memories—you wouldn't have any memories of life there.

KASSUF: [superposed] I have no memories of there, I have no memories of coming here. My earliest memory is about five years old—

LEVINE: [superposed] Uh-huh.

KASSUF: Somewhere in that, maybe a little bit before. But five years old, I have some definite memories.

LEVINE: OK, well then let's talk first about what you've been told, OK?

KASSUF: [superposed] Yeah.

LEVINE: Did you have an extended family there? Grandparents, aunts and uncles? Cousins?

KASSUF: Yes, there were, aunts and uncles and cousins there. My parents kept in touch with them. I, as an adult, have not, so I've lost contact with any of the relatives that are there. I have one cousin that came to America in the 60's—my mother's nephew. So, that's the only relative I know now.

LEVINE: That came. Now how about your family before you and your family came—were there other family members that had come to this country?

KASSUF: My father's brother. His name was Mi – Mike Sheredos. Maybe that's when the name was changed. Because he's listed as Mike Sheredos—yeah, he was a cook on a freighter. And he ended up here in the United States and he was here alone, and, um, he influenced my father to come over with my father's family but also to bring my uncle's family with him. So, he brought my uncle's wife and children at the same time that we came.

LEVINE: I see. So, now, this uncle—he was a cook on a freighter and then he got off here?

KASSUF: I – I imagine he got off and I don't know exactly how he stayed here but he ended up here (both laugh).

LEVINE: OK, so he came first—

KASSUF: Yeah.

LEVINE: And where did he settle?

KASSUF: He settled in, well—I don't know where he himself settled, on his own, but when my family came over with his family, he was – they had a home in Long Island. Queens.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

KASSUF: [superposed] Yeah, so—that's – that's my earliest memory of visiting them there. Or, actually, we lived with them when we came—'cause he was our patron.

LEVINE: I see—he sponsored you.

KASSUF: [superposed] Yeah--sponsored us, yeah.

LEVINE: OK, so, do you know why your mother and father decided to leave?

KASSUF: To leave the—

LEVINE: [superposed] Mesopotamia?

KASSUF: [superposed] Iraq? Yeah. I think mainly to bring my uncle's family over. And so at the same time we came. Yeah. And I'm sure my uncle must've told my father what a wonderful country this was, and, so, then we came.

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah. What was the family circumstance there? In other words, what did your father do when he was in—

KASSUF: My father was a carpenter and remained a carpenter all his life. My grandfather—my paternal grandfather—I understand, was a merchant. Like a little store or something. So—

LEVINE: [superposed] This was your father's father?

KASSUF: [superposed] Yes. And of course the women didn't work—the women were home. And I understand my maternal – my paternal grandmother was blind. So, she just stayed in the house.

LEVINE: Was your family religious?

KASSUF: Yes, very, very. Very religious. We practiced the Eastern Orthodox rite -- religion. And all the Orthodox—the rites are the same, it's just the language of the community that changes—so that you could be Greek Orthodox and Greek would be stolen—uh, spoken. Russian Orthodox would be Russian, Syrian Orthodox would be Arabic, so, depending what country you were in was the language of the church but the religious rites were Orthodox.

LEVINE: [superposed] Orthodox. Yeah. And that was true for your mother and your father?

KASSUF: Yes, yeah, yeah. And I understand my grandparents were also very, very religious. In fact, they called my paternal grandfather Mekdesee which means a very prayerful worshipper.

LEVINE: How would you spell (laughs) Mekdesee?

KASSUF: Phonetically, I would say M-E-K-D-E-S-E-E? That would be the phonetic spelling, I don't know how you really—yeah.

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah, people type this out and they would (both laugh). OK. So, is there anything else that your mother and father spoke about, having to do with their life before they came here, that you recall?

KASSUF: Well, my mother was—according to custom—was thirteen when she married and it's a – an arranged marriage, of course. My father was much older, which was the custom. And my mother stayed home and – because my – they moved in with my paternal grandparents, which is the custom—and my mother did the cooking and the cleaning and that because my – my maternal grandmother's name was Shmooney. S-H-M-O-O-N-E-Y. So, because Shmooney was blind, a lot of the household duties fell on my mother, and the care of – of Shmooney was also on my mother. So the men did the—the men—the women stayed home and the only time they went out was when they were attended by a male to the *Hamam*—the bathhouse—once a week and that became not only a bath ritual, but also a socialization of the women in the community.

LEVINE: What kind of social life did the women have? Or what--?

KASSUF: Not really—just with each other, gossiping. The men were the ones that went out, did the buying, the shopping, they made all the decisions. The women just followed orders (laughs).

LEVINE: Would they get together to socialize at all? Well—the bathhouse, but apart from that?

KASSUF: They may have visited in the afternoons, but there was not much. The men would invite other men to the home.

LEVINE: [superposed] Oh.

KASSUF: [superposed] But—you know, for an evening or – or an afternoon—but the women were not very socialized. Except for the *Hamam* [bath house].

LEVINE: What was the dress like? Do you know?

KASSUF: Yes, it was the *abaya*—the long black dress with the head veil on it. The only thing—in Mesopotamia, they did not cover their whole face, their face was allowed to be open. But they weren't allowed to be out, either. So, it wasn't where everything was covered but the eyes; everything was covered but the face.

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah, yeah.

KASSUF: And I think the g – the women had to wear them probably from the age of thirteen, not before. The women, of course, were not educated—did not read or write or go to school. The boys went to a religious school, where they learned to read and write and – and in our family's case, was read the Bible.

LEVINE: And what language were they—

KASSUF: Arabic.

LEVINE: Arabic.

KASSUF: Yes. Which I speak fluently. [background noise] But I have nobody to converse with anymore! (both laugh) So, yeah.

LEVINE: So you spoke Arabic at home, even when you came here?

KASSUF: Oh yes, yeah. Oh, I spoke Ara—the – the best way my mother, although she learned to speak English, and my father—the best way I could communicate with them was in Arabic. That they understood a lot better, and I was an interpreter for them. So was my brother.

LEVINE: OK. Is there anything else about life before the family came that you can think of?

KASSUF: Well, I know my parents grew up during World War One. And my father was in the Turkish army – not in the Turkish army! He was in the army, but he was a prisoner of war of the Turkish army. And I imagine—he says he was brutalized. And my mother remembers soldiers in the village. And she tells me—I'm sure it was a tra – traumatic experience, having her father shot in the town square right in front of her.

LEVINE: This was during World War One?

KASSUF: Yes. So that stayed with her. Yeah, yeah we were here in America during World War Two, of course. So.

LEVINE: OK. So then the family—was there anything about the voyage that your mother or father ever mentioned? Or—let me back up a minute. Did you mother ever talk about leaving, you know, her family, the family there?

KASSUF: [superposed] Yeah, she knew that when she left she would never see them again. But her duty, of course, to be – was to be with her husband. And, um, my mother's father, of course, was dead. My mother's mother was still alive and she was a widow and—

LEVINE: And she was blind, so—

KASSUF: No, no, my grandmother was blind.

LEVINE: [superposed] Your grandmother.

KASSUF: [superposed] Yeah, my father's mother was blind.

LEVINE: Oh, ok.

KASSUF: [superposed] Yeah. My mother's mother—once you're a widow, you're in poverty – poverty. Unless you have a son to take care of you—

LEVINE: And she didn't have a one?

KASSUF: No.

LEVINE: Well, it must have been difficult for her to leave her mother.

KASSUF: Yes, of course. And she did have a sister, Marta. My mother had a sister, Marta. And my father had a brother who was here in the America, and I think he had a sister also. But, I – I never had contact with any of them so I don't know. I think my mother did, with her sister, for a while. Well, probably up until she died. So. 'Cause my parents went over there, back in the year—50's, to visit. And then they came back. As far as the voyage is concerned—my mother was pregnant when – o – on the voyage. She had

my sister a month after they landed. And she doesn't say much about the voyage except there are a lot of people and it was a long voyage—I don't know what the length of time was at those days.

LEVINE: How about arrival here, coming into New York harbor? Or Ellis Island?

KASSUF: You know, you asked me about—if I was sure about—and now you just struck a chord—I remember my mother saying her first – her first sight was the Statue of Liberty. [not understood—Statue of Liberty in Arabic?] Yeah, so, that's the Statue of Liberty. Yeah. You just brought that to mind. I remember her saying that all the time. So it had to be Ellis Island.

LEVINE: So she—that was a memorable—

KASSUF: Yes, yes, yeah. They came and they'd heard – they'd heard about the statue, of course, over there. And their first sight was this lady, who promised freedom. So—

LEVINE: So let's see. You were two, your brother was nine—

KASSUF: No, I think seven.

LEVINE: Seven.

KASSUF: Yeah.

LEVINE: So your mother was only about twenty, twenty-one years old.

KASSUF: [superposed] Yeah, she had to be. Yeah – yeah. Yeah. I know my mother had two other children in Mesopotamia. The first born son died—the birth rate there was atrocious—the first born son died, Yonan lived. Her third child

was a girl, she died—her name was Evelyn also. And then there was me. And I was named Evelyn, which is an English name, because the English influence had come in at that time.

LEVINE: Oh, so you were given that name at birth.

KASSUF: [superposed] Yeah, uh-huh, yeah, yeah. So she had four pregnancies actually, and two live children, when they came here. And then she had a – my sister, in November. A month after they landed here.

LEVINE: Did they want to have this baby in this country? Was that a—

KASSUF: [superposed] No, I don't think so. I think it's just—that's the way it was.

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah.

KASSUF: [superposed] Yeah, she could've had her on board ship, she could've had her before they left. Whatever.

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah, yeah. (both laugh) So, did they speak about Ellis Island at all? Or the processing, let's say, when they got here?

KASSUF: I remember my father saying they got here and going through the physil – physical exam, he had either conjunctivitis or some kind of eye problem. So they kept us here.

LEVINE: Together?

KASSUF: Yeah. And – until it cleared up, or was treated. And then they – I remember him saying they had thoughts of sending him back. But they kept us here, clear it up, and then they sent us on to Queens, to my uncle's house. So,

maybe, considering the fact that he was here for a couple weeks, on the island, and my mother—due any day—maybe that all worked together, I don't know. Lots of things now, I wish I had asked my mother—but, I didn't (laughs). So a lot of it I don't know. Some is conjecture, some is what I've been told. So. We lived with my uncle—I would say for about a year. And—

LEVINE: And you don't really remember that part.

KASSUF: No – no. I guess it just became uncomfortable there. My father was a pretty independent and foresightful man, and he wanted his family in their own home. So we moved to the Lower East Side—27th Street, I remember.

LEVINE: And that's where you started school? Is that where you started school?

KASSUF: Yes, uh-huh. Yeah. I remember going to kindergarten.

LEVINE: And could you speak English then?

KASSUF: No.

LEVINE: So what was that like?

KASSUF: You learned (laughs). Yeah, yeah. And of course my brother was older than I, and he had – he had gone to school already. And he was a great teacher and mentor for me. And so I'm sure I learned a lot from him—I know I learned a lot from him, all my life.

LEVINE: What kind of a brother was he? Was he protective of you?

KASSUF: Yeah, he—of all the people I know in my life, I miss him the most.

LEVINE: Aw.

KASSUF: Yeah. Like I said, he was a friend, a brother, a teacher, mentor, a role model (laughs). So yeah.

LEVINE: That's great. Did he have a difficult time—do you know—when he first came, not knowing the language? Or were you so young, you probably weren't aware—

KASSUF: [superposed] I don't think—I was young, but he was – he was a pretty bright young man, so I'm sure he learned pretty fast. And he was inquisitive and wanted to learn and—so I'm sure he learned pretty fast.

LEVINE: [superposed] Well, when you got to school, were there other immigrant children in your class, or in--?

KASSUF: I don't know because I sort of [pause] (sighs) was sort of isolated. You know, it was – our family was – didn't mingle a lot. They had friends from the old country living in Brooklyn, and we used to visit back and forth with them. And in the tenements — in the tenements, in the Lower East Side, my parents made friends with other immigrants who lived there. I remember particularly an Irish couple who lived downstairs and my mother learned a lot from her. So—Lilly was her name. I don't remember her husband's name. They raised canaries.

LEVINE: (laughs) In the apartment?

KASSUF: Yeah, yeah. Cages full of canaries. But, um—

LEVINE: (laughs) You mean it was a business, or it was for their own pleasure—

KASSUF: I don't know – I don't know. But I remember all the cages of canaries (laughs). And she coming up and showing my mother how to cook different things—American things—and showing my mother how to dress us, and stuff like that. She helped Americanize my mother. Which was important to the immigrants, in those days.

LEVINE: Did your mother and father have the attitude that they wanted you to become American?

KASSUF: Oh, yeah – oh, yeah. I mean, they couldn't do it fast enough. Of course, my father being out and working, and he had to work for American people, and—as a carpenter. So he learned pretty fast, and, yeah, they wanted us to be American as soon as we could get there (laughs).

LEVINE: [tape noise] And were there ways of – of the culture they had come from that they held on to?

KASSUF: Oh yeah, yeah, they had that.

LEVINE: [superposed] What are some things that—

KASSUF: Well, the language, our foods, the religion, the—oh, what's the word I'm looking—[pause] I can't think of the word. [pause] Hm. Integrity?

LEVINE: Oh, just values?

KASSUF: Yes, values, that's the word. Yeah, yeah. Honest—being honest. Being truthful, faith—having faith. Deep, deep faith. And those kinds of things.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KASSUF: Being polite. Dressing properly. You know.

LEVINE: Did they become Americanized in their dress?

KASSUF: Yes, yes. Yeah—I remem – I don't remember my mother wearing *abaya* here. I think they—as soon as they got here, they wore American clothes, and—

LEVINE: Do you think they were happy they had come?

KASSUF: Yes. Oh, my mother's favorite word—God bless America. We sang that at her funeral. That was her favorite expression. God bless America. 'Cause I'm sure she thinks about what her life would've been if she had stayed there.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KASSUF: So she became free.

LEVINE: She was liberated somewhat.

KASSUF: Yes – yeah. Yeah. Although she – there was still the husband domination, she was still—in her own way—was free. And, yeah, she loved this country (laughs).

LEVINE: And how about your father?

KASSUF: Yes, he did, too. Yeah, he did. Yeah. He – he for a long time, he kept saying I'm going—every time, I'm going back to the old country. And he went there for a visit and he couldn't wait to get back (both laugh). Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: He changed.

KASSUF: Oh yeah, yeah. So, yeah. He loved this country. He loved the fact that he could come and go as he pleased, there wasn't a policemen at every door, [background noise] governing bodies ruling, and – and mostly I think, over there, more than – besides the governing bodies, it was the religious leaders that—

LEVINE: That controlled the behavior.

KASSUF: [superposed] Yes, yeah, yeah. Even though we were Christian, it was still controlled by religion. So.

LEVINE: Now, did your mother and or father become citizens?

KASSUF: Yes, as soon as they could. Oh, I didn't bring my mother's—I think, let's see, we came in 30, I think, oh, my mother—what was it. My father, I think was it 1935? My mother, six or seven. Very shortly after—I mean as soon as they could possibly. And I remember sitting with my mother and teaching her the history so she could pass her citizenship paper and get her citizenship papers.

LEVINE: Do you remember that day, when she got it?

KASSUF: I wasn't there with her, but I remember her getting the – you know, coming in the mail and she got it and she was excited and my father was happy. Now he's an American citizen and he could, you know, be – do what he wanted.

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah.

KASSUF: So. Within the law.

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah (laughs).

KASSUF: [superposed] And they were very law abiding. Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: How would you describe—I mean, when you were a little girl growing up here—how would you describe your mother's personality?

KASSUF: [long pause] The fact that she came from one totally foreign culture to this, was hard for her. And yet she did what she had to do, to get ahead, for herself, for her children. She had trials and tribulations—personal. But on the other hand, she was also a happy person. So she had both sides, yeah. And I remember her singing around the house, and—she loved her children. I mean, her children were everything to her, and she loved feeding them and taking care of them, so.

LEVINE: Were you treated differently—as a girl—compared with your brother? I mean, just on that basis?

KASSUF: [superposed] Oh yeah, yes. Yeah. I mean, they – they—the boy got first preference for everything. So if we had one piece of meat, he got the meat and we got (laughs) what we could. Yeah. I don't hold that against him, that's the way it was. And I never got – even til I was through high school and he was living at home, we made sure that he got his meal, and he had his bed, he was comfortable. And, yeah. And I think as a son was even more important than a husband in that culture.

LEVINE: Why do you say that?

KASSUF: Or maybe it was just my mother, I don't know. But my brother seemed to get the prefer – preferential treatment. And I think also, going back to the—to Mesopotamia—the son was responsible for the family, if anything happened

to the father. So they had to make sure that that son survived. And so that probably carried through. Yeah.

LEVINE: Well it sounds like your brother did his part, as the privileged—

KASSUF: [superposed] (laughs) Yeah, yeah. He was very good. I can't say anything against him. And not just because Jean is sitting here. (both laugh) It's the way I've always felt. Yeah. We were buddies.

LEVINE: And how about your father? How would you describe him, as a person, as his temperament—

KASSUF: [superposed] Oh, he – he was very outgoing. Very innovative. He was a man ahead of his time. He was.

LEVINE: [superposed] Oh. Why do you say that?

KASSUF: [long pause] He—how do I say that? He went out to work and he had no problems with us girls being out—I don't mean going out on dates, that was forbidden—but—

LEVINE: He gave you freedom.

KASSUF: [superposed] Freedom, yeah. I remember in high school my mother would not allow us to wear makeup (laughs). And my father took me to school one day and he handed me a lipstick and he says, "Put this on when you get to school." (both laugh) So – so, things like that—a man ahead of his time. My one sister was his – in his work. She would help him nail and hammer. I would help him with the two-man saw. So there was that kind of difference. The only thing we didn't do was learn to read and write the Arabic. And he started to do that when he left home, so, I never did learn to read and write

the language—the Arabic language. So. I think that carried through from the old.

LEVINE: Did he socialize with other people who were also of an Arab abstraction?

KASSUF: [superposed] Yeah, the people from the – from Mosul, the other immigrants from Mosul, yes. We would have – we would have people over at the house, they would smoke the [not understood – something in Arabic] and have food and singing and hand clapping. Yeah, he was very – he liked having people around, he liked to socialize. He loved Christmas. He went out of his way to do great Christmases for us. So, um—

LEVINE: How about organizations? Were there any, you know, formal organizations that your parents belonged to?

KASSUF: [superposed] No. Other than the church, we had—

LEVINE: [superposed] Oh.

KASSUF: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Now, was the mass—or the service, I should say—here, in this country, was it in Arabic? Did you have that?

KASSUF: [superposed] Yes, yes. Actually a lot of it was in Aramaic.

LEVINE: Oh.

KASSUF: Yeah.

LEVINE: Explain what that—

KASSUF: [superposed] That's – that's Jesus's language. The old Aramaic, before it became Ara – Arabic. And, so, a lot of the – a lot of the service was in Aramaic and I remember the prayers in Aramaic. The Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KASSUF: I can't recite them now, but I remember them. And then there was a lot of Arabic. And the church we went to was in west New York.

LEVINE: Oh. In Brooklyn?

KASSUF: [superposed] So it was in New Jersey—

LEVINE: No. In west--?

KASSUF: In New Jersey.

LEVINE: In New Jersey. Oh.

KASSUF: Yeah. West New—yeah. Up around Fort Lee, somewhere in that area.

LEVINE: So you had to travel to it?

KASSUF: Yeah. We took mass transportation over.

LEVINE: When you were in New York City you would go there?

KASSUF: Yes, yes. We grew up in the – in the west – in the church in west New York. Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh.

KASSUF: Yeah.

LEVINE: Would you go every week?

KASSUF: All day Sunday. And, yes, every week. And during the week—like I said, we were a very faithful and a lot of the activities centered around the church. So, yeah.

LEVINE: What kind of activities would the church sponsor that you would take part in?

KASSUF: Well, there were suppers, and the women – attending church, the women had—sat up in the balcony. They didn't sit with the men. The men sat downstairs. And the children were – the girls sat up with the women and then we had to go down to the basement where they had Sunday school, if you want to call it that. Then they had church suppers, and, you know, you always went to church. Holy Week we were there every day. That was, you know—that's the – I would say that's the only organization we really belonged to.

LEVINE: Now, Aramaic. It wouldn't be spoken—

KASSUF: No, it's a spoken language.

LEVINE: But, in other words, would people—your mother or father, or people they knew—speak it?

KASSUF: No. By that time it was like a lost language.

LEVINE: It would be like Latin.

KASSUF: [superposed] Yes – yes. Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KASSUF: Yeah, so, it wasn't an every day spoken language.

LEVINE: So, OK. So you started school and you caught on to the language—

KASSUF: [superposed] Yes – yes. Yes.

LEVINE: Do you know what it was that helped you to pick it up?

KASSUF: I—in retrospect, I – I—and all through my life, I've been a very studious person. And always wanting to learn, and to this day I read voraciously. And probably way back then I did too.

LEVINE: Yeah. Were the teachers kind to you, helpful to you?

KASSUF: [superposed] Yes, yes. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. The teachers were. They were very nice. Yeah, there was no—because I'm sure that I wasn't the only immigrant there and I was – they probably had children speaking ten different languages (laughs).

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah.

KASSUF: [superposed] 'Cause where I grew up, down Lower East Side, there were Italians, there are Irish, they were Jewish—we were kind of a minority, the Ar—you know.

LEVINE: Did that matter? Did you face any prejudice?

KASSUF: [superposed] No. No.

LEVINE: [superposed] Or any kind of—

KASSUF: Not that I remember. Now—when you asked me the question back about how I knew my father was ahead of his time—he did not take us to live in the Arabic enclave in Brooklyn. He brought us to a diversified community. Which—

LEVINE: You think, by design? I mean, he wanted—

KASSUF: [superposed] I th—yeah, yeah. So I think that was a big help. So we—yeah, growing up, I don't remember prejudice, and I knew I never had any prejudice. So—

LEVINE: Yeah.

KASSUF: [superposed] Yeah. All I know was, everybody was poor (laughs). And I know I was poor 'cause everybody else was!

LEVINE: Well, you did come during the Depr – the Great Depression.

KASSUF: No kidding (both laugh).

LEVINE: Yeah, right. I don't have to tell you! So did your father find work?

KASSUF: Yes, he did. He was a very good carpenter—he did beautiful work. So he – he mostly worked for some private people—but they had to, of course, be wealthy—mostly he worked for companies, manufacturing companies. He was like a handyman.

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah.

KASSUF: So he always had steady work until he got very, very sick and he couldn't work for a while—

LEVINE: What did he have?

KASSUF: He had—from what I—a stomach ulcer, a severe stomach ulcer. I remember he went in for surgery and they removed a good portion of his stomach. And, so, he was out of work for about a year. And that's when we went on welfare, for that short period of time.

LEVINE: This is during the 30's?

KASSUF: No, it was in nineteen [pause] I would say 1936. Yeah, 35, 36, somewhere in there.

LEVINE: Now, how old was your father when he first came?

KASSUF: Oh, gosh.

LEVINE: He was considerably older than your mother, who was early twenties, right?

KASSUF: Yeah, so he was – so he had to be around 35, 'cause he was about fifteen years older than my mother. Yeah, so he was 35. He was a very responsible person.

LEVINE: I was going to say, that's—you know, to uproot at that age is—

KASSUF: [superposed] Yeah, yeah. Because even back in Mesopotamia, he was responsible for the family back there. He was more responsible than his brother, let's put it that way (laughs).

LEVINE: His brother who sponsored you?

KASSUF: [superposed] Yes – yeah. So.

LEVINE: Do you think your mother and father had the idea of the American dream? Was that something that you think they thought about, or found, or—

KASSUF: [superposed] What – define "American dream" for me?

LEVINE: Well, I guess different people define it different ways—

KASSUF: [superposed] Yeah.

LEVINE: [superposed] But—for a better life, for a—

KASSUF: [superposed] For a better life—I think more so for their children than for them. Yeah. They – that – that was their dream and the fact that they got to where they did in their life was beyond their dreams. And that their children had grown up and had gotten educated and none of us – none of us girls went past high school. College was not an option. Monetarily—or culturally. So—

LEVINE: Well, high school was something.

KASSUF: [superposed] Oh, yeah, that was a – yeah, that was a gr – great thing back then. So we – that was one thing my parents just insisted—that we finish high school, if nothing else. So they saw us through that.

LEVINE: So what did you do when you did finish high school? What did you do after that?

KASSUF: I went to work for American Cyanamid in their laboratory. In fact, they recruited me before I graduated because I—like I said, I was a very good student, my marks were very good.

LEVINE: And did you stay working there?

KASSUF: I – until I got married. And—

LEVINE: [superposed] And how did you meet your husband?

KASSUF: By then – by then my brother had – before then, and – and when World War Two started my brother was in co – college, or finished college, and American Cyanamid went to the schools recruiting young men to come to work. So he got a job at American Cyanamid and he came out here and lived by himself for a year, in Bound Brook, New Jersey. And he finally said to my father, "I can't stand it by myself here anymore. Come on out, we'll find a place and bring the fam – so that we can move the whole family over." And so my father came out one day and between he and my brother they found a little house for us in Middlesex. My father bought that house and moved us all out to Middlesex. And that's how we ended up in Middlesex, and we grew up there, the rest of our – from the time I was thirteen—

LEVINE: [superposed] Oh.

KASSUF: [superposed] I lived there. Until I got married. And I got married when I was eighteen—a year after I was out of high school. And then I went to work for American Cyanamid so that's – and then – then my brother got married.

LEVINE: Before you?

KASSUF: Yeah – yeah.

LEVINE: So how did you meet your husband? (both laugh)

KASSUF: So my husband – we had met another family from the Mid-East—in fact, my sister and – and this other girl were in the same class. And my sister came home one day and said, "Mom, there's a girl in my class, she's from Lebanon." So my mother said to her, "Find out where they, we'll invite them." 'Cause we were in only Mid-Easterners in Middlesex at that time. So they did, and the Andrews family and my family got to be friends. Sam, my husband—whose name is Kassuf, not Andrews—was in the service. And when he got out of the service he got a produce truck, and he went peddling produce house to house to house. And he came and was selling fruits and vegetables to my mother. He met my sister and he asked her out for a date—so he took her out. And then when he brought her home I was home from work, and he asked me to go out. And I said, "Well, I can't, because you're dating my sister." (both laugh) So she said to me, "Go ahead and go on in here." So I went and—that was it. So, that's how we met. He's – he always likes to say he traded me for a basket of peaches (both laugh).

LEVINE: And his name was Sam?

KASSUF: Sam Kassuf. 'Cause he's – he was a stepchild of the Andrews clan.

LEVINE: Oh.

KASSUF: Yeah. His mother married Andrews. So his name is really K-A-S-S-O-U-F, but when his birth certificate came through – he didn't know until he had to

go into the service for the draft, and he got his birth certificate and – and so they misspelled his name. And he just left it that way. Yeah, so.

LEVINE: So then, did you have children?

KASSUF: I have three girls.

LEVINE: Mhm.

KASSUF: Yes.

LEVINE: And their names?

KASSUF: The – Elaine, Linda, and Donna. And the two older ones went to college, the younger one decided she didn't want to go to college, she wanted work. So see how far we've advanced?

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah.

KASSUF: (laughs) And now all the grandchildren go to college. And, yeah.

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah. So how do you think of yourself, in terms of your heritage side and your American side? How do you balance the two in your own way?

KASSUF: I'm an American. I have American values, American – my politics are more American, my culture is more American. But I value my her – Arabic background, because it brings a lot to who I am. And it makes me, I think, a more interesting person.

LEVINE: What do you feel really satisfied at having done—when you think of all the things you've done in your lifetime?

KASSUF: I've realized what a great, intelligent person I am. (both laugh) And my compassion for other people. And that's all come out more recent—maybe as I've gotten older and I have a little more introspection and not so busy with life. (laughs)

LEVINE: Do you think having come here—even though you were so young, but, as an immigrant to another country, another culture—how do you think that has impacted your personality, or your approach? Do you think it has?

KASSUF: Yeah, I think it has because thinking back, if I wasn't—although I grew up in America, I was raised in the Mid-East culture. And although I had some freedom, if I was aware of the possibilities, I think I could've done more of the things that I wanted to do, instead of obeying the rules and regulations of the old culture.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KASSUF: To be obedient, non-questioning. Just do what you're told. That kind of thing.

LEVINE: Well, of course, the cultures change too—

KASSUF: [superposed] Yeah.

LEVINE: [superposed] Women are a lot freer now than they were when either one of us were growing up.

KASSUF: Here, or – or—?

LEVINE: Yeah, here.

KASSUF: Oh, yeah – oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KASSUF: When I tell my husband that the women didn't get the right to vote until— what year is this?—he can't believe it. (both laugh) I says, "Yeah, women couldn't vote, they couldn't have property, they couldn't inherit, they—" (laughs).

LEVINE: [Superposed] Yeah, yeah. OK, well, is there anything we haven't covered that you would want to say?

KASSUF: I think, also, from—growing up in America but with the back – heritage I have, being the oldest daughter also impacted me. 'Cause I grew up with a lot of responsibilities. I was responsible for my siblings. I was also, in a way, responsible for my parents—'cause they couldn't really write and do all that stuff—so, between my brother and I, we helped them fill out papers, understand, show them how to vote, things like that. So I had a lot of responsibilities to my parents and to my siblings. And that, I'm sure has impacted me, I'm that kind of a person. So.

LEVINE: Yeah. And I suppose—do you feel like more of the Arab heritage was – that they transferred their own values from the old culture more on you than on they did on the later children?

KASSUF: [superposed] Yes – yes. Yes. It became easier for the other girls. Yeah – oh, yeah. I was not allowed to date. I mean, they – they had to – they

approved of my going out with Sam. Because he was the same background. I was eighteen then. So, it was OK.

LEVINE: But if it had not been that, it would have been more difficult.

KASSUF: [superposed] Yeah. Yes – yes. But after that, my sisters had an easier time, in school. I had to get home from school to make sure my sisters were home safe and sound, start meals—'cause by then my mother was working. My mother started working soon as we moved to Middlesex as a – in a sewing factory.

LEVINE: Oh.

KASSUF: Yeah.

LEVINE: So how old was the youngest when your mother went to work?

KASSUF: (sighs) Two?

LEVINE: Oh.

KASSUF: Yeah. 'Cause my younger sister was born 1939. And we moved to Middlesex in forty-one – forty-two. So, yeah, so she was three.

LEVINE: What prompted your mother to get – a work – a job?

KASSUF: [superposed] Work? Probably finances.

LEVINE: Yeah?

KASSUF: And since she could not read or write, she got a job doing what she could.
And sewing was an easy thing. I think a lot of women—

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah.

KASSUF: [superposed] Back in those days—that was the job they got. So, yeah.

LEVINE: That was already in the forties?

KASSUF: Yes, uh-huh.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KASSUF: I – I remember in New York, in Manhattan, she had worked for a lingerie manufacturer, for a little bit.

LEVINE: Oh.

KASSUF: Yeah – yeah.

LEVINE: Again sewing.

KASSUF: Yes, yeah. Uh-huh. So.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the build up to World War Two? Were you aware of that whole thing?

KASSUF: [superposed] I remember – the only thing I remember about that is—at the time that my father had been sick—so sick—and at the same time my mother had a miscarriage and she was sick, they put all us girls in an orphanage—

LEVINE: [superposed] Oh.

KASSUF: Up at Chappaqua. And – and I remember them teaching me about the Th – Third Reich. Of course, it didn't register then. I didn't, you know, I didn't know what it was all about. (laughs) And then when we went back home, I remember the war. Yes, I definitely remember the bo – Hitler going into Poland, and from there on I remember all the history. And I remember there was an old German man, lived upstairs from us. And I remember the other kids pickin' on him—he was an old, old, practically blind man—and they would pick on him and I thought that was terrible. So I would go to the store for him—and I, you know, sort of became his friend. (laughs)

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KASSUF: [background noise] But I – yeah, and I was the inte – interpreter for the news—Walter Winchell—every night, we listened to Walter Winchell, and I would tell my parents what the news was, and.

LEVINE: You would tell them in Arabic?

KASSUF: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KASSUF: Yeah – yeah.

LEVINE: Wow.

KASSUF: Yeah. So—

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, you were a liaison (both laugh) between this culture and the old one.

KASSUF: [superposed] Yes – yes.

LEVINE: Yeah – yeah.

KASSUF: And – and my mother, once she – once she started to work, became even more liberated, because then she made friends outside her family and home. And she would associate with them, and she would go visiting with them, and sometimes they would go on little day trips or something. So she, you know, found herself more – a lot better than – yeah—

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah.

KASSUF: [superposed] So.

LEVINE: Yeah. That must've been a good experience for her.

KASSUF: Yeah – yeah. And my mother taught me how to cook all the Arabic foods. So—and I've taught my girls, and my grandchildren, and, so we try to carry on. The only thing I didn't teach them was the language. (laughs) And now they yell at me.

LEVINE: (laughs) Yeah, right. Well, the world turns. I mean—

KASSUF: [superposed] Yeah.

LEVINE: [superposed] There was a time when people didn't do that, now its—

KASSUF: [superposed] Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: [superposed] It's back.

KASSUF: [superposed] And growing up, all through school—even through high school—when I said – when I would say Mesopotamia, nobody would know what I was talking about. (laughs) Unless – yeah.

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah. Uh-huh.

KASSUF: So. [background noise] Now they know.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you want to say anything about the war in Iraq at this point?

KASSUF: I have no emotional ties. [long pause] I have a global feeling, about the whole situation. I wish there would be peace in this world, you know. I keep saying – because I – I keep wondering why can't people get along? What is this stuff? Because I feel like—you can always get along. You can find something to agree on. And this tearing apart is not good. And – and I don't care what country it is. But, the Middle East, right now, is so crucial to the world. And—that's the only feeling that I have about it. As a per – for personal ties to Iraq, it's a shame – it's a shame that – I wish the women would take hold. They need a champion over there to – like the – the suffragettes did here. (laughs) So, yeah. I – I've become more feminized? (laughs) Politically?

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah. Uh-huh.

KASSUF: [superposed] Yeah. I think women can do what I – whatever they set their minds to—and they should. (both laugh)

LEVINE: Well maybe that's a good place to—

KASSUF: [superposed] Yeah.

LEVINE: [superposed] What we're going to do now is I'm going to change the tape, and then we'll bring your niece Jean in—

KASSUF: [superposed] OK.

LEVINE: [superposed] On this. And then we'll close. OK. We're ending with tape one.

END TAPE ONE. BEGIN TAPE TWO.

LEVINE: OK, this is tape two, and I've been speaking with Evelyn Kassuf, and now we're going to bring Mrs. Kassuf's niece Jean Potters in on the conversation. And, let's see. Jean, you're the daughter of the older brother. (laughs) OK, why don't you say your father's name.

POTTERS: My father in Yonan Sheredos. Evelyn's brother.

LEVINE: [superposed] And how do you spell Yonan?

POTTERS: Y-O-N-A-N.

LEVINE: OK. And why don't you say your birth date and where you were born?

POTTERS: I was born in Plainfield, New Jersey in 1954. And my maiden name was Sheredos.

LEVINE: OK. We've heard how your aunt described your father, but why don't you say—as his daughter—how you would describe his temperament, his personality.

POTTERS: Well, he was also a – very skilled at carpentry and – and other building trades. He built the house that I grew up in. He also loved music, and family was very important, religion was important, values—the same values my aunt talked about. Honesty, things like that. I think he inherited some of his father's hot temper, but (laughs) that's another story.

LEVINE: (laughs) OK.

POTTERS: I remember him talking about his grandfather having a caravan—he said ran from Mosul to Basra on the sea coast—and I think he said that his father had an Arabian horse that could ride on ahead faster than the caravan. And – I –

LEVINE: [superposed] Huh.

POTTERS: I believe that's what he – he used to talk about.

LEVINE: Now, the caravan contained what?

POTTERS: I imagine bringing products.

KASSUF: That's why I said I know he was a merchant. So maybe this is where the merchant came in.

LEVINE: Ah. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Did he talk about anything else about the old country?

POTTERS: The only other thing I remember was – I think he said that the house that they lived in had a courtyard where the women would go out and prepare the food.

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh. Yeah – yeah. Do you think his having come here—a seven-year-old, right?—do you think that immigrant experience was something that he incorporated and was part of who he was?

POTTERS: Absolutely. Whenever there were family gatherings my – my grandparents, my father, my aunts all spoke Arabic. The food was always traditional, on holidays and—I remember my grandfather would wear a skullcap and he had – would hold prayer beads and I remember when he would say grace before a meal he would chant and sing and—grace could go on for quite a while! (all laugh)

LEVINE: So the grandparents came later, after you—

POTTERS: Well, the – her – my – my aunt's parents are my grandparents.

LEVINE: Oh, I'm sorry – I'm thinking – OK, yeah. But nobody else came after you? From your—

POTTERS: [superposed] Just the – one cousin.

KASSUF: [superposed] The one cousin. Yeah.

LEVINE: [superposed] One cousin, yeah.

POTTERS: And when – when you were talking about going to school, I remember my father saying he didn't speak English when he started school, but I remember him saying that they told him if he had to go to the bathroom to ask for a

haircut and say, "*toilette*." 'Cause I guess, from the French, (KASSUF laughs) it must've been the same word. So – so that's the one thing he knew. And he – he always loved school and he loved his teachers. They seemed to take a special interest in him, helped him to learn English and to adapt—I think he was even – he even talked about a teacher who took him to museums on the weekend. He was jealous of her boyfriend (laughs). Things like that—I think he married my mother because she was a teacher (laughs). And he – I remember him talking about some of his summer camp experiences, I guess through the Fresh Air Fund and then, later, he worked at some summer camps. And one of the women – oh, well, actually, it was a couple that he met at one of those camps, were lifelong friends. And—

LEVINE: A couple of—

POTTERS: [superposed] That he – that were running one of the camps where he worked.

LEVINE: [superposed] Oh, uh-huh. Yeah.

POTTERS: And when you were talking about your father being and innovator, I remember my father saying he – my grandfather would make a few changes when they would move into a new apartment, like opening up windows in walls where there weren't any to get some – I guess light and ventilation.

LEVINE: Huh.

POTTERS: And how he would flatten tin cans and cover up any spaces or openings, I guess to keep pests out, keep heat in—I don't know. (laughs) Things like that. And I remember him talking about picnics. Up on the roof, or in a park. And talking about who – carrying whole watermelons in a baby carriage and cooking shish kabob over coal, charcoal fire.

LEVINE: Would this be connected to the church, you think?

KASSUF: No, it was just a family outing.

LEVINE: [superposed] Family. Uh-huh.

KASSUF: Yeah. And sometimes we would meet other Mid-Easterners from – our friends from our – the other – and it would be like a gathering at the park for a picnic.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

POTTERS: Yeah, and I always remember the same expression my aunt said my grandmother repeating, "God bless America," over and over again. "God bless America." And I think she was very much aware of how different women's lives were here—

KASSUF: [superposed] Mhm.

POTTERS: [superposed] As opposed to there. And, as you said, when they went back to visit they couldn't wait to come back here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you yourself ever go back?

KASSUF: No – no.

LEVINE: [superposed] No.

KASSUF: My husband and I went to Egypt, but at that time there were no diplomatic relations so we couldn't get a visa to visit the rest of the Mid-East. So.

LEVINE: [superposed] Uh-huh. Do you have that desire?

KASSUF: Not now, no.

LEVINE: [superposed] Well, not now, yeah, right.

KASSUF: [superposed] No – not really, I never did.

LEVINE: No, mhm.

POTTERS: I don't either.

LEVINE: (laughs) You don't either.

POTTERS: No.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

POTTERS: And the only other thing I remember my father talking a lot about was some of the jobs that he would do to raise – to – to earn money, and it was really just pennies, I guess, and nickels. He had a shoe-shine kit (LEVINE laughs). I guess he and his dad built – put together, and he would shine shoes. And I also remember him talking about selling shopping bags. He said he would buy them, I guess three for a nickel, and sell them for two cents a piece (LEVINE laughs).

KASSUF: [superposed] I remember that.

LEVINE: [superposed] Wow – wow.

POTTERS: Yeah, he said he was saving up—he wanted to go to college, but—as I understand it—finances didn't allow, so he always regretted not having that opportunity.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

POTTERS: Because he – he valued education. And instilled that value in us.

LEVINE: So do you have sisters and brothers?

POTTERS: Yes, I have one sister and one brother.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what are their names?

POTTERS: My sister is Carol and my brother is Bob. Robert.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. OK. Well, I guess, I'm trying to think if there's anything else about the immigrant experience and how it got passed along to the next generation.

POTTERS: None of us speak Arabic, either.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

POTTERS: And my mother's parents came from Italy and she didn't learn Italian, so, that language was lost, too.

LEVINE: So, was it a big event that your brother—and your father—married someone who was not from the Mid-East?

KASSUF: [chair squeaks] [pause] No – not that she wasn't from the Mid-East, they – I think it was basically that he got married. (KASSUF and LEVINE laugh) So,

there was some issue about that, but once they got to know her, they loved her (laughs).

LEVINE: Now, was your father alive when your brother got married?

KASSUF: Oh, yeah. My father lived to be ninety-six.

LEVINE: Oh.

KASSUF: He died in 1993? I think.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Oh, so, Jean, you knew them very well. I mean, they were around for quite a while.

KASSUF: [superposed] Oh, yeah.

POTTERS: Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KASSUF: Yeah, even my children – well, they – my children are the same age as—

LEVINE: How old did your mother live to be?

KASSUF: Eighty-nine. Yeah. So, we got something to look forward to (POTTERS laughs). Maybe.

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah, you got good genes.

POTTERS: [superposed] Yeah, and – and she – she loved cooking. She always – she love – that was her favorite thing! I mean, if she could cook for thirty people, she was happy.

LEVINE: [superposed] Wow.

POTTERS: She loved to see everyone eating and being together and enjoying themselves.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KASSUF: Talk about cooking—when – when we came to New Jersey—when we came to Middlesex—there was no Eastern Orthodox church, so our priest recommended that we join the Episcopal church, which we did, which is very close. And the – Saint Paul's had a – an expansion fund, and to raise money for that my mother put on shish kabob dinners every Sunday night. And people would pay – she supplied the food and they would pay, and whatever they paid went to the expansion fund. So she did that for a year, and we got the church expanded.

LEVINE: Wow.

KASSUF: So—

LEVINE: So did you stay Episcopal? Or—?

KASSUF: Yes – yes. Yeah, yeah. Because then I was confirmed in the Episcopal church, got married, my children were baptized in that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KASSUF: If – since Jean's mother was Catholic, and my brother respected that more so, they – he became – joined the Catholic church.

LEVINE: [superposed] The Catholic church. I see.

POTTERS: [superposed] Yeah.

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah. Wow. OK. Well, I thank you both—

KASSUF: Well, thank you!

POTTERS: [superposed] You're welcome.

LEVINE: [superposed] A very valuable interview to have in our collection.

KASSUF: [superposed] Well, oh, good.

LEVINE: [superposed] And I thank you very much.

POTTERS: Thank you.

KASSUF: All right.

LEVINE: [superposed] Anything else—

KASSUF: [superposed] Oh, yeah. The name Yonan is derived from Saint Eunice, [not understood], and my mother prayed to him to give her a healthy son, and that's why she named him Yonan.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. OK, well thank you both very, very much.

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POTTERS: [superposed] You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

40 minutes.