

EI-494
TOFIK SFEIR
BIRTH DATE: JANUARY 1, 1907
INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 8, 1994
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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 11/1998
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG

LEBANON, 1920
AGE 13

SHIP: "THE ROCHAMBEAU"
PORT: MARSEILLES
RESIDENCES
LEBANON: SARBA
US: UTICA, NY

HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mr. Sfeir's wife, Tamar, and Bob Jones, who is our contact here in UTICA, are also present.

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Friday, July 8, 1994. I'm in the city of Utica at the home of Tofik . . .

SFEIR: Sfeir.

SIGRIST: Sfeir.

TAMAR: Tofik, Tofik.

SIGRIST: Tofik. It's spelled D?

SFEIR: T!

TAMAR: T.

SFEIR: T, T!

SFEIR: T, like in Tom.

SFEIR: Yeah. F.

SIGRIST: T-O-

SFEIR: F

SIGRIST F-I-K. Sfeir is S-F-E-I-R. Mr. Sfeir came from Lebanon in 1920. He was thirteen years old. Also present in the room is Tamar Sfeir, and Bob Jones, our Utica connection. Anyway, thank you for letting me come out. Can we begin with you giving me your birth date?

SFEIR: The first, the first, the seventh, wait a minute. The first, the seventh, 1907.

SIGRIST: The first of December?

TAMAR: January.

SFEIR: January.

SIGRIST: January 1, 1907.

SFEIR: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: And, um, where in Lebanon were you born?

SFEIR: We were born in the, in the most, uh, all the Christians, the Christians are there. I mean, I was born in Sarba. Sarba is near Jounieh. Jounieh, and there is all Christians all the way around small towns around Jounieh. And to go to Jounieh, or to go to the north, you have to go through our town first.

SIGRIST: Um, can you spell the name of the town, please?

SFEIR: Our town?

SIGRIST: Yes.

SFEIR: S . . .

TAMAR: A-R . . .

SFEIR: R-V-A. Sarba.

SIGRIST: Sarba.

SFEIR: Sarba.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what the town looked like when you were growing up?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah. We had a lot of doings over there. A lot of doings. Lots of, uh, holy days. And sometimes, I mean, we have something, there is no, you can go and clean the town, and nobody home, nobody's home. I went back in 19, in 1920. And I was there, of course, I used to sing in church, and the priest was still there, the one who used to teach us. The priest was still there. So they went, they built, uh, they built places for benediction with, uh, with sheets, you know? Sheets, and the people get under the sheet. So, he said, the priest told me, you know, motioned me to go, because he was under, under something

with the Blessed Sacrament. And, uh, I said no. So he told some neighbor of ours, older than I am, he said, "Pull him in." He pulled me in, we went to the monastery, they, uh, like St. Basil's Church here, we went to that monastery, and they had everything ready.

He says, "You have to say benediction." I say, "I'm not going to say it." So he told this fellow, he said, "Pull him in and tell him, tell Tofik nobody's going to sing it but him." I started with it. My voice shivering, you know, but everybody knew me. You know, in our own town, see, everybody knew me. And then, uh, we went, we said the, uh, benediction, I said the benediction. And after that, we marched on. And then all the neighbors, you know, around me, "God bless you, Tofik." You know, I was a little devil when I was small, but I (laughs) changed, I changed. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Can you sing the benediction now for us, on tape?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Would you do it, please?

SFEIR: The whole benediction you want?

SIGRIST: Well, a part of it, the beginning of it.

SFEIR: Yeah.

TAMAR: Can I [not understood]?

SIGRIST: No, I'm okay, thank you.

TAMAR: Or [not understood]

SIGRIST: No I -

TAMAR: [not understood]

SIGRIST: Can you -- go ahead. (Mr. Sfeir sings in Arabic)

STEIR: [chants Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament in Arabic --O
praise the Lord all ye heathen, praise him all ye nations. For his
merciful kindness is ever more and more towards us and the truth of the
Lord endureth for ever.
Down in adoration falling, Lo! the sacred Host we hail, Lo! oe'r ancient
forms departing
Newer rites of grace prevail; Faith for all defects supplying, Where the
feeble senses fail. To the everlasting Father, And the Son Who reigns on
high With the Holy Spirit proceeding Forth from each eternally, Be
salvation, honor blessing, Might and endless majesty.]

SIGRIST: Thank you.

SFEIR: That's the benediction.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

SFEIR: Of the Blessed Sacrament.

SIGRIST: Um, can you describe for me the house that you grew up in -- in Lebanon? What did the house look like that you grew up in.

SFEIR: A nice house. My father was a stone cutter. He cut the stones for the house.

SIGRIST: What did the house look like on the outside?

SFEIR: On the outside? It's all, all stone house. It's all stone house. We see the ocean. We see the ocean, the Mediterranean. We see every ship that goes into Beirut.

TAMAR: Tell him how the house - the house looked in front.

SIGRIST: So your house sat so you could see the ocean.

SFEIR: We faced, we faced the ocean. They usually, and, uh, every Friday the women in all the neighborhood take the children and food and we go out to a certain spot where no man goes through there. They know the women are there, and they - there's some -- not like here, they dress up with something right down to the, down here to their - to their knees, see, to their ankles. Oh, yeah. And nobody, no man goes through there. They know every Friday, they take us woodlands, we go there.

SIGRIST: Were men and women very much separate?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Over there?

SFEIR: Even in church. In church, on my days, in my father's days, he used to tell us, they go in church, and the priest turn around with something, to do something, he see a woman with the man, he stays right there. He says, "I'm staying right here. You go sit with the woman on the other side," till she goes there. Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: The children would always be with the women. Correct?

SFEIR: The children, right.

SIGRIST: How old, when the boys, how old were the boys when they didn't have to be with the women all the time?

SFEIR: They have to be from ten up anyway, see. Ten up. Thirteen, yeah.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

SFEIR: George.

SIGRIST: And, tell me, you said he was a stonecutter.

SFEIR: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about his job, where he got the stones.

SFEIR: We have lot of stones, lot of rocks. Lots, lots, we didn't know what to do with it. So when we were there the, uh - in 1920, in 1930 when I went back . . .

SIGRIST: Talk about when you were a little boy, before you came to America, talk about your father's stonecutting.

SFEIR: Yeah, yeah. I don't, I remember my father just, uh, just a little bit, not much, see? I was two-and-a-half years old, two, two years and nine months. My brother was nine months. He don't remember my father at all.

SIGRIST: Did your father, did your father die?

SFEIR: No, my father was in this country.

SIGRIST: Oh, he came here when you were . . .

SFEIR: He came here. Oh, yeah. He had cousins here. That's how they used to come years ago, you know? That's how used to - how they used to come. See, here's a picture there.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

SFEIR: That's what, made what somebody, see, stonecutters, and (?), and . . .

SIGRIST: So you grew up mostly with your mother.

SFEIR: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: What was her name?

SFEIR: R-A-J-O-U-N. Rajoun.

SIGRIST: And do you remember what her maiden name was?

SFEIR: Oh, yes. Avauchavki.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

SFEIR: Avu, A-V-A-U-C-H-A-V-K-I. Avauchavki.

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about your mother's background, where, where she came from, and . . .

SFEIR: Oh, yes, oh, yes. From the same village. From the same village, all neighbors. From the same village.

SIGRIST: What did her parents do for a living? What did her father do for a living?

SFEIR: They, her father died early. And he had, uh, six boys and three girls. Some of them went, uh, went to Brazil, some went to Chile. I mean, they, they all were out, see, my uncles, except one. Except one, he didn't, uh, he didn't leave the country. He stayed there. Oh, yeah, he stayed there.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your mother's parents when you were growing up? Were they living?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah. The mother, not the father, not her father. The mother.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about your grandmother on your mother's side?

SFEIR: My grandmother, she lost a daughter. And, she lost a daughter, and they had consumption. They don't bury them, you know? They bury them, they had a place where they put them. And then all she used to say, "Yusef," that's her youngest son, and then they used to go and look for her at night, she's at the grave, she's at the grave outside the town. They bring her home. She don't, she don't remember. I mean, I remember her, I talked to her, I remember when she died.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about when your grandmother died?

SFEIR: Well, I know, I don't know how old I was. That was during the war. See, I was, I was seven, eight years old, I don't know. But I went to the funeral with them, to church.

SIGRIST: What, how did they, when somebody died, what did they do with the body, and what kind of funeral did they have?

SFEIR: Well, they have a funeral, and they buried, no such thing as, you know, like undertaker or something. They, women come, and they wash the body. They wash the body good -- and she died during the night, they bury her in the afternoon, and she died, uh, I mean, they don't leave them, see, like they do here. They do now. Yeah, oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did, um, did you have brothers and sisters?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah, I have one brother. He, I lost him about five years ago.

SIGRIST: What was his name?

SFEIR: Fred.

SIGRIST: And is he older than you, or younger?

SFEIR: Younger, two years younger.

SIGRIST: So there were just the two . . .

SFEIR: Two years younger to the day. They used to give us one birthday, January the 1st, yeah.

SIGRIST: So there were just the two boys, then.

SFEIR: Tho-- there were , and one sister.

SIGRIST: And what was her name?

SFEIR: Tamar, like her . . .

SIGRIST: Like your wife.

SFEIR: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Um, tell me about, uh, going to school in Lebanon. Did you go to school?

SFEIR: Well, we went to school, how long did we go to school? 1914, there was no such a thing as school. We just started, you know. 1914, I was, how long, seven years old? Seven years old. There was no school or nothing there. And we were lucky, if it wasn't for my uncles on my mother's side (sobbing) we would - we would be -- we saw people starving, we saw kids crying, we saw parents leave their kids, they couldn't stand them crying, there was nothing to feed them. They ate the dogs, they ate the cats. I mean, this is something I've seen with my own eyes. Over here the kids, I don't know - that --"We don't like this, we don't . . ." I said, "Don't say that. I've seen people starve, and men starving in the gutters."

SIGRIST: Why was food so scarce during World War One?

SFEIR: Well, the Turks used to come and take it, then the Germans came, and the Germans took the bulk. If you - if you was a planter, you have to steal your own - your own seed to feed your - feed your family. You had to steal your own seed and bury it so you can plant the following year.

SIGRIST: Did the Turks or the Germans take anything else other than food?

SFEIR: Oh, no. The Germans cleaned up the country. They - they used to go on dif-- people, you have to - you have to steal to live. And if it wasn't for my uncle, we wouldn't be here. We probably died like other people.

SIGRIST: Was your uncle in Lebanon, or was he here?

SFEIR: Oh, no, my uncles were in Lebanon.

SIGRIST: And how did he help you to get through that?

SFEIR: Well, see, I had, uh, three of them, three of them. One of them was a policeman in Jounieh. This is a story. Was a policeman in Jounieh. And he, uh, he was good, he was good to everybody. One day he run into trouble, they send him. He goes in there, rap on the door, somebody locked in with the knife or something, he -- he'll tell him, "Look, I'm coming in with the, with the gun. When I open the door, if you're not out with your hands up, you're going to get a bullet. Listen to me, I'm so and so, Nagit[ph] Bushopki[ph]." "Okay." They come out, I mean, they listen to him, see? They know he was fair and everything else, you know? He, uh, then the story, the one left when I went to Lebanon got married, this is funny.

SIGRIST: Is this in 1930 when you went over?

SFEIR: 1930, yeah. 1931 I got married. So we went to Beirut, you know, and bought some stuff to bring with us. And, uh, we got off, my uncle was living, but we have to walk in the sun, maybe ten minutes. In the sun, the blacktop, you put your foot, your foot goes in the blacktop it was so hot, see? So these two boys, I says, "We're not going to get off here, what are you doing?" He says, "You said Sarba." I says, "But Sarba around the other way. You go down, and . . ." I says, "I'll show you how to get there." "I know how to get there all right." So he backed up, and we went there. And, uh, I paid him. I says, "What's your name?" He says, "I am Joseph Baraket[ph]." I say, "What's Bagri[ph] Baraket[ph] to you?" "That's my father." (?) I says (?). I am m Bojafski [ph] nephew. I used to be the telephone between your house. And my - my uncle be in Jounieh -- in the town, and he needs something from him, he was a policeman, too, I say, "I know your grandpa, your grandpa and everybody." I say, "I used to go over there and tell your father what to do, or your uncle Anton." He says, "Anton is my father, the other one his cousin was with him." They were so glad. He says, "I'm glad it work out this way."

SIGRIST: When you were a little boy in Lebanon, what did you do for fun? How would you entertain yourself?

SFEIR: (he laughs) See? When there is, when there is good fruit, we go steal it. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: In, um, tell me about church. Was your mother a religious woman?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah. They're all, everybody was religious there. As I told you, when we had something there, you can go and clean the whole town, and nobody would know, because they're all out there.

SIGRIST: How did you practice your religion at home?

SFEIR: Oh, we had a grandfather and grandmother. Of course, my sister was . . . Hello, Adam.

SIGRIST: Excuse me, we're pausing just for a moment. (break in tape) Okay, we're now resuming. Um, tell me how you practiced your religion at home.

SFEIR: Every night we had pictures of saints on the shelf. We would sit down and say the rosary, every night, my grandfather and my grandmother and my mother and my sister, and, uh, -- but, I used to fall asleep. You know? They said, "Just say one part of the rosary." And I'd say, on my knee. We had one window that had glass on it that says from the shadow, you know, toward the - the mountains. That's Our Lady Lebanon, stands on the high mountain. (he coughs) So one night, and the shadow is - is blue. One night I saw - I saw my brother looking at - at his shadow, you know, and he, so, Jesus, I poked him a little bit and he, boo, broke the glass. He didn't break it. He cracked the glass. I got a licking during the - during the religious service that night. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Do you remember, did you say your prayers in Arabic?

SFEIR: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you say a prayer for us on tape in Arabic?

SFEIR: What do you want? Our Father?

SIGRIST: Do the Our Father, and say it slowly so that we can understand it.

SFEIR: Abana alathie fi asamawat li yatakadas ismok, li ya'atie malakotok, litakon mashia tok, kama fisama' kathaleka ala al ard. A'atinia khubzana kafafa yawmina, wa igfer lana khatayana, kama nahnu naghfer la man akhta'a elayna, wa la tudkhilna fit a jareeb; laken najjina min ashireer.. Amin]

[Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. thy kingdom come, thy will be done in heaven as well as on earth. give us bread for our life today and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. and do not lead us into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.]

SIGRIST Thank you. What sect of religion were you? What type of religion, what was, was it, was it a Catholic religion?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah. Under Roman, yeah.

SIGRIST: And what, did it have a name, that specific division?

SFEIR: Maronite, Maronite.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

SFEIR: Maronite. Maronite. N-I-T-E, M-R, Maronite.

SIGRIST: Well, that's all right. We'll look it up.

SFEIR: Okay.

SIGRIST: But it was, it was a Maronite sect of religion.

SFEIR: Oh, yeah. We belonged to Roman. I mean, everything belonged. And now we have, the highest one. Our patriarch is a first cousin to my father on the mother's side. Our patriarch now, he reigns over five million Maronites all over the world. He was here, you know, during the, he was in this country asking for help, during Reagan time, Bush time, but nobody looked at us, nothing. Now he sent six bishops to Los Angeles. Now they - they'll split he -- the Maronites. One bishop in Los Angeles, and one bishop in Brooklyn. The old bishop is in Brooklyn. I think he's got one more year to go and he retires, see, at seventy-five. Yeah.

SIGRIST: You said you had an older brother? Your brother is older, or younger?

SFEIR: No, younger, two years to the day.

SIGRIST: And what about your sister? Is she . . .

SFEIR: My sister was two, two years and a few months older than I am.

SIGRIST: Oh, so you're in the middle.

SFEIR: Yeah.

SIGRIST: You're in the middle.

SFEIR: Yeah.

SIGRIST: How did you get along with your brothers and sisters?

SFEIR: Well, I don't know. For years -- my mother used to, if she want to go some place in the evening, women from the neighborhood visit somebody, see, if she gave him one piece of candy, she'd give me three, so to keep quiet. Then all at once, before she, as soon as she leaves the house, they, running on the window -- both of them, jumping on the window, says, "Hey, Tofik took our candy away from me!" (he laughs) No, I was something when I was small. No.

SIGRIST: Um, can you tell me, um, uh, was there a household chore that was yours, that you were responsible for, for doing in the house?

SFEIR: Oh, no. No.

SIGRIST: You didn't have to help out?

SFEIR: Seven years, seven years old, no, they didn't expect me. Just to go to school. We had, uh, we had a teacher, Nabritek[ph] Shakid[ph]. But him, we were all scared of him. I don't know why. So one day we had a young man, and he told them, "Stop talking." And the second time he says, "This is the last time I tell you to stop talking." So this young fellow jumped in the middle of the floor, he want to fight

him. You know? So he grabbed him, took him around, and threw him out of the window. A window that high.

So the mother had a dirty tongue, see. Jesus, he went home, told his mother, she came. We were there, I mean. She's swearing at him, she this and that, I'll do this and I'll do that. So that's the only school. Finally she cooled off and she went to some people, talk to this teacher. They came and talked to him. He says, "Look, either he or I. This time I threw him, I didn't kill him. Maybe next time I'll do something, I kill him. You want me to get in trouble? Either he or I. He comes to school, I get out." That's it, that was it. I mean, he wouldn't.

SIGRIST: When your father was in America, was he writing back to your mother?

SFEIR: We'd get letters, I mean, we'd get money -- every little while, he sent the money from here into English pounds. Over there they could give us Turkish, Turkish money, they don't buy, the Turkish money that you get you don't buy a loaf of bread with it. The - the rich people, they lock the bread. The rich people. Why? They don't know if they can buy flour the next day or not. That's how bad things were. Yeah.

SIGRIST: What was your father doing in America?

SFEIR: Well, he was, they worked in the mills here. They worked in the summertime. They went out in the country, picked beans around at night, and up there, I mean, and his - his cousin was in charge, you know? They take people from here. They take them up there, they stay all summer. Pick beans, pick peas, and for the canning factories. Yeah. And in the wintertime, they work in the mills.

SIGRIST: When he first came to America, did he come right up to Utica?

SFEIR: To Utica. And ask us -- that's how you, they're, all our people came like that. They had some cousins, or, some from their country from their parts of the country, see?

SIGRIST: Well, tell me how it was decided that you would come to America? Who made that decision?

SFEIR: My father, my father did. The first boat that left New York, 1918, after the war, he was on it. A lot of them were on it. They were going back to the --he went to Lebanon, but things were bad. There was nothing to do. Nothing to do. This one died, this one died, this one went away and never came back. This were -- I mean, things were, he was there a year. Finally he brought the whole family over.

SIGRIST: How did he pay for the passage to come to America for the family?

SFEIR: Well, he had jus-in money -- he had money that he took from here. Yeah.

SIGRIST: What did you know about America before you came here?

SFEIR: We - we know, our father was here. We depended on him when he brought us here. That's all there was to it.

SIGRIST: You didn't have any ideas of what this was going to be?

SFEIR: Oh, oh, no, oh, no, oh, no. We didn't. Near the church, near the old church, for fifteen years and then '35, we started building this one.

SIGRIST: How did your mother feel about coming to America? Did she want to come to America?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah. Why not? I mean, the family came, the whole family came. See, she had her family.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the process of getting your papers in order before you left Lebanon?

SFEIR: It was no problem. They could come. My father was here, too, see?

SIGRIST: But your father was with you in Lebanon before you came to America, yeah?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: He came back to Lebanon in 1918.

SFEIR: '18, yeah, right after the war.

SIGRIST: And then did you all come to America together?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah, all together, yeah. He brought the whole family. It was bad there. There was no work, no such thing. So he decided . . .

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you took with you when you left Lebanon?

SFEIR: Oh, yes. Food. (he laughs) Those days, you know, all you could, on the boat, all you could buy is bread, that's all, see? But they, some of them had - zat [ph] -- all kinds of fruit, all kinds of, uh, olives, oh, yeah. We made it all right. Italian ship, we used to get macaroni.

SIGRIST: Where did you go to get the ship, to get on the ship?

SFEIR: Beirut.

SIGRIST: How did you get from your town in Lebanon to Beirut?

SFEIR: I took a train.

SIGRIST: Had you been on a train before, or was that your first time?

SFEIR: First time.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what that felt like, to be on the train?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah, oh, yeah, on the train, yeah. We had all our stuff. We brought a lot of stuff with him. Then finally he had to, they had to sell it in Italy. See, they, we thought we're going to, we're going to sail from Italy. We came to Italy, the Italians come to Marseilles, come to France, too. Oh, yeah, we had to take the train into Rome, from Rome to Marseilles. Then from Marseilles, we were there, I think, over a month. See, we had two cousins that had uncles here. They're, my father's first cousins. And, uh, they're underage, a brother and a sister, and they want somebody on Ellis Island to get them out, but, uh, their uncle, a very well known translator by the name of Berveri[ph]. We had Berveris[ph] here. He used to come here. He was with the uncle all the time. So he gave him, he gave him the name, and he says, "Don't worry. Everything's going to be all right." Finally they called us, they called us between, you know? And Berveri[ph], we didn't have to say a word. Berveri[ph] took over, and he says, "The uncle is here. [not understood] "

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: So you took a ship from Beirut to Italy.

SFEIR: To Italy.

SIGRIST: And then where in Italy did you go to? Where did the ship go to in Italy?

SFEIR: (he pauses) Hmm, I should know. The other, not in Rome.

SIGRIST: Naples, perhaps?

SFEIR: Naples.

SIGRIST: It was Naples.

SFEIR: Naples, yeah. Then we had some cousins with us that went to their father in Brazil. So they stayed on the ship. Because the ship, uh, it goes to Brazil, see? But we had to get off, go to Rome, and from Rome come to Marseilles, and . . .

SIGRIST: And you went by train from Rome to Marseilles.

SFEIR: Train, that's right, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the ship that you took from Beirut to Italy?

SFEIR: No.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the ship that you took from Marseilles to New York?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: What ship was that?

SFEIR: Rochambeau.

SIGRIST: And, um, you said you had to stay a month in Marseilles.

SFEIR: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about having to be in Marseilles?

SFEIR: We used to go and meet some ships and see if any, if any of our friends from our parts of the country. Yeah, we used to go. One day the ship come, they say ship coming, we go and see if somebody we know was on the ship.

SIGRIST: Where did you stay in Marseilles when you were there for . . .

SFEIR: We had a, we had a, we stayed with, uh, a man had a, like a motel, see? They had a, stoves, and they had, uh, to wash, wash by hands, those days, no washing machine. They had a stove. We used to cook. We used to eat. I mean, my, go out and buy stuff, and they cooked. Yeah. We were there a good month, see?

SIGRIST: And, um, then you got on the Rochambeau.

SFEIR: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And then you came to New York. How long did that take, from Marseilles to New York?

SFEIR: It took, it should take eight days. It took ten days. But, Jesus, I never saw anything like it. We didn't see, they put the men in one place, and for two days we didn't see my father. So me and one of the cousins, we walked, you know? We were with the women. We walked. We went there. But they didn't know. This -- rosary in his hand, I says, uh, I says, "We haven't seen you. Are you all right?" He say, "I'm all right, but I didn't dare get up and walk. I'll fall, break a leg, or break a arm or something." He didn't dare walk.

SIGRIST: Did your parents get sick on the ship? Were they seasick?

SFEIR: My father, no. My mother used to get sick. Oh, yeah, she got pretty sick. We've seen people --when they -- we seen people, we seen an orthodox priest. When -- when the ship moves, he wou-- he's laying down. He couldn't move. It's an awful feeling.

SIGRIST: Do you remember being on deck of the ship? Do you remember being up on deck of the ship?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah, oh, yeah. We were . . .

SIGRIST: What did you do when you went up on deck?

SFEIR: We look at the ocean, look at people. And, of course, Mediterranean, when we stopped at Gibraltar, all people came in, they throw a rope, you know, and if you want to buy grapes or fruit or something, they throw you a rope, you put the money, you put the money in, they send you the stuff up there. Then we stopped in Greece. That was nice. (This is my daughter-in-law, and that's his mother)

SIGRIST: (Hi, nice to meet you.) Um, uh, so the ship stopped at different ports.

SFEIR: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And you, what happened in Greece? You started saying that something happened when you stopped in Greece. This would have been the ship that you took from Beirut to Italy, right?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah, yeah. We stopped in Greece. We bought a lot of stuff, a lot of fruit and something. I mean, they throw you a rope with the basket, see? And then th-- they tell -- you tell them what you want and how much you want. You put the money in, they take the money and put the stuff in and send it.

SIGRIST: Um, do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when you arrived in New York?

SFEIR: Statue . . .

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

SFEIR: Wait a minute. No, but I saw the Statue of Liberty few years after that. I used to go down every single day. Her mother came with her younger sister. They're coming as - as passing by, you know, but you have to leave the country ten days before the visa finished. Their visa finished, they was still in Lebanon. Jesus, I ran. For one week, I run. I went to, uh, to a Catholic, uh, office, and there was a (?) monsignor in New York. We went to him. He knows lot of friends. So he took me to the office, and this man talked to me. He says, "They'll be well taken care of. I'll let, we know." "But," he says, "don't try to fight Ellis Island. To get an argument, they say you - they say you people are hotheaded. Don't do it." I says, "Okay, I wouldn't do it." So, for one week we go down, I used to go down, get a cup of coffee and hot dog, and take the boat to Ellis Island.

They're still there. Their mother is crying. I got, my maid's home, what was to do? My husband in Brazil and two sons in Brazil. So finally one monsignor is in [not understood] from Brooklyn. He came over one night, and we were sitting down. He says to [not understood] , "Don't worry. We'll do, there's something we could do." He said, "Philippe Tala [ph]". He was here in the U.N. Foreign minister

of Lebanon. He's in the U.N. Well, I've heard of Phillipe. I know his brother-in-law. I heard that his brother, but his brother got sick. So, bejesus, Sunday morning, six, seven o'clock, I woke him up. I says, I told him who I am. He says, "I know -- Tamar." He knows Tamar's mother. He knows everybody, and the brother's in the banking business, in exchange, in Beirut.

He says, "What can I do? I told him. He says, uh, "Don't worry. We'll try our best." So I was, I talked with the, with the consul, and I told them, "At least take her for one week, take her. Because my mother can't travel, see? Not in the boat, not in the ship, not in the train or nothing, or she gets sick." He says, "All right." So he went and he talked to Tala. Tala says, uh, "Bring him up here." So he came down, he says, "You like to see the foreign minister?" He says, I says, "I'd be more than happy to see him, but I didn't want to bo-- ask for him, because he may be busy." Bejesus, he jumped out of his desk when I got up there and he met me halfway. He says, "Don't worry. Everything will be all right." My God, they gave her six months. They stayed here all winter.

SIGRIST: Let me just pause for a second. I just want to . . . (break in tape) We're now resuming. Um, you were just explaining to us about your wife's family coming over and getting them off of Ellis Island. Um, tell me, when you arrived in New York . . . (voice off mike) When you arrived in New York, did you stay in New York City before you came up to Utica?

SFEIR: One night.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the one night in New York?

SFEIR: One night, oh, they took us, a lot of people from our part of the country came over to see us all evening. We had a good time over here. It was nice.

SIGRIST: What did you think about New York when you saw it for the first time?

SFEIR: Well, New York.

SIGRIST: Did you see anything that you had never seen before?

SFEIR: Oh, no, no. I mean, we, they, the next morning they put us on the train, and we beat it home.

SIGRIST: Did someone meet you in Utica?

SFEIR: Oh, we came, they gave us a home, too. We lived with them.

SIGRIST: But who, but who met you when you first arrived? Did your, did, was there a relative who met you when you first came here?

SFEIR: The following morning. We had to, they had to, he had to be down there already, he talked to Mrs. Beveri and Mr. Beveri[ph], everything's all set.

SIGRIST: I see. So when you arrived in Utica, where did you go when you first got here?

SFEIR: We had, they had a home for us.

SIGRIST: It was all set.

SFEIR: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Where, do you remember where the house was?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah. You know, you know the church?

SIGRIST: Do you remember the address of the house?

SFEIR: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What street it was on?

SFEIR: Hobart[ph] Street, on Hobart[ph]. But, uh, I don't know the address. I forgot the address.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the house for me, and what it looked like?

SFEIR: Oh, yes. It was a, like a two-family house. They had, one cousin, the two sisters. One sister lived downstairs, and the other sister live upstairs. So we stayed with the other sister upstairs. She had two sons, see, and they had three bedrooms, so we stayed upstairs near the old church.

SIGRIST: And, um, did you, were you put in school right away?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about going to school?

SFEIR: Nothing, we had, uh, some, for our people came about two, three months before us, they start to speak a little bit, see? But we used to have a lot of trouble with the Italians.

SIGRIST: What kind of trouble?

SFEIR: Well, they -- we don't understand nothing, see? They used to go in there make fun of us. But I said, finally I took a broom, I got a piece like this out of it. I used to stick it in here and under here and tie it.

SIGRIST: Under your arm.

SFEIR: Under my arm, yeah, and tie it. When they see that thing in my hand, boy, they run, because if they don't run, they'll go. Finally the, uh, the, what you call it, principal, one day he heard, he called the police. So we used to have a policeman there in the morning when we go to school, and at noon when we go home to eat and we come back, because we live near the school. And then in the evening when we come home, there's a policeman there. Finally the principal went out one, one morning. He asked some big boys, "What are you doing here?" He says, "Why can't we . . ." He says, "I don't want you here." And one of them went after and, Jesus, he -- boom! -- knocked him down. He says, "Any one of you, if I catch any of you around here again, you get the same thing next time."

SIGRIST: Did that happen a lot between immigrant groups?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Was there a lot of trouble between . . .

SFEIR: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, oh, yeah. Before, oh, yes. Even, in New York, you know, I'll tell you a story. In New York they used to call them the Turks. Well, of course, we were under Turkey. They used to call them all kinds of name. So we had an old mon-- monsignor, but one of the tough ones. He says, uh, "What day this stuff happens?" He says, "It happens on a Thursday." The old monsignor came, with the cane, and, uh, he says, uh, "Where are they?" He says, "They'll be coming pretty soon." They came, and the old monsignor says, "You think you're Christians? You're a bunch of bums. We are more Christian than you. We came from where our Lord Jesus Christ was. What are you talking about? Don't ever persecute these people. Don't do this." And he turned the cane, he said, "I'm going to use this on you." Then everything worked all right -- all right, see? Especially the Italians there. And they -- even the Irish used to, too. They used to call them Turkish. He said, "They're not Turks. We're better, we're better Christians than you are."

SIGRIST: Tell me about how you learned to speak English.

SFEIR: Well, we went to school. We went to school. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was it difficult to learn English?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah, it wasn't easy. Well, of course, we, we, uh, my father knew a little English, see? But, uh, I mean, we used to ask him, you know, what this and that. And we had a woman that came with us on the boat. She was very nice, she was here before, see? Then lost her husband, and had a cousin, a priest, in Scranton, Pennsylvania. So we used to sit with her, you know? Uh, and, uh, where we stayed in - in France, and we ask her, you know. I mean, she helps out, she knew a little bit, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you know what your, what one of the first English words or phrases that you learned was?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah, son-of-a-bitch. (he laughs) Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, it probably came in handy when you were, uh . . . (he laughs)

SFEIR: With the (?). (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Fighting with the Italians.

SFEIR: One day, one, uh, one day, one day somebody gave me a pencil, like, uh, like the American flag. I like that pencil. I never saw one like this. And, uh, a friend of mine, I mean, Lebanese, and with both big legs, they put them behind the desks, see, we couldn't fit with the - with the kids. So he took the pencil from me, and the teacher, she was nice, she says, uh, they called me William. It's easier. There was two Tofiks in the city here, it's easier to write William than, uh. She looked at me, she put William Sfeir, then something, you know, the address, Hobart Street, to write it. And she looked the second time, I was talking to him, I want the pencil. She holler at me. So I took the book, and, boom, on his head. And she - she-- she went down to him - I - she went - she - came to me and I started to cry. I couldn't explain, you know, what's the matter with him. I says, "This, this, took the pencil from him," I told him, I smacked him with the book on his head.

SIGRIST: You said that she called you William.

SFEIR: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you go by the name of William when you were young?

SFEIR: I, yeah, We still - I has -- still have somebody call me Bill. Yeah. It's easier for them. There was two Tofiks like me, you know, older than me, they called him William. I don't know.

SIGRIST: Your father, of course, had already been in America.

SFEIR: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me how your mother adjusted to this country. Was it a difficult adjustment for her?

SFEIR: No, no. No problem. There were no problem.

SIGRIST: Did she learn English?

SFEIR: Her family, just a little bit, not much, yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your mother's life when you were here in America. What, what was her life, what did her life consist of?

SFEIR: Visit, visit. Cooking, making bread, making sweets, making-- yeah.

SIGRIST: Was there some special baked thing that you particularly liked?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah. Yeah, sure.

SIGRIST: What was it? Describe to me what it was.

SFEIR: Sweets. Sweets. She used to bake sweets. Whatever she makes.

SIGRIST: What was the first job that you got when you were here in America?

SFEIR: I got in a knitting mill, where my father worked, see? There was quite a few of our people, in - in Whitesboro. In Whitesboro that, uh, I don't know what they, what they made out of it, it was a knitting mill. On the right hand side, as soon as you cross into Whitesboro.

JONES: Mele Manufacturing Company.

SIGRIST: What was it, Bob?

JONES: Mele Manufacturing Company.

SIGRIST: How do you spell Mele?

JONES: M-E-L-E.

SIGRIST: M-E-L-E. The Mele . . .

SFEIR: They used to, they used to have, uh, we used to have a boss, stuff boss. So with me, you know, I didn't speak good English. One day I was emptying those bobbins, you know, full of thread, and there was boxes in front of me and, uh, I'm emptying, this man came and goosed me, Jesus, hit my head. So I grabbed one and, boom, Jesus, he screamed holy murder. Finally the boss came, he says, "Why, you little monkey you." He could have caught me and thrown me out of the window, the man, see? Then I start to cry, and I motioned to him, me, put over here, he came and goose me, and my head over here.

So he told him, he says, "Look, any time, I don't care what time, if any one of you bothers this boy again, go in the office, get your pay, get the hell out of here." So there was a young fellow about my age. So he used to monkey around, you know? So one day I was drinking, and he took one of those little bobbins full of water, and put it in my pocket. Jesus, you know, cold water. "No. my ass." I turned around, I smacked him one. Jesus, I carried this hand for a week. He gave me, the boss gave me a week. He says, "Go." Wait till -- this one here was a long time bigger over here than this one. Nobody bothered me no more. (he laughs) It's crazy.

SIGRIST: Uh, tell me about when you got the job in the knitting mill, your first job, do you remember how much you got paid for that job?

SFEIR: Yes, ten dollars a week.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me exactly what your job was in the mill?

SFEIR: I used to run the machine that used to, uh, used to make the, uh, the bottom of the underwear, you know, they used to make the whole underwear, the bottom. See - see -- she cut and she throw it up like this. Well, I used to get them together, pin them together for the machines to put them on the, on the underwear. Yeah, it was easy job. Ten doll- ten doll-ten dollars a week. Got to pay for the streetcar one dollar, and one dollar to go to a show Sunday all day, and, what else? They are two dollars. That's all. I mean, we used to have benediction on Sunday, seven o'clock. So one night we missed benediction, and, uh, we came home, my father got mad.

He says, "No supper tonight. Go sit in your room. Go sit in your rooms." Then finally, you know, the mother, I mean, finally my mother talked to him, "I'm going to feed him. Whether you want to or not, I'm not going to let him go, go to sleep hungry." So we used to fight, my brother and I. She fed us that night. We used to fight every morning. We started playing, then we used to get a licking, both of us. We start fighting again, you know? And then one morning I says, "Look, now start screaming, but when my father come, grab one hand and don't let go." And I grabbed the other one. Jesus, we pull him - we pull him on - on bed with us, and we got on top of --. And then start calling my mother, "Come on, get your dogs off there - off of me." (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Go ahead, Bob, you can unwrap your candy now while he's not talking. Bob Jones is unwrapping a cellophane candy right now. That's the noise that you hear.

SFEIR: Help yourself. You have some.

SIGRIST: Uh, not just yet. We'll, we'll finish first. But you said you went back in 1930 or 1931.

SFEIR: 1930.

SIGRIST: 1930. Why did you go back to Lebanon?

SFEIR: I went back because the uncles started writing to me, and, uh, telling me, "We're not going to live forever." And I had a cousin on my father's side, he was old, too, see? And he just couldn't see much. He wrote, "We want to, we want to see you before we die." I, we have, so I went. Jesus, everybody came down. Everybody came down. Yeah. And they all asked me, the uncles, they says, "You have five homes here. Pick the one you want, and you're more than welcome." I says, "No, I want to stay with my aunt, you know, my, her mother was my, my mother's sister."

SIGRIST: Your wife's mother was your mother's sister.

SFEIR: Oh, yeah. Yeah. So I stayed with her. So they had, uh, one, one uncle who never went abroad. He stayed in Lebanon all the time. He used to go and tell my aunt, Tamar's mother, maybe the old lady, you know, Tamar's grandmother on her father's side, "Maybe the old lady don't

like the idea Tofik is over here." So her mother was smart, too, see? She gathered all my clothes, and she put it in front of her, all my clothes, for washing. And she says, "What the hell my sister sent me this boy for? Haven't I got enough - enough to wash clothes?" And she said to the old lady, he says, "You don't believe me." She went on her knees, she couldn't get up to go and pick up the clothes, and she says, "Give them to me. At least we got a man in the house. Don't say that to me. Leave his clothes for me. I'll wash them for him." Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you meet your wife in Utica?

SFEIR: No.

SIGRIST: Or in . . .

SFEIR: In Lebanon.

SIGRIST: In Lebanon.

SFEIR: Yeah. You see, I, of course, they all had, this one and that one and this one. But me, I had, uh, sick mothers, you know? That's her aunt, they get along, at least, together, I don't have the headache, you know what I mean? That's why.

SIGRIST: Did you get married in Lebanon?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: So that was during this trip that you were over. So you got married in 1930 . . .

SFEIR: '31.

SIGRIST: 1931. Um, what was your, your wife's first name is Tamar.

SFEIR: Tamar.

SIGRIST: What was her maiden name?

SFEIR: Tamar. Ghosn. G-H-O-S-N.

SIGRIST: And, um . . .

SFEIR: Or Bichara. I don't know. They had two names, anyway.

SIGRIST: What was the second name you said?

SFEIR: Bichara.

SIGRIST: How do you spell that?

SFEIR: B-I-C-H-A-R-A.

SIGRIST: And then did you take her when you came back to America? Did you come back in 1931?

SFEIR: The end of '31. I was there, oh, we got married in June, July, August, September. September we came back.

SIGRIST: Did you like being in Lebanon, or did it feel strange to you?

SFEIR: Oh, no. It wasn't strange. All my, all my relatives are there. I mean, all my relatives are there.

SIGRIST: Um, my final question to you is -- is there anything that your parents, your mother or father, taught you when you were young, like a philosophy about life, that you've always carried through your whole life?

SFEIR: No.

SIGRIST: Something that they instilled in you?

SFEIR: No. I was, I was really a bad boy when I was small. Years before I get home from school, maybe half a dozen kids, they come at times to fee--that this to be - that -- that -- one time. One time kids came by and had a man had an orchard, and he had a built wall, high, and he had a cement on top with the broken glasses on top so nobody can get in. But they used to. So the kids came by and, Jesus, they, they stone it. They stoned the, the orchard inside. And then my uncle came by, and he says he call my uncle, the policeman. He says, "Najeeb[ph], look what your, uh, your nephew and his bunch did." So I didn't know. Jesus, he came, ruler of the house, he came, boom.

"What you hit me for?" He says, "Why you . . ." I says, "I didn't do that." He says, "He told me it was you and your bunch." I said, "I wasn't even there." The following night I got my bunch, and I smash the hell out of it. When he came, he came, the same story, see? I made - I made sure he saw me. And then I know he's never gonna catch me. I ran like a fox, stayed away from him. He says, "You know, you slapped me last night. You're not going to slap me again because you're not going to catch me." He never let me go. (he is moved)

SIGRIST: Well, Mr. Sfeir, I want to thank you very much for letting us come out and ask, ask you some questions about what it was like to come over to America from Lebanon. We don't find many people who came from Lebanon, so this has been a treat. This is Paul Sigrist, signing off, with Tofik Sfeir. Right, I pronounced that correctly?

SFEIR: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: On July 8, 1994, on a Friday afternoon, here in Utica, New York. Thank you very much.

SFEIR: You're very welcome. (break in tape)

SIGRIST: Okay. We're just going to begin, Mr. Sfeir's going to tell a story about being on Ellis Island.

SFEIR: On Ellis Island. We went and we bought bags of peanuts for five cents each. We split them up, we so-- and we sold them loose, ten cents each. (he laughs) We, we made, my son, when he left the house this morning, he said, "Don't forget to tell them about selling peanuts on Ellis Island." (he laughs)

SIGRIST: All right. Thank you, Mr. Sfeir.

SFEIR: You're welcome. (end of recording)
EI-494/SFEIR