

EI-602
WADIH DOWE
BIRTHDATE: MAY 12, 1901
INTERVIEW DATE: APRIL 27, 1995
RUNNING TIME: 30:14
INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST
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ORIGINAL TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: KIMBERLY MAIER
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

LEBANON, 1936:
AGE:
PASSAGE: SHIP NAME UNKNOWN:
PORT OF EMBARKATION: BEIRUT, LEBANON
OLD COUNTRY RESIDENCE: BISKINTA, LEBANON
UNITED STATES RESIDENCE (S): UTICA AREA, NEW YORK

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, April 27, 1995. I am in, where am I?

ZAGBEE: In Marcy, New York.

SIGRIST: I am in Marcy, New York. With Wadih Dowe. Mr. Dowe came from Lebanon sometime in the late 1930's. We're going to talk about that experience, as well as his experience as a taxi cab driver in Lebanon. Present also is Wadid Zagbee, who's been helping me out with the Lebanese community in the Utica area. And Mrs. Dowe is also present. For the sake of the tape, I will say that you may hear a refrigerator in the background. Mr. Dowe, what is your birth date?

MS. DOWE: May the twelfth, 1901.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Dowe just said May the twelfth, 1901.

MS. DOWE: Well, he keep asking me.

SIGRIST: Well, if you know, then (laughs) Where in Lebanon were you born?

DOWE: Biskinta.

SIGRIST: And can we spell that please? Can you spell the name of the town?

DOWE: In Arabic or English?

SIGRIST: Well, probably in English.

DOWE: B-S-...

MS. DOWE: B-I-S...

DOWE: K-N-T-A

SIGRIST: Mr. Zagbee, can you repeat the spelling, please?

ZAGBEE: B-I-S-K...

DOWE: No. No. B-S...

ZAGBEE: I-N, -K-I-N-T-A.

DOWE: (emphatically) B-S-K-N-T-A

SIGRIST: Can you tell me something about that town? What did the town look like when you were a kid growing up?

DOWE: It's ah, that's the biggest town, near ah, way up, near the mountain. Mountains, Sannie mountain. And Sannie mountain you know, is the highest mountain in Lebanon.

SIGRIST: And what is that name again?

DOWE: Sannie.

SIGRIST: Can we spell that please.

DOWE: San-, ah (pauses, thinking)

ZAGBEE: S-A-N-N-I-N-E.

SIGRIST: And that mountain is near the town?

DOWE: S-N-I-N.

SIGRIST: And that's a big mountain.

DOWE: The highest mountain.

SIGRIST: And is the town on the mountain?

DOWE: No. On the bottom of the mountain. It can't be on the mountain. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you anything about your birth?

DOWE: Ah, my mother. I don't know my mother. She left me. I was maybe two, three years old.

SIGRIST: Very young.

DOWE: My sister, old sister take care of me. (chuckling) And my father.

SIGRIST: I see. What was your father's name?

DOWE: Haikyl.

SIGRIST: Haikyl. Can we spell Haikyl somewhat?

DOWE: H-I-K-L.

SIGRIST: H-I-K-L. Hikl. And what did your father do for a living?

DOWE: He used to sell some, go from house to house, sell some ah, material.

ZAGBEE: Material.

DOWE: Material, for clothes.

SIGRIST: Like a peddler. Would we call him a man who peddled clothing?

DOWE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What was his personality like? What was your father's personality like?

DOWE: He was very good. Nice man. Tall man. Nice looking. And ah, very understanding, you know what I mean? He could read and write very good.

SIGRIST: Is there a story that you like to tell about your father? When you think about your childhood, is there a story you can tell me about your father?

DOWE: (laughs) My father, we used to have, you know what I mean, that time, they call him Amara. You know?

ZAGBEE: There were princes living in the village.

SIGRIST: Princes. Amara.

DOWE: The princes, they were running the country. That time, the princes was running the whole Lebanon. You see? And ah, (laughs) my father, he used to go all the time, visit the princes. Not too many people could go there, you see. You gotta be high class. But my father used to go over there and if he don't go, they call him. And when he go, the lady, you know what I mean? She go kiss him. Because he was shaved and nice looking, you know what I mean? (laughing)

SIGRIST: What did he do when he went to talk to the princes? Was he selling them goods?

DOWE: No. No. No. Just to ah, pass the time, you know.

SIGRIST: Just to be friends with them.

DOWE: Yeah, they're not far. You know, they live neighbor, you know, see. And they like my father. They call him to go over there and talk to them, you know. Make him spend evening.

(background voices)

SIGRIST: Can you describe the house that you lived in for me in Lebanon?

DOWE: We lived?

SIGRIST: Yes, what was the house? What did it look like?

DOWE: We had one bath, you know, the flat on top, and they got 'em you know, tall built. And they go in the winter, they got roller, they roll it so the water won't go inside the house. One bath, they got red cover, you know. What the hell they call 'em Arabique, in Arabic.

ZAGBEE: Red brick.

DOWE: Yeah. Covered with the red brick. That's the bath of the house. And...

SIGRIST: How many rooms?

DOWE: One room. Big room. They don't divide it over there, you know. Big room. And down there. Big house. And they got another house. House for the wood, stuff for winter, you know. Because in the winter, they used to heat the house with the wood, you know.

SIGRIST: How? How did they use the wood? When they heated the house, how did they use the wood?

DOWE: They used to buy them up, and put the fire, lit the fire, you know what I mean?

SIGRIST: What kind of floor did you have in the house?

DOWE: Huh?

SIGRIST: What kind of floor? Floor? What was the floor like?

DOWE: Dirt floor. They got like clay. And they make it on the top, you know what I mean? And every once in a while they go, you know what I mean, fix it up, you know what I mean.

SIGRIST: Smooth it out.

DOWE: Smooth it out.

SIGRIST: Did you have animals when you were growing up?

DOWE: No. No. We didn't have. Us, we didn't have no animals.

SIGRIST: What did you eat in Lebanon? What kind of food did you have?

DOWE: Wheat bread. And they cook, you know what I mean. Rice and bulgul - that's that cracked wheat.

SIGRIST: Bulgar, like bulgar wheat?

DOWE: No. No. not bulgar. Cracked wheat. They boil them and they, they break in small pieces. You see? And they make kibbe with them. Meat. Raw meat. And they smash them, you know, with the machine you know. Grind them fine. Then they mix the bulgul, after they soak them with the water, and they mix them with the meat and then like raw, eat them like that. Some of them they make 'em like this, they fry them. And they ate it.

SIGRIST: Who did the cooking in your family?

DOWE: My sister.

SIGRIST: What was you sister's name?

DOWE: Helen.

SIGRIST: Helen.

DOWE: I had two sisters. The oldest one, Helen. The second one Badr.

SIGRIST: Bethel?

DOWE: Badr

ZAGBEE: B-A-D-R, Badr.

DOWE: Badr. You know what they mean in Arabic? The moon.

SIGRIST: That means the moon in Arabic.

DOWE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Were you closer to one sister than the other? Which sister were you the closest to?

DOWE: Oldest one was married you see. And ah, the young one will stay in the house. But the young one is take care, you know, see. Because we grow together. She's older than me. And my father, he do everything for us. You know, he's big help.

SIGRIST: Did you grow any of your own food? Did you grow any of your own food?

DOWE: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: What did you grow?

DOWE: The wheat.

SIGRIST: You had your own field.

DOWE: Wheat, and lentil. Something like that.

SIGRIST: Did you go to school in Lebanon?

DOWE: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Yes. Was there a school in town?

DOWE: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah? Can you describe for me what the school building was like?

DOWE: Building, with the, what the hell they call it? Hermite?

ZAGBEE: Yeah. Brick.

DOWE: Brick.

SIGRIST: Brick.

ZAGBEE: One big room inside. And chairs and desks in front of the students.

SIGRIST: Did girls go to school with the boys?

DOWE: No.

SIGRIST: No. Separate.

DOWE: No school for the girl.

SIGRIST: Girls didn't go to school.

DOWE: No school for the girls. Some, they, French sisters, they had school for the girl,

SIGRIST: The French sisters.

DOWE: Eh, they had school for the girls, but not the all girl, you know, goes. Just a few girls. The rich people, they send the girl to the ah, French nun. They got big building, the French nun, you know, see. There are about eight of them, and they had the school.

SIGRIST: Did the nuns ever teach the boys?

DOWE: No. Just the boy under ten. If the boy under ten, they take him. But upper then, they won't.

SIGRIST: Could your sisters read and write in Arabic?

DOWE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Your sisters?

DOWE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: They could read and write in Arabic.

DOWE: Yeah. I teach it.

SIGRIST: You taught your sisters?

DOWE: I teach it. Home.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Was that unusual for girls to be able to read and write?

DOWE: That time, you know what I mean, not too many girls know read and write. Mostly girls, you know, they don't know. They can't read and write. Very, you know what I mean. Some rich people, you know, they sent their girls to school.

SIGRIST: The rich people, the girls, the rich girls could read and write.

DOWE: Yeah. But they don't care about teaching the girls. The people, I mean, they don't care about teaching the girl.

SIGRIST: What religion were you? What religion?

DOWE: Maronite.

ZAGBEE: Catholic. Maronite Catholic.

DOWE: Catholic. Yeah. (laughs)

SIGRIST: Was there a church in town?

DOWE: Oh, yeah. Oh a lot of church.

SIGRIST: How often did you go to church?

DOWE: Every Sunday. Every Sunday you gotta go to Mass. I used to serve in church.

SIGRIST: Did you? Yeah? How did you practice your religion at home?

DOWE: We used to pray, you know, see.

SIGRIST: Was there a specific time when you prayed when you went home?

DOWE: Not so, yeah, in the evening when we sitting down, my father, you know what I mean. You pray. We pray, you know, see.

SIGRIST: Can you say a prayer in Arabic for me to record? Do you remember any of the prayers?

DOWE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Could you say one please?

DOWE: (recites short prayer in Arabic).

SIGRIST: And what did that mean?

DOWE: Ah...

ZAGBEE: Holy Mary, mother of god, prayer for us, we the sinners. Amen.

SIGRIST: Was this like a rosary prayer.

ZAGBEE: That's part of it.

DOWE: That's ah, the whole prayer. There's another prayer too, you know, see. There's another prayer.

SIGRIST: Well say the... Do you know the other one? Go ahead and say it.

DOWE: (laughing) (pauses)

SIGRIST: No. Don't remember it right now?

ZAGBEE: Guess he can't hear you.

DOWE: You know, when I want to think, that's the worst thing. When I want to.

SIGRIST: Well, it will come back to you, maybe, while we're talking.

DOWE: Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me about, what did you do for fun as a child when you were growing up? What kind of entertainment did you have when you were a child?

DOWE: We play, ah, ball, you know, see? We would throw it, you know what I mean? And ah, that's the most I think at that time. A ball, you know, see?

SIGRIST: Did the boys play with the girls?

DOWE: No.

SIGRIST: Or were you pretty much separate?

DOWE: No, the boys separate.

SIGRIST: The boys played by themselves.

DOWE: And a rough game, you know. (laughing heartily)

SIGRIST: Who disciplined the children in your family? Your sister or your father?

DOWE: My father.

SIGRIST: And how would he, how would he discipline you if you did something wrong?

DOWE: I don't know. Different discipline you know, see? Some of them, they hit hard, you no see? Get the stick, you know what I mean? And boom, boom, boom. But my father never do that to me.

SIGRIST: He didn't do that to you.

DOWE: One time, he ah, he hit me with his hand, you know, see? But after he apologized. He felt bad, you know, see?

SIGRIST: What did you do that made him upset?

DOWE: I was come late. I was playing, you know. I come late, after dark. He don't like it, you know. He want me home early. He was so mad, he hit me. After it, he apologize for me. Then after he started to talk to me, I won't talk to him. He get mad. And he apologize for me, (he laughs) after he hit me.

SIGRIST: Tell me about what happened in your town during World War I? Tell me what you experienced during that time period?

DOWE: Oh. (drawn out) Very, very bad. People start to see the people die in the road. You know what I mean? Some of 'em, you can't look at. Skinny, just bone.

SIGRIST: Why was there no food?

DOWE: They say, in Lebanon, we can't raise no food. Because all mountain. Where they raise the food in the Bacca Valley. Bacca Valley, the Turkish government sent the soldier over there, to hold Germany. Hitler, he sent the Army to Bacca Valley, not Lebanon, because Bacca Valley wasn't belong to Lebanon at that time, but the soldiers over there to bring all the food, send it to Germany. Because that's what killed Hitler, you know, starve in Germany.

SIGRIST: So the Turks came in and took all your food away from you?

DOWE: Germany.

SIGRIST: The Germans came in and took the food.

DOWE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What did you eat during that period? What was there to eat, left?

DOWE: If you got little land, you know? We had land, we planted three, we used today's worm. Worm for the silk.

SIGRIST: Silk worms.

DOWE: Yeah. So, the people that want to cut that tree, because they make a living from it, you know, see. They don't want to cut it, you know, see. Even the land, you know what I mean, the land over there wasn't flat. If you go over there, that's a wall, that's the land, that's a wall, that's the land, that's like that.

SIGRIST: Like big stairs.

DOWE: Yeah. And then, you can, but after that start to plant wheat on 'em too. Raise 'em to eat.

SIGRIST: But during the war, there just was no food. That was a bad period.

DOWE: Oh, lot of people die of starvation.

SIGRIST: Do you remember when the war ended?

DOWE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: How did you feel when World War I ended?

DOWE: Oh, the people went crazy. The bells start ringing, the bell. And everything, you know.

SIGRIST: Tell me when you began the taxi business? When did you start driving a taxi? I was told that you were a taxi driver in Lebanon?

DOWE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: When did that start?

DOWE: (long pause)

SIGRIST: Was it after the War?

DOWE: Oh, yeah. Before the war were no cars anyway! All the automobile after the war. They didn't have any car before the war.

SIGRIST: Tell me how you learned how to drive? Who taught you how to drive an automobile?

DOWE: One fella, he was here in this country, and he went back to old country and he got car with him. I went with him, he teach me, you know see? He teach me couple of days.

SIGRIST: Was it hard to learn how to drive a car?

DOWE: No! When I drive the car, you know what I mean? I was driving pretty good. He got out the car and he sent me to go between the tree, you know, see. When I sat alone in the car, I don't know what to do, you know. I went over there between the tree, I don't know how to stop the car, I hit tree to stop the car. I went down. The fellow he said, I give him slap in his face, son of a gun! You should have stayed next to me. That's the first time I drove the car. He said, I see you drive pretty good, I thought. I said, yeah, I know, but when I was alone, I don't know what to do!

SIGRIST: You learned by trial and error. (they laugh) Tell me, who were the people that you were driving in your taxi?

DOWE: Who's the people?

SIGRIST: Who was riding in your taxi?

DOWE: All people. Every people, you know because Biskinta, you can't buy anything there, Biskinta, except, you know what I mean, they ain't got no big store there Biskinta. Every people, they want to buy something, they have to go Beirut to buy the stuff. All the business, you know what I mean. They got... (pauses) (clears his throat) If they want, you know what I mean, something in a coat, you're going to have to go to Beirut, near Beirut. You know what I mean?

SIGRIST: So that's what you were doing?

DOWE: Taking people to Beirut and back and forth.

SIGRIST: How long of a ride is that?

DOWE: In the summer? Huh?

SIGRIST: How long does it take to go from the town to Beirut?

DOWE: Is about 50 mile, I think. But (laughs)...

SIGRIST: Up and down mountains and . . .

DOWE: We had, to go to Biskinta...

SIGRIST: Everyone's making winding gestures.

DOWE: To go to Biskinta, Biskinta up on the top, and the road way down. You go this way, and you go this way.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

DOWE: Then they get the top.

SIGRIST: Winding down.

DOWE: 'Til you get the top, then you... But it's still hilly, you know, but you could make it.

SIGRIST: Now, did you charge people for this service?

DOWE: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: How much did it cost to go from the town to Beirut? Do you remember?

DOWE: Ah, (thinking) two dollar and a half.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh. What is that in Lebanese money? What is Lebanese money called? What? They didn't pay you in dollars, what did they pay you?

DOWE: No, they, ebanese money.

SIGRIST: Right. What is that called?

DOWE: They call it paper.

SIGRIST: Paper?

DOWE: Yeah. [] Is it?

SIGRIST: Paper.

DOWE: Did you remember?

ZAGBEE: Livre. L-I-V-R-E is a French word for the Lebanese money.

SIGRIST: L-I-V-R-E is the French word for the Lebanese currency.

ZAGBEE: The Lebanese unit.

SIGRIST: Were some of these people going to Beirut to leave the country?

DOWE: Some of them to leave, some of them shop and came back. But mostly come back. Nobody leave, maybe once a year. Not too many, especially that time. (adjusting microphone).

SIGRIST: I'll fix it. It's okay. We're just fixing the microphone here. It came undone.

DOWE: I forget. I was wondering what it is. (laughing)

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

DOWE: I don't know. My brother was here ahead of me.

SIGRIST: Did he come a long time before you did?

DOWE: Who?

SIGRIST: Your brother. Was he here for a long time?

DOWE: My brother came here, early. 1902, I think.

SIGRIST: Oh, very early.

DOWE: Then he went back to the old country, 1910. With the two brothers. One of them, he don't like it. He came back. The one stay over there and when the war came in, he came, no, he stuck. He stay with us over there. You know?

SIGRIST: Why did you want to come to America?

DOWE: Me?

SIGRIST: You.

DOWE: I come for visit.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

DOWE: I came here. I wasn't like it, because when everything I go, the people speak English, and I don't understand one word, you know. (laughing) I sat like a, you know, but the war started, I couldn't. I went to school. Night school.

SIGRIST: Here in America?

DOWE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What did they teach you in night school?

DOWE: They teach me how to read. I start in the bottom one, the first you know, grade. And at the end I won the highest one. I got the diploma.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what the first English word that you learned? What was the first English word that you learned?

DOWE: How do you do? (laughs) So the principal come special to see me. He was wondering how come I start down, and the same year, you know what I mean, I was up there and I got the first. When they got the, I was the first one. He come to visit me. And I couldn't speak very good English, you know. He said, ah, Mr. Dowe, I want to, we give you diploma, I mean you could take the diploma, but I want you to come back next year to learn how to speak English. I told him, I coming back. He didn't have to tell me, because I want to learn. You see.

SIGRIST: So you went back that second year then, to learn more.

DOWE: Yeah. Yeah. But ah...

SIGRIST: You think that you came to America in like 1937? 1937? 1938? What year was it that you came to this country?

DOWE: 'Til the war started. I was there.

SIGRIST: You were here.

DOWE: Yeah. I came '36.

SIGRIST: So you came in 1936, you think. Yeah. 1936.

DOWE: Because with the war, I was there. The war came I think 1938, isn't it?

ZAGBEE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: How did you get to America? How did you travel to America?

DOWE: By the ship.

SIGRIST: And what was the name of the ship?

DOWE: (laughs) I don't know. I can't...

SIGRIST: You forgot? Do you know how long it took?

DOWE: I think, ah, four days from Beirut to Italy. Then you gotta stop in Italy because the ship coming from Mediterranean small. They can't get in. You gotta take bigger ship, the Atlantic, you know. They got the bigger ship. But Mediterranean, they can't.

SIGRIST: So you took a small ship from Beirut to Italy, and then you got on the big ship from Italy to the United States. And where did you land in the United States?

DOWE: New York.

SIGRIST: And what happened your first night in America?

DOWE: Huh?

SIGRIST: What happened on your first night in America? What did you do your first night that you were here in America?

DOWE: I was home.

SIGRIST: You went to your brother's house?

DOWE: Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: And what did they do for you? Did they do anything for you?

DOWE: Hey! (He laughs robustly) People like that! They come from all over. Some of them to ah, they see me, and to ask about their people, and old country. The house was like that for almost week.

SIGRIST: They were coming to see the new immigrant. (they laugh)

DOWE: You know, a lot of people they want to find out about their people over there, you know what I mean?

SIGRIST: Are you happy that you came to this country?

DOWE: Yeah, I'm happy.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go back to Lebanon to visit?

DOWE: No. I was gonna go back for visit. I don't know. I think the war started and I couldn't make it, and I never...

SIGRIST: Never did. Well, Mr. Dowe, I want to thank you very much for letting me ask you some questions.

DOWE: You're welcome.

SIGRIST: You did a good job. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Wadih Dowe on April 27, 1995. Thank you very much.

DOWE: Thank you.

END INTERVIEW

EI-602/DOWE