

KECK-89

DR. AELYAS KASSAB  
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INTERVIEWER: NANCY DALLETT  
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SYRIA, 1899  
AGE 16  
SHIP RECALLED AS "THE PORTOBELL"

DALLETT: My name is Nancy Dallett, and I'm speaking with Dr, Aelyas Kassab on Wednesday, November 27th, 1985. We are beginning this interview at 1:45 and we are about to interview Dr. Kassab about his immigration experience from Syria in 1899. This is the beginning of side one of Interview Number 89. Can you take me to the beginning of your story and can you tell me where and when you were born?

KASSAB: I was born in Damascus, Syria in 1883.

DALLETT: Can you tell me about your family life in Damascus?

KASSAB: Well, I was educated in the syrian-British schools in Damascus. And at the age of sixteen I was through and had the choice of either remaining in Syria as a workman or coming to the United States. And I jumped at the (he laughs) option to come to my brother. I had a brother here.

DALLETT: What did your father do in Syria?

KASSAB: Who promised to take care of me. So I left Damascus at the, at, in July, 1893 to Beirut, Lebanon. In Beirut, my first cousin, now you have to, I'll give it to you but you should correct it. My first cousin knew the agent of Thomas Cook and he took me there to get a ticket to the United States. When I arrived at Thomas Cook & Sons and saw the ticket the agent said you don't have to go full fare because you're, I was a little, I was a little, what is the word, I was a little, little boy. So the fare to New York from Beirut was fifteen English pounds sterling. So we bought the tickets to New York and standing there I met a fellow with his friend who were coming to New York and we made a party of three. This gentleman was the brother of the minister of the church of Damascus, Because there is something connected to this story. We got on deck on the steamer Portobell of the Mesagerie Maritime Line. And our tickets called for being on the deck only. Not for rooms or anything. It was March. We didn't mind. This is on the side. We didn't mind the weather. And as we were, as, when we, after we left Beirut the purser came on deck for tickets. He looked at me and he said, "How old are you?" And I said, "Sixteen." But I hadn't been sixteen. He said, "Sixteen? You can't travel on half a ticket. Therefore, I will have to put you off unless you pay the other half." My father had given them the full ticket, the price of the full ticket, so they gave me the other half to spend on the way. So they gave me no more than nine and a half pounds, which I paid to the purser for the full ticket so that he wouldn't put me off the steamer. He was going to put me off at Haifa. Since we were going, coming here on deck only, not with rooms or anything, it was summertime, they supplied us for, and baskets of food, our family, that would carry us from Beirut to Marseilles, France. Being on deck all day we were not very comfortable. Every time they wanted to open the hold, you know, to put the goods down, we had to move everything. So we stayed, we had no other place, we stayed on the hold. And my friends and I and there were many others, passengers from Beirut. Mostly were coming third class, on the-- Next morning we got up, we slept on the hold. Next morning we got up. We went to have breakfast. I found that the food that had been given to me by my family was stolen. And the money that I had was paid to the purser, so I had

no more money. My friend said, "We'll support you, don't worry." So we went from Beirut to Marseilles, France. It took us eight days. In Marseilles, France the company from which we bought the tickets had promised to look after us in France so that we can go through France and to, to New York. We stayed one day in Marseilles and the next day during the night we went by train to Paris. And from Paris we stayed all day and in the afternoon they sent us to Bologne. Bologne is like a harbor. And there we got on the White Star Line, I don't know, I forgot the name of the ship. White Star Line. From Bologne to New York. White Star Line gave us rooms. They gave us food. But in Paris we had the scare of our life. Because we saw lots and lots of refugees, not refugees, of ah, people that want to come--

DALLETT: Immigrants?

KASSAB; People that want to come to New York, not refugees, like myself.

DALLETT; People emigrating to this country?

KASSAB: They were coming to this country. We saw them in Paris.  
They had been returned from Ellis Island. That's the reason I'm telling you this. We were scared to death. Because there were three conditions that would prevent you from entering the United States.

DALLETT: What were they?

KASSAB: If you had trachoma, no, never. If you don't have money the United States didn't want you. And if you don;t have anybody to look after you, you don't go in. Now I gave you this as background. I had no trachoma. I had no money. But I had a

little courage in telling the truth. We disembarked at Ellis Island after having one of the finest sights in all my, in my life. They told us the night before to be sure to get up early in the morning so that we can see the Statue of Liberty. And we all got up before daylight. Went up on deck, the deck was full of the passengers. Everybody went up. The morning was beautiful. And we looked at the Statue of Liberty and honestly we all cried. Here we are now in New York. And in time we arrived to Ellis Island and of course the other passengers who had the proper credits, second class, they were taken with the ships direct to New York. But stragglers like ourselves, we landed at Ellis Island. As we entered into Ellis Island it took a long time to get our luggage and everything else. Then they began to separate us. A group would go, if they're going west, a group would go if they're coming east, and so on amongst the passengers. So my friends who were going to California, we parted company.

DALLETT:       What language were you speaking when you came to Ellis        Island  
that day?

KASSAB:        What time?

DALLETT:       What language were you speaking?

KASSAB:        I?

DALLETT:       Yeah.

KASSAB:        I knew a little English but my language was Arabic.

DALLETT;       Did someone translate? How did, how did they separate        you?  
How did you know where to go?

KASSAB: Well the friends that went with me, they, as I told you, one was the brother of our minister so we spoke Arabic. He was also educated so he knew as much as I knew of English. So I didn't, I never saw him since that day. He went his way and I was worried about myself, what were they going to do with me, you know. We didn't know nothing. Nothing gives you as much worry as when you don't know what's coming. So we went down. I had a certificate from the American doctor who was at the Embassy in Beirut that I was well. I had no criminal record, that my eyes were examined, and I had no trachoma. But I had no money except just as we were getting into the, on the ferry, I remembered that that's one of the things that they would ask me for. So I asked him to loan, if he'd loan me five pounds. And O got down and, you know, like sheep you go, down the steps, we were a little high up, smiling down. I reached there and the doctor looked in my eyes, he said, and he saw this, and looked in my eye, and said, "No, you have no trachoma." I went to the examiner and he said,, he said to me, "Young man, where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to my brother." "Where is your brother?" I said, "He is waiting for me on the dock." I said, he said, "We don't go to the dock. Step aside." He said, "Do you have any money?" I said, "I have three pounds." "Stop here." He continued with the others. He continued with the others until he finished. Then he went, I was standing with my luggage and all and he went and called another man with a police robes. He had, I think, he was, I couldn't read, but I think he was a Traveler's Aide. He said, "This fellow who came has nobody here. He wants to go to Chester." When he asked me where you want to go I said, "To Chester, Pennsylvania." Chester, Pa. PA." (He laughs.) He didn't know what Chester, Pa. was.

DALLETT: Chester, Pennsylvania.

KASSAB: Pennsylvania. So it was getting toward dark. So he took me into, he took me into a large room with benches. I think it was a waiting room at Ellis Island. "Sit on here and wait until I come back. And don't you dare move from here." So I sat and waited and

waited and waited. Six o'clock came and I was tired and hungry and I went to sleep. And I woke up. It's dark and late and everything. about quarter to nine he arrived. Woke me up. "Do you have any money?" I said, "Yes." I gave him the three pounds. He took it and changed it for me from English money to American money and he helped me with my luggage. He carried half of it, poor fellow. And we went to what looked to me, you know, the first time I, and I haven't seen it since, but looked to me a huge building. and we got, water here, water everywhere and it turned out to be, and I later saw it was a ferry. It took me from Ellis Island all the way to New York. And it kept on going until we reached a large station, what looked like a large station. And when I went in I heard the "whish, whish, whish" of the trains. We walked over until we reached one of the trains, you know. And the conductor of the train was standing by. He called, and he called the conductor and he said, "This fellow wants to go to Chester, Pennsylvania." I heard "Pennsylvania" then. But it was still in my mind, was "Pa". I'll tell you why. "You must put him down in Chester." He gave him my ticket. He gave me the rest of the money and I got on. And they put me, you go up the steps, the side there. We sat there. and at nine o'clock on the dot the train "whish, whish" started toward Chester. While I was in the waiting, before the man returned, I was hungry. I saw in a distance a room, a stand through the cage and all and so I went back and bought some so that I could eat. And the fellow in the stand was Italian. And I thought, an Italian, like me, a stranger, he would want to help me, you know, not cheat me. "Where are you going?" "To Chester, Pa." "Pa., Pa., Pa. is two, two and a half days from here." So I began to buy supplies for two and a half days. I'm telling you this, the reason. We got, we left

the station and at midnight, twelve o'clock, it took three hours from here, it was the New York to Washington express. "Whish, whish, whish." They stopped at Chester. He didn't want to stop but he had to stop. So they came to me and they found me asleep in the corner. I was so tired. "Getup." I wouldn't get up (he laughs). "I got two days to go from here." "Come on. You can't keep this machine standing here while I'm arguing with you." And they threw me on the--

DALLETT; Platform.

KASSAB: Clothes and everything.

DALLETT; What were you traveling with? What did you land in Chester, Pennsylvania with? What was in the luggage?

KASSAB; That luggage? You'd never, you don't know, we didn't see Ellis Island and the--I had a lot of luggage. Presents to my brother. (He laughs.)

DALLETT; Presents to your brother.

KASSAB: From my father. "Whish, whish, whish." The train left. You know Chester, of course. You know where the station used to be? There was nobody on the station at midnight except this lonely passenger standing by. I looked this way. I looked that way. And I began to cry because I have two days more to go and he got my ticket and I don't have it. In a few minutes the station master arrived. He wants to close up for the night. Chester was a small

town. The station was a small station. "What are you doing here?"

I said, he looked and said, "The train left, what are you doing?"

I said, "I was asleep and he put me here. I wanted to go to

Chester, Pa." He says, "This is Chester, Pa." I said, "No, I've

got two days to go." He said, "Come on." He took me around and

said, "See that? Chester, Pa. You're in a good place. Now, where

do you want to go in Chester?" I said, "I want to go to my

brother." He said, "Where is, where does your brother live?" I

said, "My brother is a dentist. He lives at 18th and Edgmont

Avenue. But he works at-- He lives at 18th and Providence Avenue

and he lives down, he works down at Edgmont Avenue. So we were

going down Edgmont Avenue but he said, "You won't find him at

Edgmont avenue because he works there, but he lives on--" So we

turned back. He helped me with it. So we get back to the station.

It was too much for us to walk to 18th and Providence avenue. He

said, "I'll tell you what I'll do. Come and sleep with me tonight

and in the morning I'll see that you get to 18th and Providence

Avenue." So we went to the station master's room where he sells

tickets. He slept on the table, I slept on the floor, as usual.

And, but that's between parenthesis. I had to get up at night. And

I got up to find the door and I wanted to get out. But he got up,

poor fellow, got up and helped me. Then we were in bed and at

quarter to five he got up to open the station. And he said, still

my luggage was outside. We didn't take it in. It was safe in

Chester in those days. Standing there he saw a huckster coming up

Edgmont Avenue. Going up with the railroad station. He says, "Come

over." So to the huckster, he says, "Which way are you going up?"

He says, "I'm going up Providence Avenue." He says, "This fellow

tells me that he lives at 18th and Providence Avenue. Can you take

him up there?" He says, "Sure." Put my luggage on with this huckster. And he started up to 18th and Providence Avenue. He said, "What family do you want?" I said, "The O'Neill."

DALLETT: What was that name? The O'Neill?

KASSAB: Yeah. The O'Neill. Probably your father, he used to know them. So he went up and it was early, five o'clock. about half past five. Because the station opened at five and it took us twenty minutes to reach up there. Then Mrs. O'Neill opened the second floor window. "Why are you coming to wake me up at this hour of the night?" With that my brother opened the third floor window and saw me. And oh, the meeting we had. He had, my brother had given word to his friend in New York to meet me at the dock. And he met me and he was worried sick that I wasn't on the ship when it arrived in New York. So my brother also worried why I hadn't come back. Why hadn't he sent me. And of course we had a joyful meeting. Now that's the background.

DALLETT: Okay. We just have to turn the tape over. This is the end of side one of Interview Number 89 with Dr. Aelyas Kassab.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

DALLETT: This is the beginning of side two of Interview Number 89 with Dr. Aelyas Kassab.

KASSAB: My wife and I got again on the Mesagerie Maritime with my sister and her three children and a maid. We all came first class this time. And ah, we came in 1921 which was after World War One.

And I had lost my father and my sister had lost her husband and all their property was gone. And I went from here to bring them and when I went to Beirut I found (?) which I married and then I brought my sister and her family here. And they had a maid. The maid could not read nor write. Nor speak another language, nor, oh, she had nothing. When we got to New York, Ellis Island, she went through what I went through. I was with her all the time. "No good. On the side."

DALLETT: They held her aside?

KASSAB: "Return." And I said, "You can't send her back unless you give me twenty-four hours to make arrangements for her going back." I wanted to take her case to a higher authority. So I got here and they sent her back. In the morning, I think by telephone, I got that she was on the ship going back. And I really got very worried and very mad. And I had a friend in Philadelphia who knew the boss in Philadelphia of the Republican Party. Mayor Samuel, he was, I called him by his first name, he called me by first name. We were very friendly. I took the train and went to Philadelphia. It was Saturday morning. I said, "This is my story and I want help and I want help quick." So I told him the story and he says, "We can't. The ship has gone." "But they made no arrangements. How could they take her back, send her back like that?" He said, "Don't worry." He took the telephone and called Washington. He called the Secretary of the Interior and said, "I want you today, this afternoon, to listen to this young man's story. He said they promised him that they would let him know before they sent her back and they didn't." He said, "That's a bad thing. Send him up to me." So I took the train and went up to Washington. Had an appointment with him at 3:00 o'clock. Got to Washington, went to the neighborhood, to the Department, told him my story. He said, "I can't bring her back now." I said, "If you don't bring her back my family is going back to Beirut because this girl has been in the family, she's a persecuted Jew and she has no connections there

whatever. And we brought, we brought her here to take care of her. We've been taking care of her from birth." "Why didn't you tell me that? Why didn't you tell them that? I'll get her back." So, her story going back I'm not going to tell to you, but they brought her back. They brought her back on the condition that we would teach her to read or to write.

So we went to the Larkin School (he laughs) to study for six months we couldn't teach her A from B. They would come and ask about Lela. "Yeah, she's still in school. She's still in school." Finally they forgot her. We took her until she died, took care of her. We couldn't let her, my sister would have gone back because she was like a child to her. So that's all I know about that.

DALLETT: So what year was it then that you brought your sister?

KASSAB: My sister?

DALLETT: Yeah.

KASSAB: 1921.

DALLETT: That was in 1921.

KASSAB: That was the year I was married. We came back on the Mesagerie, the largest steamer that used to ply the, Mesagerie Line, the mediterranean. But I got her back.

DALLETT; And then, tell me, did you go to school at that point?

Yeah, when you were a young boy when you landed here.

KASSAB: When I came here I went to the Larkin School. Not knowing the language, I knew a little bit of the language. The O'neill's

had a family by the name of Smith. And this Smith was a teacher. And she happened to come in the night I arrived to my brother. My brother was living in the same building with the O'Neill. And the O'Neill wanted to tell her about this boy that just came from, (he laughs), that says, "Pa." I had an Irish teacher that taught me the Irish brogue. And I had a time with the boys here when I went to school. So, (he laughs), she says, so they told her, "Mary, you have Aelyas on your hands. You've got to work with him this summer." "I'll see him Monday and I'll let you know." That was Saturday night. Chester was open house. So Monday she called up and said for me to meet her at a certain time. We went to see the superintendent. We told him, I told him what I had gone through. And he says, "Well, I'll give you an examination and see how much you know. And then I'll put you." So he arranged, he gave me, oh, probably ten or twelve books. "Review those and come in two weeks. I'll give you an examination." Thomas Cole, Superintendent of Chester Schools. So I came. He examined me and I flunked. I flunked. I didn't know anything. He said, "You can't go, you can't go to the grammar school here. You don't know anything." Well, it's not my fault. He gave me ten questions in arithmetic, all percentage, and I had never seen the percentage sign. He gave me five or six questions on the name of volcanos. I had just come through the Vesuvius. We called it "Yesuv." (He laughs.) So he said, "no, you can't go to high school." And I said, "I'm sixteen and I can't go down to the grammar school." "You've got to go." My brother said, "You go." And I went and it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I had three teachers in grammar school used to teach me after school and at recess. Stand on the corner and read to me and make me read and taught me the beginning foundation. So

that I went to the grammar school one year and at the end of the summer, at the beginning of the summer I said, "Give me the books to read. Ninth grade." They gave me the books for the ninth grade and in September I took the examination, passed, the ninth, went to the tenth, passed the tenth, went to the eleventh, passed the eleventh, went to the twelfth. So I stayed in Chester Hugh School one year.

DALLETT: You covered all that, all that schooling in one year?

KASSAB: I took all high school in one year. Because I had, I could teach the teacher Arabic. I mean I could, and mathematics. Many times during the lesson we would skip this problem because they couldn't do it. But I was, we had a thorough, in Arabic, thorough, in language and mathematics and science. Why ah, I didn't do it, how could I make examples with them.

DALLETT: And then you went to dental school after that?

KASSAB: So, in order to go, they put me in the twelfth grade. They said I had to finish the eleventh and so in the summer I took the, studied for the twelfth. And I said, "To heck, I'm not going to high school." I went to the University and I offered to enter on examination instead of on certificate. So I took the examination in the Fall and I passed. So I matriculated 1901 and 1904 I was graduated as a dentist. I had to. You have to when you have to. You've got to. Then after that we started practice and began to bring my family one after the other. We got them all here. That's too much for you to write, just cut it short and just make it about the interesting part about Ellis Island. Don't go through this.

DALLETT: But it's all interesting, it really is.

KASSAB: Huh?

DALLETT: It's all interesting though, it is. (We go off record.)

DALLETT: When you first arrived in Chester, Pa.--

KASSAB: I'll give you an example. They used to say in the old country, "You'll find money in the street in America." So one person was walking in the street after he came out of Ellis Island and was allowed to go through. He found a coin on the floor, on the ground. So he picked it up and as he went by he saw a blind man sitting and he gave him the coin. He said, "You poor man. You don't see. I can pick the money up off the street because I can see." (He laughs.) That's what we used to think. Oh, it was heavenly here in those days. Never close windows or doors. (He laughs.) We had no trolleys in Chester, no, we had trolleys in Chester before they had them in Philadelphia. And we had no, oh, yes, my brother put in the first telephone, around the first year that the telephones were, but they were, I guess, used amongst, in big companies, but they hadn't been used with us little folks. But it was nice. Oh, Oh, America is today is like that. I don't care for its wealth or for its political power but it's a beautiful country.

DALLETT: So you were happy, as soon as you came you liked America?

KASSAB: Oh, in ways, in those days nobody could dare say a word about America.

DALLETT: What would you have-- You said your father gave you the choice to stay and go into a trade or come to America. What would it have been like if you had stayed in Syria? What would you have done there?

KASSAB: Donkeys.

DALLETT: Donkeys? (They laugh.)

KASSAB: Donkeys. You know what donkeys are. If you were able to pay you would have horses. But the average people. By the way, I rode on the first train that left Damascus to the Horan. Horan, what is it in English?

DALLETT: Horan?

KASSAB: The train that went from Damascus to Mecca. And it was an open car and we were only allowed, Christians, to go so far and no further. And we had chairs on these flat cars. And our neighbor was, uh, used to work with the railroad and when the first train went through he asked some of his friends to get him an invitation so I rode on that. We have--

DALLETT: When you first came to Chester, Pennsylvania and you moved in with your brother, were there other people in Chester from Syria that you knew?

KASSAB: No.

DALLETT: Why was it that he came to Chester? Your brother, why did he settle here?

KASSAB: Why? Oh, his story is worse than mine. Mine, yeah. He came and went through two depressions. In those days it was terrible so he had to go south. He didn't come to Chester, he came to New York. He had a, his teacher in Damascus came ahead of him and they told him, "If you want to get to America I'll sponsor you." Which he did. And Wadia went. And he had a very hard time. He had to carry the little bag with vases

and things like that between Washington and Philadelphia and they had to walk and stop at this house and this house. I won't tell you that story.

DALLETT: Okay, but by the time, by the time you joined him here in Chester--

KASSAB: By the time I joined him here he was a dentist.

DALLETT; He was already a dentist here.

KASSAB: Yeah. And so he wanted me to come so that I could help him. He made me, he made me do his laboratory work. He taught me how to do it so that when I went to the University I made a high record there because, not because I was smart but because I trained before I went there.

DALLETT: So did you ever have a chance to use your Arabic once you were here or did you just begin to speak English?

KASSAB; You mean my education?

DALLETT: Your language.

KASSAB: Did I tell you about those three beautiful teachers? They taught me. "Stop that, say that, don't say that." They taught me the language. They taught me the grammar. Hours they spent with me and for nothing. But let me tell you, when I became a dentist I fixed their teeth. (They laugh.) They were wonderful. Americans to me the first year that I was here, they were a different people. Maybe, I don't know, maybe I was different and I got worse. (He laughs.) They were kind and smart and oh, it was peaceful.

DALLETT; How long was it--did you feel like you had become Americanized?

KASSAB: I was Americanized the first day.

DALLETT: Really?

KASSAB; Oh yes. Right away when I saw that people were like this, that can leave their work and come and take me and guide me this way, and then the treatment from a foreigner. And then I saw the difference between the two. But don't you dare put that in.

DALLETT; (They laugh.) Okay, I won't ask you anymore.

KASSAB; You can ask me, but don't dare put that in, (he laughs), about what I said about foreigners.

DALLETT; It's all right. This is the end of side two and the end of the interview with Dr. Aelyas Kassab. (Thanks off record.)