

KM-74/Shahen

KM-74

NICHOLAS GEORGE SHAHEEN

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INTERVIEWER: KATE MOORE

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LEBANON (BORN U.S.), 1923

AGE 9

PASSAGE ON "THE ST. LOUIS"

MOORE: Good evening, this is Kate Moore for the National Park Service and today is the 20th of July, 1994 and I'm in Clairton, Pennsylvania at the home Nicholas Shaheen who was born in the United States, left for Lebanon in 1922 at the age of eight years old and returned to the U.S. from Lebanon in 1923 when he was nine years old. Why don't you begin by giving us your full name and date of birth, please.

SHAHEEN: Nicholas George Shaheen, born March the fourteenth, 1914.

MOORE: And where were you born?

SHAHEEN: Clairton, Pennsylvania.

MOORE: And could you spell Clairton for us

SHAHEEN: C-L-A-I-R-T-O-N, suburb of Pittsburgh,

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Pennsylvania.

MOORE: Now, where was your family from?

SHAHEEN: From a village in Lebanon by the name of Hamet,
H-A-M-E-T.

MOORE: And what was the large... How large was that
town?

SHAHEEN: It was a small village.

MOORE: What was the next larger town near it?

SHAHEEN: Ah, the next largest town would be on the coast
by the name of Batrun. If you go fifteen miles
north from Hamet, Tripoli is right on the coast.
That's the second largest city in Lebanon.

MOORE: No, what was your town in Lebanon, what was it
known for in terms of industry?

SHAHEEN: There was no industry there, ah, I can remember
my uncle, one uncle who was raising, who was
growing tobacco leaves and he was active in silk,
silkworms. And the rest of the village, they had
their own ah, olive groves or oranges, grapes and
nuts, whatever you want.

MOORE: Now, you were in the United States. You were
born here.

SHAHEEN: Yes.

MOORE: What was your father or mother doing here at that

time?

SHAHEEN: Well, Granddad came here first, and he established businesses. So, then he brought his four sons over.

MOORE: What businesses did he establish?

SHAHEEN: Well, the first, it was clothing store. Then from clothing store he went back and then in 1914 Granddad and his, Well, a little bit before 1914, Granddad and the ah, his four sons decided to build a theater. They completed it in 1914, the theater. And they named it the Liberty Theater.

MOORE: And where was this theater?

SHAHEEN: In Clairton on Miller Avenue.

MOORE: Is it still standing today?

SHAHEEN: No, they tore it down a couple of years ago.

MOORE: And um, so your father was here in business, was he?

SHAHEEN: Yes.

MOORE: And what was he specifically doing?

SHAHEEN: Well, since he being the youngest he had to do all, shall we say, the dirty work. Well, ah, my dad and the uncles, they went out peddling from house to house. Since the people can't come to

the store they went to the home. Ah, I would say at least sevety-five to eighty percent of the people in the city of Clairton were foreigners. Couldn't speak English.

MOORE: Now, where was your father born?

SHAHEEN: In Lebanon.

MOORE: And your grandfather?

SHAHEEN: Lebanon.

MOORE: Okay, so you were the first born here?

SHAHEEN: First generation. My brother and sister and I.

MOORE: And when you said the town of Clairton had a high foreign population, high percentage of foreign, foreign people, what backgrounds were they?

SHAHEEN: Mostly Slavonics.

MOORE: Were there other Lebanese, than you?

SHAHEEN: Yeah, well the relatives, yeah. Like his family or...

MOORE: And ah, what was your father's name?

SHAHEEN: George Jacob Shaheen.

MOORE: What, um and we discussed his occupation. How would you describe how your father looked?

SHAHEEN: I never even, I was only three months old when he died. I have a picture. Go on and step on over here and take a look at it.

MOORE: All right, a little later, but thank you. They can't see on the...

SHAHEEN: They say he was very handsome, well-educated. Unfortunately, he had an untimely death. He had an infected, ah, kidney and by the time they got to it it was too late.

MOORE: What about his personality and temperament? What does the family say?

SHAHEEN: According to Mom and the rest of the, hm it all depends who you speak to, now. Each has a different opinion. Since my dad being the youngest he didn't have a voice. Like I'm the youngest, I do not have a voice. You know what I mean. We had to listen, see?

MOORE: And um, what was you mother's name?

SHAHEEN: Najiba Aun.

MOORE: How do you spell that?

SHAHEEN: Now there's two ways to spell it A-U-N or O-U-N.

MOORE: And how about her first name?

SHAHEEN: Her first name?

MOORE: How do you spell that?

SHAHEEN: N-A, N-A-Z-I-B-A.

MOORE: And what was her maiden name?

SHAHEEN: That's...

MOORE: That's it.

SHAHEEN: That's it.

MOORE: Okay. And her occupation?

SHAHEEN: Her occupation, take care of the family, the kids.

MOORE: And how would you describe what she looked like, your Mom?

SHAHEEN: Beautiful. Well-built. One., um one drawback. She was too strong for us (he laughs). She was, she was a strong woman.

MOORE: How tall was she about?

SHAHEEN: 5'2", 5'3".

MOORE: And her eyes? Color?

SHAHEEN: Color I guess was brown.

MOORE: And what were, what was her personality and temperament like?

SHAHEEN: Well, Mom was number one in the family. She was the eldest. Actually, she had like a demanding personality.

MOORE: Hm hm.

SHAHEEN: See, that clashed with Dad, you know. Her dad spoiled her. I guess she wanted the same treatment from her, her husband. Built a clash,

there, but as far as being a mother she was very disciplinary person. You do as you're told.

Children should be seen and not heard.

MOORE: And what were her chores around the house, then?

What did she do at home?

SHAHEEN: Before she started work? Take care of the family, the kids. Ah, it consisted of two rooms, a kitchen and a bedroom.

MOORE: And you said before she started to work. Later in life she started to work?

SHAHEEN: After Dad died. She peddled like Dad did.

MOORE: Um, is there a story about your mom that you associate with your childhood, at all?

SHAHEEN: Well, only thing I can remember, I don't know whether it's pro or con, she was so desperate, she didn't have none of her relatives over here.

See, all of the relatives there was were on my dad's side. And no assisted her. No one tried to help her. So she went out, she used to carry me and go to work peddling from house to house and she used to nurse me on the way.

Occasionally she'd leave me to, in someone's home until she'd come back and pick me up and bring me home.

MOORE: And how old were you then?

SHAHEEN: Just born.

MOORE: You were just newborn. Now, you had mentioned that you're the youngest. What brothers and sisters, what, how many...

SHAHEEN: I had one brother four years older than me and a sister two years older.

MOORE: And what are their names?

SHAHEEN: Uh, my brother Jacob George Shahen, Susan Shahen Myers. Well, she's married now. Susan Myers.

MOORE: And...

SHAHEEN: Susan Shahen, yeah.

MOORE: And what did they do for a living?

SHAHEEN: For a living? Susan worked as a clerk in a drugstore. Our brother worked as a machinist in a mill.

MOORE: And, um, what was your profession then in this country?

SHAHEEN: (he laughs) Do I have to say it?

MOORE: Yeah.

SHAHEEN: All right, ah, I'm a high-school dropout. My first job was down the mill chipping stone with an airhammer, although I only weighed a hundred

nineteen pounds. I fought with the bosses and they kicked me out. Then I went in a boiler house, steam department, I had five boilers. That's when I went in the service. When I came out of the service in 194- November of 1945, I got a job with Veteran Administration. 1945. Then I stayed there until 1949. I left there and I got a job with the state store, liquor store. And I stayed there to the duration.

MOORE: Um, we'll get back, we'll walk through that later in more detail. Do you remember when you went, um, back, your first voyage, to...

SHAHEEN: Lebanon...

MOORE: Lebanon. Now what... What led up to your family going back?

SHAHEEN: Well, it was difficult to make a living.

MOORE: Here?

SHAHEEN: Yes. 'Cause in those days they don't have, they had no such thing as welfare or woman and ah, widow's assistance. Nothing. So Mom was in a predicament. Stay here and starve or go back where she's familiar with. So we went back, toOkay a chance. Unfortunately, it was worse there than it was over here.

MOORE: Now, did she speak English at all here?

SHAHEEN: She spoke broken English.

MOORE: But she, . she could not continue to do the job that your, your father was doing as a profession?

SHAHEEN: She, she did it for quite some time until finally she got a job, thank God, um, a politician, Jimmy Orman got her a job as a janitoress in a school and she stayed there until the duration.

MOORE: Okay, so what do you remember, what are some of the first memories that you have, um, in relation to living here and going back?

SHAHEEN: Well, Okay, leaving here and going there, you don't have the amusement here, there that you have over here. Candy, ice cream, the movies, whatnot. See? But, ah, it was more beautiful there because it was nature in the rough. People were people, down-to-earth, see. So, ah, we'd complain about that so Mom was having a difficult time there so we came back here.

MOORE: Now, do you remember leaving here?

SHAHEEN: Oh, leave, yeah, well, leaving here was a excitement. Something new. It was adventure.

MOORE: And did you speak Arabic?

SHAHEEN: Yes.

MOORE: So, at home, what was your language at home?

SHAHEEN: Arabic.

MOORE: Arabic. And then you, when you went to school did you know any English?

SHAHEEN: I barely spoke English.

MOORE: When you went to kindergarten?

SHAHEEN: No kindergarten.

MOORE: Oh, you went to first grade.

SHAHEEN: First grade.

MOORE: And did anyone ever make fun of you for being Lebanese?

SHAHEEN: Yes, you're Lebanese, you're a foreigner, you spoke your own language. There's a certain class of people in this town, how do you say it, the American class of people. They belittled us. They laughed at us. They did everything possible to make our lives miserable.

MOORE: What did they call you, for example?

SHAHEEN: Oh, I'm a dumb, ah, A-rab. If you're Italian, you're a wop. You're a Slovak, you're a dumb honky.

MOORE: And this actually happened, I mean it's not...

SHAHEEN: Yes.

MOORE: Was it frequent?

SHAHEEN: Oh, continuous.

MOORE: Did you get in fights because of it?

SHAHEEN: Oh, many a fight.

MOORE: And how...

SHAHEEN: But see, well, if you want the, unfortunately, the people said those things controlled the city, controlled the school, controlled the mill.

MOORE: And what background were they?

SHAHEEN: English. So, if I got in a fight with one of the English boys and they found out who I was, the first question they used to ask us, "Do you have anyone in your family working at the mill?" So they could fire them. There was no union.

MOORE: And they owned the mill?

SHAHEEN: They were the bosses in the mill. Yes.

MOORE: Did you have any names for the English?

SHAHEEN: Johnny Bull.

MOORE: Johnny what?

SHAHEEN: Johnny Bull.

MOORE: Johnny Bull?

SHAHEEN: Yeah.

MOORE: You called they Johnny Bull?

SHAHEEN: Yeah, cake-eaters, Johnny Bull, yeah. (they laugh.) Charlie will back me up on that.

MOORE: Well, Okay, So when you went to school, um, were they... How did you learn English, then?

SHAHEEN: Well, naturally, little by little, little by little. Then there was a clerk in what we call honkytown and we started mixing with the outside people, the English. Little by little, little by little we learned English pretty good, see? But they never, they never erased the stigma on us. Dumb honkys, dumb A-rabs, dumb this, dumb that. Now, there's a clarification I want to put in here. The Italians were known as wops. Wop does not mean you're Italian. Wops means you try to get into the United States without papers, Without Papers. It's pronounced wop.

MOORE: Right. Well, did, was there a hierarchy of those nationalities in your neighborhood that were more prestigious than, than...

SHAHEEN: Well, to them we were nothing but slaves. We couldn't do anything. They, you want to go to your house take somebody, they did it. You had no choice in the matter. Ah, while I was working down the mill, the boss and I sat down to have our lunch. He started laughing and I said, "What the hell are you laughing about?" He says,

"Well," he says, "I sneak out of the mill," he says, "I take care of these guys womenfolks." You know what I mean?

MOORE: Yeah.

SHAHEEN: That's how we were treated. So, God bless the union, 'til the union came in. And when the boss said, he looked at me. I have a couple of words with him, he says, "Now it's easy to hire a person but it's more difficult to fire a person."

MOORE: Mm. Well, Okay, so you went to school for at least a year or so here?

SHAHEEN: Before I went over? Yes.

MOORE: Yeah. And, ah, were the teachers nice to you?

SHAHEEN: Some of them. Ah, like see, you can't judge them all together. Some teacher, well, I'll, I'll give you this in town. I think it was Room 3. I think it was Miss Thorpe. So she asked us, some other girl. Elizabeth Evans was her name. Gave her a question and unfortunately couldn't answer it. She went, "I'm sorry I can't." Teacher referred to her as, "You're a dumb honky girl." That wasn't called for.

MOORE: But that was that common, do you think?

SHAHEEN: Very common. Even down the mill. My name being Shaheen, I was mistook for Irish. Until they find out I wasn't Irish.

MOORE: Is Irish better than Arabic, Arabic?

SHAHEEN: There's nobody better than anybody else? To me, people are people. What makes a difference if you were born in Pennsylvania or you were born in Ohio?

MOORE: But I mean in terms of the bosses. Did they...

SHAHEEN: The boss, yes.

MOORE: So they preferred...

SHAHEEN: Well, they, well, it all depends, they get the weak spot. They'll get a foreigner where they could control. To me I can not stand, stand to see anyone be mistreated. I'm blackballed down the mill. (he laughs) See, to me people are people. What has nationality got anything to do with it?

MOORE: Well, did you then, do you remember the excitement of going back home? What about the boat trip? You mentioned some story about a priest giving your brother a...

SHAHEEN: A priest. Oh, yeah. Episcopalian priest. When we were leaving, he gave him that package.

MOORE: Now, how'd you get messed up with an
Episcopalian?

SHAHEEN: Ah, Miss Farnsworth, her dad was the mayor of
Clairton, and she's the one started us going to
the Episcopalian church.

MOORE: Who was she? And how did you know her?

SHAHEEN: School. She was the teacher.

MOORE: A teacher.

SHAHEEN: She asked us whether we go to church and we says,
"No." "Would you like to attend our church?" We
had to get permission from our parents. They
said okay, which we did. And I'm glad it did
happen because we learned a lot from the
Episcopalian church. As a matter of fact, every
church. Children need religious training. We
stayed there until 1922, then when we were
leaving the priest gave my brother a package that
said, "Do not open until you come to the Statue
of Liberty." Which he did and when he opened it
it was a picture of himself.

MOORE: And, well, how, going out of the harbor, how was
that?

SHAHEEN: Ah, excitement. Fishes in the ocean, oh, we're
going, well, fortunately for me, you'll never

believe this, I was the only one didn't get seasick. (he laughs)

MOORE: What accommodations did you have on th...

SHAHEEN: Terrible.

MOORE: What class did you travel?

SHAHEEN: Third class.

MOORE: Mm hm, did you have, ah explain the bedding situation, the bed situation.

SHAHEEN: The bedding was bunks.

MOORE: Bunks, yeah. And were you with other people?

SHAHEEN: Yes. All nationalities.

MOORE: And no partitions between...

SHAHEEN: No. Not that I recall. No partitions...

MOORE: And your mom was sick?

SHAHEEN: Oh, the whole family was sick except me. I was down the kitchen eating all the time.

MOORE: And how was the food?

SHAHEEN: It wasn't bad. Kids when they're hungry will eat anything.

MOORE: So, uh, that trip, do you remember fondly or would you say...

SHAHEEN: I guess I do. Well, on, on the oceans, on the ocean, I remember one time I was playing around I tripped. I almost fell overboard. Fortunately,

I grabbed the railing. Saved myself. Well, see. we had so many of us going there the same time, his family (referring to a man named Charlie also present), his uncle's family, our family, ah, there was another uncle of his family that all went there. There was some half a dozen families where we kept ourself visiting one another.

MOORE: And why were you all going together? Why were they going?

SHAHEEN: Well, in unity there is strength. (he laughs) And, I'm balling you up on this. Well, they all want to visit the old country. Ah, Charlie's, ah, grandmother was still living and his uncle wanted to see his mother. They lived next door to each other. He wanted to see what he could do for them. They had nothing. They were very poor. The whole village was poor, matter of fact. There was no industry except my uncle, my mother's brother, ah, he grew, ah, tobacco, tobacco and he worked in a that, ah, ah silkworms. Cocoon. He spun silk.

MOORE: So, you said when you go back there though the conditions were not, your mom went back because her people were there.

SHAHEEN: Yeah.

MOORE: And what, did you go to school there for a while?

SHAHEEN: Yeah. One year.

MOORE: And what was that like?

SHAHEEN: Hell.

MOORE: Why?

SHAHEEN: Well, because we had it so much easier here than they over there. They were more stricter over there. We were not pampered in school over there. You learned. Ask Charlie the whooping he got. I got a whooping, too.

MOORE: For what?

SHAHEEN: Because we didn't always learn our lessons.

MOORE: So you, you're, you were punished for not learning?

SHAHEEN: Yeah.

MOORE: Did you learn the lessons then?

SHAHEEN: Well, we were forced to but, ah...

MOORE: Did they think of you as foreign over there?

SHAHEEN: Poor? No they...

MOORE: No, foreign.

SHAHEEN: Foreign. No, no, no, no, no, no, because, ah, just the children were foreigners, shall we say. But they made fun of us because we couldn't

speak the, because they, because, you know there's this. If you learned the tongue outside the country, you learned the proper way of speaking. You understand me?

MOORE: Mm Hm. More formal.

SHAHEEN: Yeah. Like here in the United States. I speak broken English, usually do, and the people that come from over in Europe and different places they speak more proper English.

MOORE: So when you went there you spoke a more formal type of...

SHAHEEN: Well, I spoke both Arabic and English.

MOORE: Now, what happened over then that, do you remember any discussion of coming back once you were over there?

SHAHEEN: Well, first we lived with Granddad and he was taking care of two of his granddaughters, kind of cramped. They didn't have too much.

MOORE: What were the house like where they lived?

SHAHEEN: Houses were made out of stone.

MOORE: How were they heated?

SHAHEEN: Ah, ah fireplace. Okay, that's what I was going to bring up. There was no running water. There was no gas. There was no electricity.

MOORE: Mm hm. And did you have those things back here?

SHAHEEN: Ah, yes.

MOORE: Did you have inside plumbing back here in...

SHAHEEN: You want to laugh again? Granddad built that house now that we called, down on Bridge Street. Beautiful house. He had sewers in it and everything in it but one thing he left out. Water. We had to go outside in the wintertime to draw our water.

MOORE: Did you have a toilet inside?

SHAHEEN: Outside.

MOORE: Outside. So here, here in Pennsylvania you had an outside toilet and an outside well.

SHAHEEN: Yeah. Yeah.

MOORE: So when you went back to Lebanon was that, was it a big change at that time?

SHAHEEN: Ah, you want to hear the details on that? I had to go. There was no outhouses. There was nothing. You just go behind that tree and do it.

MOORE: Where?

SHAHEEN: In the old country.

MOORE: Really?

SHAHEEN: Yeah.

MOORE: Hm.

SHAHEEN: You're not laughing. (they laugh.)

MOORE: So and, but the water source was where?

SHAHEEN: Water. It never rains in Lebanon during the summer months. Winter months it rains. So Granddad had a trough going all the way to the well. What the water we catch is off the roof, the rainy season is our drinking water. In the middle of the, the village they have two deep wells. When you run out of water you go up there and get your water.

MOORE: Now the house that you were in you said was a stone house.

SHAHEEN: Stone house.

MOORE: How many rooms?

SHAHEEN: One, two, three.

MOORE: How many people were living there?

SHAHEEN: Granddad and his two granddaughters.

MOORE: And then...

SHAHEEN: Oh, that's, that's on my father's side, now. My mother's side there was Grandma. We lost Granddad on that side. Ah, Holomusa and Anne, there are two there, and us. There was only two bedrooms.

MOORE: So how many people all together in that house?

SHAHEEN: That would be two and, ah, four would be six.

MOORE: And how, um, how did you, who did the cooking in that house?

SHAHEEN: Well, Grandma and Mom.

MOORE: And what was your favorite food in Lebanon.

SHAHEEN: Whatever we can get. Well, we'll have to go in details on that. Since there's no refrigeration, you cannot save food. We were vegetarians all through the week. On the weekends they all had chicken, they all had cows. Weekends you went and killed a chicken. Now, we loved lamb. We eat a lot of lamb there. But for one family to consume a lamb in a period of two or three days is practically impossible. So the neighbors get together and get the lamb and each buys a share of it. That's just for the weekend. And then they go back as vegetarians.

MOORE: So did you keep animals in your house? I mean not in your house but did you keep animals?

SHAHEEN: Chickens.

MOORE: Chickens. Anything else?

SHAHEEN: That's all.

MOORE: And how far was this house from the center of

town?

SHAHEEN: Well, my granddad's, my granddad's house?

MOORE: Yeah.

SHAHEEN: Oh, five minutes walk, ten minutes walk.

MOORE: And, ah, how did they get, how did people get from one place to another?

SHAHEEN: Walk.

MOORE: Did people have horses at all?

SHAHEEN: Ah, my cousin, the doctor, he had a Arabian horse and he had donkeys, jackasses or whatever you call them.

MOORE: Now, um, tell me what happened then. What led to you mother coming back, to your family coming back?

SHAHEEN: Well, like I said, it was very difficult. They barely could make an existence themselves so Mom thought well, go back. In America at least everything's plentiful in this country. So we came back. We took, we went from place to place. So we were all young. Mom was relying on my brother growing up much faster than he was so he could help her. Well, I went out. I worked paper boy. I worked digging, doing any kind of job. I set up pins in a bowling alley, pick up

junk, anything to make a nickel.

MOORE: Were you ever hungry at all as a child?

SHAHEEN: Well, for a period of time we lived in a family house. Rarely, rarely we ever went to sleep with a full stomach.

MOORE: Where, what years was that and where was that?

SHAHEEN: Right after we came from, came back. Right after Dad died.

MOORE: So, before you left for Lebanon and right when you came back from Lebanon you were hungry some...

SHAHEEN: Yeah. Yes, always. Mom had, I can't remember what year it was when Mom sat down and ate with us because she never sat down because there wasn't enough food for all of us.

MOORE: So she went the hungriest? When you came back...
In Lebanon were you, were you ever hungry?

SHAHEEN: Over here?

MOORE: No, over there.

SHAHEEN: Over there? No. No, because, see, you have over here we're spoiled. You want something to eat, you go to the store. Over there there's no such thing as going down to the grocery store. You have to prepare, you have to store your own food.

They'd have wheat. We grew a lot of grain. They had wheat, they had whatever you want, they grew. We had, ah, olives. We had grapes, nuts, pomegranates, oranges, lemons. We had all that.

MOORE: Now, what about religious life back home?

SHAHEEN: Uh, the village that we came from, the village we came from was Orthodox religion. Ah, yes, they were very religious people.

MOORE: And was your family at all?

SHAHEEN: My family? We were, yeah, we were Orthodox religion. Ah, ah, I can remember where it was the church's duty to take care of the unfortunates. Over here, you're poor, you're poor.

MOORE: Now, when you say Orthodox, Orthodox....

SHAHEEN: Well, Orthodox, well, Eastern, ah, religion. Actually, we're all, we're Catholic is a universal word.

MOORE: So, did you go to church?

SHAHEEN: Over there?

MOORE: Over there.

SHAHEEN: Tried to get out of it.

MOORE: Did your mother go?

SHAHEEN: Tried to get out of it but we all went. Ah, then men sat on one side and the women sat on the other side.

MOORE: And were you taught prayers...

SHAHEEN: Yes.

MOORE: Before you went to sleep?

SHAHEEN: Yes.

MOORE: Did you say grace before meals?

SHAHEEN: Occasionally my Mom did that... did that for us.

MOORE: Um, did you experience any persecution in Lebanon at all?

SHAHEEN: No, only thing I've noticed, like anywhere else in the world, if one person has a dollar more than you, they think they're better than you. You know what I mean?

MOORE: Right. Well, what were your favorite hol... holidays in, in Lebanon?

SHAHEEN: Easter and Christmas. The customs are out of this world. Some day I wish I you're around a Orthodox church on Easter time, Good Friday, go to one and see how beautiful the services are.

MOORE: So, you had special food, did you?

SHAHEEN: On the holidays. All they could do in the Lent

season, it's Lent. Wednesday and Friday's taboo.

Ah, first week of Lent you don't eat no, you fast all week. They were strict.

MOORE: Now, um, when you came back in this direction, tell me about what you had to do to prepare and, and what that trip was like coming back to the United States in '23.

SHAHEEN: Ah, preparing we just put our clothes back in the trunk to come over here. Now, when we arrived on Ellis Island we were stopped. Unfortunately, the loss of our father before he became a citizen prior to women's suffrage, was it 1921, I think it was, then when the man of the family become a citizen the entire family becomes citizens, too.

But, unfortunately, Dad died before he received his second papers. So, when we came back our visa expired so Mom can not go through the, uh, Ellis Island and come back home.

MOORE: Now, did you have a physical examination before you left?

SHAHEEN: Yes. No, no, not before I left, no. When we got to Ellis Island.

MOORE: And when you left from Lebanon, did you bring with you food or anything?

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SHAHEEN: We took some food with us, yes.

MOORE: What type of food did you take?

SHAHEEN: Something not, not perishable. Uh, something sweet, something like bread, something like that.

But, ah, I couldn't explain it to you, fruit, there was, ah, figs made like, ah, uh, preserves.

Something like that. We ate, we ate that.

MOORE: Okay, let's take a break for a second while we turn the tape.

SHAHEEN: Uh, how'm I doing? Okay?

MOORE: Fine. Very good.

SHAHEEN: You going to pay me? (Tape ends.)

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

MOORE: Now, if we go back a bit, when your mother left Lebanon, what was her reaction about her leaving her people?

SHAHEEN: Well, she, she, well naturally she grew up there.

She was at home there. In America she was a stranger, see, and she was lost. So, ah, she preferred to stay there but she knew we couldn't make a living there. There was no industries. I

think there was two stores in the whole village.

How is she gonna exist?

MOORE: Before she left did anyone give you a farewell party?

SHAHEEN: No, no such thing as farewell party.

MOORE: And what was her reaction? Was she emotional about leaving?

SHAHEEN: Yes, she cried.

MOORE: And how were you children?

SHAHEEN: Well, children, the only thing they have in their minds, oh, boy, we're going to go on a ship again. That was, well, naturally, we had some friends there. Well, ah, it's hard to leave, yeah. Ah, Charlie's one uncle, Uncle Mike, he stayed there and we left. We sort of like, we hugged each other. We said goodbye, goodbye. We were leaving our friends behind.

MOORE: Well, how did you get, what port did you leave from in Lebanon?

SHAHEEN: Beirut.

MOORE: Beirut. How did you get from your village to that port?

SHAHEEN: Car.

MOORE: Car. Whose car?

SHAHEEN: Well, it was a rented a car.

MOORE: It came to your house and picked you up?

SHAHEEN: Yeah.

MOORE: How far is that to Beirut?

SHAHEEN: Between Beirut and Hamet, twenty-five miles, I would say. Roughly speaking.

MOORE: Now, did anybody come with you to say goodbye at the boat?

SHAHEEN: I think, ah, I think Granddad did. Yeah, I was his favorite.

MOORE: And were you close to him?

SHAHEEN: Yes, I was devil. (he laughs)

MOORE: Do you have any stories about your grandfather?

SHAHEEN: Grandfather, yes, certain things he said to me I didn't understand in Arabic, ah, how should I clean it up a little, "hardi, mardi, tize quldi."

It's like, "sticks and stones may break my bones," but it's a little more ornery than that.

So, I didn't know what it meant, see. I got mad. He would say, "Come here, what do you say we'll go up the street, kid," between my Granddad and Grandma. So I left Granddad and went up to Grandmother. I refused to come back. I didn't understand what it meant. I thought he was

making fun out of me, see. And, ah, Mom went over to Grandma's, she grabbed me by the hand and she dragged me, she dragged me all the way from my Grandmother all the way to my Granddad's. And I cried all the ways down. I didn't want to go back until I know what he said. Now, I can, I can laugh about it now.

MOORE: You were close with him, then?

SHAHEEN: Real close, yeah. Matter of fact it was through him, that he wrote out a will to make sure we got our share.

MOORE: Did you ever see him again once, ah, you left?

SHAHEEN: That was the last I seen him.

MOORE: So you went to the port in Beirut. Did you have to wait overnight at the ship?

SHAHEEN: No, we got right on board ship.

MOORE: And were the conditions, what were they like on that boat?

SHAHEEN: It was a little better than the one we came down with.

MOORE: What does a little better translate as?

SHAHEEN: Ah, sanitation. Organization. We ate, and the people was a little better than that. Well, they have second class, third class... What else, you

know.

MOORE: What did you go?

SHAHEEN: Oh, the same way. We were poor, we didn't have anything. But, ah, the upper class, they came down, mixed with us, see that we have something to eat, you know, felt real sorry for us. And we were all babies, you know. That was, it was wonderful. But, unfortunately, I got seasick going back. I didn't get seasick going out.

MOORE: And what was the difference? In weather conditions something different?

SHAHEEN: Well, it could be your system, too, you know.

MOORE: So, the second time around, was it as fun as the first?

SHAHEEN: No.

MOORE: Were other people sick?

SHAHEEN: Yeah.

MOORE: Your brother?

SHAHEEN: My brother, my sister, my mother. They stayed in bed.

MOORE: And did you see anything on the ship you'd never seen before?

SHAHEEN: Whale, big fish.

MOORE: You saw a whale?

SHAHEEN: Yeah. There were big fishes jumping out of the water and what not.

MOORE: Hm. And, ah, what about seeing land for the first time then? Do you remember any reaction?

SHAHEEN: Yes. You see like a fog way on the horizon. Land! Land! Land! They were hollering out. I don't see no land. All I see is fog, clouds, you know. And then 'til we got up to it, then land. Well, our first stop when we left Beirut was in Italy and, ah, they made us take a shower out in public.

MOORE: Where was that in Italy, do you know?

SHAHEEN: Naples, I think, most likely somewhere. From there, from Italy we went to France.

MOORE: We, wait a minute. Who made you take a shower out in public?

SHAHEEN: The authorities. They figured the ship was dirty or what not. And then they had, ah, stalls with no doors on them. We were all kids, you know, Mother bathed all of us right there, people going back and forth. We though nothing of it, you know, and from there we went to a harbor, gee, it was over here somewhere.

MOORE: In France?

SHAHEEN: Ah, huh.

MOORE: Cherbourg.

SHAHEEN: Cherbourg?

MOORE: Cherbourg, in France, France. C-H-E-R-B-O-U-R-G.

SHAHEEN: We went to the ship out in the harbor. It wasn't
ah, okay, how...

MOORE: St. Louis? What's that? (she reads from
document) On the vessel St. Louis.

SHAHEEN: Okay. May I have my glasses, please.

MOORE: So you're looking at your United States of
America Declaration of Intention.

SHAHEEN: See, this is wrong. We were under the Turks rule
prior to the First World War. And prior to the
First World War, after the First World War,
Turkey lost out to France. We were under French
rule.

MOORE: So, it says here that the, ah, name of the vessel
was St. Louis.

SHAHEEN: St. Louis could be, yeah, does it say St. Louis?

MOORE: Okay, now, um, all right, so you got in to... Do
you remember for a second time?

SHAHEEN: No. It was, that I do not recall. So I'm sorry.

MOORE: All right, but, all right, tell me about how you

got to the boat to Ellis Island, then.

SHAHEEN: The boat to Ellis Island. Had to be with the, our boat. See, that I do not remember.

MOORE: Okay, what do you remember about Ellis Island?

SHAHEEN: We all go to get, the men were separated from the women, from the females. And uh, there was, uh, upper deck and lower deck in the big building. The women up there, by that, in between the landings there was a, a big mirror hanging right between the first and second floor. They cover it for the simple reason that you could see the women upstairs undressing and the women could see us undressing down below. After we went through there...

MOORE: What did you have to undress for?

SHAHEEN: Any disease or...

MOORE: You had a physical exam?

SHAHEEN: Yeah.

MOORE: And what did they look for?

SHAHEEN: I don't know. They just, ah, check everything. Lice and everything because us kids were filthy.
(he coughs)

MOORE: November, excuse me I found it, it says November 17th, 1923, Le Havre, H-A-V-R-E...

SHAHEEN: Havre.

MOORE: Ah, yeah, right, France. So, that's the port there.

SHAHEEN: Okay, now, like I was saying, Mom was interviewed. She was next in line to pass through (he coughs) Ellis Island. They asked her question, her name and address, what she, ah, she has, ah, any talent or any whatever. They want to know why she overstayed her visa. Okay, and she says, well, she didn't want to leave her family. They said, "Well, do you, could you read or write or have anything?" Mom says no. Then they said you cannot come in to America because you have got to have your papers. Maybe I referred a little while ago, "with out..."

MOORE: Papers, right.

SHAHEEN: Wop. So, this Arabic person that represents the Arabic people tried to help Mom out but he couldn't help her because she couldn't read or write in English or Arabic. And she did not have a trade. So they would not pass her. And her eye, one of her eyes was bad. (he coughs) So they said, "We're going to have to send you back." Mom said, "Go ahead send me back. What

are you going to do with my three sons, my three children? You can't send them back because they're American citizens. They're born here." They talk it over, talk it over, no, no answer. Finally, that day, the day after they put us up in a hotel in New York.

MOORE: Who's us?

SHAHEEN: Ellis Island.

MOORE: Yeah, but who put who up?

SHAHEEN: Why, my bother, my sister and I.

MOORE: And how old were all of you together, then?

SHAHEEN: Nine, eleven and thirteen.

MOORE: Who took care of you?

SHAHEEN: Oh, no one took care of us, because when we went to the hotel there was a woman came in and check up on us, could be, uh, so we decided to take a walk in New York. We got lost. A woman found us sitting on the curb crying. Since we weren't able to speak English, she got enough out of us to know where we were staying and she took us back there. Meantime Uncle Abe came over. We got in touch with him. He picked us up and brought us back to Clairton. But Mom still stayed in Ellis Island. They will not release

her.

MOORE: How long was she there?

SHAHEEN: One week.

MOORE: A week.

SHAHEEN: After a week's time who's come marching in the house, Mom.

MOORE: And how'd she get there?

SHAHEEN: Like I said, she had someone to help her out.

MOORE: What was her reasoning for getting helped out?

SHAHEEN: Well, what would you do with three children with no parents? Who's going take care of them?

MOORE: So she was feisty enough to say that to them?

SHAHEEN: She was brilliant. You know, although she lacked the education that, all you got to use is common sense. In this case it's common sense, to me, and she got away with it. She come marching in.

Oh, we were so happy. Happy one way (?).

MOORE: Well, when she got there, where, what was the address you were at, do you remember it?

SHAHEEN: Address? 113 St. Clair Avenue.

MOORE: And that was your...

SHAHEEN: Are you challenging my memory?

MOORE: No, yes, no. And that, and that was your uncle's house?

SHAHEEN: Yeah.

MOORE: And did you stay there?

SHAHEEN: No.

MOORE: Where did you go?

SHAHEEN: So, we had to get rooms elsewhere. We stayed there for a period of time. The house belonged to the family, so one day our uncle came in and said, "You're going to have to move. We're going to sell the house." Mom didn't understand him and we couldn't (?) so we had to move. We moved, say, across the alley.

MOORE: Now, what did she go to work as at that time?

SHAHEEN: Same as she did. You know, you have to give those people credit. They couldn't read nor write yet she went out peddling. She used marks. One line meant a dollar, two, half a line meant fifty cents and so forth, yet she kept accurate account of what people owed her. She had a memory out of this world.

MOORE: And you said that these were hard times when you first came back.

SHAHEEN: Yeah.

MOORE: And you all tried to help out?

SHAHEEN: Well, well, I was, shall we say, I took care of

myself. I was no, no burden to my mother. We all tried to help out, yeah. But, ah, we were too young to get a job. Like I said, I was a paperboy, I dug ditches. I went and picked up scrap metal and sold it for scrap. I did whatever I could do, matter of fact, I worked one place for a dollar a week. I saved thirteen dollars. I went down to (?) and bought in a suit. Hard to believe, isn't it?

MOORE: Okay. Well, you, now you, you mentioned you had to go back to school then, right?

SHAHEEN: We went back to school. I wore hand-me-downs but they were clean. Teacher said, "Look at your cousin Nick." Talking about that. "Look, they are hand-me-downs are patched, are sewed, but he's neat and clean." So, that went on a good while. She, she stayed there, until she was 74 years old, she worked.

MOORE: Your mom? And then tell me about your life. What happened then? You went in...

SHAHEEN: Well, little by little, like I said, ah, I was taking care of myself. I worked in a bowling alley setting up pins, I sold papers. I did this, I did that. And my brother went down the

mill working. First he was water boy. Two dollars a day or something like that. Then later on he was, ah, working the machine shop. Mind you, none of our relatives tried to help us out.

Now, like I said they were having a difficult time themselves, but little by little we started building up. I went to school. I'm a high-school dropout. I don't have a high-school education. For some reason Mom said she wanted me to stay in school but we couldn't afford it.

MOORE: What age did you go out to work then? I mean for, like...

SHAHEEN: First steady work down the mill it was 1936, I was twenty, '36 I was twenty-two years old.

MOORE: That was the Depression time before that.

SHAHEEN: The Depression came in 1929.

MOORE: 1929. Yeah, right.

SHAHEEN: (he laughs) I'm enjoying this.

MOORE: So, did your mother ever adjust to life here, do you think?

SHAHEEN: I hate to say this. We couldn't get along with our, our relatives. We were down and out. And then they made a will out. The will was never executed, um, I mispronounced the word. So, we

had to be on our own. Whenever Mom bring up the subject of when are we going to divide our property, which they never did. We only kept our theater until 1914. We had that store where we were merchant down, down there. They sold everything. When Dad died they bought ten lots out there in the cemetery. They said, "That's your share of the property." What'd we need ten lots for?

MOORE: Hm.

SHAHEEN: See, they wanted a kiss to us, they washed their hands from us. Then we went out on our own. It wasn't easy, believe me, it wasn't easy. The worst part, truthful, the worst part, stop and think, we all lived in the same house where my relatives was living high on the hog, eating while we were starving. Holidays, like Christmas and Easter, "My Daddy bought me this! My grandmother bought me this," and we got nothing. Those things I cannot forget. Like when we were kids we didn't understand what they were doing, see.

MOORE: Well, what happened? Did you ever, did it ever get resolved? Did you ever get your part?

SHAHEEN: I'm still getting telephone calls. They, we still have property over the old country. Over here, well, there's, what they did to the property over here, Mom got nothing. Ah, we were getting phone calls from the old country now that we have a big shindig going on there people up and say why don't you sell out, you sign your share out to the, the other people? I says no, why should I? What in the world have they ever did for us?

MOORE: So, you basically helped the family most of your life, did you? I mean your Mom...

SHAHEEN: Yes.

MOORE: Who took care of your Mom when she was older? You did? And so you worked, you worked and kept her?

SHAHEEN: Out of the three of us I was not married. I always, well, I assumed, now. I assumed that if I brought another woman into the house, Mom being the number one in her family taking care of her brothers and sisters, she had, she got used to that authority. Then after Dad died she had more authority. How would she act if I brought a woman in the house? You follow me?

MOORE: Yeah.

SHAHEEN: So who do I cater to? My spouse or my mother?
To me, spouse comes first but how could I ignore
my mother after all she went through?

MOORE: Yeah.

SHAHEEN: So, I said, well, forget it. Mom apologised to
me later on. She was sorry that she'd prevented
me from getting married. I bought this house to
bring her home.

MOORE: Now how long did your Mom live?

SHAHEEN: She was 96.

MOORE: How do you think she viewed coming to the United
States, her decision to come back here, later in
life?

SHAHEEN: Well, I'm, I'm assuming this, too. Granddad had
spoiled her, see. As long as she was home with
Granddad she was happy. Over here she had no
one. You know what I mean. She had no one to
run to help her out. There's your difference
right there. We had more friends through our
neighbors, outside people, than we did with our
own relatives.

MOORE: Did you get along well with you neighbors?

SHAHEEN: Beautiful, like one little family. Next door to

me was the (?), Italian people. They made sure we had enough to eat every day.

MOORE: Are you still friends with those people?

SHAHEEN: Only, out of eight boys, two left, who are beautiful people, wonderful people. And their grandmother we used to call Mammell, in Italian it means grandmother. She always came over the house, made sure everything was okay. That's what you call neighbors.

MOORE: Mm hm. Now, did you mother ever regret her decision to come to the United States?

SHAHEEN: That I couldn't, I couldn't answer that. I would say, as long as Granddad was living I would say yes, her father. But after he passed away, I would say it's a toss up.

MOORE: How about you? How do you feel about coming to this country and life here?

SHAHEEN: Well, I was born here. I'm used to it.

MOORE: Have you ever thought about going back to live in Lebanon?

SHAHEEN: Not to live, visit. Ah, I want to go over there and visit. There were four of us Arabic people before the war brOkaye out in Lebanon, we were going to buy a car, have it shipped to Beirut and

make a trip and go all through the Middle East and sell the car and come back. Educational it would have been, see. Unfortunately, the war broke out and we didn't go. And I had a chance not too long ago to go over there. I couldn't make it.

MOORE: So, do you, you view yourself primarily as what nationality now growing, growing up in this country?

SHAHEEN: Uh, now, I'm going to get my self in trouble. I'm proud, very very proud of my heritage. May God bless America.

MOORE: Well, I'd like to thank you on behalf of Ellis Island for sharing your story with us.

SHAHEEN: My pleasure.

MOORE: And we'll send you a copy of this for your family.

SHAHEEN: Okay.

MOORE: And, uh, this is Kate Moore signing off on July 20th, 1994, with Nick Shahen in Clairton, Pennsylvania for the Ellis Island Oral History Project.