

Interviewee: Rodolph Wakim
Interviewer: Alicia Sell
Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

AS: My name is Alicia Sell. I am at Saint Elias Catholic Church on Cove Road. Today is June 8, 2007. I am here with Father Rodolph. Thank you for meeting with us. We're just going to do a basic, start out with a basic background about yourself. Where and when were you born?

RW: First, thank you for meeting with me. I'd be happy to be of any assistance in this project of sharing information through the library. I am very supportive of the library work. Is my voice too low?

AS: No, you're perfect. I can make sure that its working.

RW: I was born in Lebanon in 1964. I came to the States for good in 1987. I was 23 years old. I have been living in the States for the last 20 years.

AS: Why did you come to the United States?

RW: My father lived in the States and he – For two reasons, first to be with him because he was having open heart surgery. (phone ringing) The other thing is to continue my education in physical therapy.

AS: OK. So, you started out with an education in Physical Therapy over here. What made you decide to go into the priesthood?

RW: What made me decide to go into the priesthood?

AS: Mm mm.

RW: Its a long story. (chuckle) I don't want to get off the subject. I'll make it brief. Why I decided to become a priest – Its not a decision, you find yourself at home when you're at church. I found myself at home. I found I enjoyed giving my time to God, not only part time but full time.

AS: About how old were you then when you became a priest?

RW: I became a priest when I was 33.

AS: When did you move to Roanoke?

RW: In November, 1997.

AS: And you came here to be here at Saint Elias Church?

RW: Correct.

AS: Tell me a little bit about what was Saint Elias like when you first came here. What kind of size was it? Is it strictly for the Lebanese community or what kind of membership do you have here?

RW: When I first came here, the church was mixed of Lebanese and non-Lebanese descendent. When you say Lebanese, actually its not correct statement because 90% of Lebanese, they're all American of Lebanese descent.

AS: OK.

RW: We have very few new immigrants which you could call Lebanese, direct descendent, but that counts a small minority. The majority of those who are of Lebanese descent do not speak Lebanese. They have been here 2 or 3 generations. This church here began its first location on Salem Avenue back in 1914 or 1917. The reason we have those two dates is there was a priest here. His name was Father Peter Rabel. He was visiting North Carolina and the people invited him over to celebrate the Divine Liturgy in Arabic for those immigrants. The Lebanese immigrant came to this part of American, United States because it resembled Lebanon, the country, the mountains. The mountains and the nature was very similar.

AS: Is the climate very similar as well?

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RW: The climate is very similar as well. The only difference is you have Lebanese along the coast, the Mediterranean. So, that's the only part missing. (chuckle) In general, most of the immigrants came to this part because of the trains. The first immigrants worked as peddlers. They were hard working

people, very resilient, very determined and very – How do you say it? - Proud, they never would solicit or beg for money. They earned their living and they refused to be dependent on anyone. So, they worked very hard like most immigrants. The story of the Lebanese immigrant resembles almost every nation that migrated to this country.

AS: So, in 1914/1917, there was already an established community here?

RW: Yeah. There were people, immigrants, of Lebanese descent living here already, and when they heard of a priest that is visiting North Carolina, they invited him to baptize their children or celebrate or pray. They used Saint Andrews Church for a while until they were able to save up some money. So by 1917, they purchased a church on Salem Avenue. I think 525. I don't remember the exact address. We could look it up. I believe it was purchased with cash, debt free. And that's where they were and Father Peter Rabel was here for almost 50 years until his death in '64 I believe. He was succeeded by several priests. Well, after that, there were going to close this church because there were no Lebanese priests. There were no priests who served this community. But the people here they go together and went to the Catholic Bishop in Richmond and appeared to him to find them a priest. They refused to close their church and they were really determined after 50 years. So he finally found them a priest, I mean a Latin, until they were able to get another priest. So, they had a priest was Monsignor Asar Awad (??). He was here for 2 or 3 years and left – He left for I believe Ohio for 3 years. During his absence, a few priests came over and then he was back in 1970 for up 'til 1996/97. Altogether, almost 27 years, almost 30 years.

AS: And then you were the priest after he -?

RW: And between him and I there was a priest here for transition of 3 months, around 3 months between July and November. Its important to note that during the time of Monsignor Asar Awad, the church experienced a growth, physical growth in number and improvement in the facility. He was able to purchase this land that we are here on 4730 Cove Road. He purchased the land and he first built a social hall, a banquet hall, in 1977. The banquet hall was used as a center for bingo. That was the major fundraiser. Saint Elias, Knights of Columbus, Saint Andrews Church, they all used the hall every week for bingo for fundraising. So it almost became like a bingo center. (chuckle) With the proceeds, from that – That helped build the church in 1984. The church that is existing here now.

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AS: Is the church on Salem Avenue, did they sell that or they still use it?

RW: It was sold. Now it is a studio, photography studio.

AS: Oh, I think I know exactly which one it is.

RW: I think the address is 525.

AS: Let me ask you a question about the early church and the early community from the church. What kind of jobs did the people in the community have?

RW: That's a very good question Alicia. The early, as I started telling you, early Christians or early immigrants, they were peddlers. They traveled from one – They got on the train and they went from one city to another and when they got to Roanoke, they loved the scenery. It reminded them of home. So, they got off and stayed in the area and they opened their own little stores. They were peddlers here but eventually, they saved up some money. Around in the 20s and 30s, there were many grocery stores owned by Lebanese. So those early immigrants basically worked in trade, businesses, sales and you still have some produce – What is it? Najim (??) Fruit and Produce. There are a few businesses existing still. So those early immigrants worked very hard at what they knew best, trade.

AS: Were they welcomed into the community?

RW: Not really. That's another question. Let me finish the first thought.

AS: OK.

RW: They worked very hard, saved up money but they made sure their children are educated. Education was, what you would call sacred. All of their children were all well-educated, higher

education. Had degrees in different fields, many fields. One of them – Some of them became politicians like, God rest his soul, Vic Thomas of the House of Delegates. He was proud of his Lebanese – As a matter of fact, his parents owned a grocery store. (chuckling)

AS: Here in Roanoke?

RW: Yeah, yeah. On Orange Avenue. He even inherited the grocery store. They still have it as a matter of fact. Its still – 2 or 3 generations. Many of them like lawyers and like that Ray Ferris. He's a prominent lawyer in the city.

AS: Once their children were educated, did they stay here in Roanoke or did they go out to other communities?

RW: Most of them stayed here. Some might have left. The second question that you -

AS: Were they accepted into the community?

RW: Actually, no. They had to earn their acceptance. Unfortunately, there were treated – public places – treated the Middle East, the Lebanese, like they treated the black people today. Call them black or African-American -

AS: African-American.

RW: I don't know the polically correct statement – but back then, they were treated equally, the same way, prejudiced against both. For instance, public swimming pools, they were not welcomed/allowed there. And I hear a lot of stories from people of – older people, they tell me – not long ago, I mean, talking about maybe 40 years ago, 50 years ago, 30, 40, 50 years ago. That when they went to the swimming pool, the cousins, the one who was blondish, light-skinned would get in. They couldn't tell – The one who had the Middle Eastern features – dark skin, black hair, they wouldn't let her in. So that was – Purchasing property. On the deed, they would say, “Not allowed to sell to Syrian or Lebanese” or whatever. In other words, they did have to earn their respect. And they did work very hard and the Lebanese community in Roanoke is prominent, I mean, respected. Things change. Today, Roanoke is a cosmopolitan town/city. They have all these different nationalities here. When we celebrate the Local Colors, you see all these different people. (Knock at the door) Can we pause for a second?

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AS: Yeah, sure.

AS: OK, we're recording again.

RW: So the Lebanese community, they earned their respect, the respect of the city and, as you know today. There was a nationwide change in the mentality on how to treat foreigners, you know.

AS: And in many ways, they weren't necessarily foreigners anymore 'cause they had been here for more than a generation.

RW: Correct. Same like blacks. (chuckle) African-American descent. I would say that not all of them are from African descendents. Anyway, that's true. And, as a matter of fact, during the second World War, many people of Lebanese descent who were already born here served in the Army and Marines and Air Force, soldiers, intelligence. As a matter of fact, my secretary and _____, they both were in intelligence.

AS: Oh.

RW: Yeah. But I'm saying that they did serve their country and one of the most decorated soldiers in Virginia is Lebanese.

AS: Really?

RW: Yeah. Joe Moses. I believe his name is Joe Moses.

AS: I had just never heard of him.

RW: His last name was Moses. I think Joseph. I'd rather double check. His last name – He is Lebanese. Just one of the highly decorated soldiers. So they did really serve and contribute to the country and to the valley, the Roanoke Valley. Today, where are they today? They're – Today, they are everywhere. They inter-married. They mingled with the society in a way that there are so many inter-

marriages.

AS: Is it still a very strong, tight-knit community today?

RW: Yes, yes. Even thought they are 3rd generation of – 2 or 3 generations – They still hold their traditions. They still hold it up and family ties are very strong. They – All you have to do is put on some Lebanese music, you'll see them all gather around. They come from the woods, everywhere. Lebanese food. (chuckling) A few weeks ago, we had our Lebanese Festival.

AS: How long has that been going on, the Lebanese Festival?

RW: This year was our 9th year. It started in 1998. Let me see, I'm sorry, '99.

AS: So that started around when you came here?

RW: '98 will make it – '99 – yes. A year after I was here, we started this festival. Not to say that they did not have festivals before, they did. They had major functions and events but it was not annually. They had many functions. This was an event that was meant to stay, to be annual.

AS: Its very successful isn't it.

RW: Thank God, its been very successful and it reunited the people, build that strong bond that we are the pride of who they are. And, as a matter of fact, people who have any – what do you call it? - roots. If they have some roots of the Lebanese and they would bring it up now. I mean, if somebody is 1/10 Lebanese, they'd say, "I have 1/10 Lebanese in me".

AS: (laughing)

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RW: Its like that makes them, like people are coming out. And that was the main purpose of it to bring this pride. Not to boast but to – not to hide it. You have a lot to offer. Lebanon is – These are the descendents of the Phoenicians, the great Phoenician Civilization who were adventurous, courageous. The Phoenicians were the ones who invented the alphabet. They were – They built the greatest boats and traveled the world. As a matter of fact, we were talking the other day, in South America, thousands of years ago, the Phoenicians landed there before Christopher Columbus. They got lost and they landed there and ended up – I don't know if they were killed or died a natural death, they made it to this part of the world by accident like Christopher Columbus got here by accident. As you know.

Lebanese, they have that in their blood, adventurous, courageous. They trade doing business. One of the biggest quality you find in them, their devotion to God, loyalty to the Faith. And number two, of course, that goes hand in hand with family, God, the family. And the other beautiful quality is their love of hospitality. Its very common to see, to go to Lebanon, if you go to Lebanon today, people will fight over who's going to welcome you better. Who's going to treat you better. Its funny, its really, it sounds funny that they do want to honor the guests and they get – Who's going to host you? They compete over hospitality. That's because I guess Lebanon lives because of its beautiful nature and geographical, strategic location on the Mediterranean – Always hosted many civilizations as they've been through that country and it has beautiful mountains and green trees. No deserts really. Rich in water. Its the richest country in the Middle East in water. It might sound – water, who cares about water but when you are surrounded by deserts, water is more valuable than gold. Other countries are rich in oil, Lebanon is richest in water which I see as a beautiful gift from God. So, that's why tourism is the main source of income for the country. There are what you call ruins of many civilizations. For lack of words I said ruins but you find temples or castles, fortresses built by many civilizations. They are remarkable. The art and the engineering of all different civilizations. They left their mark in that country because its on the coast so back then, when they traveled, they traveled along the coast. So they came through the land. Lebanon has a lot of beautiful sights, places to see and natural beauty. I guess that made them more hospitable, to welcome the guests. People been through their country.

AS: I won't take too much longer of your time but is there anything that we didn't cover that you'd like to mention?

RW: I forgot to cover – The rice and beans, I forgot to cover them in the kitchen. Should I go back.

(both laughing)

AS: Thank you very much for meeting with me.

RW: You're welcome. Well actually as a conclusion, I think I look into the future. Usually we look – what do you hope for? What do you wish? My view, unfortunately, I'm being transferred in the next few days, I'm moving. The people – My hopes and my view what tomorrow is going to bring, you will, people might not stand out as Lebanese as they are already American first. They don't speak Lebanese. But its in their blood. Those of Lebanese descent will continue to enrich this valley and inspire them with their loyalty. First to God and then to family. In any country, anywhere in the world, when you see those 2 great values held, you can predict a great future. When you always God number 1 and family, protect and defend and hold it close. That's, I guess, what we need to work on and actually that may help our country who needs help in the department of family. 'Cause family is a little in danger now. Its threatened. I mean when you say family, you think about children. Children when they have no home or broken families, you see the future is broken. I hope and pray that the Lebanese continue to inspire our country – Americans of Lebanese descent, continue to inspire our nation and love of God and family.

AS: Thank you very much.

RW: You're welcome Alicia.