

SR 165 Oral History Interview with Sam J. Kahl and Zaki Kahl

by Robert J. Gassner

Portland's Syrian/Lebanese-American Community

1988 September 6



THE OREGON
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY
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Compiled by Ellorashree Maitra

Tape 1, Side 1

1988 September 6

Time Stamp	Title	Synopsis	Keyword	Keyword	Keyword
00:00:01	Introduction of Tape's Content	Oral History Interview with Sammy and Zaki Kahl; date and location of interview.			
00:02:53	Family members in the US	Zaki says that his family are all in North America; noone left in Syria, although they continue to "go back and forth." Sammy and Zaki ask RG about other interview subjects.	Syria	Governor Atiyeh	Lebanese
00:04:38	Atiyeh brothers' arrival in US and reasons for settling in Oregon	Sammy describes the connection between his family and the Atiyehs. The Atiyeh brothers, George and Aziz, arrived in Oregon for Lewis & Clark Exposition in 1900. Reasons for settling down in Oregon. Opening of first rug store in Oregon.	First Oriental rug store	George Atiyeh	Aziz Atiyeh
00:07:31	S.A. Kahl's arrival and life in Oregon	Aziz Atiyeh visits Syria, and brings his nephew, S.A. Kahl back with him to Portland. His early schooling and teenage years. Career in the rug business.	S.A. Kahl and Company	Hill Military Academy	Oriental rugs
00:09:08	Close relations between Kahl and Atiyeh families	Sammy explains that the Kahls and Atiyehs became related through marriage, and continued to inter-marry in later generations; discusses possibility of a relation between the Hanna and Atiyeh families.	Inter-marriage	Jim Hanna	
00:11:29	Sammy Kahl's arrival in US and journey to Oregon.	Sammy describes his long, halting journey from Damascus, Syria to Portland to see his uncle, via stays in New York, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. Describes travel conditions. The "miracle" of air travel. Not liking the climate in Michigan, almost decided to go back but changes his mind when he arrives in Portland. Education in Cairo University, Egypt. Trips back in 1964 and as "official translator" for a US trade delegation in 1984.	Ellis island	Trade delegation	Travel conditions
00:14:59	Family ties with Atiyehs and S.A. Kahl's carpet washing business	Aziz Atiyeh's close relation with nephew, S.A. Kahl. Sammy likens it to the emotional connection he feels with his nephews. "I love them just as much as I love my own kids." Establishment of S.A. Kahl's chemical washing plant, the Radiant Wash Division of S.A. Kahl and Company, the first of its kind on the West Coast. Plant relocates twice.	Family ties	Radiant Wash Division of S.A. Kahl and Company	

00:17:35	Role of the social club and the Orthodox Church in the Syrian community	The social activities of the Syrian-Lebanese American club. Collection of money to help newcomers. Location in the basement of the Syrian Orthodox Church. Growth of membership led to relocation of the clubhouse.	Syrian-Lebanese American Club	Syrian Orthodox Church	
00:19:07	Syrian Orthodox Church becomes the Antiochian Church	Historical reasons and events behind the Syrian Orthodox Church becoming the Antiochian Christian Church.	Patriarch, Antioch	Antiochian Christian Church	Syrian Orthodox Church
00:21:51	Role of the Atiyehs and S.A.Kahl in founding the club and church	S.A. Kahl and the Atiyehs founders of the club and the church.	S.A. Kahl	Atiyehs	
00:22:05	Significance of the church in the community	Even as members of the community began to worship at other churches like the Episcopalian Church, the Syrian Orthodox/Antiochian Church remained "the focal point" of the community, hosting various community events and gatherings (bazaars, dances, wedding receptions, etc).	Bazaars	Episcopalian Church	Church hall
00:23:44	Negotiations Re: Building a New Clubhouse in 1966	Zaki describes his and brother's roles in locating and acquiring the property for the new clubhouse and church at 115th and Holgate. Describes the "hard" process of convincing other members of the community who were not Orthodox Christians to agree to the move.	New clubhouse	1966	
00:27:08	Activity of the Club at the time of the interview	With decline of Lebanese membership in the wake of the civil war in Lebanon, 80 percent of the present membership are newcomers who arrived in the last 20-30 years, mostly from Amar al-Husn, the Kahls and Atiyehs family village. The club is "still active, but not as active as it should be." Still serves as social headquarters of the community.	Amar al-Husn	Civil War in Lebanon	
00:28:37	Religious Make-Up of the Older Community	A mixed community from the beginning, reflective of the community in Syria, comprising 3 great religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism). Support for the church and club across faiths.	Community, mixed	Religion	

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Time Stamp	Title	Synopsis	Keyword	Keyword	Keyword
00:00:01	Religious Make-Up of the Community	In the past, several Muslims came to the Orthodox Church regularly because of lack of mosque, donated money, took part in social affairs, fundraising drives. Presently, Muslims continue to come to the Church bazaar. As the the Orthodox Church was the only Arab church, Catholics also contributed to the church in time of need."Everyone helped. It was a very close community." Even now, with more churches serving different denominations, there is a culture of support across denominations.	Orthodox Church	Muslims	Church bazaar
00:02:01	Impact of Independence of Lebanon on community in Portland	SAMMY: Little indication of problem until Mr. [Robert] Bitar became the Hon. Consul of Lebanon, which provoked some to become "aware" of their Lebanese identity. The friction between Syrian and Lebanese communities regarding Israel-Palestine conflict, purchase of arms by Syria from Russia, charges of communism leveled at Syrians, etc. Zaki's explanation of the "core of the problem" between the communities and views on regional conflict arising from Palestinian displacement.	Lebanese, Lebanon	Israel, Zionism, Palestine	Syrian militancy
00:06:01	Syrian Business Community in Portland	To begin with, like Atiyehs and S.A. Kahl, mostly in the Oriental rugs and cleaning business. Atiyehs started the business in New York, Pennsylvania and then came to show the art, handmade rugs, tapestry, at the Lewis and Clark Exposition. Stayed on, and continued the business in Portland. S.A. Kahl learned from them and set up the business. Others in the community went into the grocery business. Construction business, including sewers, also popular business. Later on, younger generation went into law, medicine, car manufacturing business [Hanna family]. Two judges from the community [Abraham and Younis/Yunis?].	Oriental rugs, cleaning	Grocery	Construction, sewers
00:08:42	Where the Syrian community tended to live in Portland	Sammy and Zaki describe where prominent members of the community used to live. Primarily concentrated in South East and North Portland. Locations and names of Syrian businesses.	SE Portland	N Portland	

00:10:50	How did the Syrian community fit into the city?	"We are very flexible people; we live any place."-Sammy. On maintaining identity as Syrians, Sammy again: "How can you lose it? ...I have been here for 40 years, I am Syrian." Role of the club and church in maintaining Syrian identity. The club and church as "focal point" holding the community together, helping members to retain their identity. Community identity also maintained through social gatherings like picnics, family events like weddings, to which all the community members (Lebanese, Syrian, Arab) were invited.	Syrian identity	Flexibility	
00:12:08	Mosques in Portland	Now there are 2 mosques in Portland. First mosque to be built (for Muslims mainly from the Persian Gulf) was located on Capitol Highway/Street. As Muslims from Pakistan, Afganistan and Bangladesh settled in Portland, a second mosque was built.			
00:12:51	Leader of the Syrian Community	Community organized as a democracy; President of the club elected every year; names some past presidents. Sammy and Zaki helped to "spearhead" projects in the club and community with the support of Atiyehs and other prominent members of the community.	Club President	Democracy	
00:14:16	Syrian Community's contribution to Portland	Sammy: Good law-abiding citizens, not criminals, good family people. They served their community and nation very well. I'm very proud of them." Flexible and integrated community. Very industrious and hardworking people. Syrian, Lebanese and Arab families recognized and well-liked by their neighbors.	Industrious	Family	Law-abiding