

Tape # T-4-85 Phil Dabagia T-4-85 Syrians

Transcribed by Therese Zelasko.

George Schultz:among other things, the Islamic community. Now Phil, this is a very informal kind of thing, we may not even use this particular tape, but there's no sense in recording it twice in case we happen to touch on things we want. But mostly it's a very informal discussion, I'm hoping from you to give sort of an overview of how the Arabic Islamic community got here and what has happened to it and why it was here and what's happening to it now. Just from your point of view, from your perspective, I think it would be good to start off for people like me who are ignorant of many things, where did the people come from, what is their religion, this type of thing?

Phil Dabagia: Well, in my society, the Islamic society, religion is Moslem and most of our congregation, originally the members came from the Middle East, which is known today as Lebanon. At the time it was Syria up to 1948, so today we're known as Lebanese. Where my parents came from at the time, it was Syria, but now since they've divided it, it's now known as Lebanon, so when I'm asked the area I'm Lebanese, but technically I'm of Arab descent.

George Schultz: Arab is a general term for a large number of people.

Phil Dabagia: It was mainly like, you know, over there the national language is Arabic, the culture and everything, it's Arabic.

George Schultz: Do you have only Syrian or Lebanese people in this community, do you have any other Arabic people who are from other Arabic speaking countries?

Phil Dabagia: No, you had some, we had some like in our congregations, as I understand we had people from Iran, Pakistan, a few from India. Most of the congregation is Lebanese, though, and I think we have two or three families from Syria.

George Schultz: Well, this is a fairly unique community in the United States, having such a percentage of Arabic people. Is that correct to say Arabic people?

Phil Dabagia: Arabic.

George Schultz: Ok, Arabic speaking people. What percentage, perhaps what percentage was it when it was at its height? Do you have any idea on that, any ballpark figure? What percentage in Michigan City were Lebanese or Syrian, do you have any idea?

Phil Dabagia: Now?

George Schultz: Now, and say at the turn of the century, or whenever the height of it was. I'm asking for a guess now.

Phil Dabagia: I'd say maybe earlier there was a good 25%, close to it. Most of them, the majority I believe, were Polish and German descent. There were quite a few of the Arabic speaking people here.

George Schultz: You're sure it would be at least over 10% of the population?

Phil Dabagia: I'd say now possibly now fairly close to 10%. A lot of them have moved on into the Detroit areas.

George Schultz: OK, now why is it that this particular community, this is unique, you know, in the Midwest, I would imagine there are very few cities that have this large of an Arabic population?

Phil Dabagia: Detroit has quite a few.

George Schultz: Detroit, okay, any other cities?

Phil Dabagia: Detroit, Toledo, Flint, Michigan. Bay City Rapids has a pretty good-sized community.

George Schultz: But in the United States as a whole you don't hear of Arabic communities in Keokuk, Iowa or San Diego as much, as percentage wise. Why is it that they would center themselves here?

Phil Dabagia: Well, Michigan City was called the Mecca over here in this universe, or in this hemisphere, because like, I used to talk with a lot of the older generation, and when they had first come from the Middle East, they came to Michigan City primarily for work. There was no work over there. If you didn't have a business, you were a farmer. Well, farm land wasn't that good, and they came here to better themselves. In Michigan City at that time they had Pullman Standard, which was going, you know, full blast at the time, and when they would come here they would send for many of the relatives or friends would come in. They would be taking them in; they had boarding houses at the time where they would stay among themselves. Once you got going, they remained here in Michigan City, or they moved on to other areas.

George Schultz: What time period are you talking about?

Phil Dabagia: Well, you're talking about, I'd say between during the first World War and just afterwards. You had quite a few coming in then, a lot.

George Schultz: Was Pullman actively recruiting over there?

Phil Dabagia: No, just that they had a lot of jobs, there were a lot of job openings and that's why they would come. Because a lot of them didn't speak English when they came over.

George Schultz: Their families would have to arrange to get them jobs?

Phil Dabagia: Oh, yea, and taking them into their homes and everything. My father was one of them.

George Schultz: Tell us about that.

Phil Dabagia: Well, from the stories I hear, my father, when he first came over, he was a young man in his early twenties, I believe. When he first came here, as I understand he stayed with the Mufta family, and I think their home

was there on Tennessee street. And he worked at Pullman and pretty soon he went into a business for himself, he had a little grocery store right there at Tennessee street in the 800 block, and he branched out and went into the bar business.

George Schultz: Did he send for five of his brothers?

Phil Dabagia: Yea, five of his brothers. They stayed, I think the longest one stayed for about three years. All the brothers went back, except the youngest one, that was my Uncle George, he became a fireman later on, on the Fire Department.

George Schultz: Now, do you, this would be fairly typical, you think, of the other families in this area?

Phil Dabagia: As far as taking other ones in, oh yes, oh yes.

George Schultz: You just mentioned somebody who, a little while ago, and I realized that you were related to them too. The thing that struck me about your community is that everyone seemed to be related in some way to everyone else.

Phil Dabagia: We're a very close knit people and I feel good about that.

George Schultz: Explain what you mean, is it blood relationship or is there other ties?

Phil Dabagia: Well, when we marry there's probably no direct relationship, when I married I took in my wife and all that, her side of the family is considered my relatives as far as if they need help or I need help, they're there to help me. And most of us come from large families and we have a tendency, like during that time, I don't know if I mentioned it to you, during that time we used to marry second cousins. In Lebanon, there they were marrying first cousins, not as much now but it was very strong then. So it was nothing unusual here, like when you married cousins, come to find out that was your second cousin or the (undecipherable) was also your second cousin. You were very strong about marrying within your own, the idea was marrying within your own was you had 50% of your problems solved right off the bat.

George Schultz: You said your family was large, how many people?

Phil Dabagia: Well, there was five in our family and five in my uncle's family, my uncle is from the old country, where each one had least four children.

George Schultz: And that was sort of a tradition, it was sort of expected that the family would be large or it just worked out that way?

Phil Dabagia: That was like a tradition, it was meant to have large families. We didn't believe in birth control or anything at that time.

George Schultz: Why don't you describe for us your memories what it would be like at a family gathering, who'd be there, what it was like, say, what

would, now you wouldn't celebrate Christmas or would you in the same way the Christians would celebrate Christmas?

Phil Dabagia: Well, religious end of it, we believe in Christ, we believe in the Virgin Mary, we would celebrate Christmas, yes, maybe perhaps not in the way that a Catholic would, but we believe very strongly in the teachings of Christ. Where we differ is the Holy Trinity, that's basically (undecipherable). but we do believe in Christmas.

George Schultz: Okay, so you were, would have a Christmas celebration, Christ was a great prophet rather than a god, you wouldn't consider a god in the same way?

Phil Dabagia: Yes, in that respect we don't consider that, we do not believe in the sense that Christ was the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost, we believe that Christ was a human being like you and I who was sent by God as far as religious and other codes.

George Schultz: So you would celebrate Christ's birthday. Perhaps, maybe you could describe one of your early Christmases, the way you remember it, what was it like?

Phil Dabagia: We'd go to the mosque and go to the services and that, it would just be an all day affair. The aunts, the uncles would be there, the cousins would be there, just sit down and have a nice dinner, sit and talk about old times, tell stories. We usually set out early in the morning and end right around 10 o'clock at night.

George Schultz: What were some of the unique things that you did that perhaps some of your non-Arabic friends did not do? What were some of the things that would differentiate you from the other kids in the community?

Phil Dabagia: To think back, like you and I go back a long way. But I hate to say Americans, because we're all Americans, I was born here. But my parents were strict, especially my mother. I didn't have too many friends on the outside, I stayed mainly within my own group except school activities. We used to run around in our group, there were about ten or twelve of us, and out of that ten or twelve we were very close, ten were of Arabic descent. and whenever we did anything, we did it together. Very seldom did you see one without the other.

George Schultz: Was it your cousins generally or other, it was a clannish, I don't know which term to use.

Phil Dabagia: Clique, I think that's the best word to describe it.

George Schultz: Now was your clique exclusive, usually when there's an in group, there's an out group?

Phil Dabagia: Well, as a matter of fact when I had gotten married one of my best friends was Bernie Ianocci, remember Bernie?

George Schultz: Yes.

Phil Dabagia: I made a promise, that when I got married, Bernie would be my best man, of course I had Joe, Mike, and Keith in my wedding party, Bernie was my best man.

George Schultz: He's Italian?

Phil Dabagia: Yes, Bernie's Italian.

George Schultz: Mary is doing a program on the religious and ethnic history and perhaps while I'm generating questions she might have some?

Mary: I'm interested in the neighborhood development when all the Syrians came over, there was just a certain part of town that they all stayed in?

Phil Dabagia: Right, from what I understand originally when they first came over they used to live in what was called the Canada area, that's where they first had settled. As a matter of fact my wife Maria's grandfather before he moved to Detroit had lived in Mission City at the Twin Sister's grocery store, originally that was his and all of them used to come there. Many jumped from the Canada area to the west side, that's where a lot of them had stayed. And now you've got a few of them still on the west side but they're all spread all over now. But originally that's where they stayed.

George Schultz: Did most of them work for Pullman?

Phil Dabagia: Oh yes.

George Schultz: In the foundry, you said.

Phil Dabagia: In the foundry, yes.

George Schultz: Why was that?

Phil Dabagia: That's the only thing they could do, they didn't have to do any talking. All they had to do was point and that's what they had to do. Like I used to sit down and talk to my wife's grandfather and her grandmother told stories about when they came over they couldn't speak, read or write or anything. They used to stand and joke the first thing they learned was a cup of coffee and a piece of pie, whenever they went out to eat, that's all they had. And my wife's grandfather (undecipherable), once he learned English he didn't want any more pie.

Mary: Were they encouraged to learn English?

Phil Dabagia: Oh yes.

Mary: How did they learn?

Phil Dabagia: By working among the other fellows and everything like that, you know they used to have where they lived and all that, it wasn't solid people from the Middle East, it was quite a few in that area, you had other things. You'd sit and listen and talk, go downtown and walk, just listen to people.

George Schultz: Was there such a thing as an Islamic school for the children?

Phil Dabagia: Yes, we have one now as a matter of fact at the Islamic center. In the early thirties when we had the mosques there on 2nd Street it was called the As Al (undecipherable). I can't name the person that used to talk, he was teaching Arabic. He taught the kids Arabic, how to read and write and kept up the customs and everything like that.

George Schultz: Did your parents feel it was important for you to know the language, the Arabic language or did they want to, was that important in your family for their traditions?

Phil Dabagia: Yes, they completely tried to keep the customs up and everything like that. Like my mother very seldom talked to me in English when I was younger. It was always in Arabic, that's how I learned the language. Plus when you went to some other people's homes and everything that's all they ever did was talk Arabic. So if you wanted to understand you had to learn it.

George Schultz: In my family, which was Polish, several family members decided they wanted to drop the Polish name and went from Kryscelski's to Sharp's. Was there much of that in your community, where the people wanted to sort of ignore or minimalize their family, their Arabic background?

Phil Dabagia: No, not too much, like our family kept the name Dabagia. I don't know if it's spelled correctly but that's the way they kept it. My one cousin Eric had come over about four years ago and we got into a big discussion about that he said our name was spelled wrong, he said if you translated the Arabic letters into English our name would be Dabaja instead of Dabagia.

George Schultz: But there wasn't a lot of men or women trying to sort of Americanize as quickly as possible?

Phil Dabagia: Most of them had kept the names, well, like the Arabic names they might pick up an English name. Like my father's name was Hallof, that was his Arabic name but he took up the name Charley in English. The last name he kept.

George Schultz: Why did he take up the name Charley, because it was easier for people to pronounce?

Phil Dabagia: Because the Arabic language you have to roll with the tongue. It's not that easy.

Mary: You said that most Syrians went back, they would work here a few years and go back?

Phil Dabagia: No, my uncles had gone back, all except my father and my Uncle George, they stayed, out of all the brothers.

Mary: But that wasn't indicative of the rest of your community?

Phil Dabagia: No.

George Schultz: Why did they go back?

Phil Dabagia: Because they didn't care for the country.

George Schultz: What do you ever feel, why they

Phil Dabagia: Well, some of the ones I talked to had first come over, the pace in this country is a lot faster than it is over in the Middle East. They have a tendency to take things slow, they feel like going to work, now this isn't all categories but the ones that I've talked with, you know, if you had some friends come in from out of town or something they just didn't have to go to work. They wouldn't go to work, where here you don't work you don't get paid. And the pace is much faster here and I just don't believe, I just don't think that they were used to it.

George Schultz: Did your folks speak of any discrimination against them in the town? How did they relate to the other members of the community?

Phil Dabagia: Oh, yes. We were called, just like some other, I'm sure other ethnic groups, they were called names like everything else. We were called us Guineas, they called us black.

George Schultz: They couldn't tell, they couldn't make up their minds which ethnic, did they really understand you?

Phil Dabagia: No. I think that was part of the problem. I think just like, every group that's come over here, the Irish, the Polish, everyone's got some. My turn was that time, we don't get too much of it now. My friends call me a camel rider and all that and I just smile. As long as they know who I am, that's what counts.

Mary: What did the Syrians call the Polish and the Germans and the Irish?

Phil Dabagia: Called the Poles Pollocks, they said it was with an accent just like everybody else.

Mary: Did you, did the Syrians look on everyone else as one group, they didn't cut them into different ethnic groups?

Phil Dabagia: No, no. They could tell after a while. You have to understand, too, when they first came here, they stayed among themselves. We had our own mosque, we had our own certain coffee house that we used to go to. One of the Hassans, I'm trying to think, Mike Hassan, he used to have a coffee house on the north end. I believe it was in the (undecipherable) restaurant, I think it was at 2nd and Franklin on the northeast corner. Well, that was the same coffee house, that's where they all went to. They stayed among themselves, it was a common thing back then. It was just like if you, I don't know what nationality you are.

Mary: Polish.

Phil Dabagia: You're Polish? If you went to Poland, where would you stay, do you have relations, you would stay with them, wouldn't you? Or some close

friend? You wouldn't stay with someone else, with someone of a different background. It's the same way with us.

Mary: You said before your grandfather had a grocery store?

Phil Dabagia: My wife's grandfather.

Mary: Did the Syrians just patronize Syrian establishments?

Phil Dabagia: At that time, yes, because it was credit.

George Schultz: I imagine they had some very special and familiar foods.

Phil Dabagia: Oh yes.

George Schultz: Tell us about the foods, Phil.

Phil Dabagia: Well, Kibbe, raw meat. Cracked wheat

George Schultz: It's not raw meat.

Phil Dabagia: Raw ground meat. You grind it, it's fresh killed. You grind it and mix it with wheat, a little spice with it and everything like that and we call it Kibbe.

George Schultz: It's never been cooked, I've had it. I didn't realize it's was never cooked. It's good, it's delicious.

Phil Dabagia: And the meat pies, it's ground lambs meat with onions, a little bit of parsley flakes, oil, lemon, some spices.

George Schultz: Baklava.

Phil Dabagia: We call, if it's what I'm thinking, we call it Batlay. It's a very thin crust sugar coated and everything with the nuts, the pine nuts and so forth.

George Schultz: And the barbecued lamb.

Phil Dabagia: Oh yes, we have that.

George Schultz: I think those are the kinds of things we wanted, some of the things we wanted.

Phil Dabagia: I remember when I was younger, when we were home, very seldom did I ever sit down and have a hamburger or steak or eggs. It was always kibbe, shish kebab, always something like that.

George Schultz: What's that?

Phil Dabagia: Lahamishiri(?) is the shish kebab.

George Schultz: So you did keep your traditional foods even while you were growing up?

Phil Dabagia: My mother did.

George Schultz: This is an intangible, but to me a very important one, and maybe it was just my perception, but I perceive your community as a very warm one. It was my impression that there was a real strong sense of community, a real supportiveness among the neighbors, and from the outside, a very happy community, more or less. Now those were my impressions, what are your impressions?

Phil Dabagia: The same.

George Schultz: Really?

Phil Dabagia: Yes, we have, like we talked earlier about it, the Sacred Heart Church, the 8th Street group revival, we get along very good. The last few years, we've had joint picnics where both clubs, you know, Middle East clubs, Wildwood, Sacred Heart group.

George Schultz: Perhaps you should explain the factions, I know all about them, but a person listening to your tape might not.

Phil Dabagia: Well, like the Islamic Center is an organization, it's a club, but it's tied into religion, we're a very religious club. St Anthony's, which is the Catholic.....

George Schultz: Catholic Islamic, no, excuse me, Catholic Arabic.

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Phil Dabagia: Arabic Catholic, right. Of Arabic people you have the Muslim, which I am, you have the Catholic and you have a few Syrian Orthodox, and that's St. George. And what we did is that the clubs would get together and we'd have a picnic for all our people to come together. We'd have Arabic music where we do the Syrian dances and we'd bring our children out and we'd have games for them. we used to have a lot of them because we had plenty of parking and the picnic table area and everything like that. And we have functions at our club, at the Islamic Center, they come to ours and I always go to theirs. And when we have weddings, sad occasions such as funerals, we're together. And I honestly feel in my own heart that if something happened where if I need help, if I went to them, I'm sure I wouldn't be refused. We have one thing in common, we come from the same backgrounds irregardless if we were born in this country or if we just came straight over. It's something that I think we're instilled with and I want my children to feel the same way.

George Schultz: Do you know, what are some of the disadvantages, there must be some disadvantages living in a community like that?

Phil Dabagia: Well, the only thing I can think of offhand is sometimes being as close knit as we are, is when favors are needed, sometimes you can be

strapped, or you're put in a position where your judgment tells you "Don't do it" but you'll do it.

George Schultz: You feel obligated, where you wouldn't feel otherwise.

Phil Dabagia: Yes, I feel an obligation.

George Schultz: Yes, this is the kind of thing that we want. You were just saying that when you first came here, the people who first came here went right into factories. What I remember going to high school with people who later became doctors, lawyers, and police detectives, things like that, is there a tradition or an emphasis, like in the Jewish community there's a strong emphasis at times for the kids to become educated. Is this something in your community?

Phil Dabagia: Yes, this is something we strive for, like I believe there's a bigger, a much bigger Jewish population in Michigan City than there are of our people. And you've got to remember that they've been here a lot longer, I believe, than people from the Middle East. When we came here you're talking about the early 1900's where you know, you went to Pullman, that's all you did. You raised your children and the second generation coming in here wanted more for their children, you strived more, they were willing to sacrifice. Now I'm not saying the other ones didn't do that, but college, if you were brought up in our, at that time, and you're a girl, you got one strike against you, why do you want to go to college, you're going to get married. You're going to have six children, what are you going to do in college? You can't eat that degree, that was some of the attitude. As time went on, you know, they started sending their children to college to better themselves, because the more you learned, the more good you're going to do for us. More physicians are getting into it.

Mary: Is it because of status was improved then?

Phil Dabagia: Not so much a status symbol, no, I take it back, to a certain extent, but overall, you're bettering yourself, where the knowledge you gain you can help me in what I might be lacking. Like, maybe in my profession, I could do some good for you, but in your profession, you could do some good for me. Maybe the day will come when I need a favor, where it's not going to hurt you, but don't you feel good when you do something for somebody? Doesn't it give you a good feeling? Or if you're in trouble you can turn to one of your own and ask for that help? And then without any question, I'll help you? It's a good feeling, it's a two way street, that helps. I know I've gone to people when I've needed a favor or something at one time, they've helped me, and I've helped other people. And it's a good feeling when you can help someone or the time comes when I've needed help, all I needed to do is turn right around and I've got someone there to help me.

Mary: (Undecipherable) thrown out, you found in disgrace?

Phil Dabagia: We don't throw our people out.

Mary: They accept everything?

Phil Dabagia: No, I can't recall anyone being thrown out in our group. The Islamic center, no, I cannot recall offhand, I've been going there a long time.

Mary: What about Syrian culture at large, the Lebanese culture at large, you know? Perhaps if you don't belong to the Islamic center?

Phil Dabagia: Well, speaking for the Islamic center, if you're a Muslim, you're welcome regardless. If you're from the Middle East, fine. If you're not from the Middle East, as long as you're a Muslim, you come into our community, you're welcome to our center. In the event that you pass on, or someone in your family, we have a burial spot here in Greenwood Cemetery where we've purchased some land. If you're a Muslim, we cannot deny you burial, we will bury you at our expense. If you want to donate, fine, but you're not pressured into it. We've had some families that have lived here and moved on years ago and the father passed on and his request was that he be buried in the Islamic portion of the cemetery, and we've done it at our expense. See, we take care of our own, we send most of our people to Hummer and White. What we do is that they understand our customs, and we wash our deceased, I don't know if you knew that or if I told you about that. But we wash our own, they do the embalming, but we say our prayers over them, we wash them, we wrap them, we place them in the casket and we bury them in our own section. If you're a Muslim we do not deny you, we do not deny anybody.

George Schultz: Are you trying to get at the issue of what happens to the "Black Sheep", the guy who.....

Mary: Well, I was just wondering that most tight knit groups that are based on religion like the Jewish or the Amish, they have certain limits that where after that you're not accepted in the group anymore.

Phil Dabagia: No

Mary: I was just wondering if there was a point where you could get into so much disgrace, with breaking so many traditions, every group has an unwritten code.

Phil Dabagia: No one has ever been thrown out to my knowledge. I've never heard any stories from the older ones.

Mary: So what do they think of a Lebanese that marries out and stays out?

Phil Dabagia: You mean goes away from the faith and everything? Well if he goes away from the mosque on his own that's not our doing.

Mary: But do you accept him socially, in social situations anymore?

Phil Dabagia: Of course, I've got people of my family who have married out.

Mary: I was just wondering.

Phil Dabagia: No, I know, we like you to marry your own, just like any other group, we'd like you to stay with one of your own, but if you don't, as long as you're a Muslim, you keep the faith and everything, you're not going to be

thrown out Even if you leave the mosque, so to speak, leave your church and give up your religion and everything like that, if I see you on the street and as long as I know you personally, I'm still going to say hello. But naturally, you know, you lose, you know, if you walk away from your mosque, it's not my doing, I don't know how else to describe it.

George Schultz: Do you have what would be similar to a priest?

Phil Dabagia: Right, we call them shaf or imam. A shaf is a priest, the imam is like a bishop, a man of higher learning that has gone to the school, you know, to take up the Muslim religion.

George Schultz: Would he be like a rabbi in the sense of that.....

Phil Dabagia: Yes, he would take on the Jewishness

George Schultz:A wise, learned person who knows a lot about the....

Phil Dabagia: He studied, yes.

George Schultz: But he has no special powers like a priest would have in the Catholic religion. In the Catholic religion they believe the priest holds special powers that an ordinary human being does not have.

Phil Dabagia: No. We look upon our shaf as a man of the cloth, as a man who knows our religion, that when we go to him to talk with him, he gives us the sermon and everything, this is what we look on him as.

George Schultz: What would the service be like?

Phil Dabagia: Well, they have, we have lectures and Sunday school and everything. But when we go into pray we have one certain room where, we have no pews, no statues, no pictures of the religion or anything. It's just a very plain room and we have carpeting there. When we go in, we remove our shoes and everything. (End of side one)

(Start side Two)

George Schultz: In the mosque there's a special room for your watch and your wallet and your shoes. It has an apostary of some sort. What does it mean exactly?

Phil Dabagia: Well, when we go into the room which is our prayer room, we go into the house of God. And what it is that the man next to me might be very well to do, he might be a big businessman, while I'm just, I work for someone. In the eyes of God we're all the same, and when we say our prayers, when we kneel, we lie prone on the floor, we're not any different. Do you know what the biggest religion in the world is?

George Schultz: Buddhism.

Phil Dabagia: Now I'm talking you take each religion, you take your whole Christian faith, there are more Muslims in the world than there are of any other faith.

George Schultz: What's the proper pronunciation, Muslim or Moslem?

Phil Dabagia: We say Muslim.

George Schultz: Are visitors allowed to come to your mosque?

Phil Dabagia: Yes, you can come, you won't be allowed in the prayer room, though.

George Schultz: I see.

Phil Dabagia: Our prayer room is separate, so when they go in there, it's only Muslims who go in there to pray. But, you know, you can sit down in our Sunday school classes and you're welcome to join us at breakfast, talk with us, ask us anything you like. But when it comes to the prayer room, no.

George Schultz: How does one become a Muslim?

Phil Dabagia: How does one become a Muslim?

George Schultz: Is it saying more than "I believe" or is there some, how does one become a member, say a Christian wanted to become a Muslim, how would you go about that?

Phil Dabagia: If he wants to become a Muslim, I would give him some books, I would not send you to the shaf, I would never send you to the shaf. If you believe in your heart, if you believe in our teachings, if you believe in the five major prophets and accept the teachings of Muhammad, you know, and say "I am a Muslim", I believe in the five major prophets, I believe in the teachings of Muhammad, you will be accepted. You follow the teachings, you pray five times a day, you abstain from eating pork, (Undecipherable), if you're actually interested in the religion, if you came to me and you said you were interested, I would, I would never sit down and say "George, this is what you got to do", I would never do that. I would give you a book on some of the basic teachings and all that and if you wanted more, then I would give you a Koran.

George Schultz: As much as anything is typical of anybody, would you say you're a typical Muslim?

Phil Dabagia: No, I say I have room for improvement.

George Schultz: Okay, you seem to be very religiously oriented, very family oriented. Would you say that's typical?

Phil Dabagia: As far as a Muslim goes, I would say that Muslims generally are no different from your Jewish, your Catholic. I don't see us acting any different than anyone else. I feel, I am a Muslim, I feel I have much room for improvement, I wish I had the time to do it.

Mary: I was just wondering, a lot of the ethnic groups (several words undecipherable), like you said before, everyone is an American, (several words undecipherable), usually they find that out by talking to a number of people and finding out how they identify themselves, how they label other people and their interaction.

Phil Dabagia: If someone asked me "What are you" the first thing I would say is "What are you talking about"? If they would come back with "What is your nationality", if you say "What is your nationality", I would tell you I'm Lebanese, I'm of Arab descent, I'm an Arab. But if you come by with "What religion are you, Phil", I would tell you I'm a Muslim.

George Schultz: I have a question, you must know some of these marvelous old timers. I only met them briefly, could you describe one or two of your kind of favorites, Uncle So and So perhaps, I don't know who it might be for you and what he was like and what things you remember about him and what things you remember he did when you were a child, things like that?

Phil Dabagia: Well, that's a tough one, George, there's so many of them I remember. I remember my father very well, I remember my Uncle George.

George Schultz: Tell us a little bit about maybe your father and your Uncle George.

Phil Dabagia: What do I say, I love them. My father, he was kind of a carefree person, funloving, loved to smile. Very seldom did I ever see my dad without a cigar in his mouth. A very jolly person, good to the kids, he was very good to us, hard worker, he was a good father.

George Schultz: Was he, did you have the father role, that's one thing that's interesting to me, it seems to me their families were warmer, especially the men perhaps. Phil doesn't appear to me to be the macho male, you know, where he stands away from the children or whether the woman is cooped up in her place. It seems like, okay, do you see the difference between, was that what you describe in your father, he was a family man who related very closely with the children, maybe I'm wrong, I don't know.

Phil Dabagia: No, my father was, he was, I knew my dad, how can I put it, he worked an awful lot, you know. But when he was home we were all sitting around watching TV or we'd go to the show, he'd take us on picnics. I know it used to be a treat to go to Detroit, I think at that time when we were kids, it took us 8-10 hours to get to Detroit going by old 12, and we'd stop two or three times to have that picnic. He always let us have a picnic, my father was very good to us. He wasn't the stern father type, no, no, but when the time came.....

George Schultz: You said your mother was stern, is that typical, was she a

Phil Dabagia: I believe, I think the reason my mom was stern was because when we lost my dad, she didn't speak any English at the time, she had no basic education the same as here, she was very well educated over there. My mother spoke very little English, very little English and she had a very rough time with her kids. I was the oldest, I was thirteen going on fourteen.

George Schultz: What did you do?

Phil Dabagia: Everything we had we lost because my mother didn't know what my dad had and my uncle, every time we needed something, my uncle was there, and he you know, he had the other kids to think of.

George Schultz: Does that make you sad?

Phil Dabagia: No, that's, no, my Uncle George was the fireman I was telling you about.

George Schultz: And he was killed too, wasn't he?

Phil Dabagia: He died in a fire. After my dad passed on I remember I felt bad about two or three years and he was saying, Man, I'd break down in tears. But then I had my Uncle George, he was my last lifeline, so to speak. I looked to him, anything we needed he was always there, he was always coming to the house. I remember the kids were always there, we still got together and everything. And after he had passed on, that was it, all I can say is God bless my mother. There's only two things in this world, George, that I'm afraid of, that's Uncle Sam and my mother. Those two things I don't mess with, anything else, I'll try, but I do not mess with my mother.

George Schultz: She's a very strong person, is there an Arabic personality that you can describe, I mean is there, was she an old country woman, was she a typical old country woman?

Phil Dabagia: Yes, my mother was very old fashioned, of course now she's a little bit older she's getting mellow, but I'm 37, George, and she'll still knock my head off my shoulders.

George Schultz: Physically?

Phil Dabagia: Oh yes, and I'll take it.

George Schultz: Really? Is it a hot tempered kind of thing?

Phil Dabagia: No, no, it's just respect to my mother. My mother comes into my house or I go in my mothers' home, what she says, I do, because that's my mother, that's the woman that raised me. That's the woman that took care of me, fed me, clothed me, put up with me. And yet when I needed that attention or that certain love it was there.

George Schultz: Would you say that was typical?

Phil Dabagia: Yes, definitely.

George Schultz: So you wouldn't have the same kind of teenage problems that the.....

Phil Dabagia: Oh, I had my share, sure I did, Mama didn't like 'em.

George Schultz: I've heard in some places in San Francisco at one time there was no juvenile delinquency among the Oriental people, because probably, the Chinese people, for example (Rest of question undecipherable)

Phil Dabagia: Generally, we try to take care of our own. You got to remember, too, upbringing was another experience. And I remember when I was a kid and I used to get into trouble, there was Dave and if you did something wrong, he was there. And I remember many times I used to get the boot and he'd send me home.

George Schultz: He was a family member?

Phil Dabagia: No, he was just one of our people and that if he saw any of us kicked out, we had to go home. And then you talked to him, no one ever come back and said you're picking on my children, we didn't have that. They said "What happened" he'd tell them what happened, chances are you'd get another one.

George Schultz: So the people of the Islamic community, I use all the terms interchangeably, the Arabic

community would watch out for each others' kids. I mean it was, they felt the responsibility and the right to correct them.

Phil Dabagia: Okay, I found a lot of times when I was a juvenile officer, very seldom, but once in a great while, I'd find one of our own got in a little mischief or something like that. And I would find that when I went to the house to advise the parents of what was going on and everything like that, that I got more cooperation and understanding with me than with someone else. And I could tell I had more of an ease, maybe it's because I knew the people, I knew more of the background. Because there's very few of the Arabs around here that I don't know, most of us know each other and we know the families. If we see the kids we ask them who they are and then we can relate.

George Schultz: If this culture turns into an American culture entirely, I mean what would you think would be the biggest loss, what things would you hate to see lost the most, so to speak?

Phil Dabagia: The closeness, the feeling of family, of mutual respect, of working together. I hope I don't see a time like that.

George Schultz: What does it look like, Phil, excepting your family? What does it look like among the other people in your group?

Phil Dabagia: I think there's a period of time when you could feel the (undecipherable) except for the older ones. I think we're taking steps by having these picnics, by having social functions, by letting the kids see the other ones, you know, let's get together and go to So and So's house, talking a little Arabic, sitting down and having a nice dinner, I don't mean hamburgers, I mean Arabic food, it's going to stick in their minds. Because when I think back, I think very little of some of the bad times I've had, I remember most of the good things and my only regret is that I wish my father and my uncle were here. I think they would have been proud of us. I wish my

uncle was here to see his sons, what they have done, I wish my dad was here to see how we did, because I think it would make him feel good, you know.

George Schultz: Are you teaching your children Arabic?

Phil Dabagia: I send my son to Arabic school, I don't teach him Arabic, so I figure he's going to learn Arabic. I speak Arabic, but I don't speak that high Arabic, and I think my son David should be speaking the high Arabic.

George Schultz: Does he go to school once a week?

Phil Dabagia: No, it's twice a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays. We had rented extra classrooms from

Edgewood School and after the snowstorm, you know, on account of the energy, we sent them up to the Islamic center, we sent our teachers out there. We teach them ourselves.

George Schultz: You put a lot of energy, obviously, into preserving your culture. What do you suppose you're doing that other cultures don't seem to be doing?

Phil Dabagia: I can't speak for the other cultures, I'm going by my experience and my familys' experience of when we were kids of how much fun we had and everything. And there's a period of time where I didn't think I was going to marry one of my own and I thought I was I was drifting away from it when I was in the service. I think everyone goes through that. But when I came back home, I settled back here in Michigan City, and especially when I got married and my first boy came, David. Then it dawned on me, I want him to have some of the fun that I had, so I'm going to do my best to do it. If he has half as much fun as I had, he'll be alright.

George Schultz: What are some of the names of the large families?

Phil Dabagia: Mohammed, Maqwed is a large family, Shakani, very large family. I'm trying to think, there's more, but those are some of the large families. When I was engaged to my wife and the day we got married, we had a sit down dinner strictly for the relatives, that's a (undecipherable term), then after the dinner we were going to open up to the guests coming in. And we had the band coming and all that, anyway I was very active in the Islamic youth association, used to travel a lot. I used to go to Detroit and Toledo quite a bit, you know, see my friends, used to go chum around. Her family, her aunts and uncles and cousins, I had known, but I never knew that they were related until the day of the wedding, I about fell over, because these were my friends. And the people I was inviting to come to my wedding, you know, where the ones that her side of the family had invited, and we knew each other. I knew them long before that.

George Schultz: And you knew your wife from childhood?

Phil Dabagia: Right, but if asked if I was going to marry her I would say no, until one day it just hit me, there it is.

George Schultz: A beautiful wife and lovely children that you have.

Mary: You were talking about the population in Detroit?

Phil Dabagia: Well, Detroit, you know you have the Ford factories and so forth, so there's a lot of work for them up there. But it can hold only so many, but my God, how many jobs are you talking about. To show you how many Arabs are in Detroit, that in Dearborn they have two schools if I remember right, one of my buddies was telling me, they have schools that almost 90 percent of them are Arab. Even the teachers, that's how many of them are there. At one time the Arabs (undecipherable), you know, they were so strong there. This is what would like to see here eventually, I would like us get to the point where we're more close knit. I'm not saying they're not there now, but there's so much potential among our people because I know our meetings. You know, we might argue about something, you know, about something we've done, but when it comes time to vote, once that final vote is taken, even the one that argued against it, they're there helping us. That's what I like. If we can get our people together, you know, strong, strong knit, just think what we might see. Say if one family had some problems, so just each one of our families, just each family gave ten dollars a month just to help that family until they got on their feet. They'd be more than willing to help you. Ten dollars is all they're asking. Maybe send them some food, not that they don't do it now, sometimes I think we don't take as much time out. But I think that's progress, we don't take as much time out for each other as we used to. Now we have TV, a man comes home and he's tired, I can understand that, I've done that myself. I'm inclined to stay home more than to go out. Maybe some day we'll get it, we'll see.

Mary: You said before girls weren't encouraged to go to college, don't you have any sisters? (Most of this question was undecipherable)

Phil Dabagia: Oh, listen, there was a big difference. I was the oldest, I could do pretty much what I wanted to do, but as far as my one sister Dina, she's 35 going on 36, she is not allowed to go anywhere, I mean nowhere. She can go to the mosque, you know, if they have a party there, she can go there, but date, no. She is not allowed to date.

Mary: But the boys were?

Phil Dabagia: Yes, that's how big a difference there was. Remember my younger sister Alice, she wasn't allowed to date. We used to have a lot of arguments in our house, she wanted to be a candy stripper and my mother said no. I signed the papers for the uniform and so forth and she got to go.

Mary: If they weren't allowed to date how did they find a husband?

Phil Dabagia: Well, some were sent back to the old country, some were fixed up. We used to have these conventions like I talked about earlier where you met your other people and sometimes that helped.

Mary: So what did they do if she did not want to marry?

Phil Dabagia: She did not want to marry, what would she do?

Mary: Yes

Phil Dabagia: Probably be an old maid, stay at home.

Mary: Would she have other options?

Phil Dabagia: Some of them married out.

Mary: Well, not just marriage, careers.

Phil Dabagia: Careers?

Mary: Something like nursing.

Phil Dabagia: Well, we're not like that, I'm talking about the older generation.

Mary: That's what I mean.

Phil Dabagia: Well, some gave in, some never got to be what they wanted to be, some left home and went on their own.

Mary: But were they considered any type of outcast?

Phil Dabagia: No, they weren't considered outcast, no. The parents didn't like it, maybe they wouldn't talk to them for a few years, but you know, time heals everything.

Mary: Undecipherable question

Phil Dabagia: It wasn't like that, you have to understand. If you were raised from the time you were born to stay among your own, you wouldn't know, would you? The only way you would know if you went to school and talked to the other ones. But still you always had that respect for your parents, what you don't know about, you don't miss.

Mary: Do you think that the school was a good source for cultural contact?

Phil Dabagia: Are you talking about outside contact? Oh yes, yes.

Mary: (Undecipherable) in the factories?

Phil Dabagia: Well, I mean they worked among other people, but like for breaks and all that, yes, they mixed with them. They had friends and all that, but they stayed among their own, there was always one of us around, it's not like big brother was watching you, it wasn't like that at all. They wanted to be like that. It's hard for you to understand because you're not one of us, you're not raised with us. You don't understand. How strong do you know your Polish background? You're Polish?

Mary: Yes.

Phil Dabagia: You know how to make any Polish food?

Mary: Yes

Phil Dabagia: How much?

Mary: Pierogies.

Phil Dabagia: That's it?

Mary: That's it.

Phil Dabagia: (undecipherable) you need to make Kibbe. But you have to understand, you know. I don't know how strict your parents were with you. I don't know if you associate with them, I know there's a big Polish population. But I've seen, when I look around at some of the other ones, a lot of them don't even know who's their cousin and who isn't their cousin. They don't know, they say they might be a distant cousin because they have the same name, but they don't know. They don't know where they came from, they don't know how many children they have.

George Schultz: It's my experience that there is a distinct, I mean that your culture is unique in the sense of you're keeping track and of trying to, consciously trying to keep the culture alive, where I think most people are just kind of letting it dissipate. Maybe I'm wrong, as far as their ethnic and racial.

Mary: A lot of it has to do with, you've got a lot of different ethnic groups and the Catholic church. Once the religion starts breaking down, you start losing your strong sense of ethnicity, I think, because the church contains a lot of people, and if the church is the center of maintaining the ethnic ideal. And if you have other people in that ideal, you start breaking down that culture, and that's how it was here. Most of the Catholic churches started out multinational.

Phil Dabagia: Sacred Heart is Lebanese.

Mary: It started out, when they first came here they had no choice, but then when there were enough people, they could break away and start it.

Phil Dabagia: They didn't have enough Polish people?

Mary: Well, yes, St. Stan's is Polish.

Phil Dabagia: You go there?

Mary: No.

Phil Dabagia: Why not?

Mary: I'm outside everything now, I'm third generation.

Phil Dabagia: So what ended it for you?

Mary: Well, it depends on where your parents went to church, things change.

Phil Dabagia: Well, there you go. So what I was saying earlier, so you don't understand. Now we respected our sisters, we didn't beat them and say "You're not going no place. We stuck up for them, you know. And they had their fun in other ways. Now I'm not saying that, you know, that it, when they said no, no, we were sneaking in front of them. This is how some of them married out, I could tell you some stories about it. You know, when you watch these movies, I see a (unintelligible word), sometimes you get irritated. You see this dirty Arab in the story coming down at you and everything, where do they get that from?

Mary: I don't know.

Phil Dabagia: Do they say we kill women and children?

Mary: (unclear response)

Phil Dabagia: No, I'm not. I'm just trying to bring up a point. These are some of the things I used to go through when I was younger, I used to have to go through that. We were considered heathens, but yet you Christians have taken some of our inventions, glass, our spices, our ways, our math, our numbers, all that stuff. If we were so bad why did you take that stuff for, why didn't you leave it with us? Our architecture, see what I'm saying?

Mary: Christianity too is a pretty recent (unintelligible word)

Phil Dabagia: Recent?

Mary: Islam is much older.

George Schultz: Is it?

Mary: Yea.

Phil Dabagia: We believe in the teachings of Moab, Abraham and Moses, this is why the Muslims and the Jews, I shouldn't say Jew people, the Hebrew people, they call us cousins because the prophets Moses, Isaac, and Ishmael, one went off to one tribe and Ishmael was the other one. From one came the Jewish and from the other came what we know as Moslem. It's very interesting. When I was younger, if they found out what I was, when I was younger, they wouldn't go out with me. I've had two incidents, they wouldn't go out with me. They'd say, "You're a Mohammedan". And you're young, you know, right away you get uptight, I've tried to explain, they wouldn't, I've had one shut the door in my face. I went to pick up his daughter, her and I had gotten along very well, she knew what I was, you know. And we never talked religion, but she had an idea, and somehow or other her father found out about it, I don't know if he didn't like Arabs or what it was. He slammed the door in my face, I never forget that. But later on we became friends, I never mentioned it, he always mentioned it, but I never mentioned it. And I forgot it, in most cases.

Mary: Did your role models or heroes or whatever, did they come from your religion or your family?

Phil Dabagia: My what?

Mary: Heroes, like people growing up to be certain things?

Phil Dabagia: No, it makes me feel good, not a hero.

Mary: Well, you talk to your father and your Uncle George, you can talk to other people and they'll talk about childhood heroes. They find a stronger, they have this knowledge available to them inside their own culture.

Phil Dabagia: OK, I see what you're saying.

Mary: If you felt, when you got upset, or being denied certain things, you know, where would you turn?

Phil Dabagia: Very few times I was denied anything. I think what it was maybe I was much stronger in my belief and with my heritage. I'm very proud of my heritage, don't call me anything than what I am. I'll defend it, I'll sit down and talk with any person about me, about anything about my heritage. And I'll give them a good conversation, I'm proud, say what you want, I know. When I see one of my own doing well, like my cousins, I'm proud, that's my family. I'm proud of him, he did it on his own. But this guy wasn't there, so when his father was, he did what he could and God bless my aunt Mary, because she was able to do something.

Mary: Well, I was just wondering, like the blacks not being mentioned in history books, like your heritage not being acknowledged by those outside. When you were growing up, how did you compensate for yourself?

Phil Dabagia: For myself? Well, the only thing I did was bit my lip, and then after I walked away, you know, say a few words to myself and everything. I just put up with it, that's life, that's just life. It hurts me, you know, once in a while I catch it now, in a joking way, but sometimes there's that fine, thin line and it kind of brings back bad memories. But I'm over that now, I'm older, I'm wiser, I'm mellow. But if you made a comment about it and I felt it was wrong, I'll tell you about it. Before I might have punched you out, I don't know. Now I just smile and say "Let's sit down and talk about it".

George Schultz: This is a question that may not be relevant, but did your choice of job career, being a police detective, have anything to do with your background as an Arab?

Phil Dabagia: No, if it did I'd be a politician.

George Schultz: I think, mentioning, I see you as going into people work more than working on a machine and all. Somehow I see you're a very people-oriented person.

Phil Dabagia: I like being with people, I love to see how other people are, I do. I love it, I like people, I love meeting people, I can't stand to be alone. My wife is in the hospital, I go nuts, I don't even want to go home. I went over to her mother's house or something. I couldn't stand it. I don't like being alone. I love people, I like to be around people, I live my life that way. I like kids.

(End of tape)