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Interview with Tony Jabar by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Anthony 'Tony' Jabar, Sr.

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Anthony “Tony” Jabar, Sr.
(Interviewer: *Andrea L’Hommedieu*)

GMOH# 015
May 27, 2008

Andrea L’Hommedieu: This is an interview for George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College. The date is May 27, 2008, and I am in Waterville, Maine, with Tony Jabar, Sr., and this Andrea L’Hommedieu. Tony, could I have you start just by giving me your full name?

Tony Jabar, Sr.: Anthony Jabar is the full name, no middle initial.

AL: And you’re a senior?

TJ: Yes, I’m a senior, yes, I am.

AL: Your son is junior.

TJ: Yeah, I’m a senior.

AL: And where and when were you born?

TJ: January 17, in Waterville, 1932.

AL: And so is Waterville where you grew up?

TJ: Yes, all my life, yeah, stayed there all my life until I moved, when I went to school, I went to Colby, and then I ended up, after graduating I went in the service; I got out of the service and started to teach [in ‘55].

AL: And what did you teach?

TJ: I taught just about everything, history, physical education, and then I transferred to [Wilton Academy], I stayed there for about nine years, this was in Wilton, Maine, and then I ended up in Waterville; that’s where I ended up finishing my time teaching.

AL: Now, were you teaching at the old Wilton Academy?

TJ: Yes, I certainly was, nine years.

AL: It's a wonderful old building.

TJ: It's a wonderful old building, and it was really an excellent experience. It actually was like my second home, there were wonderful people there in those places, they were just marvelous, I got treated wonderfully. As a teacher, you know, just coming in, and so it was marvelous to be [welcomed].

AL: Now what part of Waterville did you grow up in?

TJ: It was called the Head of Falls. You know where the police station is down here, below the tracks – it's all now cleared out – where the Two Cent Bridge is? All right, and you know where the railroad track is, we lived down in that section, it was called Head of Falls.

AL: Right, and now the Mitchell family lived down there as well.

TJ: Yeah, [] they lived above the tracks, further up towards Fairfield [on Front Street]. Not too far, actually. And so we were below the tracks and they were just above the tracks, the tracks ran, was right across from where they were, and we were just below the tracks. So, you know, that's where most of the Lebanese people [lived] when they came over, they congregated in that particular section, and that's why there's the church, the St. Joseph Church there is where, was our center of getting together. It was interesting, it was very nice, for us, when we were kids it was terrific.

AL: Right, you had lots of people your age around to play with.

TJ: Well yes, we did, we all had big families. Like the Mitchells, Mintaha [George's mother], she had [four] kids, my mother had eight, so you know. And it was close, they were sort of close together, and it was really nice to have that many. We never thought about what the future was, everything was just right then and there, we played and we never – of course it was different then, too, you know, the times were quite different, and family was, for us family was everything. And it was a typical attitude of all of our generation down there because they, most of them had family, they relied on family, everything meant what, you know, the attitudes came from the family.

AL: And what were your parents' names?

TJ: [My mother's name was] Amelia [Ayoob] Jabar and my father's name was George Jabar. He came from Lebanon. See, I'm a full blooded Lebanese, and down there is where we ended up. And there was a mill there, across, right from the, I don't know if you know where the Two Cent Bridge is, have you been in the area of the Two Cent Bridge? The mill on the [river], if you look towards Winslow, on the left hand side, there used to be a mill, and [mostly] all of our people, a lot of them worked in that mill. So it was a saving grace as far as work [was] concerned for them.

AL: And what kind of a mill was it?

TJ: It was a textile mill called [Wyandotte Worsted], and that's what they used to do, I mean that was their life, so to speak.

AL: Did your mother work in the mill, or did she raise you kids?

TJ: No, no, my mother stayed home. But Mintaha did work there, she did. She was a wonderful woman. So it was, the kids that lived down there, we always used to go to the, there used to be some ball fields and stuff, we always played together that way because it was, you know, it was a little town. And what really was important was that, the family was the most important. And having to earn a living and stuff like that, everything was sort of family oriented. Money was never yours or mine or anything, it was the family, and [whoever] was in need we just participated, you know, and took care of that. So it was wonderful.

AL: Do you have any recollections of George's parents? I know it's from a child's perspective, perhaps.

TJ: [George's] father I knew, but he was really sort of a busy man, he wasn't around too much, at least we didn't see him much, but Mintaha was. See, George and I and his brother Robbie, okay, we were all about the same age – Robbie was the oldest – and we used to go up, in that area they had a little field up there and we used to play ball and all that stuff. And Georgie would, when we'd go out to the house, and Mintaha used to provide us with milk and cake, and she made a marvelous chocolate cake, I'll always remember, that's why we always wanted to go up there, because she would, it was sort of something to look forward to. So it was a regular, like any other kids with getting together and playing. It was all informal, you know, we never had these organizations. But it was great, though.

And we were all competitive. George was competitive. Of course George was, you know, he was a very placid student, he was never outspoken or aggressive. Calm; he was a smart, smart boy, you know, in high school we knew that. And the church we went to we both were altar boys. He tells a story [about] Robbie and – we used to go to the Boys Club, okay, that was our home because we lived there, so to speak, stayed there all day whenever we could, you know, playing down at the Boys Club.

Robbie and Georgie used to take care of the place, clean it up after [hours]. And George always used to say, well while I was working he ended up using the phone, calling Janet, that's his wife, so that was always something that he said was just things that they did. And we always had things like ping pong, basketball, a pool table, at the Boys Club. That always used to be fun, used to be really competitive and all that, and we used to have tournaments. And like I said, George got excited but he's just, he is what he is today, he's a marvelous guy.

AL: So were you able to maintain a friendship with him as you got older?

TJ: Yes, yes, yes, as a matter of fact, yes, all through school, in high school, we had a group, our group, that we called our group that always went together. There was me, there was Al Joseph, Alfred Joseph, there was Sherman Saperstein, [Arthur Dexter], [Al Halliday], I'm trying to think, there were a few others that were together as a group, Arlyne Rosenthal and [Nancy] Eustis, plus Betty Johnston, Laures Terry, [and my wife, Marlene Hurd], as a group we socialized together, we went – Al Dexter, his father used to own a ice cream place, like that, so we used to go down to his place and enjoy ourselves and have ice cream. So that was our neighborhood as kids, that we participated in.

And also, my, we had an affair where George wanted to honor Mrs. Whitten [when he was a Senator].

AL: Yes, Elvira?

TJ: Elvira Whitten, okay, so he came [to Maine] and they honored him, and he presented the teacher that he was most influenced by, and it was Mrs. Whitten, because she taught him expository [writing] and she taught him how to read the great books and stuff like that, you know. And my wife was the one that he presented, in place of her, she [] received it. And they were, we were all very close, that whole group with my wife and me, and Al Joseph and Saperstein were very close in terms of groups. Always stayed that way; always stayed that way. And to this day, of course, we don't have a chance, we're never able to get George because he's been so busy, but sometimes we get a chance, like when I come up we get together. So it was a, for us, we loved it, you know, school was wonderful for us, we loved school.

George was just, he's brilliant and he was so calm, like he is, you know how he is today. Why they choose him to want to do all of these, like the [Northern] Ireland situation and negotiating, I mean, one thing you know about George is, if he's going to do anything he does it thoroughly. He never [was] influenced by [any] comments and stuff, he really deals very deeply. I mean he's very serious when it comes to that kind of [pressure], well respected, always has been well respected. If they want anybody to do a job that makes, you know, that kind of work, he's the one that can do it. Always been that way. At school he was such a quiet kid, you never knew he was around. He was so smart, and George, he's just like everybody else.

I can't remember ever seeing him get mad, not really get mad. I mean I can't remember him getting into a fight, even with a kid, you know how you think, some, you know, but he did everything we did. We had what we called, a little area below the tracks [with] big trees, sort of like a jungle. It wasn't a jungle, it was just, there were trees in it, and we used to go down there and play and swing on the trees and all that stuff, we used to do that.

AL: What was that area called?

TJ: It was called, it wasn't called 'Jungle,' it was [called] 'Big Chief,' it was near the river, the river was right there, Kennebec River. And in that area there were stone steps, must have been about thirty feet high, okay, and it was sort of like, it must have been a location for

something they put on to, transportation for the ships or something. But we used to climb it, I mean that was, [if] we did [that] today they wouldn't allow [it]. We worry so much about today, I mean we did crazy things like that, climbing trees like they were nothing. But to us, we didn't think about, we just enjoyed the moment. We didn't worry so much about, and we didn't have the problems they have today, not at all.

AL: Now, did you get to know Barbara [(Mitchell) Atkins] at all, or was she too much -?

TJ: Yes, we did, yes. We didn't see much of her; she wasn't around too much, but yes. She was a very nice lady, Barbara was; pretty lady. [She and my sister Reggie lived in Washington, D.C. together for awhile]. And she was, you know, the Mitchells, they were all very bright people. See, I played basketball with Robbie, that's when I played. When they went to the New Englands, [he] and I went, so, it was that year, 1949. And of course his brother, the year before, that team, my brother John and Johnny, Johnny Mitchell, they were teammates and they won the New Englands the first time in the history of the Waterville school. Came down on the train, and there were five thousand people waiting up for them and whatnot, it was all of us. And then we grew up, Robbie and I, and we went to the New Englands for the first time and lost the first game, but we played very well. So that was a big, big scene.

So we had some great moments, in spite of the times, but it was great moments for us, we enjoyed it. We had our problems like everybody else but we had, and we were, like I say, when you're family oriented you're not so much about me, me, me, you know, kids, so, and struggling financially, all of us were in the same [], but we had one thing in common. We had, for example, the church was our center, all right, and we were [Lebanese], came from the Maronite Rite in Lebanon, okay, but that wasn't, that was just a small little group, the Maronites. Mostly it was Muslim and Arab descendants, our culture was Arabic culture. And I just wish I was able to speak it, I can't speak and I don't understand it, just a few words, you know how it is when – and now I say, “Geez, why didn't I?” Because I was the fifth one born and I was more American, so to speak, they didn't really [teach me], but my older brother can understand; Johnny Mitchell, he can speak a little and understand it when they speak it.

So it was really wonderful. I keep saying that because I think of all these kids today, what they [go] through, I feel bad for them. We didn't have those problems.

AL: Now, did any other of your family members have connections with Senator Mitchell over the years?

TJ: Oh, well yeah, my brother John [Jabar]. [George was Ed Muskie's assistant after my brother, John left. We were all big supporters of George when he ran for any office.] He was the same year [as Johnny 'Swisher'], he played on the same basketball team with John []. And then Paul, of course we had, Paul Mitchell was the oldest son, and yes, we associated with them, you know, we were into politics when they were, and we're all Democrats so we always shared the same, you know, basically shared the same sentiments, and still do. And, yes, he was sort of a, he was a great athlete, and my brother was a wonderful athlete, and they played on the same

team. And you know, you get that whole sharing whatever you do, and people know you and they're close. But it was a close neighborhood, it was like that. [And Robbie Mitchell and I were very close. In fact Janet, Robbie's wife, was the maid of honor at my wedding to Marlene.]

AL: So you probably, I'm sure, grew up with Lebanese food.

TJ: Oh God, Lebanese food. We had cabbage rolls, and we had, that was a special thing, and we had what they call zaatr, it was spice on a piece of Syrian bread or pita bread, and it's like a pizza, the other kind is like a pizza, and with zaatr, you spread the spice on it, it's called, yeah, zaatr, and it's very spicy and it's sort of special, you know. And then we had what we call baklava which was a sweet, it's a sweet that they make, and it's layers and layers of this thin crust [with a sugar surprise inside].

AL: Like a pastry?

TJ: It's a pastry. It was just – so we had, we made Easter cookies. You know what Easter cookies are, the special, you don't know Easter cookies, yes, you've heard of them. It's a, it's filled with sugar and walnuts, and they cook it, they make little, what do they call them, there are filled ones and there are flat ones, and it's a bread that has, what do they call it, anise, anise in it, they sprinkle anise on it, yeah. You haven't had them?

AL: Well, I don't think I've had them called that.

TJ: What did you have?

AL: I don't know. It sounds a little familiar, but.

TJ: Okay, oh, and zaatr, it's a black spice, you know, that they spray on it and they cook it, and then with the, what was the other one I just mentioned?

AL: Anise?

TJ: The zaatr, oh yeah, and the Easter cookies, you can [make it you had] the recipe, but it's a sweet, and it's Easter time, that's why they call it Easter cookie. But I tell my wife I [want you to make some], my daughters make it and they send me some, because it's a process. Sometimes I wish they'd make it all year round, I just, you know, I love those cookies, you know, it's just absolutely wonderful.

AL: So you were able, the next generation, to pass down some of those meals.

TJ: Yes, oh yes, oh yes, they do a lot of that, they keep the Lebanese [tradition]. And we have kibbeh, you know what kibbeh is, right? That's smead, and the hamburger [*sic*] [(actually most Lebanese use lamb)] is really not hamburger, it's almost like steak, it's absolutely fat free, and they mix this. [] The smead, it's like burghul wheat, okay, with this meal, and of course we

used to eat it raw, loved it raw, and they'd knead it, all right, mix it up, olive oil, salt and pepper. But we had to stop that because we couldn't, eating raw meat wasn't a [good thing], now you wouldn't. Well, what they used to do, and they all did it, all of the Lebanese women did it, they used to make a pan full, you put a layer of that kibbeh on there, they'd put a filling, the filling would be hamburger [or lamb], pine nuts and some rice, and they'd fill it in there and they'd put a layer on it and then they'd put oil and stuff and then cook it for an hour or two, and it was delicious. Have you had that?

AL: I've never had it, but I'm getting hungry.

TJ: Well, I'm telling you, you tell them, you've got, I'm sure, you tell them, can you get some of that, or try it, you know, there are some of these stores that have some of that they're selling. And same way the, what we call Lebanese bread, you know, you probably have what they call, a circular kind they call pita, the bigger one, and thin. But there are smaller ones, and they used, and the women used to make what they call a flat one, used to be thin like that, and used to be about that wide. And the way they make it is, they make the dough and they do this, it becomes bigger and bigger, then they put it in the oven, take it out and lay it down, then they make another one. The store down here, Joseph's Market on Front Street, it's where the Mitchells used to live, on that same street, they have that bread, now they make it I think, I remember seeing that kind. I mean, you're talking about food now, you'll notice how familiar I am; I've had it all.

AL: So, I know you've moved away but do you know if there's still a strong Lebanese community in Waterville? You mentioned the store, at least there's something still -

TJ: Yes, yes, but we're sort of spread out a little, not quite, you know, we've intermixed, intermarried and all of that. So we do have it, not as much but you still have the sense of the, the church holds that, holds us together and that, but in that respect we don't have quite as many. I think we have them, but since the families are mixed they're either have some tradition, or the older ones, like now, I don't think they have quite as much. But there's always some, you know, we always have a group, you know, and the families that maintain that. We're having a hard time finding priests now, but we do have some that replace [other Lebanese priests].

And it's a good tradition, we use the, you know, the Lebanese have their own, they don't use Latin, it's not a Latin rite, they have a different kind of, Aramaic [i.e. Maronite], that they use in the service, so of course we hold tight to that, naturally, you know. But otherwise than that, it is thinned out because of that. I don't think they have the same tradition that we had, but those that do are very faithful to it, you know. But we're trying, they're trying to get it, even those people, although they don't have the, you know, the background behind it because they're born here and they have this kind of environment rather than, ours was quite, we were unique because we had to stay together you know, and then, and promote our lifestyle. Well, we didn't really promote it, we had to live together.

And it was close, it was all families. I think the biggest critical thing of all of that was nothing; it

wasn't that you had things and I did, it was, everything that we did was, had, related to the family, no matter what it was. If I worked, or you worked and you had money, I mean problems and troubles and finances, basically [we all chipped in], we lived financially not too well in that sense, but we had wonderful families. Provided for ourselves, but it was very important that, and we all understood that.

My father, he was a labor leader, and he, first thing he said, and I'm sure Mintaha and, George's mother and father said the same thing, first and foremost was no consideration or anything to consider as far as education was concerned. We were going to finish high school and go to college, and they all did.

AL: That's amazing.

TJ: It's just, you know, it just all comes with, it's not something that, well, you have to enforce, it was automatic, that's what we had to do. It was taken for granted, it was like infused, you know how something's infused? This is what you have to do. Education was the most critical thing in all the families, education was the most critical thing that we really felt was necessary. And there was no, well what do you, today, they go to college and then [again] they may not, but it's different today. You can't compare this, you can't compare, you have to have lived in that time.

We say, oh, they have all kinds of things, and why do they do that. Well, it's a little different. Back then, we had just ourselves, we didn't have all the, the entrapments they have today. And you can't necessarily always, I'm not being soft on kids but you must understand it's a serious problem. I mean, what do you do if every day they do these same things, you feel like an outsider sort of like that. And we didn't have that problem, I mean it was, we didn't, you didn't have the money to do all the spending and all of that stuff.

But you know, we weren't, in a sense, that poor. But we did all the other things, we went to dances, we used to go to the swimming hole, Bang's Beach which is on Messalonskee Lake, was a place that we all, the Lebanese gathered. And we used to have what they called like Lebanese fair and go out there, and they'd cook all of this stuff and it was just [fun], and all of them were there, from the church.

So it was, when you think of it, it was something that we now appreciate more than, then, we just took it for granted then, and didn't think - And I'm sure we had our own troubles, we had our problems, it's not like everything was wonderful. No, there was a lot of struggling. But we didn't have some real big, big problems that they have today, and the younger kids, what they, so.

AL: Did your father or mother ever talk about why they came to the U.S. from Lebanon?

TJ: Well, the only thing that, if I remember, my mother, I believe, was born here.

AL: Oh, she was born here, but your dad did come.

TJ: My dad, yeah, I think there was a group that was coming over and the church was being settled here. He was born there and then he came over and went back and then he came back, okay, I think it went, and the family came over and that was, you know, I'm sure that's, that's probably what happened, in terms of why he came over, that they, America was really something for those people over there [where you could make a good living].

AL: Right. Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you feel is important to add?

TJ: Let's see, I'm trying to think of a, I'm trying to think of any events that might have occurred that might have been a little interesting. No, really, I'm, no. No, I can't think of anything else that would be pertinent.

AL: You mentioned somebody whose name I hadn't heard before, that was part of your group of friends.

TJ: Who was that?

AL: I just blanked on the name, it was, I know Al Joseph.

TJ: Sherman Saperstein?

AL: Yes, Sherman Saperstein, now is that somebody that's still living around?

TJ: Oh yes, he now lives in, they used to own, in fact, [a lumber company in Fairfield], and he lived in Waterville. He's another one, the Jewish friend that was absolutely marvelous. They're [all] very good friends of ours, and my wife's, and we went [all through] school together, all in the same grade. See, [] my wife and I started to go out [] when we were in the seventh grade, since then, and they all went to, we went to Colby, [except for George. He went to Bowdoin.] Al Joseph and myself, and my wife, and we also had Arlyne Rosenthal, a friend. This is the Rosenthals, they're a well known family in Waterville. They were bright, bright, yeah, he was a bright student, they were bright students. And so we had a wonderful time. So, and now Al Dexter, he's now a, I think he's a principal.

AL: Is he in Maine?

TJ: He's in Maine, yeah. He doesn't live in Waterville now, but, I'm trying to think, he may live [in Damariscotta—Lincoln Academy]. But basically George was like one of us, you know, he didn't distance [himself], sometimes some people know how smart they are and they carry a sort of an air about them, sometimes they do that. But George, you'd never know it. Laid back, quiet, never knew he was the smartest in the lot, I mean he was just one great guy, just a wonderful person. And he's done wonderful for us, for our tradition, and for the country I mean, which is, what [more] could you ask for. His contribution is, for us is unparalleled, [just]

wonderful, and we're all so proud to know him.

AL: Great, thank you very much.

TJ: Well, you're very welcome.

End of Interview