

**Luis Gabriel**

September 23, 2012

Syriac Catholic Church

Jacksonville, Florida

Esam Alhadi, Interviewer and Translator  
for University of Florida

George A. Smathers Libraries

Edited by Jardee Transcription

Also present, Richard Saltzburg

Alhadi: Thank you, Mr. Luis for being with us this day.

Gabriel: You are welcome.

Alhadi: My name is Esam Alhadi from the University of Florida. This interview takes place here in the Syriac Catholic Church in Jacksonville. Today is Sunday, and the time now is 12:25 PM and the date is September 23, 2012. We are happy to be with you. We usually start by asking that you give us a general idea of the earlier period of your life, your birthday and your education before coming to America.

Gabriel: My name is Luis Gabriel. I was born in Baghdad, Iraq, in 1957. I can't tell the entire story for a period of twenty-three years before I came to America. I was a student at a high school in Baghdad which was operating under the supervision of the Jesuits. Unfortunately, we were expelled by the Iraqi government. I continued my education until I graduated from the College of Engineering at Baghdad. All members of my family left the country when I was in my senior year. I was the only one who remained there. My intention was also to leave the country. Baghdad University was a government controlled university and because of their strict policies, I was unfortunately unable to acquire the necessary academic transcripts with all the details of the courses I took and the grades I obtained. To make the story short, I managed to come to America in 1979 when I was twenty-two years old. I joined my brother Jack who was then residing here in Jacksonville. I checked with the University of Florida in Gainesville and

met with the dean faculty of civil engineering whose name escapes me at this moment. I told the dean that I didn't have any records or transcripts to show proof of the courses or grades I had taken or acquired back in Baghdad. I was very lucky that the dean of faculty trusted my word and understood my situation. He directed me to meet with the dean of students at the college of engineering, Professor Byrne Stangler, who gave me a list of fifteen names and phone numbers of professors from the college of civil engineering at UF and asked me to meet with each one of them. This was all to be done in a short period of time. It took me about four months to finish meeting with all the professors. It was a very wonderful experience talking to each one of those professors. I was subjected to a number of oral tests by some of those professors in each one's area of specialty such as structural engineering, soil engineering, transport engineering, as well as many other areas including chemistry and calculus. The answers I gave to many of those professors convinced them that I was qualified, while others asked me to take the final exam in the classes they teach. I remember one of these classes was reinforced concrete design. It was, in all, a very interesting and unique experience for me to get through all the challenges and obstacles that I encountered. Without getting deeper into further details, UF agreed to give me credits for two years and one quarter, and I had to finish the rest to get my degree, which I did. I enrolled in January 1980. The university was following the quarter system at the time and switched to the semester system in the fall of 1981. I obtained my B.A. in civil engineering and graduated in late 1981. Because I was enjoying it very much, I decided to continue with my study and to obtain a master's degree from the university. I enrolled in the structural engineering M.A. program in January 1982 and finished in May or June 1983. I went back to Jacksonville at a time the economy was not at its best. One year later, I obtained a job with a structural engineering

company named Morales and Shumer in Jacksonville, Florida. The company's specialty was preparing structures for bridges. Two years after working with this company, a friend of mine proposed to me [that I] take the position of a civil engineer with Jacksonville Electric Authority, JEA. JEA generates electricity and sells it, and for this reason, it needed engineers in all fields of engineering. I started working for JEA in 1986, [and have continued to work for them] up to the present time.

Alhadi: Do you mean that you still work for JEA?

Gabriel: I do, and now after twenty-seven years of work with them, I have the option to retire whenever I feel I want to. I also want to mention that working in the engineering profession requires licensing after taking a practice test. This is how engineers are recognized as professionals. That is what I did, and in 1988, the State of Florida recognized and certified me as a professional engineer. I started contacting some contractors and structural engineers from outside JEA to join me in creating a consulting structural engineering company, and I created the company.

Alhadi: When was that?

Gabriel: I began working on it, and in 2002, I incorporated it and became ready to work.

Alhadi: What is your company called?

Gabriel: LJG Engineering. The name comes from my initials. Thanks to God that it is doing just fine, although the economy is not the best, and hopefully one day it will kick back again and everything [will] turn [out] fine.

Alhadi: I believe you mentioned earlier that you had a brother living here in Jacksonville and that is why you came here. Why did the two of you choose to make Jacksonville your home?

Gabriel: I came here to join my brother. That is the only reason. I have no relatives in America except my brother. My brother's situation is an example of the Arab men who submit to whatever their wives dictate. He and his wife started in California, but his wife decided they should move to Florida because she had aunts living here.

Alhadi: Is she American or Arab?

Gabriel: She is Iraqi. They moved to Jacksonville, and thanks be to God, he did very well.

Alhadi: Is your brother still here?

Gabriel: After settling here for four years, my brother decided to take a very good-paying job in Abu Dhabi in the mid-1980s.

Alhadi: What is his field of specialty?

Gabriel: He is also a civil engineer, but he focuses more on the area of project management more than project design. He is still in the [Persian] Gulf area.

Alhadi: Are you saying that he has been living there since 1984?

Gabriel: He came back here in 1993, and joined Jacksonville Transportation Authority, but he returned back to the [Persian] Gulf region.

Alhadi: Did he have his family with him?

Gabriel: Yes. It might be that some people there liked him.

Alhadi: Let me ask you about your relation with Iraq. Did you ever return back to Iraq?

Gabriel: No. After obtaining the American citizenship and passport, I wanted to go back and visit my relatives in Baghdad. I couldn't go because of the developments that followed the date of August 1, 1990. The rest is history.

Alhadi: Before we go back to talk more about business, I want to know if you are still maintaining any connections and contacts with relatives in Baghdad.

Gabriel: Not at the present time. I used to have some contacts with relatives in Baghdad in the 1980s up to the early 1990s. There was no Internet at that time. My contacts were through either letters or phone calling. Long distance phone calling was not cheap at all. After the Internet came into existence, the situation there deteriorated. Let us leave it at that.

Alhadi: Let us go back to business. Who helps you with the work? Are you doing it all by yourself, or do you have others who help you?

Gabriel: I am the one who does the engineering consultancy in the company. I get help with the drafting. I am an old-timer, which means I do drafting by hand. But since we [now] have CAD [computer-aided drafting], which I am too old to learn, [I get help with the drafting]. My main worry is always to have the correct design. When I need to have somebody to do the drafting, I refer to some people that I know who are specialized in drafting, and they do it for me and they get paid for that.

Alhadi: Is your work concentrated only here in Jacksonville?

Gabriel: I work in Jacksonville and other areas in Florida, but nothing outside Florida.

Alhadi: You told us earlier about your brother who is working in the Gulf. We know that the Gulf countries are having a huge number of construction projects everywhere, day by day. Are you thinking of developing any relations with Arab countries to start some construction projects there?

Gabriel: I might have had some plans like this fifteen years ago, and I was about to go to Kuwait. There was an active construction movement in Kuwait after the 1990 events and I applied to a number of companies, but it didn't work out well. Currently, and at this age, I don't have any plans to work there.

Alhadi: I know that there is a big Arab community here in Jacksonville that may reach tens of thousands who originate from a range of Arab countries including Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt and others. Do you feel that there is a notable presence of Arabic culture in Jacksonville? In your case as an engineer, do you know of any architectural features that you may call Arab?

Gabriel: Frankly, no. I am not aware of anything like that except the mosque that I have recently seen on St. John's Bluff. This is the only building that bears some Arabic features. Other than that, I am not aware of anything here in Jacksonville.

Alhadi: Is there anything else other than architecture where you may sense an Arab cultural presence?

Gabriel: In Jacksonville, there are many Arab restaurants and Arab grocery stores.

Alhadi: Do the Arab people here organize concerts and parties?

Gabriel: Yes, there are many of those.

Alhadi: How do you see the Arab community here in Jacksonville?

Gabriel: The Arab community lives within its own limits and borders. It is isolated. Let me take the case of this church, which by the way is Syriac and not Syrian as you called it earlier. The Syriac is supposed to be Iraqi and Syrian, but the Syrians chose to have their separate church. Each group of an Arab nationality such as the Syrians, Egyptians, Iraqis, and Lebanese lives within a circle that they set for themselves and tend not to make it widely open to others. This doesn't mean they don't talk to each other. They do talk to each other, especially when it relates to joint business.

Alhadi: Let us talk more about business. Did you, as an Arab and Iraqi immigrant, ever face any problem in running your business that may have caused you to be unable to keep up with the market? I know you are an American citizen.

Gabriel: I don't recall facing any problem because of my ethnicity or immigration situation. I have always been treated fairly. However, as an engineer, I compete with others to get projects. Sometimes I do get them, sometimes I don't. This has nothing to do with my ethnicity. It is a market rule and a very legitimate competition.

Alhadi: We are very happy that we had the opportunity to meet with you Mr. Luis. Thank you very much for this interview. With this statement, this conversation is completed. Thanks to you again.

Gabriel: You are welcome.