

Raff Ellis delivers family history and signs his book “Kisses from a Distance”

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Reported by Elie Nabhan

The Lebanese Emigration Research Center at Notre Dame University, as part of its ongoing lecture series, invited American of Lebanese descent Raff Ellis to deliver a lecture on the ground-work behind his book, *Kisses from a Distance*, a book that traces the history of his ancestors’ emigration to the United States.

The event was moderated by Dr. George Abdelnour, who is NDU’s Fulbright resident Fellow. Dr. George Abdelnour introduced the guest speaker as a writer who has spun his family’s oral history into an engrossing account brimming with little-known history, such as the fact that the Ottomans were not entirely responsible for the first great wave of Lebanese emigration, or that Ellis Island was closed for a number of years at the height of immigration to the United States.



Lecture moderator Dr. George Abdelnour introduces the guest speaker and the book (Oct 2009).

Mr. Ellis then began his presentation of the book. He explained that the first wave of immigration to the U.S. started in the mid-1880’s and lasted until the outbreak of World War I. Lebanon at the time was under Ottoman rule. “The principal reason for the first wave of exodus was rampant poverty,” explained Raff Ellis,



Dignitaries at the event (from left-right): Mr. W. O. Okuwobi, H. E. Sonaike Ayodeji, Ms. G. Hourani, Professor R. Haddad, Dr. A. Eid, and H. E. Rida Mariette Aljure-Salame (Oct 2009).

The mostly Christian Lebanese who left during this period were mainly poor Maronite farmers or laborers from Mount Lebanon but also Orthodox Christians who were traders or who belonged to the urban merchant class. Most were enticed to travel abroad and seek untold riches and opportunities from agents working for ship owners.

In addition to poverty, Ellis described the boost in population as a result of “the long peace” that Lebanon enjoyed for close to 50 years, adding demographic pressure to leave.

Another cause had to do with food shortages. During the so-called “the long peace” the Lebanese geared themselves toward profitable silk production by turning to large-scale mulberry farming in order to feed the vital silk worms. As a result little else could be planted in the soil. Little arable land meant produce shortages and food became scarce.



Mr. Raff Ellis delivers his lecture (Oct 2009).

He went on to describe how steam ships sailing from Lebanon eventually docked in Alexandria, Naples, and Marseilles. In Marseilles specifically, an entire infrastructure grew up to help the new emigrants along the way: hotels were built and translators and dockside boys, who often acted as translators and guides, were employed.

From there emigrants traveled by train to Cherbourg or Bordeaux and then across the Atlantic to Boston, Philadelphia, New York or New Orleans. Those emigrants in third class or in steerage were always taken through Ellis Island, he said.

In his chapter on Ellis Island, New York's immigrant gateway to America, Ellis pointed out one of many misconceptions: "Ellis Island had nothing to do with the changing of names, this is an urban myth," he said. Names, he explained, were taken neither from passports nor visas, but rather from the ship's manifest. Another misconception is that Ellis Island was also destroyed by fire in 1897 with the new terminal opening in 1902. During these years, no immigrants filtered through, again contrary to popular belief.



Mr. Raff Ellis reads a passage from “Kisses from a Distance” (Oct 2009).

According to law, any immigrant barred from entering the United States due to illnesses or such had to be shipped back by the shipping companies. Since many ships did not return to Europe, rejected migrants would be off-loaded at Latin American ports, hence the extensive Lebanese presence in Latin American countries today.

In turning to his family, the author recalled his uncle Youssef Hobeich, who was a member of the gendarmerie and part of an extended family that included prominent Kmeids and el-Khazens. Five boxes of letters kept by the author’s mother triggered a mission to complete the book. *Kisses from a Distance* started as a fond remembrance turning into a historic piece where every fact was studiously examined.

The book is a vivid account that includes a visit back to Lebanon to see the charred kitchen of the ancestral home and the orchard that grew out of a disputed road and to meet with members of the Hobeich, Kmeid and el-Khazen families. It also includes memories of a childhood in Carthage, New York, and being responsibly trained to handle a sale and money at his father’s store; of listening while growing up to surly immigrants suspicious of all forms of government but full of praise for the beauty of the homeland, frugal immigrants good with money, always ready to haggle and bargain, immigrants whose children too would perhaps one day record and research the history of their family’s migration during the first wave.

Mr. Raff Ellis indulged his audience by reading out passages from his book for the first time ever. Following a period of questions and answers, the author signed copies of his book for the audience.



The author signing copies of his book after the lecture (Oct 2009).

The lecture was attended by the Ambassador of Colombia in Lebanon H. E. Rida Mariette Aljure Salame, the Chargé d'Affaires at the Embassy of Nigeria H.E. Mrs. A. A. Sonaike Ayodeji, Administrative Attaché of the Embassy of Nigeria Mr. W. O. Okuwobi,, Mrs. Salam Matarji Social Secretary of the Embassy of Nigeria, Mrs. Cevane Chahine representing the Director of the Directorate of Emigrants of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mr. Haitham Jomaa, Mayor of the Municipality of Jounieh, Lawyer Juan Antonio Hobeich, General Michel Nahas, former candidate for parliamentary elections Engineer Clovis el-Khazen, Architect Alain Joseph, Lawyer Ghassan Hobeich, Mr. Rizkallah Hobeich, Mr. Youssef Hobeich, Mr. Badih Hobeich, Mr. Joseph Kmeid, Mrs. Aida Kmeid, the Vice-President for Research and Development at NDU, Dr. Assaad Eid, NDU Dean of Humanities Dr. Carol Goff-Khouri, LERC Director Ms. Guita Hourani, Professor Sami Samra, Professor Amal Malek, Professor June Bechara, Professor Heba Tannous, Professor Hadia Harb, Professor Mona Majdalani, Journalist Sam Mednick, Banker Robert Harris, members of the Hobeich, el-Khazen and Kmeid families, and professors, and more than 25 students and staff from the University.



Souvenir picture of the author with LERC: (from left-right) Mr. Elie Nabhan, Ms. Guita Hourani, Mr. Raff Ellis, Ms. Basma Abdel Khalek, Dr. George Abdelnour and Mr. Rudy Sassine (Oct 2009).