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 - Sahadi, Charles, Oral history interview with Zaheer Ali, April 4, 2016, Voices of Brooklyn oral histories: Business and industry, 2008.031.2.004; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Oral History Interview with Charles Sahadi
Voices of Brooklyn oral histories: Business and industry, 2008.031.2.004
Interview conducted by Zaheer Ali on April 4, 2016
at narrator's home in Bay Ridge, New York

ZAHEER ALI: Okay. So, the recording has started. So, I have a release form I'll have you sign when we're done. It's pretty standard. So, I'm going to start by -- I'll just tell you how the interview -- how I think of it in terms of sections. So, we'll start with your family background, your family history, what you can tell me of your family history. Then we'll move into your early life as a child growing up, things like where you went to school, what the neighborhood was like, your teenage years. Then we'll transition to how you got involved in the business. And the changes you've seen happen over the years that you've been on Atlantic Avenue both in terms of the food service industry, the grocer business, but as well as the neighborhood. And so, I might throw out some names of people who used to be there who might still be there in terms of other merchants to paint a portrait of what it was like at various points. And then we'll talk about the intergenerational continuity and the role of your children. So, kind of four parts, right?

CHARLES SAHADI: Sounds good to me.

ZAHEER ALI: So, I'll start by slating the interview. Today is Monday, April 4th, 2016. And I'm at the home of Charlie Sahadi. And we are doing this interview as part of the oral history, Brooklyn History Makers Oral History collection at Brooklyn Historical Society. So, I would like for you to start by giving your full name, your birth date, and where you were born.

CHARLES SAHADI: Okay. My name is Charles Wade Sahadi. I was born in Brooklyn, New York. I was born seventy-two years ago in Brooklyn, New York, and have lived here all my life. I forgot the other part of the question.

ZAHEER ALI: That's it. I think it was where you were born, your full name, and -- okay. So, tell me a little bit about what you remember of your family's background.

CHARLES SAHADI: Our family, the Sahadi family, started in business in the United States in 1895. The person who started was Abraham Sahadi. Opened a company called A. Sahadi & Company. Abraham was my father's uncle, or my great-uncle. I don't know when he came from Lebanon, but he did establish his business in 1895. Many years later, my dad, who was born in 1901, his name was Wade Sahadi, he opened -- he came to America in 1919 and went to work with his uncle. This was to help support the rest of their families, which were still in Lebanon. He worked with his uncle for twenty-two years, from 1919 to 1941, when I say they had a parting of ways, which means they must have had an argument somewhere along the way. And at that time my dad had become a small partner in the A. Sahadi & Company. And he was bought out with chickpeas and lentils and olives and cheese. And he took those items, and I believe he moved three doors away. Not three miles, three blocks. Three doors away. And opened Sahadi Importing Company right next to A. Sahadi & Company. I don't know how that stood with the rest of the family. And I wasn't here to figure it out, 1941 I wasn't born yet, so I have no real clue.

Washington Street was an important part of the beginning of his business. He had invested basically all his money into the new business that he was opening. And because they were still drafting until you were forty-five, he took on a partner, Nicholas Sabah, I believe in 1945, and they stayed on Washington Street until 1948. Actually, going back, in 1946, they bought the building on Atlantic Avenue, 187, which was the first of our buildings there. And they moved into the building in 1948. I believe there had been a barbershop there and it took maybe a year, year and a half to get the people out and also to develop it into a grocery store format. And well, the rest, as they say, is history. For the last sixty-eight years we have been a part of the downtown Brooklyn landscape. And I've been part of it myself since 1964. So, I've been doing it fifty-two of the sixty-eight years we're on the street.

ZAHEER ALI: That's an excellent introduction. So, you were born on [date redacted for privacy] 1944.

CHARLES SAHADI: Correct.

ZAHEER ALI: This is a few years before the business was moved to Brooklyn. But before we get to that. Tell me about -- you were born -- where were you living when you were born?

CHARLES SAHADI: My parents bought a house in Bay Ridge actually about two miles from us here on Gelston Avenue. And I lived in -- I believe I was six months old when we moved into that house and I lived there till I was just over twenty years old. I met my future wife four, five years earlier, and when we were just short of twenty-one years old we got married in 1964. So, we're blessed to have been married fifty-one years so far and counting. Gelston Avenue was a mixed block of many, many different kinds of people. We -- growing up I didn't know the difference between Arabic and Greek. And I mean we didn't have any -- except for church we didn't have any real social things going on with any specific groups.

Church of course was -- we belonged to an Antiochian Orthodox Christian church. And I've been there all my life. Actually, when I was born there was no church in Bay Ridge, we belonged to Saint Nicholas Cathedral, which is on State Street and Bond in downtown Brooklyn. That's a cathedral that's about 110 years old now. In 1951 our church in Brooklyn, Saint Mary's Antiochian Orthodox Church, was built in 81st Street and Ridge Boulevard. And we became parishioners here in Brooklyn -- I mean closer to home. And we've been there the rest of our life.

ZAHEER ALI: Would you say your family was -- how observant would you say your family was?

CHARLES SAHADI: Well, my father was a big churchgoer, but my father was also sick. He had many different ailments while I was growing up. He was in and out of hospitals many times. I would say he probably had six major operations. So, when he was available, when he was up to it, when he could, he would go to church on Sunday. When I was seventeen my dad and mom allowed me to take drivers' ed so that I could get a license at seventeen and I could become the designated driver. It was

very difficult for my dad to get in and out and do different things. So, I'm the oldest of three boys. And I was the one designated to do that. And of course, I did what I needed to do for my family. And I'm very glad that I had that experience because I think it kept us as a very close family as we were growing up.

ZAHEER ALI: So, you're the oldest sibling of three.

CHARLES SAHADI: Correct.

ZAHEER ALI: What are the -- how spaced out -- spaced apart are you?

CHARLES SAHADI: My second brother Richie was twenty-two months younger than I. He passed in 1981. And my youngest brother Bob is eight and a half years younger than I. And he and I have been partners in the business for about forty years.

ZAHEER ALI: OK. What elementary school did you go to?

CHARLES SAHADI: I went to PS 104, which is on 92nd Street and Gelston Avenue on one side, Fifth Avenue on the other. And yeah, I went -- that was from first -- from kindergarten to eighth grade. So, we went the full eight years there. Went from there to Fort Hamilton High School in Brooklyn also. And then in 1961 when I graduated, I went to Pace College for about two years for an accounting degree. But my dad was in and out of hospitals, and I switched my schedule from days to late afternoons, and after six or eight months of doing that, I realized that this was not in the cards. So, I left college at that time and I came in to assist at work. And I did that. So, from 1964 I've been working full-time. So, as I said fifty-two years of that. That's how I got into the business.

ZAHEER ALI: So, tell me what it was like. You said when you were growing up the block you lived on was a mix of different people. What was it like as a young person, as a teenager, growing up in Bay Ridge?

CHARLES SAHADI: Well, Bay Ridge was a lot of fun. It was a lot of nice things going on. Some of the local churches had dances on Friday nights. Our church did a lot of things. We had a very active church at the time. We had a lot of kids in Sunday school. I mean our Sunday school today probably has forty people in it. We had 350

kids in Sunday school when we went to church at that time. So, we had a lot of social connections with the people at church. And I have to tell you. Some of them -- I still know about twelve or fourteen people that I went to kindergarten with. When you're a seventy-two-old man and say that, you got to realize you were six years old or five years old in kindergarten, so we're talking sixty-six, sixty-seven years ago. So, it's wonderful to say and to know and to enjoy their friendship till today. And the neighbors, I mean many of the -- well, many of the neighbors that lived there on Gelston have passed since then. But sometimes their extended families are there. Their kids or grandkids. So, we still have a nice group. If we go to Gelston we still have a nice group. My brothers and I still own the house on Gelston. So, it was something that I didn't see any reason to let it go. Fortunately, we didn't need the money. The house is going up in value. And I figured someday when we die and the kids get that as part of their inheritance that would be the first to go because they never lived there, so they're not attached to it like we are. They'd be attached to this house we're sitting in now, because they grew up in this house on 79th Street.

ZAHEER ALI: So, tell me what your first exposure was to the family business that you remember.

CHARLES SAHADI: When I was four years old, I remember my first visit of the store I believe. The gentleman that my dad had taken on as a partner, his type of work before he did this was a carpenter. And he was the one setting up the shelving and the counters. And I remember the hammer and the nails, putting the business together there. And that's the only recollection I have of the old Atlantic Avenue before me. As I was growing up in high school on Saturdays, although I wanted to play basketball, I was told that the family business was very important. And I have to say I really love what I do, so it was good that I was pushed a little bit into going in. I learned social graces, how to take care of customers. And anyway, this was in my teen years. And then when I came in at twenty in 1964, I came in with a good background. I didn't just walk in and say, "Gee, I have no idea what we do."

My dad in order to protect me said, "You take care of the customers. And I'll run the business." Bad idea. Because three years later he passed. Christmas Day, 1967. With a very unprepared oldest of three boys who had never really done any buying. Sold -- I sold to the customers that came in. But lack of real experience of running a business. And my biggest asset at the time, the partner was a wonderful man, but my dad was the dominant partner as far as buying and selling. So, Nick, the partner, was very good at packing stuff. We shipped stuff out. We did a lot of things inside. But when it came to buying, I said, "Nick, you know where we get feta cheese from?" He said, "No." "And where do you get this from?" "No."

Fortunately, we had a bookkeeper who had worked for my dad many years earlier. And then she had a family. And my dad brought her back in as a temporary bookkeeper. I don't remember what year. Let's see. She died in '67. Probably about '62, '63. And she used to do the books with him, and she used to write his checks. So, she knew who he was buying from and this and that. She was a very big asset to me for a twenty-year-old know-nothing, well, it was twenty-three by then. I learned a lot from her. It was a very good learning experience, just like getting an education in college, except I was getting hands-on education in the retail business. And yes, I made many mistakes growing up doing this, but I made them in small increments so that I never jeopardized the business by buying 200 boxes of something I didn't know about. You bought twenty-five boxes. You sold it. You bought twenty-five more. And as you gained confidence and now knew what you could sell wholesale and retail in a specific period of time it became much easier to run a business. But it's a learning process, like any other business. You have to learn from -- and you learn from the bottom. You start at the bottom and work your way up. I even tell my staff today. I said, "There's nothing here I would give you that I didn't do already. And there's nothing here I would give you that's too dirty for me to do. Because if it's too dirty for me to do it's too dirty for you to do also."

ZAHEER ALI: What was the bookkeeper's name?

CHARLES SAHADI: Bridget Kenia [phonetic]. She was married to a Yugoslavian gentleman and they were -- no, Czech. Czechoslovakian at the time. When the countries were by their real name. And a wonderful family. He used to be on the -- he was a dock boss on the pier. So sometimes when we got stuff in, he was able to help us get it off the pier a little quicker than others. So, it worked out very nicely. They have three wonderful daughters who we still see from time to time. They both passed but their family is still friendly with us and it's just a wonderful feeling thirty years later, forty years later. Because you can say these are people that I grew up. They're a little younger than I, the daughters. But they're just a wonderful family.

ZAHEER ALI: So, you said along the way you made some mistakes that were learning experiences for you. Do you remember one in particular, maybe the first one? Or what happened and what your response was?

CHARLES SAHADI: Well, yeah. It's embarrassing but what happened, I bought walnuts. And I think -- I'm going to take a guess, we bought fifty boxes or twenty-five boxes, whatever it was, of walnuts. And our partner. "What the heck you doing? You bought too much of this and too much of that." I said, "Nick, you don't help me in any way as far as -- you do so many things here, but this is not your specialty. You don't do this." And he said, "Well, you can't do it." I said, "I tell you what, starting today, you buy everything." So, for about two and a half weeks every salesman come in I said, "The gentleman is over there. Talk to him." And they'd go and talk to him. And after two weeks he said, "Charlie, this is not fair, you got to do it." I said, "Well, I'll do it, but you can't -- I've got to learn, and I'm going to make mistakes, but I'm not making mistakes on items that we're going to get stuck with, I'm making mistakes on items that I know we can sell." And it turned out we had a wonderful relationship for -- let's see. I'm going to go back to '64, so he retired in '85, approximately twenty-one years. My dad was there three of them. So about eighteen years he and I actually worked together, and we worked together very nicely. But that was the start. I was this uppity kid, and I didn't want to be told what to do. Especially if you weren't helping me. If I'd

ask first and get no real response, but as I said, it turned out to be a wonderful blessing.

Now with my dad being sick all those years, I don't think we'd still be here if it wasn't for his partner. His partner was a straight honest decent person. And worked very hard. But not the buyer. And without that knowledge of buying -- and I blame my dad for that because he was the stronger of the two partners, he started the business, and he had already worked at it for a while. And because of his strength in that I guess he didn't want anybody else to share that. So that's how we got into starting.

ZAHEER ALI: Tell me a little bit more about your relationship with your father.

CHARLES SAHADI: We had a good relationship, my dad and I. Again, being sick, he was - one of his ailments, he had very, very bad arthritis. And there were times, two or three days in a row he couldn't get out of bed. I mean he couldn't blink. That hurt. Any movement. So, I had to assist in many ways. In ways that -- if you had an orderly working with you, they would have done all these things. We didn't have anybody like that. So, I was there. When he needed medicine, I would go out and get it. I mean I was the gofer. And I was the gofer for my family. And it was fine. I mean it was fine. But it was something that I got used to doing. My middle brother was actually working with us at the store too. But most of this came on me. And my younger brother, even when we got married, he was -- '64, he was twelve years old. So, it was a lot of pressure on the older brother at the time. I never resented it. And I think I grew from it because they needed help, and it was nice to be needed, I need to be driven here or here. Yes, it took a little bit away from our time, my wife and I. But all in all, it was an interesting time to grow up. And again, each division of my life taught me something that I didn't know before. And I think it helped me become the person I ended up.

ZAHEER ALI: Tell me about your mother.

CHARLES SAHADI: My mother was very laid-back. My grandmother, God bless her, lived with us also. And my grandmother --

ZAHEER ALI: This was your father's mother?

CHARLES SAHADI: My mother's mother. My mother's mother. I never met any of my grandparents except the one grandmother. My mother's mother, who lived here with her. So, they all lived in the same house. She was the sous-chef for my grandmother. My grandmother was the cook. She wanted cucumbers from this store. She wanted lettuce from this store. She wanted cold cuts from this store. And don't mix them because this store doesn't do cold cuts the right way and this store doesn't do good cucumbers. So, my mom would go out and go to three and four stores. And pick-up stuff to make the meals. And my grandmother, God bless her, was an excellent cook. My mother was a good cook too, but my grandmother was the dominant one in the kitchen and my grandmother wasn't as mobile as some. I mean she had some leg problems. But they got things done together as a team. And my mom, right after my father died, the doctor said she got a premature hardening of the arteries, which was Alzheimer's. But before it had a name. And for -- that was '67. She passed in '75. But for much of the time she was here, she wasn't here. She was here, and a lot of the caretaking for her was on my youngest brother, who actually -- they had to move out of the house for a while. There was a fire and they moved out of the house. And they were living together. So, he was -- after school. He was going to Hunter College, or even high school when he was there. And he was sort of the caretaker for her in that part of her life. And then we got her back to the house, and then we got a full-time person that could be with her. And we did the best we could in other words to make her last years as comfortable as possible.

ZAHEER ALI: What was your mother's name?

CHARLES SAHADI: Najla, N-A-J-L-A.

ZAHEER ALI: And your grandmother's name?

CHARLES SAHADI: Ameenie, A-M-E-E-N-I-E.

ZAHEER ALI: So, let me ask before you -- because we're going to move into that segment where we talk about the business. Your father moved the -- opened up the store on Atlantic in 1948. Before then he was still operating in Manhattan?

CHARLES SAHADI: I believe even for the first six or seven months they operated two stores. I don't -- again I was four years old.

ZAHEER ALI: Right, but you don't remember going to the Manhattan --

CHARLES SAHADI: No. That one time. No. I don't even remember Manhattan. Whether I was ever there. Transportation now is different than it was then. And a four-year-old, what are you going to take them -- what are you going to show them at the place? I don't think I was ever there. No.

ZAHEER ALI: Did you have any relationship, or your family have any relationship with your great-uncle?

CHARLES SAHADI: There was a period of many years, probably until 1958, when the two segments of the family were not really together. Although, okay, several cousins took over the business. They were part of the business like my dad was. Two brothers, Emil and George. Emil passed but George stayed. And George Sahadi, his sister Selma and my parents were the best of friends. At least once, sometimes twice, a week they'd come over in the evening. They'd play cards. They'd sit and BS for the night. I mean you got to remember this is basically before TV, so this is the way things progressed.

And they came over and so I never saw friction in the family. I mean I hear the stories. And George, the cousin that took over the business, if we'd see him in church. He was very cordial. Again, it was his uncle too, it wasn't his father. Uncle Ibrahim, Abraham had no children. So, there's five boys and two girls in the family. My dad's family. And it was -- no, in my dad's father's family. And it was something I never saw. The only time I saw something, we got married in 1964. Two or three weeks before the wedding sixteen people canceled, because their mother said Wade, my dad, was not good to them. That was the only time I saw this.

So many years later when either my cousin, who came over, or my daughter, got married, I had more Sahadis at a wedding than they ever had in their lives. Because I was determined that this family was going to be a family. I felt very good about doing it because I'm a family man and I hate to see division in a family. Drives me nuts. A brother comes in, the sister walks out. I just can't stand it.

ZAHEER ALI: What kinds of things did you do to bridge the family?

CHARLES SAHADI: Well, I called people up that I didn't really -- I mean a lot of the cousins I didn't really know, I knew, but I didn't know. And I called them up. And the beautiful thing, when they all got together, some of them saw each other for the first time in twenty years. And they were hugging and kissing. And how could we have gone so long? And I felt so -- I tell you. Inside I mean I'm at a wedding for my daughter or my cousin, I don't even remember anymore. And I'm the proudest guy there because I was the one that instituted this getting together, and I was so proud to have so many Sahadis. There was nobody that didn't like anybody. But there was a reason why they couldn't get together. And we broke that barrier. And we got them together and we had a blast. It was just wonderful.

ZAHEER ALI: So, growing up, you said you wanted to play basketball before you got -- you had to take on a greater role in the business. Did you have other ideas of how your life would unfold as a young person in terms of what you wanted to do?

CHARLES SAHADI: No, I never did. I had one other job in my life. One summer I was going to summer school for something and I worked at a paint store on 78th Street and Third Avenue. And that was the only real outside job I've ever done. And the rest of my life has been at Sahadi Importing. I mean I credit that with making me better at what I do, but I never really had any whims about oh, I want to be a doctor, lawyer, Indian chief. None of the other things. I did like the business. And I tell people today I'm blessed to be a people person in a people business. Made a great deal of difference. If you don't have a passion for what you do, it's very difficult to be good at what you do. Money is only one driving factor. And after a while the money -- it never

stops being good, but it stops inspiring you, because I've been there, done that already. You need something to inspire you on a daily basis. And the customers are what inspire me on a daily basis.

ZAHEER ALI: So, let's talk a little bit about -- not a little bit, but let's now talk about the business on Atlantic Avenue. In the early '60s the *New York Times* began running stories. You begin seeing stories about Little Damascus or Damascus in Brooklyn or Little Syria in Brooklyn or Middle Eastern food is now taking a kind of spotlight. Tell me about what it was like working in the store in the 1960s. What kind of changes you saw in terms of clientele, in terms of what the popular food items were during this time.

CHARLES SAHADI: In the late '50s and '60s we were strictly a Middle Eastern food store, which means if you didn't come from the Middle East, and I mean Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, I'm not even going to go broader than that, you probably would not have shopped in our store. Now as an American born, I'm astonished to say that, because we were selling nuts and dried fruit, we were selling ethnic cheeses but cheeses. We had at the time fifteen kinds of olives. You forget. You forget. People at that time were not as liberal as they are today. They wouldn't go into a foreign store because they didn't know what was going to happen to them.

And I keep saying to myself, "We're not selling strange stuff." But to a lot of people. The only other place you could have bought what we, the Middle Easterners, were selling on the street was on the Lower East Side at an appetizer store, where they sold very similar to us. The so-called enemies, which were never enemies, but the so-called enemies actually were so much together in the way they ate and did things that the perception is they're always feuding.

And my one funny story. I went to Lebanon for the first time in 1972. My dad had passed in 1967. And I didn't know any one of my first cousins. They were all in Lebanon. I didn't know one of the suppliers we were dealing with. I'm ordering stuff through my cousins, who are agents over there. We'd send them a letter for eighty,

sixty, 100. Whatever is a container load. And they'd go out and buy the stuff for me. But I'm sending it to Cousin Ibrahim, who I don't know. So, we make the trip. And people tell us, "Wait till you see how they talk about Israel." I didn't know a Jew from a Christian. Didn't mean anything to me. So, I get there. We're there. My longest vacation ever. Why? It's a family reunion. I never met my family. It's a business trip. I got to -- so we're there twenty-eight days. And I tell people in twenty-eight days, I didn't hear one negative word about Israel. Not one. And people say, "You're telling me that because I'm Jewish." I said, "First of all I didn't ask you if you're Jewish and I don't know what you are, it's none of my business. However, I tell the truth." I said, "The problem, the friction they had in that time was Damascus more so than Israel." Israel and Lebanon lived together like brother and sister, the way the world should be. The way the world is in Brooklyn, where we have a melting pot. Well, it wasn't -- it was just -- it was an eye-opener. I also learned. Why do people come in and say, "You're a dollar for this item, your neighbor is eighty-five cents"? So, my answer is usually in my head why don't you go buy it from them. Then I find out in Lebanon everything you buy you bargain for. This was a whole new culture to me. You go into a store, the guy tells you a dollar, you offer him sixty cents, you get it for eighty-five cents.

So, I came back with a whole different -- I mean it was a wonderful trip for that reason. I came back understanding what's going on. Prior to that I had no clue. I used to get mad. What are they doing this for? Your Sahadi foul was forty-five cents and the guy down the street was forty cents. I mean in my head what are you -- just go buy it for forty cents, I mean we don't change our price. But I did understand the way it was done. And it worked out very nicely. I mean for me again it was another education that I got. And Lebanon at that time was paradise on earth. I mean I'd never been overseas anywhere. And you wondered why anybody would leave. You could ski and go to the beach on the same day by going up to the mountains and coming. I mean there were so many wonderful things. Food was the main thought

over there. Everything, you're eating dinner, and my uncle was taking us around, says, "Where are we going for dinner?" We'd eat lunch. I said, "Can we finish lunch first?" I mean I wanted to see how the people lived. I wanted to go into the town. I wanted to see a supermarket or whatever it is that you shopped at. I wanted to learn. And it was very difficult because all they wanted to do was set up the next meal. Dessert in between. And then we'd have late night something. So, after nine meals, oh my God. Okay, I'm off the track.

ZAHEER ALI: No, no, this is perfect. So that is very interesting. So you were twenty-eight when you went on a trip in '72.

CHARLES SAHADI: Yes.

ZAHEER ALI: So, I'm interested. So, you were of course born in Brooklyn. You're a Brooklyn boy. Did you have a sense of your family's cultural ethnic identity? How did you --

CHARLES SAHADI: Not yet.

ZAHEER ALI: You didn't.

CHARLES SAHADI: I didn't have it.

ZAHEER ALI: So how do you think you -- how do you remember, if you do, identifying yourself or thinking about your identity as a teenager?

CHARLES SAHADI: Well, again I didn't know what a Lebanese was. So, it didn't mean anything to me. My parents were both Lebanese. So, I had no clue what this meant. Again because of the connection with the church we had a lot of Middle Easterners at the church. So, there were Syrians and Lebanese, and they would be spoofing on each other. But I saw that later in life. But this time, again I never looked at you and said, "Where are you from?" It didn't matter to me. You were a friend, that's all that mattered. You didn't go to my church. Would that make you a bad person? Of course not.

So, it was tough. When I went to Lebanon, I learned a little bit about the ethnicity. I learned a little bit about my background. So, I came back being proud to

be American but proud also to be of Lebanese descent. And it was -- again that was a good awakening because now again I could relate to people differently. The problem I had was when my parents, when they're bringing us up, they would ask us questions in Arabic, and they would want us to answer in English. Very bad. Very bad. Very bad. I tell all our customers today, "If there's two languages in the house, speak your language to the kids. They're going to learn English in five minutes. But if you don't give them your language, they're never going to learn it." I'm comfortable understanding, I'm very uncomfortable speaking. It's a very -- bilingual, trilingual. There's nothing like it. They say youth is wasted on the young. There's a perfect example how youth is wasted on the young. So, I really felt it was a negative thing for me not to have learned the language growing up. Blessed to understand a good portion of it. I'm not perfect in it, but I understand enough to get through. And most of the people I'm speaking back to if they speak in Arabic also understand a little English. So, we speak with English Arabic. And we get them to understand what I'm saying. And by listening to them I get seventy-five percent or eighty percent of what they're saying. So, I get the gist of what the conversation is about.

You also asked before about the customers. We started with again mainly Middle Eastern customers. In the late '60s or maybe very early '70s my late brother Richie got involved with a couple of salesmen who sold specialty foods. We didn't even know what specialty foods was. Gourmet slash specialty. And my brother Richie was a big talker. So, the guy would come in. And they'd sit in the back of the store for two hours talking. I don't know. Looking outside. Customers outside. Used to drive me nuts. His innovations were much better than any of ours. He got items into the store that we would never have gotten into. We would still be a Middle Eastern store, we'd still be in the Dark Ages, if it wasn't for Richie. But I knew it used to burn the hell out of me. I'd say, "Oh, he's trying to find a way to spend an hour, so he doesn't have to work." But it turned out to be some of the most wonderful things that we brought in after that. Came through his discussion with these vendors. And again,

everything was trial and error. But you didn't buy twenty-five, twenty-five, twenty-five cases. You bought two, two, two. Worst scenario, you got stuck with them. You put them on special and got rid of them. And that's how we built up our inventory of stock.

And what it did more than anything, it brought in a whole new aspect of customers who didn't know us and who we didn't know. And these customers would come in and the ethnic customers fell in love with the specialty foods we brought in. The specialty food customers found a whole new world in ethnic foods. The tabbouleh and the hummus and the baba ghanoush. I mean we're living in 2016. Everybody knows what hummus is. In 1970 hummus or tahini or tabbouleh, these were all foreign words. Unless you were from our region of the world you didn't know what the hell we were talking about. So, it opened our eyes. And it also -- people would take -- they said, "Oh, we use tahini too." The Oriental people used it, but not for what we used it. We learned that many of the items went way out of our range into someone else's range. Again, making the conversation more interesting, making the store a more interesting place. I was very happy when the whole thing worked out together, because it extended our roots to so many different places. And now we weren't limited to the same number of customers or the same group only. There were so many others that found us interesting. And well, you can see sixty years later we're still there. So, something went right in this transition.

ZAHEER ALI: So, I want to talk a little bit about what Atlantic Avenue was like when you first started working both as a teenager and then in the '60s. What were some of the other businesses you remember that also sold Middle Eastern food or Middle Eastern -- I know there was like music shops and bakeries and pastries. What were some of them that you remember?

CHARLES SAHADI: All right. Well, I can tell you just about every one of them. Going back, there were the Malkos. There were three Malko stores. There was one down the street was Charlie and Elias. And the older brother Simon. Across the street was their

brother George. In Bay Ridge on Third Avenue was their brother Joseph. And then their nephew later opened a store two doors away downstairs. So, we had four Malkos on the street at one time. Instead of making a large corporation each one wanted to take from the other. It's a shame to say it that way, but that's what it looked like. I shouldn't say -- that's what I see. I think instead of working together and helping each other each one took from the other so that --

ZAHEER ALI: Competition.

CHARLES SAHADI: Yeah. I mean eventually they all died, every one of them, there's not one of them, there's a Malko on Atlantic Avenue now, he's not a direct descendant of the other Malkos. Malko, by the way, is sort of like their nickname. Their name is Karkanni. But I mean my dad was friendly with Joseph Malko, the one that was on Third Avenue in Bay Ridge. I was friendly -- we were all friendly. Elias, I mean the competition on Atlantic Avenue was wonderful. We weren't -- we were friends and competitors. I ran out of chickpeas, I could go down the street, I could borrow from them, or they ran out of something, they'd come and borrow it from me. There was no secrets. I was allowed to walk in their store. They were allowed to walk in my store.

We treated each other with respect. We were competitors, yes, and I understand that. But if we didn't have something and somebody asked you and if you told them, "I don't know who has it," and you knew the guy down the street had it, and they found it there, you were not a nice guy. Why didn't you send me there? So, I learned to deal from strength, not from weakness. So, where I could send people to another store to get it, I said, "If they don't come back to me, they weren't really my customers. So, I shouldn't fret about it and say, 'Oh, I shouldn't have done that.' You should have done it because it was the right thing to do." Share the wealth. And really that works out much better.

That works with the Americans in the neighborhood too. When we don't have something there's a store around the corner Two for the Pot. I send people to him. When people want wine, we have Heights Chateau down the block. When people

need cooking apparatus, we have A Cook's Companion. These are all friends of ours. And they send people to us all the time. We do nothing but reciprocate for all of them because of the -- it makes us -- none of us are islands by ourselves. I need you and you need me and if we help each other we go forward in a much better fashion.

ZAHEER ALI: So, in addition to the Malkos who else?

CHARLES SAHADI: Okay, now we had next door to us was Rashid Sales. Rashid was a music store run by Albert Rashid the father, Stanley Rashid, and Raymond Rashid. We bought the building, the double building that we're in next to our 187. We bought 189-191 in 1977. Rashid was one of our tenants. They were a tenant there from before. They stayed until 1998 when they had a property on Court Street that they moved into their own property on Court Street. And they left Atlantic Avenue. A year or two later Stanley, the older brother, retired and moved to Vermont. And Raymond took over and Raymond had some health problems and his wife passed. And he decided to get out. So, I don't know if Ray or he or Stanley or the both of them owned the building. I believe they still own their building. But they rent it out to a pet store now. And I think when they left Atlantic Avenue, they lost their identity. I think they had much better customer recognition when they were on Atlantic Avenue. I mean we're using that store now. So, in some respects I'm glad they moved. But I also feel bad.

We also had the Alwan brothers. We had Mahmoud and Fuad. Mahmoud was actually in 189, the store right next door to us. He made the best ice cream and he made very good pastry. His brother Mahmoud was on top of what was the Near East Bakery at 183 Atlantic Avenue. He made the best pastry, and his ice cream was very good also. But these two brothers did not talk. They did not talk. I mean they were three doors, four doors away. But I don't know why they didn't talk for years. The Alwan -- Fuad had a fight with the guy who owned the building, a guy named Raymond Ayoub owned the building and he got the marshal, had him thrown out of the store. And they were going to rip all the wall hangings and everything down. And my dad and I were coming down that morning in the car we were on the other side of

the street. We see the marshal car outside. We ran over there, and we worked out a deal with Mr. Ayoub, the owner of the building, we'll pay you so much and we'll keep the stuff in there. And they did. And so, we used that store from 19 -- let me think, maybe '66 or something like that. We took over the store next to us and used it.

Actually, my dad was sick at the time. Maybe it was '65 even. We set up an office for him on the main floor, so he didn't have to walk up to the second floor. We brought in Middle Eastern art objects. Bazaar Near East is what we called the store. And we had a bunch of stuff there. And my dad sitting in the back, customers would come in. And he had time to talk. He loved to talk to the customers. And he would show them the different things. He had wonderful knowledge of the stuff. So, we made his life easier by putting it on the main floor. So, for two or three years he was in that store. And then when he passed, we moved the office back up to the second floor. And then years later we bought the building in 1977 because Mr. Ayoub, who had the building, I'm just going to give you a history, had a fifteen-year tax abatement. He bought the building I believe in '62, he did a lot of renovation, I think he took eight apartments and made them into sixteen and he renovated the whole building. And he had a fifteen-year tax abatement. And in 1977 that abatement finished, and he said, "Oh my God, the tax went from this little number to this large number," and he said, "oh, no, no, let's get out." And my dad had told me earlier, "Charlie, if the building next to you ever becomes available you got to buy it." Thinking to myself. And my dad is dead now. I said, "Dad, where we get the money to buy this building? Looks like a telephone number. Oh my God." Well, we did buy the building at that telephone number. We begged, borrowed, and stole till we got the down payment. And the rest is history. Now if you ask me, I said I went in with a gun and stole it. Because it's only -- but it's only worth what it's worth if you're selling it. You can borrow on it, but it's really -- it's a difficult situation.

I have two kids in the business with us. So, I get calls every day. We'd like to buy your building. I said, "How would my kids feel if I sold it from under them?" They

said, "We're more than willing to overpay." I said, "What kind of real estate tells you that?" It's so funny the way things have turned around over the years.

But we're blessed to be in the right place at the right time. Let's see who else. Near East Bakery was again one of our favorite shops. That was down in the basement. That was run by the Canatis [phonetic] family. It was another family before them, the Reis [phonetic] family I believe. Anyway, the Near East Bakery was run by the Canatis [phonetic] family. They were Arabic Lebanese. I think Canatis [phonetic] was the first name and when in Ellis Island you came in your name got switched. So, they became the Canatises [phonetic]. Sounds like a Greek name, but they're not. And they ran a pita bakery there. They made the best meat and spinach pies. They made very nice pita bread. They made the sesame rings. They made sesame bread. It was just a nice family business. The meat and spinach pies. And potato pies. Aunty Olga, which was Marie, who ran the bakery, it was her mother, Aunty Olga. Made the best potato pies. And one of her sons, George, who didn't really work at the bakery, in fact he worked with us part-time, when he wanted potato pies, he couldn't go ask his mother because he wouldn't pay for them. So, he'd come to me. Charlie, order three dozen potato pies, two for you and one for me. This way I'll get it. Because Grandma won't make it for me. I said, "Okay." His mother wouldn't make it for him. These are the cute little stories.

But the family stayed in business. Marie died. And about three years later they got out of the bakery business because Marie's son had an allergy to flour. So, because he had an allergy to flour, they couldn't continue the bakery. The other -- Marie's brother ran it for a while. But they found it was too labor-intensive. I know they all -- the ones that are still alive regret it today because it would have been in vogue right now. It would have been one of the highlights of the street. They had a brick oven under the sidewalk. How did you know that? Every time it snowed the only place that didn't have snow in front of it was Mr. Alwan, because he was on top

of them. He never had to shovel the snow. The oven was on twenty-four hours a day. So the snow would hit the ground, and it was gone.

Those are one of the interesting stories. And they did a book about night places because they opened -- they start about six at night. Everything was made by hand. And everything was made -- I mean the proofing and everything was done, there was no machines. They had a machine to roll the dough, but other than that. So, when they made the dough and put it, they had to leave it for eight hours to rise. So, they could bake it. So, at six o'clock, seven o'clock at night, they would start the tomorrow. So, if you were coming by at night, you'd see a light. You'd go down, you want to buy pita bread, you want to buy -- excuse me. Meat or spinach pies that were left from the day or something. It was just a place open all the time. My favorite Near East Bakery story. Bob, the brother, was baking the bread. And they had an oven, and he had a stick and he put three loaves of bread on each thing. And he put one row, two rows, three rows, four rows, about three minutes went by. Take out the first row. Take out the second row. Take out the third row. Take out the fourth row.

Now you're right here. It's right in front of you. This is not in the back room. It's right here in front of you like an open kitchen in a restaurant. Well, this was an open bakery. One day I was there, and a man stepped to Marie. And he said, "Are those fresh?" She thought for a minute. She said, "No, no, we heat them every hour." I mean it was -- you're watching the dough go in. And you're watching the bread come out. And you say to yourself, "How could he ask?" You want to say -- well, you didn't want to say. But it was just -- that was one of my favorite stories. That probably happened forty years ago and I remember it like it happened yesterday.

I couldn't believe the question. Oh. They made very good za'atar bread also. At the end of their career, the last two, maybe three years even, they stopped making pita bread. Why? Because pita bread was labor-intensive. Not a big profit. And it just didn't pay to go through all the extra work. this way they had time to make all the other stuff without bringing on more staff.

So, they searched the market to see who had the bread closest to their bread. And after doing that for several weeks or a month, they found that a place in Yonkers called Daily Pita Bakery using a brick oven, but an automated brick oven, made bread that was very, very close to what they made. So, for the last two or two and a half years every morning Daily Pita would deliver them bread in plain bags which they would put in their bread trays and they'd cover them with a box, and they'd put them on top of each other. So, you came down at one o'clock, said, "Can I have two packs of pita?" Oh, yes. Here's two packs of pita. It was very close to their bread, but it wasn't -- but they never advertised that it was outside. And they never put the name of the bakery on it.

Turns out many years later we sell Daily Pita now because I said, "If Marie thought this was the best bread out there who the hell am I to argue with her?" And we were fortunate enough to do that.

Another thing, we never sold bread, because we didn't think it was fair to the bakery. So, we're really basically selling bread. We can play with the price. But there was no reason to do it. But every Saturday at two o'clock or 2:30 both -- especially the Near East Bakery would run out of bread. So, we found a bakery in Bay Ridge called Aladdin Bakery on 83rd Street and Third Avenue. A guy named Eli Rodriguez [phonetic]. And he was the first to automate. Nobody, everybody else throw the bread in, take the bread out, throw the bread in. Well, he went to automate. And he was -- in an hour he produced more than they did in a week. So, we started buying fifty, sixty, seventy packages of bread. And we put it in the basement -- in the back room. At two o'clock I'd walk down. Marie, are you out of bread? Says, "Yeah." Okay. We bring the bread out. I didn't want to sell it against her. Right? I didn't feel it was fair to take her livelihood away. I tried to be a fair guy. That's -- I pride myself on being fair. So, we'd bring out the bread in the afternoon and we'd sell the pita bread then. Very rarely did we get stuck with any because you show respect, you get respect back. And it's a very important thing that I learned along the way also. And I'm glad I did it that way

because I don't think I would have been happy with myself if I was taking from someone else.

ZAHEER ALI: Before we get too deeper into the '60s I want to make sure we cover the story of how you met Audrey, how you met your wife, the circumstances and your courtship and your marriage. Because that happened around this time, right? The early '60s.

CHARLES SAHADI: 1964 we got married. We started dating I believe in '62. We met in high school. We're born the same year, but she's born in June, I'm born in February. The cutoff was May. So, I graduated 1961, she graduated 1962. So, people say, "You married somebody the same age?" I said, "When you marry at twenty, what do you do, marry a twelve-year-old?" It's been an interesting life, I have to tell you. We met through a friend. My next-door neighbor on Gelston Avenue, who's still a friend, he was dating somebody. And Audrey was a friend of this other girl's. So, my buddy Jim met Audrey before me, and within weeks or a month or whatever I got to meet her, and we started -- let's see, probably '62 or -- yeah, '62 we started going out. And it was a very nice courtship we had. It was very good. We'd go out on the weekends and do different things.

In 1964 when my dad was -- no, '64, we got married in '64. I'm just trying to think. There was -- oh, my dad was sick in '64. And I left college and I went to Audrey and I said, "How about we get married?" It wasn't exactly the greatest proposal in the world. But I said, "How about we get married? I'm not really doing -- I'm not doing well in school because I'm not really there, I'm spending more time at the store than I actually envisioned at that time." Thankfully she said yes. And we had a wonderful marriage in 1964.

Now when I hear stories about my dad, prior to my being an adult, he was evidently the life of the party. My dad got up and danced and he drank, and he smoked, and he did this and did that. I never saw any of that. Never saw. Most of my

adult life he had one ailment or another. He had ileitis, which President Eisenhower had. This was one of the surgeries. And many others at the same time.

So, it was interesting because the night of our wedding November 8th, 1964 happened to be the same day my parents got married. We didn't even realize it when we set the date that it was their anniversary. Well, my dad must have been hopped up with whatever drugs the doctor gave him. So, you get through the day. He was up dancing, he was socializing. I kept saying to myself, "I never saw my dad like this." He was so happy.

Well, the moral of the story is the next three days he couldn't get out of bed. He was literally a board in bed. And it was a very difficult thing. And again, not knowing much about business at the time -- we got married in November. Two and a half weeks before Thanksgiving. One of the busiest holidays of the year. So, where are we? We're in Bermuda on honeymoon seven days. We got back the day they were dedicating the Verrazano Bridge. November 20th, 1964. And we had gone by plane and we met a bunch of couples there. And they said, "Why don't you come back on the *Queen of Bermuda* with us? We're coming back on the boat." There were five or six couples. So, we traded in the tickets for the airline, we paid another \$100 or whatever it is to come back on the boat. The sickest three days of my life, being on this boat that was in rough waters. Oh. Here's a kid twenty years old hasn't got twenty-five dollars to his name. I was looking to pay somebody \$10,000 to get me off this boat. How I would have paid it back I have no idea. But I was so sick. Oh, and thankfully we got back, I said, "Thank God that bridge is opening tomorrow." I wasn't even going to take the Staten Island Ferry again. That's how much I was off on boats.

Anyway, that's these little stories I add to my interesting life.

ZAHEER ALI: So, one of the things that I read about that happened, I couldn't get any more information, I don't know if you were involved with the Atlantic Avenue Merchants' Association.

CHARLES SAHADI: Yes.

ZAHEER ALI: You are. You were.

CHARLES SAHADI: Going back to 1974. Yeah. We're the ones that started the "Atlantic Antic -- it's gigantic!"

ZAHEER ALI: Yes. Yes. So, tell me. I want to get the history of that. But I read that in part the association at some point was involved in challenging the city's plan to build housing that may have -- yeah, so I want to hear a little bit about some of the challenges that you faced in terms of neighborhood change in Atlantic.

CHARLES SAHADI: This was in the '50s and early '60s. I was not really involved. But I knew there was a grassroots thing to keep Atlantic Avenue as it was. They wanted to make it into a thoroughfare with no parking at all and three lanes and whatever. And that would have hurt business a lot because we do -- I mean we love our neighborhood business. It's wonderful. But we do depend on vehicular traffic to come in and buses to bring people. And these are all part of the charm of the street that people can come and enjoy and merchants like myself are happy to take them on a tour, to give them a little history, to make the street more alive and more interesting.

And I'm so thankful that one of the people that was doing that -- across the street from us there was a company called Regina Nut Products. I forgot to mention that. Regina Nut was a roaster mainly of seeds, pumpkin seeds, squash seeds, melon seeds, watermelon seeds, sunflower seeds. And they did nuts also. And they were across the street from us till the mid '70s. A family, Joe and Sam Shuda [phonetic]. Well, Joe was an activist in the neighborhood and got involved. And he was very active in this keeping this thoroughfare from happening. And I didn't realize it till later in life. I don't think I ever thanked him enough because it was a wonderful situation.

But to show you how the world turns around, in 1990 we bought Regina Nut Company. Regina Nut Product Corporation is what it was. And we ran it as a separate business. My son-in-law and my cousin. We asked them if they were interested because I said, "If you're not we're not going to buy it." Oh yeah, yeah, we'd love to

run our own business. My son-in-law said, "I can go to work in jeans and sneakers. You got me right away." He was working on Wall Street. And you had to be a little more dressy to be there. So, he was very happy with that. So, in 1990 they took over that company. And in 2001 we moved it into our wholesale warehouse so it's part of the Sahadi Fine Foods wholesale, which is different than Sahadi Importing that we are on Atlantic Avenue.

That business is my son-in-law and my son. Atlantic Avenue is my brother and I. And my daughter and son have a piece of it also.

ZAHEER ALI: Some other names. And maybe you've talked about this. A name I came across was Mike Karneeb who was known as the Lamb King.

CHARLES SAHADI: Yeah, he was directly across the street from us where the caterer is now downstairs. Mike was a very interesting man. He was a meatman. When we got to Atlantic Avenue, I just go back. I skipped a whole portion. They were all mama papa stores. There was no such thing. We didn't have a Trader Joe's on the corner. We didn't have Barneys New York. We didn't have the other store, the women's store across the street. None of those were there. We had all mama papa stores side by side. The biggest store on the street was Clinton House Furniture, which was a furniture store. And even that was a family-run business. The Attara family, who's still our good friends, ran that business. The whole thing has changed in the time I'm there. I mean I look across and I say, "Ten years ago if you told me Barneys New York was going to be across the street I would have had you put in an institution." There was no chance in hell there was going to be a Barneys on Atlantic Avenue. Trader Joe's at least is a food store. And it's a discount food store. Upscale discount food store. They belong there. But some of these other stores I didn't think belonged there at all.

But there was butcher shops up and down the street, Tripoli restaurant, which is now on the other side of Clinton Street, used to be on our side, it was on the corner

till a fire came, and after that they took over the corner store, which was originally Clinton House Furniture, who sold and moved into the bigger building.

There were -- on the corner we had A&P. And next to the corner was Neergaard I think was the drugstore there. An old-fashioned drugstore with old apothecary jars and stuff. It was a very interesting place. A&P was there for years. They had a fire one time. And they had to -- they ended up selling to Key Food. And next to Key Food a chicken store took over. You couldn't change the decor on the side of your landmarks. But I think another fire occurred in that -- somehow it fell. I don't know how it fell. But it then became part of the Key Food complex all the way to the corner. But it was Rego's Roost, a guy from our church opened a chicken store there. And then he moved to where Mr. Alwan was for many years too. So that was on the street for many years.

We had a variety store on the street. Two Jewish brothers, two wonderful people, we really loved them, Marty and Leo, I used to ask Leo, "is your son here?" He said, "That's my brother." Well, people used to come to me and ask me about my younger brother and say, "Is your son here?" We get a little peeved when we're perceived to be so much older than we are.

Then we had the Alwan. I'm trying to think. There was where the greengrocer is. There was Alimfone [phonetic] Records. It was a record emporium with Jim Alaslan [phonetic], who was a musician, an oudist. And I think he gave lessons also. And he had a little bit of a store there. But I think it was owned by a club from one of the colleges. So, the college put it up for sale one day and I think at an auction or something. And the Korean guys that own the greengrocer bought it. It was two little stores. No, it was two little offices and something in between. Well, one night when we're all asleep everything came down. And all of a sudden it was the biggest property on the street. Except for Clinton House. It was the widest. So, they built a one-floor store there and that's how the greengrocer opened up as Atlantic -- no, what was it? Atlantic something or other. On the corner we had Moroccan Star restaurant,

which originally started as Eastern Star restaurant. We had a tailor shop next to it, Mr. Fily [phonetic], who was right next door to that. On the corner for 100 years before Rite Aid was built this is where the restaurant was and Mr. Fily [phonetic]. There was a candy store there which sold candy and cigarette products. I mean it was an interesting store.

Across the street from us where Barneys is now the right side of that store was George Malko. He had built the building. He had been our neighbor next door to us in 185. When he left the club that owned the building wanted him out, so he moved across the street, he bought a piece of property owned by a Arabic record business -- who's here? Okay. And he bought the business on the other side of the street, knocked the building down, and built his own building. So, and then when Barneys bought it, they knocked the building down too. Barneys didn't buy it, it was bought by the developer Two Trees. And Two Trees rents to them.

ZAHEER ALI: You mentioned a club. Were these the community clubs?

CHARLES SAHADI: Well, there's the club upstairs. It's called the SYMA Club, the Syrian Young Men's Club. MA. Syrian Young Men's Association. And someone said you should add an L to it, call it the SLYMA Club, because there's a lot of Lebanese in there also. But they never changed it, it's the SYMA Club. They're a social club. They get together once a week, once a month, whatever. And they have parties once a year. They rent the place out. And I think their charter has three or four churches are going to get the proceeds of this property when and if it's ever sold. So, they're using it as a clubhouse, knowing that it's gaining in value, knowing that the churches will be the recipient of this building somewhere down the road.

ZAHEER ALI: Now did your father ever talk to you about why he chose Atlantic Avenue? Or maybe you can shed light on that. Because I know that for a while people were also living there too, right? Like in an area where it would be customers. But tell me a little bit about like why this place became such a magnet for these businesses.

CHARLES SAHADI: I've asked that question many times. First of all, we had three bakeries on the street. Damascus Bakery, it's Damascus Bread and Pastry now, but that was Damascus Bakery. Near East Bakery. Middle of the next block, other side of the street Alexander's Bakery. So, you had a ready audience coming for bread. You also had others like the Malkos, like we came from Washington Street. So, I don't know who came first. Again, I was four years old. I can't tell you that. But a lot of these people came here. There were --

[Interview interrupted.]

CHARLES SAHADI: Like Mr. Karneeb with the store, the two other butchers. I forgot the name of them, but there was other people on the street. And you sort of had the basis for doing business already. These people from Washington Street came from a two- or three-block area. We had ten or twelve stores. So, they were used to competition side by side. So, this was no big stretch for them to come to something like this. Also, in downtown Brooklyn we have Our Lady of Lebanon Church which is a Melchite -- or Catholic church. We have Saint Nicholas Antiochian Orthodox Cathedral on State and Bond. We have the Church of the Virgin Mary on Second Street and Eighth Avenue. These are all Middle East-oriented churches. Again, a ready audience within a mile or a mile and a half or two miles. Which you felt you could get some support from.

Again, this is my theory. Do I know? No. Again I have no idea. I thank my dad three or four times a week. Thank you for putting us in the right place at the right time. Whether anybody -- you got to realize the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway hadn't been built yet. Used to get off the highway, the Gowanus. You'd get off on Hamilton. And you'd make a wide U-turn and you'd come up Clinton Street. That's how you got to work. There was no extension over here. That was years later.

Talking about neighborhood now. Long Island College Hospital -- twenty, twenty-five years ago did a major expansion. So, they bought up. They used eminent domain. And they bought lots of property from lots of Middle Eastern people. And

because of that I mean a lot of these people didn't know if they'd ever see this kind of money again. They were aging and they said, "This is a good time to retire." So, they would take the money and move to Florida or Phoenix or New Jersey or wherever they had family to make it interesting. So, our resident downtown population, a lot a lot of Middle Easterners, went down a bit, because people found other places.

I mean Middle Easterners are all over the country. We actually went into mail order in 1951 until 1976. We did a mail order from the back of the store selling to people who had -- mainly the ones who had left the neighborhood and moved to Chicago or Detroit or wherever. And they still needed product and they couldn't find a store like ours there with the diversity of both specialty and Middle Eastern.

So, we fit a void at the time where we were in vogue. The people were very happy to be able to reconnect with us even from a distance.

ZAHEER ALI: Was there -- so it seems like this part of Atlantic had a lot of Syrian, Lebanese-descended people. Mostly Christian, right?

CHARLES SAHADI: Correct.

ZAHEER ALI: Was there any relationship with Muslim Middle Easterners, also like maybe further up Atlantic? Like I know there was a mosque, the State Street Mosque, which was one of the first mosques.

CHARLES SAHADI: Right, that's right behind us.

ZAHEER ALI: Right. Was there interaction? Or was there not? What can you tell me about that community or your relationship with that community?

CHARLES SAHADI: Okay. In 2001, 9/11 happened. We -- the Museum of the City of New York had an exhibit called *the Arab Americans in New York*. They didn't cancel it, they postponed it till February of 2002. I unfortunately only went once. And they had a wonderful timeline there, telling you when the majority of Arabs came into this country, Middle Easterners came into this country. The biggest population came in between 1990 and -- 1890 and 1900. The second biggest group came from 1960 to 1970. The first group was a hundred percent Christian or very close to. The second

group was very mixed, probably more Muslim than Christians. And you added Egyptians, you added Yemenis, you added people that we did not know. We had no Ramadan before that because there was no Ramadan here. We didn't have enough Muslims to make a Ramadan, which again made the street more interesting. We have so many varieties of both religion and people now.

So, the interaction has been wonderful. Forty years ago, Oriental Pastry opened across the street. Go back one step. Before Oriental Pastry on the next block was Oriental Mercantile in the middle of the next block on our side of the street. Oriental Mercantile had a big -- he had a nice big square store. I remember his store very well. George Ayoub and his brother Albert or Abdul we called him in Arabic. He was part of the business. Well, George and his brother had an argument, like every other family. And George -- I mean Albert found a Greek guy, George the Greek, and they opened up Oriental Pastry on the other side of the street. George the Greek was a wonderful pastry maker. Albert was a wonderful -- he's like me. Had a PhD in BS. He could talk to anybody and get things done. So, between the two of them they opened the store. And they ran it for -- I don't even know, maybe five or six years. The Moustapha family came from Syria, Muslim. Took over the store. Father Khaled and the three sons. And they've been our wonderful neighbors all these years. Again, the term Muslim against Christian against Jew I never put them together. I mean to me they're my neighbors, they're my friends, they're my competitors. That's basically their thing. And I'm glad it's that way because the perception after 9/11 is all of them are no good. That's ridiculous. There's no such thing. There's no such thing. We all came out of a mother, we were born the same way. There are bad people on my side. There are bad people on your side and their side. So, if you're going to generalize and say we're all bad, I mean there's somebody who doesn't like all Christians, there's somebody who doesn't like all Jews, there's certainly somebody who doesn't like all Muslims. You live in Brooklyn. You live on a melting pot. On one street you got twenty languages. You got ten religions. You got people of color. They live next door

to each other like brother and sister. Why can't the rest of the world do this? It's baffling to me why we don't set an example that others will see, unless you live here.

ZAHEER ALI: Did you ever feel during these moments of like international conflict that people responded to you or the store differently? So, I'm thinking of like the '80s, '84, the war in Beirut, or the '91 Gulf War, or even maybe the '67.

CHARLES SAHADI: Okay, let's go back to '67. Sixty-seven war, we were -- we've been blessed. We've been treated like we've been here forever. And we -- friction has never been there. Thankfully people -- I tell people, "I'm never apprehensive going to the store. I can stay late at night. I leave sometimes at eleven at night. I never think. I have the key in my -- I'm a New Yorker, you have a key in the hand, you walk quickly to the car. I mean you don't dillydally because dillydally causes you trouble."

But in '67 one of my neighbors, I won't tell you who, but one of my neighbors was interviewed on the corner, and he said -- the reporter said, "If we went to war would you be on the American side or on the Arab side?" He said, "I'm an American." He said, "I've got to be for the Americans because this is my country." Of course, his business was international so-and-so. And he was selling to all these foreigners and all the UN people and everybody. And you say to yourself, "Boy, he got flak from everybody." I mean thank God it wore off and things went back to normal.

My situation, I'll give you an example at 9/11, just to go further up way ahead. 9/11, we closed immediately. When we heard what happened, I told the kitchen, "Close down." She said, "We just made all this food." I said, "The hell with the food, let's go home." Everybody got to go home and be with somebody you love. This is no time to be at work. So, must have been ten-thirty, eleven, eleven-thirty in the morning. We all pile out. We drove some of our people home because the city was in disarray.

9/12, I get to work early, I get there about seven in the morning. We open at nine. There's five, six people milling in front of the store. I don't get apprehensive, but what are they doing here? I walk up and I'm unlocking the gate so we can get in. I

came early so that my kitchen crew can do their prep work. Two of them walked up to me and said, "Can I give you a hug?" Excuse me. Said, "We want you to know we love you as a neighbor and a friend." And I said, "There's nobody down more than us after knowing that somebody from our part of the world caused this international problem." I said, "You don't know how much this means to me." And the other thing was the school on Court Street, the Montessori school. Three, four, five days later, maybe a week later, came up, 120 kids with three or four parents coming up with them. Walking in line together singing love and peace songs to Charlie Sahadi in front of the store. And each one made me a sign or a card or whatever it was thanking me for being their neighbors. I lost it. I absolutely lost it. It was the most emotional thing that has ever happened to me in my life.

And it was -- I still come to tears when I think about it. I mean so -- when kids come up and do that for you it's above and beyond anything. And I thank them for being my neighbors as opposed to my -- them thanking me for being their neighbors. It was just a wonderful experience in a very down time. Helped us all get through a very bad period. The papers wanted to come up and say, "Anything happen here?" They want somebody spat on your window or somebody threw a brick through it. I said, "No. If you want love and respect stories talk to me." If you want -- I mean I know things were happening. I'm not saying -- I'm not naive to the world. But you're asking me about my area, I didn't see any big problems.

Naji Almontaser, his wife is a teacher in the public schools, goes in fully dressed. And school started what, two, three, four days later, whatever. You want to be apprehensive? Now you're going into a school. Probably a lot of Jewish people. I mean the nature of the way schools are. Soon as she walked in. They all rushed over to give her a hug. It was such a wonderful story. We were at a meeting for something. He was telling the story. It was -- in the street she had to walk with somebody because she was afraid somebody would come. But when it came to the people she knew and loved, they treated her just like they treated her before. It wasn't her fault what

happened. If it was her fault, then you get mad and you go out and do what you have to do.

But there was no reason to do that. And again, it was something that made you grow in life. You felt -- people used to say this is a cold city. I dared people after that. I said, "You come up and tell me this is a cold city. You have to show me where it's cold." These people were -- everybody was bending over backwards to help their next-door neighbor. The guy across the street, the person hurt in the street. Everybody wanted to help somebody. I was so proud to be a Brooklyn person. I truly was because I just thought it was a wonderful experience.

A tragedy to happen, but it brought out the best of people here. My pride is very strong about Brooklyn.

ZAHEER ALI: So, tell me about your work with the Atlantic Avenue Merchants' Association and the birth of Atlantic Antic.

CHARLES SAHADI: In 1974 or maybe '73, '73. Three or four people came from Manhattan, I believe they were people running the Third Avenue Festival. I believe their festival is one year older than ours. And they met us on the street, a bunch, three or four of us were there. And they said, "You're going to have a festival." Excuse me. Not do we want to have a festival, you're going to have a festival.

It must have been driven by money someplace but anyway, we don't like being approached that way. You want to have a festival on our street, talk to us, we'll be more than happy to cooperate. Anyway, we were not thrilled, and we didn't answer and we just kept doing our thing. We're talking to ourselves. If this really happens, I think we should boycott it, we should close and let them walk right by us as if we're not here. Two or three weeks later, a Greek woman, I think, and two other people came from the city. I don't remember their names. We sat up in the SYMA Club because they had place to sit. And they talk. Listen, we'd love to have a festival on this street. We think we can cooperate with one another. We can get -- now we're

talking, we're talking. We're talking something good for the street. And we are 100% good for the street, we want to work together.

So, they ended up working with Harry and Howard. Harry and Howard had a silk flower business on Atlantic near Fourth Avenue. Near Third. I think it was near Fourth. I didn't really know them at the time, but we got involved and met them. And we started going to meetings. And they decided they were going to do the Atlantic Antic some weekend in September, I don't know what day it was that time. And the Atlantic Antic was on a Saturday, the first Antic was on Saturday in September.

Well, we organized our part of the street. Somebody else was running the fair. But if each block captain sort of ran their street we knew we could get things done. And we had very good participation on our street. I would say probably eighty percent of our street participated.

ZAHEER ALI: What did they -- when you were -- when they brought this idea to you what did they say they wanted to see happen at the festival? What components of what they wanted to see?

CHARLES SAHADI: All right. Technically first of all the Atlantic Antic was made to show the rebirth of downtown Brooklyn. The theme was "Atlantic Antic -- it's gigantic!" I just saw a poster from that in '74. I'm going through some old papers. And it was very -- we had no idea what a festival was like on the street. We had no idea how we could accept it, would accept it, but it was worth a shot. And if anything, if it brought any people, and it showcased the stores, then on a Tuesday in February when you're twiddling your thumbs because there's nothing doing because it's cold and raining, all of a sudden there's some people here because oh, we saw you at the Antic. Well, this was the hope and theory behind the Atlantic Antic, which has come to fruition. It really did work out as they said it would. Or they thought it would.

And as I said because I think they had the street festival on Ninth Avenue, which is an international food street, more so foody than we are, but it made a very interesting display. And most of the other food trucks that they put out were on the

other side of Court Street or on the other side of Clinton Street. But even on the other side of Clinton we had three or four Middle Eastern restaurants that participated. So, we didn't have a lot of outside vendors on our street. Yeah, you want to sell jewelry, come on, sit next door to me, but don't put food, don't put falafel next to falafel. Don't put hot dogs next to this. So, you wanted Nathan's, they were on the next block. Which is fine. And it showed a diversity on the street.

We are blessed to have a very wide street and very wide sidewalks. So, lots of people can be on our street without overcrowding it. So, the first festival happened on a Saturday. I don't know if they ever took any count, but my rough guesstimate is 50,000 people showed up. Again, you're running from Hicks Street to Fourth Avenue. Maybe even from the waterfront to Fourth Avenue. And they had a parade. It was from ten to six as opposed to now it's twelve to six. There was a parade which took about an hour and fifteen minutes. There were dancers, there were stilt walkers. Something to stir the crowd. And then behind them the people were following up the street. And that's how they get to see the street.

And it worked out very nice. We had a very nice day. But after the festival several of my neighbors and I got together. And we thought that the festival being on a Saturday was a shopping day. If we made the festival on a Sunday, that's a family day. And we all thought a family festival would be much more fun than a grocery festival. So, we went to a meeting January, February of the next year at Kalfaian Carpet, which was a carpet store down near Fourth -- near Third Avenue, I guess. And they were ready to vote on next year's Antic. And of course, we the pain in the neck Middle Eastern merchants who get there late and want to be heard got down there and we said, "We have a theory that if you changed it from Saturday to Sunday, you'll draw more people and it'll be a better day." See, I'm closed on Sunday. So, I said, "To me Sunday is an extra day for me, but I really think strongly enough that this will be a better festival."

And lo and behold, they agreed with us. So, February let's say of '75 we set the date. And for six months Stan Rashid, myself, Dennis Halaby from the bakery, we're all saying, "What if it doesn't work out? We had 50,000 people here. What if it doesn't work out? They're going to crucify us if this happens." And comes the day before the festival in 1975, it poured. I said, "Well." Day of the festival God shines down on us and gives us a beautiful day. My guesstimate 300,000, 350,000. Whew. We wiped the brow. And the biggest estimate we had from the police department was 2011, the thirty-seventh Antic, they estimated 1.3 million people on the street.

Now what does that say? If a festival is thirty-seven years old and it's drawing that kind of crowd, it's getting bigger and better every year. So, we were very proud that we made that adjustment, and we feel that we gained a lot. We gained a lot of new friends, new customers. There was the year we decided to do something different. So, we got a camel and an elephant. Camel and the elephant I'm going to say was probably the fourth year. Third year, fourth year. We rented the camel and elephant from a place in Connecticut who gave us till midnight the night before to cancel in case they -- we got rain. It didn't rain, and the camel and elephant came and marched in the parade, all the way to Fourth Avenue, and came back. And across the street from us where Barneys is this was the parking lot for Independent Savings Bank at the time, where Trader Joe's is.

And we were able to set up right there, because that space was no stores. They said we weren't blocking anybody. And we put the camel and elephant, and we sold rides for a dollar, five dollars, three dollars, whatever it was. And the neighbors got nervous. Our neighbors. You know how much we paid for those camel and elephant? You let them walk all the way to -- I said, "Do you realize the spectacle we made by doing this?" I said, "Don't you look at the big picture? All you look at is dollars and cents." If we wanted to collect \$100 to pay for the band, we had to promise them they'd have \$200 by ten o'clock so that they weren't going to lose anything out of their pocket.

We had Eddie Kochak, who's our resident bandleader, who's now ninety -- he'll be ninety-five this year before the Antic. He's still doing the Antic for us. And he used to bring us a band and he would set up on the street in front of Key Food. And he would draw a crowd, thousands of people around the stage. And they'd all stand there for half an hour watching the show. And then when you finish watching the show and you're all hopped up you mosey on down the street, you don't rush by. If the street festival is a walking thing, you keep walking. Well, now they're moseying, and they see Sahadi's, they see Damascus, they see Oriental, they see Malko, they see the other stores on the street. So, we created our own richness by bringing this band. But at the beginning we were beggars. We went from store to store to store to store. And Eddie Kochak went with us. Can I have fifty dollars? Can I have \$100? To finally get it done so we could have this. So, we've been through a lot of different things in order to make the festival what it is today. But I think Atlantic Avenue is what it is because of the festival. I think that was an important part of making it what it is. We also try to get everybody. Don't gouge. Whatever you sell for a dollar sell for a dollar. Get people to see that you're a reasonable store, so when they come back next time they won't say, "That SOB, he sold us for a dollar fifty, he sells it for ninety cents during the day." All right, if it's ninety-five and you round it to a dollar, because it's easier outside to take change, but some of the things were a dollar ten, we made them a dollar. You don't look at the profit for the day. You look at the goodwill you're creating. And I wasn't always able to get that through to my neighbors because their whole concern was bringing back the dollars quickly. And there's long term and short term. I look long term because we've been on the street sixty-eight years. I say we must have done something right, number one, and number two, I look at tomorrow, not yesterday. Tomorrow is the most important day after this finishes, because that's our chance to go forward.

ZAHEER ALI: So, one of the -- I mean one of -- this is an important story that you have been there so long. And certainly, as Atlantic Avenue has become even more popular

is the story of the development and change that Atlantic Avenue has seen. Especially in the last -- I would say twenty years. But maybe you can tell me like at what point did you -- what was the signal to you that Atlantic was turning?

CHARLES SAHADI: See, some people think that it's very good now, it wasn't so good. I never saw Atlantic Avenue as not good. I've been blessed with fifty-two years to be on the street. I never saw a down. I mean yes, if they had built that thoroughfare we would have been in big trouble. But I never saw a downer. I always thought each year was good. Our business was going up yearly. The comments from customers was -- I mean so wonderful to hear them come in and rave about what they bought from us. The fair prices. The wonderful service. I mean all things that makes a boss very happy. I've been blessed to have all of those told to me. We try our best to satisfy you because you are the most important customer because you're right in front of me now. And when you leave the young lady behind you is the next most important customer.

We watched the neighborhood change because the rents and purchasing price has gone up tremendously. So, a lot of people who couldn't afford to stay there moved out of the neighborhood and younger, more hip for lack of a better word people moved in. But that didn't take away from our core group, which is still our Middle Eastern background people, who many of them still live there or their children live there. Or they've moved to Jersey, but they still come in there once a month to buy their provisions. We've seen a great mixture of people now. More so than ever before. Because as I said by going to specialty, we drew people from all over the world here. And they all like to consider it their store. Pick an item like spices. We started out with about twenty-five or thirty. We have 160 I think now. Spices have become very important because I want what you eat, and you want what I eat. So, we eat differently. So, whoever happens to be there, they'll talk to you, ask you questions, and they'll want to pick up some of those spices.

I also tell people by being a reasonable store if the economy is poor you don't stop eating. People eat every day. Usually, three times a day if they can. They may eat less in restaurants because you can feed a family of four or five at home for basically the same price you can feed one in a restaurant. So, if times is tough instead of -- tough, you don't go to a restaurant three times a week, you go once a week, or once every second week. You dust off your old cookbooks and you find you need coriander and pine nuts and pistachios and this and that. What are we? We are an ingredient store. We are here to give you the ingredients, healthy ingredients too. We're not a health food store, but we sell healthy food. And by doing that a whole segment of the population that never shopped with us before now buys their stuff from us because we can satisfy them with products they need for their own place. Yes, if you're Chinese you want to go to a Chinese market because they have everything Chinese. But if you're especially Mediterranean we're very strong in Mediterranean foods. And a lot of the foods we have are from all over the world too. So, I like to think we're well situated for the 2016 season.

ZAHEER ALI: Over the years what are some of the food items, Middle Eastern food items, that you saw attracting non-Middle Eastern clientele? Like I pulled some *New York Times* articles like food articles or recipes. And they would all say, "And you can find this at Sahadi's." For example, baklava, phyllo dough, umm ali, yogurt. What were some of the -- that you saw. Hmm, I didn't think people would be buying this. What were some of the food items that you thought that you saw that --

CHARLES SAHADI: Couscous. Couscous. Again, we really don't use couscous in Lebanon. We use an item called moghrabieh, which is a very large couscous. And it's raw, so you have to cook it. Couscous is a precooked item that takes you four minutes to boil and it's ready to use. But watching the varieties that people use couscous for, how they make different meals with it, it's been very enlightening. Some people make tabbouleh using couscous instead of bulgur. I never thought of that. But why not? You make pasta salad. What's couscous? Pasta. So, it's a different type of pasta salad.

The most amazing item is hummus. Hummus in America today is over a billion. Sixty-five or seventy percent of it belongs to Sabra. And who is Sabra? PepsiCo. So, Pepsi makes the hummus that everybody wants. Now in Lebanon there's one kind of hummus. There's not twenty-four varieties like you go to the supermarket, it's twenty-four varieties. I tell people they took our wonderful delicious healthy item and amplified it, and they added every flavor they could think of to make it -- so this way you like roasted pepper, oh, you get roasted pepper, you like garlic, well, we got garlic, you like so-and-so, you get so-and-so. I just think what we consider many times peasant food is the most popular item we sell.

Mujadara. Mujadara, which is lentils and rice with the onions on top, the roasted onions. That is real peasant food because the beans are cheap as could be, and you sprinkle a few onions on top. When we do the Atlantic Antic that's one of the most popular foods we put out. People -- because it's not something they know, but now they know. People come in. Give me -- they don't pronounce it right. But mujadara is what they want.

Tabbouleh, another thing. You go to an American store, you go to a health food store, they sell tabbouleh, it's wheat with parsley. You go to a Middle Eastern store, it's parsley with wheat. One is green, one is white. Takes a lot of time to chop parsley. You throw wheat in there and throw pieces of parsley, it's tabbouleh, but it's not. I mean if you want traditional stuff you have to at least learn from the stores that know it in order to make it yourself. So, don't just assume that oh, that's tabbouleh. I mean I see some of the stuff in some of the stores. Tabbouleh has a three-week shelf life. Who is going to eat soggy stuff that's three weeks old? Even hummus. We don't use any preservatives. Hummus has a seven day, maybe ten days if you're lucky shelf life. Now that means you can't dip in it with a spoon three or four times. You certainly can't dip with bread, because you got bacteria here and there. That takes away half the time, so now you have three or five days on it. And in the summer when it's hot, if you don't come with a refrigerated bag with you, you're going to spoil before you get

home, you're going to call me, "My hummus is this big. And it's bumping out. What do I do with it?" I said, "Put it right in the garbage and remind me next time you come in. I'll give you another one, but the next time it's on you because if you're not prepared to take it home on a hot day, heat is the biggest element to hurt hummus or baba ghanoush." So again, it's a learning process for the customer and it's an educational process for us. We have to let you know how to protect yourself and God forbid you eat it after it's foamed up like that, it's all acid, it's not safe, it's not healthy, so I want you to throw it away, I'd rather waste five dollars and give you a new one than have you get sick and say later, "I shouldn't have eaten it."

ZAHEER ALI: Food seems to be -- and this is true for many cultures, right? A central way people transmit culture is through food. And certainly, in your family not only has food been something the way people transmitted culture, you talked about your grandmother and your mother cooking. But also transmit business, the way your father handed the business down to you, you took up the responsibility. Tell me about how you saw the future, when you saw the future of your endeavors for the next generation of your family.

CHARLES SAHADI: Because we're drawing from a much larger audience, I see no limits to the future. I'm an optimist in that way. I'm not always an optimist. But about food again my problem is if you have a peace conference you should have a good meal before you have the conference. Then you're at peace and then you can talk to each other and you can get something done. I don't know why it doesn't start that way. They have the meal after they fight instead of before they fight. I just think that international food is at the highest level it's ever been because non-Mediterraneans want to get in on the act, they want to be on the Mediterranean diet because it's one of the healthiest diets. They're finding that relatively simple foods to make are very healthy for you, very good for you, and make most people smile. And I just see the future as being very bright.

The thing you have now, you have the Internet. See, I'm not into social media. One of the reasons I stepped back now, I'm not interested in social media because it's not me. My kids do know their social media. So that's fine. And in order to go to the next step you got to be in there. So, it's better that dad and mom take a step back so that they can take it forward without having to look at us and say, "What are they doing?" They know what they're doing. Both -- the two kids that are in the business with us are finance majors. They know finance much better than I. My simplistic approach, people said, "How's business?" I said, "Well, we pay bills three times a month. There's always enough money on each of those three times to pay bills. Business is fine." They said, "Well, that's a very simple way." I said, "I'm a simple guy. As long as I can pay my bills and my employees are paid and everything else is going fine, why do I have to know more than that?"

Of course, you talk to somebody who knows economics and they, what are you crazy, you can't. Well, anyway that's why I have two finance majors that are running the business. My other daughter, the smart one who got away, Renee is a teacher. She's got a master's degree in deaf education. She's in Philadelphia right now teaching -- well, she's working in a deaf program. But she's done deaf teaching for about twenty-two, twenty-three years. And very good at what she does and enjoys what she does. This was not for her. It's not like we chased her out. It was not for her. This was not what her passion was. She went into what her passion was and I'm very happy for her because she is very good at what she does. I tell people. I told both my kids before they came in. I said, "Go out and get a real job. And if it doesn't work for you, this is a wonderful business to fall back on. And I won't be embarrassed if you fall back and say, 'This is what I want to do.'" And they both tried something outside and they both felt they wanted to be their own bosses and they wanted to be in the food business. And the one that's my daughter with me, Christine, is a gourmet chef. I mean my favorite story about her is if her husband called her at three o'clock and said, "I'm bringing five people over for dinner at 6:30," without giving her any

warning, she'd come out with a gourmet meal from what she had in the house, she would prepare something that everybody would be very proud to have. And it would be a very diverse group of items from different parts of the world because she loves to cook, and she loves to create. So, the right daughter is in the business with us. The other daughter, it wouldn't have been for her. And I'm glad she's doing what her thing is.

ZAHEER ALI: And I read one of the things Christine brought to the store was prepared food or cooked food, is this right?

CHARLES SAHADI: Yes. She was in NYU Business School. After two and a half years of business she hadn't gotten any finance courses yet. So, in high school when she needed something she'd go in and badger the deans a little bit because she wanted to get on with her life. And the dean was -- after they argued back and forth, the dean would say, "If you promise not to come back in here you can do anything you like."

So, she did. I mean they tell you, you can't take English one and English two in the same semester. She says, "Why not?" Well, anyway she graduated in three years from high school because of that. And she went to NYU. So, we were doing the renovation, 1985, and one day she calls me. She said -- no. She came back to work. She said, "I'm leaving." I said, "What do you mean you're leaving?" She said, "I'm coming back to work. Because I can't -- what I want." She said, "But Dad, when you're doing this renovation, the most popular thing in the specialty food business now is prepared foods."

So of course, we didn't have a kitchen, we didn't have it. So, we prepared a kitchen nicely to her specs. We set up a small deli. One counter. And she and my wife ran the kitchen. I mean they bought the stuff, they chopped it, they cooked it, they baked it, they cleaned the dishes, and we didn't have any perception how it was going to go. So, you build, you start small, and you build it as you go along.

Well, it picked up very nicely, and it went. But as it set up, Christine came back and said, "Dad, I'm going back to school." I said, "Wait, wait, wait, we just set up

the department for you.” She said, “No, no, no, I’m going to run the department during the day and go to school at night.” So, she worked forty-five hours a week running the department during the day. Went back to NYU at night. And came out with a double degree in finance instead of a single degree. So, I always say, “When a woman tells you she wants to do something, take two or three steps back or you’re going to get run over.”

And the strongest of the three of my kids is Christine. The oldest is the strongest. She -- when she sets her mind to something, it generally gets done. And it works out fine. She’s the most go-getter of the three. She’s the most tenacious of the three. My son is more laid-back. He gets his work done but not in the same aggressive way that she does. And Renee is sort of in the middle between the two of them.

ZAHEER ALI: So, tell me at what point did you feel like you arrived at a place where you could step away.

CHARLES SAHADI: Well, again as I said before, social media I think was a big factor there. I realized that at this stage of my life I didn’t want to get involved in social media. I realized even more so that the business needed social media. I mean they were coming up with ideas and these things. Completely against the grain for me. But the right thing to do. And I’m smart enough to realize that. So, you back away and let them make -- not their own mistakes. But let them make their own decisions. Some of them work out fine. They pat themselves on the back. Some of them didn’t work out so fine, they kick themselves in the butt. But you get up and you go to the next one.

Business, whether it’s social media or anything else, is trial and error. And you don’t put all your eggs in one basket because that’s when you really get hurt. So, you try something on a small scale. And if it works it’s easy to expand. But if you start on a big scale it’s very hard to scale back. So yeah, I think that’s really the thing.

And at this stage in my life, after fifty-two years of doing what I love, I also have other things that I'd like to do. We'd like to travel a little more. I'd like to be able to do interviews like this which I did. I mean I've always done them. But you have to find the time. Now it's not a big deal to find the time. I have three interviews in the next -- between now and the end of June. I have three set up. And I enjoy doing them because the history of Sahadi's and the history of the street are embedded in my brain. It's not a big chore for me to pull out a chunk and tell you something about this.

I mean when you remind me about other stores then of course it depends on how much into the history you want to do. It's just nice to know that I lived through all that. I always tell kids, "The only thing you don't have is a history, because your history is starting now."

I already have my history. And yes, you would change a few things if you could. In business especially. You might have done things differently. But I'm one of these, like an investor, I invest cautiously, because I want money to be there at the end. The guys that take the big risks either get very rich or they go broke. I don't want to be in that situation. I'd rather slow and steady wins the race. That's me. I'm the turtle. I believe in going for your goals but going for them in an appropriate way.

The broker we work with works with us very nicely because she knows our philosophy and she doesn't push us into things that we're not going to be comfortable with. Because if she does ultimately, it's going to -- she that's going to suffer. Because then she's not following our goals. And we've been with her for thirty years now and I have nothing but love and admiration for her because I think she works well with us. And I think we work well with her also. So, it's been -- we're her first account. So, it was very nice to say that twenty-five or thirty years later we were one of her first big accounts. So, it's very nice to be in that position, I have to tell you.

ZAHEER ALI: All right. Well, thank you very much for this oral history interview. If there's anything else you want to add, feel free.

CHARLES SAHADI: Well, there's so many aspects. But no, I think we covered just about everything. I know I didn't answer all your questions directly. But --

ZAHEER ALI: We got there. We covered everything.

CHARLES SAHADI: I like to think my interesting stories -- I'm a storyteller by nature and I have so many stories because of fifty-two years of doing this that I could talk to three people in the same day and I'd use all different stories.

ZAHEER ALI: For me a good oral history interview is when I'm heard as little as possible. And you made that very easy.

CHARLES SAHADI: I hope I didn't talk too fast. Because I have a tendency to do that. And I try in an interview to slow down. But as a New Yorker, we talk fast. Because you snooze you lose. And --

ZAHEER ALI: Well, they say actually people's capacity -- people actually can listen to faster speech than most people talk. So --

CHARLES SAHADI: And you weren't writing. See, if you were writing, then I have a problem with the people that write, because they can't write as fast as I speak. I have to slow down to a pace.

ZAHEER ALI: I had like a printout of like things that I wanted to touch on, and there were a couple of things you said, you saw me jot down, because I asked you some follow-up. But no, this was excellent.

CHARLES SAHADI: Anything missing that you need that I missed?

ZAHEER ALI: No. I think this is very thorough.

CHARLES SAHADI: I went around the bend, I got you the answer, but I went around the bend.

ZAHEER ALI: It was good, it was good. We got -- like I said we covered everything that I wanted to cover. So, thank you very much.

CHARLES SAHADI: My pleasure. I'm glad it all worked out.

ZAHEER ALI: It did. So, I'm going to stop.