Video interview at Ann Arbor, Michigan
By Alice Rothchild

Wadad Abed transcript

AR: Tell me your story.

WA: Wow, I was born to a Christian family in the city of Nablus. Normally I don't talk much about religion, but it is very important these days because somehow this issue has become Muslim/Jewish and we get lost in the process and people like to think of it in terms of religions. I was born in the city of Nablus in 1949.

AR: So we're the same age.

WA: Yes we are. Cool. I love the year 1949, '48, not so. But, I was the fifth girl in a family that had been anxious to get boys, and so the boys followed. To my parent's credit, I never, even though the reception was a bit rough, but my parents treated boys and girls exactly the same and what was required of one was required of the other. There was a little favoritism just merely, "Take care of your brother," kind of thing, but other then that it was fine. And this story that I like to tell actually about the year I was born is, my sister was born two years earlier, 1947, I was born '49, and somewhere in Colorado in one event, we ran into a Jewish girl who was born in 1950. We were all born within a 50 meter radius. My sister had Palestine on her birth certificate, I had Jordon on my birth certificate and the American Jew had Israel, and that tells you a bit about the story.

AR: And what did your father do?

WA: My father had a liquor store. He's you know, there were two liquor stores in the city, the city of Nablus is very conservative and we lived in Rafidiya , so we lived on the left side, and there were two liquor stores in town owned by two Christians. One in Nablus which was S- then my father was in Rafidiya. His customers were a lot of Muslims.

AR: And so what are some of your earliest memories of your childhood?

WA: My childhood, I had a very happy childhood. I had some issues in my childhood in the sense that somehow being the fifth girl and having heard that they were trying for boys. And I don't know whether it did or I did put on a certain sense of responsibility, that I am responsible for my brother because he is so precious. And then I had to work hard to try and figure out a place for myself in the family because I felt that the oldest had this natural position of being the oldest, the second was really the prettiest, the third one was brilliant, the forth one was so funny and all these natural attributes, nothing is left for me. So what do I do? So I became the most responsible, and I still feel that a lot of times. I don't know whether it is a rationalization on my part trying to understand it, but that is the truth, that is the situation.

AR: So there was one boy after you or more boys.

WA: Two boys. By then my mother was exhausted. No more, seven is plenty.

AR: And then you went to school.

WA: I went to elementary school in the city. No, the first two years I went to a Christian missionary school, CMS, up until the second grade. And then from there I went to public school up to the sixth grade. And then in the seventh grade I transferred to Ramallah to a boarding school, a Friends School in Ramallah, to follow in the footsteps of my sisters. And I graduated from there and my graduation day was actually, actually June 5th, 1967.

AR: So, tell me, do you have family stories from '48, what was the impact of refugees coming in?

WA: Well few memories come, you have to remember my childhood, my knowledge of the Nakba was very gradual. It's just you wake up and you begin to see certain things and you begin to ask questions.

AR: Like what did you see?

WA: Well, like, we had a maid in the house who was my age, twelve years old, and she was a friend of ours and my mother would teach her this. And when you asked, "Where did you get this maid?" and she came from the refugee camp, from Balata refugee camp. And, "What is the Balata refugee camp?" and then you sit with her and you begin to get her story. Even though she was twelve and she herself did not feel it, she was born in the camp, but she knew that story that we were never, we were not always from the camp, that our village and our home. And so it's her stories that came through.

The other memories is my aunt and uncle, my paternal aunt lived in Haifa, and so I've heard of the stories of their four sons living with us, at least two of them living with us, and they're much older then us, but the two younger ones lived with their uncle, and at Christmas time we had to go to Applebaum Gate to meet them and every other Christmas. So it was this big story, "Oh Applebaum, what is this?" so this story unfolded gradually. My parents never sat down and talked much about it when we were kids because they had way too many kids and really the focus of our life was to play, because we were kids and we were allowed to play and since we lived in Rafidiya we had the space to play and we had enough members of the family to play.

AR: So did you ever visit a refugee camp?

WA: Oh yeah, I mean we were in Nablus so we were surrounded, so when we would take Fetaya to the refugee camp, we had to drive up to a point and, if you know Nablus, you know Balata is next to Jacob's Wells, so you go picnic in Jacob's Well, you are next to Balata Camp. There is Asker Camp. Nablus is surrounded by camps, so if you are trying to go to Jenin and Tulkarem you would pass by.

AR: But did you go in and meet other families?

WA: Ah no. We were invited a couple of times. Not necessarily to the camp but more to villages around nearby for me as the [?]. No, I don't recall that. I did that as an adult but not as a child.

AR: So if we are following your history, you have this graduation in '67. What was that like?

WA: Well my father came from town and he said, "I saw a lot of tanks in N-" which was leading up to the '67 war and none of us really believe, my family at least wouldn't believe really, really they're taking this seriously? And I believe we were told we probably cannot go to Ramallah because there are curfews and they are closing the roads and there may be battles and we have just heard of Egypt and Syria and all of this. And my father came with food to provide for the family and he was excited. He was happy, he said, "We are in good hands, the Iraqis are all over town," the Iraqis are the Jews, but we didn't know that. The Iraqis are all over town so we are going to be OK.

AR: So you had your graduation?

WA: No, of course not. We did not have the graduation. I had to witness the war from the window. Two or three months later I went to the city of Ramallah and we went down to the basement of the Friends School and our principal was there and he handed us the diploma and that was that.

AR: What did that feel like?

WA: It didn't feel, well you know you get so excited about dressing up and go out and march with your friends and do this and that, well that had to, you can't have those dreams anymore. And then there was the excitement and the fear and the anxiety about the war, that immediately you can't spend too much time worrying that, "Oh, I didn't have my graduation." There's survival.

AR: So you kind of grew up quickly?

WA: Yeah, even though I actually had been a grown up. I mean I was an older child all my life. A very playful older child, but I was an older child, but suddenly you take on responsibilities.

AR: Like what responsibilities?

WA: Well, part of my responsibility is that I, my father and mother were, and my brother were home. The four of us were home. My youngest brother was caught in Beirut, Lebanon, so he wasn't there and at that time my sister, number three, the brightest, had eloped with her boyfriend who was a Muslim. So my father is going, "Oh my god," Drama! "Bring the gun, let's put the gun to my head." Of course, later on I find out there is nothing in the gun, and I had, I felt a sense of responsibility that I needed to keep my parent's spirit up; less about Palestine and more about the family, but using Palestine to put things in perspective. So, it's like guiding my father, "We've lost the land, you worried about this?" And you know at the same time, when the actual battle was taken place, the first couple of days, because June 5th was the beginning of the war and that was a Monday, Wednesday was the day that Nablus was taken.

AR: So what was that like, the day that Nablus was taken?

WA: Well, it was very scary because we had no shelters, there's nothing, and we had to find a place in the house that was the safest. So we sat all in one corridor and then we had to have the lecture from my father about what will happen if we separate, because there was this fear about that we had heard from the past: about taking prisoners, raping women, whatever it is. But I think all of that dimmed compared to the idea of, we are going to be kicked out. I mean, that's the fear. So we will be, go put whatever you need to take with you together because we are going to be kicked out and I think that's the fear of the Palestinians after '48. So, I remember my father coming to us and basically handing us the little money that we have and some jewelry and we all agreed that if we separated and if we were kicked out, where we were going to meet.

AR: Where were you going to meet?

WA: We were going to meet in Amman at my, at the cousin who lived with us, at his home in Amman. That was the place where we were going to meet.

AR: So you didn't get kicked out of Nablus at that point?

WA: We did not. A few days after that, if you recall the history of the beginning of the occupation, Israel did what it had learned in 1948. Go destroy the villages that you want to take, destroy them, eliminate any possibility of life being there and I think three to four days after that, we woke up and we found our backyard and the neighboring yard full of people, and children and donkeys and babies and mothers and all of that. So we went out to check what happened. I mean the whole yard, hundreds and hundreds of people. And it turned out that they were all from the town of Qalqilya, and that all the bordering towns Israel had moved there. And they kicked the people out and so they started them moving toward Nablus which gave us the idea that next is going to be our turn; that we are all going to be packing together. And I recall actually a woman gave birth to a child and the child now lives in, I think, the Washington DC area, because he looked my sister up one day and he said, "I just want you know that when I was born, that some of the blankets that were used came from your house."

But, so that lasted I think, a couple of nights. But there was a lot of commotion at the United Nations and then they allowed them to go back to Qalqilya and neighboring villages and that's when we had a sense of, okay, perhaps the world is not going to allow them to kick us out this time around. And then we went through about a month of terror basically because they would come at night in the tanks and the jeeps and all of that and sirens and it would be like two in the morning and they would get the sirens going until about five in the morning just around town and then bullets.

AR: And what were you feeling then?

WA: It's all fear. It's all fear. And we all, instead of being each in their room, we had to move together in the middle just to make sure that we're safe. I forgot to say that my sister number two was in the house and she had decided it's time to document this thing. So she went out and when she found out the battle to take Nablus was there, she would go to the window and witness

this thing and then came out and wrote maybe about a ten page letter that she had sent to the family all around the world and said, "Please share this with everyone else, this is what we are going through." And then, of course, the next thing was there was no food. So we had to have, there was total curfew and then they would open the, they would allow us for maybe a couple of hours to go downtown to get some food.

AR: So how would your family organize that?

WA: All together. Nobody went separately. We could not use cars, we could not use anything, because I cannot remember the timing of things, but at some point they asked everybody who had a car to take their car and put it in some park. So for months we did not have a car. And then following that, I recall my father talking to a couple of people saying, "We can't accept this thing, we need to resist," and so they were talking about "OK, who's got guns? If we have guns then we can train everybody else." And that's when I knew that my father had this little gun. I didn't know until then, I mean I, this came after I, OK there was drama about my sister and my father put the gun and I jumped and grab the gun and put it under my mattress for a while. So my father was saying, "We are going to train," and everyone saying, "Stupid. Train what, train who?"

AR: Was he a member of any political party?

WA: Nah. My father worked for the British Mandate years and years ago and he had his own experience in 1936 where...

AR: Can you tell me about that?

WA: Absolutely since it is, since it is behind, and he can't get in trouble for it. But, he was more in the office. What the British did at that time in order to terrorize the community into acquiescing to the presence of the British there, was to go to villages and just pick and choose randomly a number of the young men, kill them, and then the whole town would be quiet. So one day my father was in the office and the names of seven kids who were going to be killed came across whatever the desk there, and my father saw it, sent a message to the village. And he said, "Get those kids out of there," and of course nobody was bright enough to send like 20 kids away, only the seven. And his boss I think knew because what else, and so he suggested to him that he better resign or else if they catch him he would be in trouble and all of that which is what made the change in my father's life. That's when he came back and got married. My father's position was in Tiberius, so he came back to Nablus, the family home, that's where he was born, I think he was born there or perhaps in Jerusalem, but that's where the family, both sides of the family lived and in Rafidia.

AR: How did he meet your mother?

WA: His sister knew her, presumably because we're a Christian family and because it's a minority, people know one another and somehow everybody knows, whether you meet them in church, people tell everybody else. You know it wasn't like they met and they fell in love. It was like oh, she's good for him and she's a good woman and she is and she was, she was and she is.

So his sister decided that it is time for you to marry and this is a great catch. But my father always looked at his seven kids as some mystical connection with the seven guys that he let go. He always felt a sense of connection to them. So after that, he's held back from, you know when you get married and have children you have responsibilities, so he did not get involved in politics.

And then after Israel was established and Jordon took over and we had to do all this dance around King Hussein. And it just you know, you go to the movies, they show Hussein, and you have to stand up and most of us would stand up like this, (crouch) so that they, so that the police would not see us, and my father was caught one day without the picture of the king in his shop and the police came and yelled at him. And then he said, "How could I dishonor him with the liquor?"

So you know, he wasn't involved, but he was very, very man of the street. Working man kind of person in the sense that, that's where his sympathy was. And he went to school in Jerusalem at the Zion School at the top of the hill because it was an Episcopalian school and he was an Episcopalian and that's where he went to school. And my mother went to school in Nazareth, it was an orphanage. And my mother was brought up to feel, to be colonized, you know the British of this and the Europeans, you have to have your tea in the afternoon, and she learned how to make scones and rock cakes. You know I grew up with this stuff thinking it was natural, this is the way people live.

My father, on the other hand, had this rebellious side from when he was really young. He just despised colonialism; he was very much of an Arabist, a pan-Arabist kind of a person. He didn't know he was a pan-Arabist, but over time that's how it evolved. And so in our family there was a very, very strong sense of nationalism. You're Arabs, your Palestinians. Our last name, my last name is really not just Abed, my last name is Abed M- S- because you can never have Abed. Abed is servant and it needs to be followed by one of the names of God. And so my father dropped M- S- from our names because he said the religion is ours, we are first Arab-Palestinians and then we are Christians. And that was his since. And before he died I asked him if he had ever been religious, and he said, "You know, I believed in world ethics." He liked, he said, "I liked Jesus, loved Mohammad," 'cause you know from the politics, and I said, "How about Moses?" He said, "I have trouble there."

AR: And what kind of messages did your mother give to all the children about when you were trying to survive in Nablus and there is all these people in the backyard? Did she mobilize, what did she do?

WA: There wasn't that political awareness to mobilize. The mobilization was, "We have to help," So it was, "Go, get this, let's get this, let's get the food, let's do this." So it was mobilizing to help people as opposed to mobilize to resist. My parents were very worried about us, they had always been concerned about us and in fact that's one of the reasons why we came to American because my two brothers were roughed up and that was after five girls, two boys, we are not going to loose these kids to the Israeli army. And that's when my father and mother made the decision to bring us to America.

So there was always, my family, my parents were family focused, they had their politics, they brought us with very strong sense of identity as Palestinian and as Arabs. It was never just Palestinian without, we were Palestinian Arabs. There was celebration of poetry in my family, my father loved poetry and we would play games that were: you say a verse from a particular

poem and then you have to start, the next person would have to come up with another verse that starts with the last letter and we would just go around and of course my dad would beat the daylights out of us. There was a strong sense of geography in our family because as Palestinians in particular, a good portion of our tragedy is geographic, not just identity and all of that, so we would be studying maps and cities and countries and that would be the conversation at dinner table. "What's the capitol of the city? What kind of government? What are the products of the city, how are they related to this? Is this a kingdom or whatever kind of government it was?" And that was very important. And the fact that we had, like I'll start with me and the two boys younger then me, one of our sisters was very politically active and very intellectual about things.

AR: With what group?

WA: Nothing in particular, we were all nationalists. But her activism when she was at the American University of Beirut, at that time you have to remember that as we were growing up, Palestine was always in the background. But we had Algeria, we had Congo, we had Communism, we had non-allied nations, we had Vietnam later on. I mean we had all these that were our issues. I remember going out as a child in elementary school while I was still in Nablus going out to the streets, demonstrating against the Shah of Iran. We demonstrated against the Tunisian president at that time because he made the statement of saying that we need to talk to Israel, B-.

King Hussein left and right, we were always demonstrating against him, and we would wait, we would be sitting in class and we would hear the boys school coming out to demonstrate in the street, so we would pack our stuff and we would wait, cause they are gonna come and get us out. And of course we were all Palestinians including our principal. Our principal would sit there, but she would have to go through the motion of being upset, "You can't come in here, you can't, you can't take the girls!" And they would push her and then she would have to give in, of course, it was all a charade. And we would all just line up and go from school to school, pull these kids to go out to demonstrations. And my poor father comes around in his V- and he would be collecting his kids around.

One of my earliest memories about what can happen to you if you were caught doing all this stuff by the Jordanians, not the Israelis at this point, was Nablus. There were two young men who were hanged because the public claim was they were spying for Israel. The understood message, everybody, is that they actually were against the Kingdom, and so Palestine, we started to be coming aware that Palestine was starting to be used to the advantage of the ruling power. So, of course I think I was in third grade, I was in public school, and they said that the two guys are going to be shown, their bodies are going to be shown in the middle, in the city center. So I sneaked out and I went, of course, I was this tall. So I ran to the city center during recess and I was able to sneak in so I had front view, I mean, I'm looking at them and it was just awful because they had their head this way and then somebody, the police men would go in and turn them around so it is a lesson to all of us. And I thought I was going to get away with this and go back to school and nobody would know. I was in the bathroom, I was late, that kind of thing. Well my older sister was on the bus going home and she saw me, so she told my father and my mother and I was punished for that. I mean, not severely, I was told not to do that.

AR: That's a major trauma.

WA: Oh yeah, and I have never forgotten that. I can tell you exactly what they looked like. I can tell you…But that was the beginning of intellectual awareness of this thing that we had lived with, the Nakba. And the stories and people come and people go, and refugees and classes of people, and this is lower then that and all this are just if you have seen the film Armarcord, [Fellini film], it's just like slices of life but they never came together. At that time things started coming together, because I would hear it at home and you know I am number five so the conversations were taking place at home but I started paying attention because this alerted me that there is something. And then of course this sister Naila now who was at the American University of Beirut, she was demonstrating for the Algerian Revolution. I recall the story of J- B-. I mean there was a poem and I remember I wanted to be just like J- B-, the Algerian woman who was taken to jail. But my sister I remember also coming home without her watch because she had donated it on the street to the Algerian Revolution. But she came home with the idea of atheism, Marxism, socialism, communism, and all these -isms and I was like, whoa this is really great. So you begin to listen to this thing and you begin to shake some of the things that you take for granted.

AR: And how did your parents react to these –isms.

WA: Oh they enjoyed it. They enjoyed the conversation and it was, my mother was a curious woman so she would ask these questions and because she did not have college education, she lived through whatever excitement my sisters would bring home and my father was just intrigued because naturally that's what he is, he is inclined to be a socialist. I mean that's what his sentiment is, he didn't know it, but that's really where his heart is. So when you talk about workers and the proletariat and all that, it made a lot of sense to him naturally, and governments and the abuse of governments and all of that it was a natural thing for him.

AR: So, doing a little bit of history, '67 comes, occupation. Tell me about personally what happened to you and how did you get from there to here?

WA: We didn't stay very long after the occupation, was in '68 that we came to America.

AR: Why did you pick America?

WA: Because it's always been in the back of our mind. Immigrants always go where other immigrants that they know have gone and my paternal uncle, my father's brother, left in 1904 and he was a stowaway I think, on one of the boats because he was escaping the Ottoman rule and came to America and he was a peddler, He sold linen in the Philadelphia area to rich people's homes. He would sell them all this beautiful linen and things like that. Later he developed an Oriental rug company and at that time he thought he needed to get his younger brother, so when my father graduated from high school his brother said, "Come to America. I have some money and I'll put you through school and you can become an ophthalmologist." And my father thought, "Nah, I need to go to the army and I need to do this and I'm living here." He's a young man, why does he want to do that? So he did not. Then after he married, my uncle again said, "You need to come," especially after '48 and my father said, "No, it's easier to bring the kids in our culture here. We're stable; this is where we want to stay." By the time it was '67 and my two brothers got roughed up.

AR: So tell me about this.

WA: Well, '67 I was not allowed to go to college after that because my parents got scared to death that if I left, I am not going to come back.

AR: Because you would go to Beirut or you would go…

WA: No, no I was going to go to American definitely by then, we were talking America. When my parents started sending us to the Friends School, we knew that it would be America. And because we had family and we had relatives in America, it was easier to go to America and in many ways cheaper to go to America, to go to schools, much cheaper then going to AUB [American University of Beirut].

So, I had to stay home during '68. I became a very good knitter. But my brothers were still going to school and they were in the Jerusalem area. They went to the Saint Georges School, so they were both boarders there. And the kids at that time would talk about the occupation and soldiers and we wanted to eat and sneak down to get some falafel and humus and this and that. And so every time they would see them, a couple of boys together, they would yell at them, "Go your separate way," and yell at that. At one time they were talking with about nothing, but what boys talk about, and the soldiers came and they actually beat them up and they said, "Go back!" And my brother was 13 and started crying to my father, he was homesick, that he's in boarding school, and then on top of that soldiers beat him. Nothing major, but my parents just lived for us, we knew that, they knew that, so for any of us to be in danger was not worth it.

AR: So describe the process of packing up, leaving, permits, papers, where did you go?

WA: Well some of it was very humorous, a lot of it was very painful, a lot of it was very dramatic. We were, it's really funny, in many ways we were very sophisticated. We had a lot of non-Arabs come to the house. We had older sisters who were interested in archeology and anthropology, and politics and sciences so the new ideas were coming into the house often and we were not very closed, religious family, even though my mother was religious and we had to go to church when we could. My father added the lighter side about our religion so it wasn't forced on us, there was just celebration.

But we also had very strong sense of Islamic identity as well, and that is part of being an Arab. And the language my father had a sense of strong… that we acquired, his friends were Muslims and there were a lot of appreciation for Islam and Muslim. And all of this and part of being nationalistic is embracing all of this and we have a very strong sense of, not strong, but if someone asked me about, "Are you Christian?" I always say, "I am a Christian Arab or Arab Christian," never Christian because I don't connect with the Christians somewhere else because of the faith. But I know that Christian Arabs had a major role to play in defining the Palestinian identity, in the Arab identity, in the resistance movement, when you look at the Palestinian movements and you see George Habash and H- and you see a lot of Christians. The Communist party, anything that was not religious had a lot of Christian influence because that's when you're a minority, that's how you survive. You make sure that it's not the religion that takes over. But as a community the Palestinians at that time were not very religious community. There were all these beautiful ideas that were floating at that time. It was like Renaissance, we were just

coming out of colonialism and all these young men and women were so excited about all these -isms around the world and the possibilities and the fact that we have a connection with the Congolese, it was really very nice.

So when we decided, after '67, after seeing all this and worrying about his kids, my father wrote to his brother and said, "I think the time has come." So, my uncle revived all the papers, I mean he always had the papers ready just the moment my father would say, "I'm coming." So, he revived that, in '67 is when they started, or late '67 and we did not leave until September 15th of '68, so it took all the papers to get done. We had to fill a lot of bizarre papers like, why are we coming to America? Are we going to be prostitutes or overthrowing the American government? But…

AR: And you had Jordanian passports?

WA: We had Jordanian passports. We got tickets on the boat.

AR: And you didn't have refugee cards?

WA: No we were never refugees. We were in Nablus. We really never experienced the refugee thing. We experienced the immigrant thing, but not the refugee thing.

AR: So you went from Nablus to?

WA: Huntington Valley, Pennsylvania via, we went to Haifa.

AR: And tell me about that.

WA: Before we got there we had to go say goodbye to the trees, we had to go say goodbye to the soil, to the places. And we had favorite trees in our yard so we had to hug them and kiss them and we wanted to make sure that our neighbors took care of these particular trees and on and on.

AR: Who would take care of your house? Was someone gonna?

WA: My aunt was left there. And we didn't want to sell the house because we were scared it would be Israelis who would buy, so we left it for my aunt to sell. I think we rented it, we had people who were renting it, and then when my paternal aunt came a few years after that, she sold it to a Palestinian family and they still own it and I have been to it a couple of times since. So we got in a car, I can't remember how we got to Haifa, but we got to Haifa.

AR: So you had to cross, I mean you could just cross through checkpoints?

WA: Yeah we had to go through Jenin, but at that time it was not as major. The checkpoints were actually on the boarders. The checkpoints today are in the towns and the cities and everywhere else. But then it was one of those where you're crossing…I can't remember how we got to Haifa, but we did get to Haifa and it was my two brothers, my parents, and I.

AR: Where was everybody else?

WA: They were traveling; they were all over the place. They were not living in the house at that time. So we got on a boat that was Greek American and we were almost in steerage, I mean, we were really down. It was very funny experience, but one of the things that stand out very strongly in my mind is for a few days on the boat nobody, none of the Greeks would speak to us. Nobody and we thought, "God, these people!" We thought the Americans are the cold people, the Greeks. And then one day I came out of the room and I was wearing the Jerusalem cross, the Byzantine cross and suddenly I was embraced by everybody and talking.

They thought we were Jews because we got on the boat from Haifa and they did not want to talk to us. When they knew that we were not, because of the cross, it was OK and that was the first experience that I had from the other side. Because all my life it has been, the Jews are the bastards and then now I'm going, "Oh, wow, what it feels like to be a Jew," so the adjustments. So you get these moments in your life where like you get a sobering moment where a light goes on and then you begin to build on it so, the early memories of using Palestine by governments, this one was the first time that alerted me that okay, what did they experience even though I read about it, but I could not have sympathy. I was so much wrapped up in my own pain to have sympathy for the Jews.

AR: What did you take on the boat with yourself?

WA: We wanted to take a couple of pieces of furniture, but we couldn't. We took some things that were very Arabic, like what we call *menal,* it was just all brass, it was beautiful. So we took a lot of the things that were very Arabic. We took a lot of stuff that looked very Palestinian.

AR: So you had trunks?

WA: We had trunks, oh yeah. We were coming on the boat, four of us, I mean, we were leaving forever and as kids there was a little bit of excitement. For me there was excitement and fear because I am going to go to college. I don't have to stay at home and then we were giggling and laughing with my brother because there were funny people on the boat and my father had a sense of you know, would comment on anything

AR: And could he take his money out?

WA: He took his money, he took everything; there was nothing that stopped us. There really was nothing at that time. It really was almost benign, the occupation, compared to what we have now. It was basically just border to border, and when you crossed that border and for them, it was delightful. Another Palestinian family leaving, so why would they stand in our way? So, we were on the boat for 15 days and landed in New York and that's when I had a knot in my stomach because I realized, I don't love America. I mean I remembered, it's not like I don't realize, I remembered I don't like America because America helped the Israelis and America is my enemy and because after Vietnam and America, all these things about American politics and I suddenly thought, what am I doing in America? But of course, I'm with family so there's also excitement in that.

AR: Do you remember coming into the port?

WA: Came into the port. You're all standing up trying to balance yourself, your legs are spread apart because you have to balance yourself. And then this guy comes up and we're all timid, kind of sticking with one another, and we all spoke English and we read English, let's put it that way, speaking something. And so at one point this huge man, what seemed to be huge, he was big but he wasn't probably that huge with blue eyes, blond hair, came up to me and said, "Miss. Abed?" and I turned to my father and said, "The CIA found out that we're here. Let's get back on the boat and let's go home." But turned out that my cousin, he was a truck driver that my cousin had brought and he said to get our luggage and our furniture.

My first experience in America was hilarious because I had seen all these Doris Day, Rock Hudson movies and America and middle class and this and that and then of course you land on 42nd street and I was going, "What?" It's like a schizophrenic, I mean I knew about racism and the civil rights movement in America and combined it with Vietnam. Of course I knew it from a third world perspective. So it's all one party is to blame and that's it and it's usually America and the West and capitalism and all that stuff that I have in my head, yet the romantic part of America and the movie, I lived with those all my life kind of thing

AR: So your relatives were in New York?

WA: In Philadelphia, but they came to New York to pick us up. These were the kids of the uncle who brought us. So we did come. We stopped at Howard Johnson's and we had the most awful meal which was bloody hamburger that was leaking blood. This is all I remember and next to it is coleslaw with awful mayonnaise and soggy French fries with blood on them because they were sitting, and I thought, "God, these Americans. Not only are they horrible, they eat blood." I don't think I ever touched hamburgers after that. It was just too awful.

Two years after this, I mention this because it is very important to what happened to me afterwards, is I had in my head all this anger about American and what America had done to us and to the world and to it's own people kind of thing. This anger of, you know people would say, but it's the American government and I would say, "I'm sorry, I learned it was government by the people, for the people, to the people. Where the hell are the people? Why aren't they anything about it? Why aren't they stopping this?" And so I found myself isolating more and more. I didn't want to be part of America. I didn't want to assimilate at anything. I wanted to, you know, and I started getting active in things that have to do with Palestinian culture and getting the Palestinian voice out there because I felt a certain sense of responsibility, I have got to get this voice out there and I didn't know enough because I am not political by nature, but you can't be a Palestinian and not be.

AR: So you are now how old?

WA: I was 19. No, by that time 20, because it's a couple of years after that, 20, 21 in fact. And I remember in the fall I was looking at a tree, you know the fall in Pennsylvania, you've got the same thing in the Boston area. I couldn't see the beauty of the tree, I just could not see the beauty, and it was ugly just because it was on American soil. And I thought for a moment, "Ooo wait a minute, stop. You can't do this thing." And I remember telling myself, "America can live without you, you can't live with America, so what are you going to do with this?" And at that time I started facing my fear of assimilation, that I didn't want to forget where I came from, I

didn't want to become one of those people I hated. So what is there? Isolation did not serve me, assimilation I will never do because I don't want to forget who and what I am. So I came up with a word at that time and I had no idea what it meant, but I thought, it must be integration.

And I started my process of integration at that time. I said if I am going to be bi-cultural then I will have a choice of what to take in and what to give up. And then you go through the process, OK, what am I giving up, I need to know it. So I went back into my identity. Who am I? What is it to be a Palestinian? What is it to be an Arab? What is it to be a Christian-Arab? What is it to be an Arab woman? What do I want out of this? Family relationships? All these morays and values that I carried with me because I was told, this is the way things are, do they really serve me? Are they really true? And that's over time. And then look at America and say what is beautiful about America and what can I take in? What can I come up with?

It was very painful, very lonely process, very rough, and when I came to that point early on when I saw the tree, I remember going home and crying and realize that my father was unhappy, my mother was unhappy, and my two brothers were unhappy and my father at that time said, "Listen, it's not late, the house is not sold, we can pack our stuff and go back to Nablus," and that's when I think we all sobered up and said, "I can't, I can't do that. We have to go through with this."

AR: And what was he working at?

WA: He came when he was 60, he came at a time when in his own community he would have retired, been respected, given all the honors that you give an older person and money didn't mean anything. We were not a well-off family, we just didn't know it, a happy family. We had what we needed. We were allowed to do whatever it is, our parents were there for us, it wasn't… and we, with all the insecurity, political insecurity around us, we were extremely secure at home. There was no question in our mind what the home was like. Oh, he didn't have to work and I assume my uncle was sending some money because how could he have taken care of seven of us with my mother and himself? He came initially and he decided he needs to find a job. Somebody told him to, and I have never said this before, but he worked, I think as a custodian in a hospital and he just couldn't take it.

AR: Too humiliating

WA: Absolutely, and for us too to see our father at 60 doing this. So then he went and worked with my nephew. His brother had died since. He worked with my nephew in the Oriental rug company and he was happy then, always making up stories about carpet, Oriental rugs, you know. And I think that was until he collected enough so that he could have social security. I mean that was really the purpose of the work. It's not the salary and all of that.

AR: So your folks went for a citizenship as quick as possible.

WA: Well, we came as immigrants and we had our green cards; we got it on the boat, before you get into the port, you had your green card. And in 1973 is when we became citizens, I believe it was '73. And all of us went together, and we stood there with like 250 people and you had the Asians and everybody's so happy to be Americans and we're standing there and my father said, "Why is it that we are the only ones who are not happy to become Americans?"

AR: Did they name the countries?

WA: They named the countries and we were Jordon, of course, you know. And then we Pledged Allegiance and my father mumbled, you know that's when we was talking. He was not saying Pledge Allegiance, he was saying,"Why are we not happy to become Americans?" I said the Pledge of Allegiance because I felt you have to say it, and then they gave us flags and we very quickly hid the flags because there was joy and shame at the same time. I had no trouble giving up my Jordanian passport because I did not have loyalty to the passport. Had it been a Palestinian paper, it would have been harder. Now my father did not, I mean he gave up the Jordanian citizenship, but kept the passport because my father had an Ottoman paper, he had British papers, he had Palestinian papers, he had Jordanian papers, he had Israeli papers, and he had Israeli, meaning Palestine under Israel, just the indication there was, and then American. My brother has all these papers now and all the birth certificates.

AR: So then you went to college?

WA: We arrived October 5th is when we landed, it was a Saturday; Monday morning I was in class. They had already started calculus and I had no idea what calculus is.

AR: What school?

WA: It was called the Academy of the New Church of Jerusalem in a town called B-, just outside of Philadelphia. They had already started because they started I believe, in early September and I thought I was good in sciences, but I just could not catch up with calculus, I had no idea what the heck they were talking about, and the year that I skipped hurt tremendously, just keeping up with things. But I recall really being homesick and wanting to just hide under the bed was when I went to American government class. I had no idea what Senate and Congress and what they do and the Bill of Rights, the Constitution. I had no idea because at home in Nablus, Ramallah, and Palestine we learned world history. America was not that important to learn its history. America for us was the political demon basically, I mean that's really how we learned, but it was through politics that we learned about America. However, world history and geography and all that we learned everything about. We knew everything about the British Empire and the French and this and that. In addition to that, about the Arab history. So coming to America and beginning to see it in a different light and having to learn about it was very difficult.

AR: Did you have friends, did you make friends? Did you only make Arab friends?

WA: For the longest time I did not make friends. Not because people were not trying, but because I did not allow it. I just didn't know what to do with them, I didn't know what to say and they didn't know what to do with me, so they would come to me and the conversation had to always be serious because what do you talk to a foreigner except about serious stuff, about their country and this and that. And sometimes I just wanted to talk about the weather. I could talk about the weather, I'm OK, I could talk about how difficult this is, but I think it was both ways, that we just, you know you have to be inviting for people to come up to you.

But I needed every excuse to hate even more, so the Americans are cold and the

Americans this and that and dealing with the nonverbal communications in America was just awful. It was really awful because the use of space. Well, you know, I'm an Arab. You touch, you breathe on the person and your personal space is so close, so small. So I come here and I'm talking with the Americans here and I am so close and they pull away. I touch them and they don't like that. I breathe on them and they're not too happy. And initially you'd say, "Do I smell? I know I brushed my teeth or whatever," and finally you don't want to be responsible for it, so it's blame. You don't understand this, so these people are cold and I didn't understand this until a few years later that there is a difference. Because suddenly to avoid being hurt all the time you begin to acquire, to learn that OK, I need to stand a little farther and they don't behave this way. If I don't touch them, they don't behave this way. So you start behaving like them and then you feel like, OK, safe. But I didn't understand it. So the judgment remained in my head, but I learned to protect myself.

AR: And what did you study?

WA: I studied elementary school education. I studied for two years and then I thought, I became very dramatic. I quit for a year because I thought, do I really want to be a teacher? Or is it that I always believed that I was going to be a teacher? So for a year I decided to go and become a secretary and learn short hand. So I would carry my, it was a great experience, I would carry myself on the train, go down to Philadelphia, go to this class and then in the middle of this I realized, I hated this and so I would run away, find excuses to go to the market or whatever and not do the class. And I realized that, OK, this is really ridiculous, you really do want to be a teacher, so I had to wait for the year to be over and then I went back and got, and then I taught for three years then decided, OK.

AR: Where you living at home?

WA: Yea, oh yeah, absolutely. And I stayed living at home until I was 28 and I wasn't allowed to move out until I bought a place. My father decided, "I will help you with the down payment. You buy a place. You don't move from your parent's home to an apartment." And I said, "OK." But I taught for three years and then decided then, very dramatically because I tend to be dramatic, that I've always been protected. My life has always been like this. Even the college I went to. I want to be a number. I want to be invisible, because I have always been a minority wherever I went. And so I went to Penn State to be invisible. Well, when you're a graduate student you are not really invisible because you are part of the department, but it felt good. I didn't go to get a degree, that was not my motivation. I just wanted to be invisible. I just wanted to be a number, wanted to experience being a nothing.

And then I went and worked in Colorado for a computer company and I think in, when I was teaching is, I became extremely active in taking, in articulating the Palestinian voice. And went to graduate school and I started getting involved in student associations and even when I was teaching in the classroom, I would fight because they would want teachers, if you teach the Middle East you have to teach Israel and I would fight like mad not to do this thing. And actually the principal, I was a good teacher and the principal allowed me to develop my own curriculum. They did not have that, and what convinced him was the Crusaders. He wanted me to teach the Crusaders and I said, "How do you want me to teach this? I'm happy to teach, I'll be very happy to teach the Crusaders, but what do you want me to do?" And he said, "Well you

have to teach this," and I said, "Well that's not the story and that's not the way I experienced it or I know it."

And so I explained to him, if you want me to do this, this is what I will teach and he told me, "No, develop something that's different," so I developed courses, a whole curriculum about war and what starts wars and the stories of war. How do we hear this thing? What instigated that? Those who lost the war, can we see the war from their perspective? Can we understand that? So I took the whole thing and did that.

But I had been involved in giving presentations. I had to learn to dance so that we could go and dance Palestinian dances. I joined a group, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in Philadelphia. Didn't know anything, I was quoting Marx, didn't know what the heck Marx said. I really had no idea, but I just loved the whole idea of Marxists and all of that. We have circles and we'll meet and talk about it. We did nothing, but, and then I got involved with, my first dialogue group was in Colorado and I believe that was as a result of the 1982 invasion of Lebanon. And so there was a need to come because I could sense that there were enough people in the Jewish community who wanted to reach out and the Palestinians are always looking for ways to grrr [*makes a struggling, fighting face*] and of course we had a gathering and we had to bring a Quaker because Quakers mediate. So the Quaker sat and we had Palestinians on one side and Jews on the other and we felt very good about ourselves, that we were big enough to be in the same room, and of course it fizzled out because it was based on absolutely nothing except everybody wanting it.

I had some friendships as a result, but I remember getting engaged with universities that go from campus to campus to speak, organize students to speak, organize events, bring other people. But my voice started softening even though the dialogue thing fizzled out, but my voice over time started softening because I was beginning to realize that to be effective you can't just attack people all the time. You can't always say, "I'm the victim, I'm the victim, I'm the victim," and you can't bombard them with so much information it's overwhelming; that you need to engage people. And for some reason at that time I came to realization that stories, this is how we're going to go, we need to be telling stories and I started talking about identities and stories and all of that which was more captivating because people could relate more to that.

And then after that I just, whatever I went, I ended up focusing more and more on how do I become more effective. When I came to Ann Arbor I joined Rabia and Farouq and Huda with Palestine Aid Society and we were extremely active then and it was Tel al-Zaatar and all this, well it was after Tel al-Zaatar, but it was a time, there was more hope, there was more activism. And we used to give presentations, put on conferences, do all sorts of things, and now just the whole thing is down to being charitable thing for basically a couple of organizations, you know for the embroidery and all of that.

But over time what happened is that, you know I consider myself a very well integrated person, wherever I am, I don't like a very well defined identity. I don't want to be seen just as a Palestinian. I don't want to be seen just as an Arab or just as a woman. I love my multiple identities and I, by nature I am comfortable in chaos. I like chaos. So I am comfortable navigating through these things. There's something lovely about it and I found it very rewarding because so many people can fit with them, a lot of these things, so my world becomes more interesting. But through that I found that my Palestinian voice is making more impact because people see me as the person I am and that's one of my identities and if it's my identity and that's how I see the world, who are you to question that?

But in the last five years, six years, being part of Zeitouna, which is the dialogue group,

that's the fourth dialogue group that I have been part of. The one that has left an impact on my… and has helped me transform, opened my heart, I mean overtime, my heart was opening up for the Jews. It's not like it wasn't, but I would say the greatest transformation was now because I really wanted the easy way out. I wanted Jews to tell me that, this is a religion, so I could come back and say, "Well we can't have a theocracy." Wouldn't life be easy this way? Then I could just have my argument and I'm happy and all of that. But, you know, this is not the way it is. So I go to the first gathering and every Jewish woman in that group was saying something different and none of them were religious and you grow to love these people and that's their story and you're celebrating and just as people see my life and my this and that, I am seeing this thing. So I went, and over time I read quite a bit about the Holocaust but I felt I was dishonest in the way I used the Holocaust in my conversations and I used, I found myself….

AR: Talking about the Holocaust…

WA: Well when I started reading about the Holocaust and I realized as I am providing a voice for the Palestinians over time, and we're thinking about 25 years and [?]. I would talk about the suffering of the Jews and I would talk about the Holocaust and I would talk about this and that but it was always with, but I didn't do that to you kind of thing. And being part of Zeitouna and having to look inward and to look at what are the assumptions, I realized that I was a hypocrite, or manipulative, one of those things. But I realized that I was using it more as a strategy. If I show sympathy to your cause then you will show sympathy to mine. So I need to work on internalizing it enough, to not understand it, but to get it. And I got it. And I got it through the stories, I got it through the readings.

So when I speak about it, about the suffering of either people, when I speak about the tragedy, when I speak about the Holocaust and Nakba, in my mind I don't even connect them, even though they are connected in some way. I separated them because I needed to look at each one of them and give it the respect that is due to that experience and what has this experience done to these people. When I see them come together is the fact that I know with every fiber in my body that our destiny is intertwined and our future is together. I don't know how long it is going to take us before we realize that we have to coexist and live together. But when I brought them together, I had to bring them from what has this, how did this tragedy mold the people and made them what they are, make these decisions so I can understand. Because one of the things I never understood was the fear of the Jews. It's like, excuse me you've got the bomb, you've occupied us, you're killing our children, you're doing this when you're destroying everything else, you own this land, and you haven't defined your borders yet. What are you talking about? What is this fear? I should be the one scared. And yet I don't have that fear. And so I had to understand that it's really DNA level. This is beyond fear. This is something that is at a DNA level. And that if I don't understand that, and if I don't accept it as the reality of the other, so to speak, I will never cross the line to erase this.

AR: Do you remember the first time you met a Jew that wasn't an Israeli soldier?

WA: Yeah, I remember it was in one of the presentations we had. I was still going to college, undergraduate. Part of our political activities were at Penn State and I met simultaneously what then I considered the good Jew and the bad Jew. I met the Jews who really saw things as I saw them and were pro… well I wouldn't say pro-Palestinian, but they were really angry at Zionism

and what Israel has done in their name and all that. You see the people who are just… And then at the same gathering I saw the anti-Semite. And I actually recognized him as an anti-Semite, as opposed to a supporter of my cause. And I was like, wow, OK we don't want this guy in this group because he is saying some things that just, he can take the name Jew out of there and can put in the name Palestinian, and it would be the same, or Black, whatever. There is something wrong in that. And I was so proud that I actually recognized it. Because I had never understood, what are you talking about anti-Semitism? I don't hate the Jews because they're Jews, you know, when I first heard of that. But it was an exercise of how do you…

I spent a lot of time trying to define my enemy. Who is that entity that pained me? Who is that who injured me? You know, and I started out with, of course it's the Jews, and then, no, no, no, it's not all the Jews, because I met some good ones, so it must be the Israelis. Well all these Palestinians and all these good Israelis, it cannot be the Israelis, so finally I land on, it's the Zionists! And then of course you know we come to Zeitouna and I thought about the Zionists and now they come to you with there's cultural Zionism and there's spiritual Zionism, and I said, "Give me my enemy!" Alright so my enemy is political Zionism, but you know my enemy is beyond that. It's the same enemy that you have. It's what we all have, an important realization.

AR: Just a few more questions. What happened to your sister who married the Muslim?

WA: They went to Saudi Arabia for a couple of years and then by that time we were in America and my father helped bring them to America. I'm not quite sure whether it's my father doing the papers for them or because her husband is a physician, the hospital he worked at worked the papers. I don't have the story straight. I have it one way, my brother has it another. So whatever. They were here, and we for the sake of pictures reenacted their marriage and they're married. They've got grandchildren and in fact he became my father's physician so all of it was a passing thing because it's what will people say. And then you sober up and you realize you lost a country.

AR: Memory of childhood traumas, psychological price…

WA: Well it is not that traumatic. In fact I get that now more than I got it then, because the tragedy is getting worse and worse and I wake up at night now more than ever, realizing that something is slipping through our hands, through our fingers, and I have to take a deep breath and just say, what will be will be. I just have to do my things. I have to affect whatever I can affect. I can't do this thing. And then other times it's not the concern, it's more the anger. Even though I'm not an angry person by nature, but there's a lot of anger about how the world is turning the other way. And anger not just for the Palestinians, actually, but anger that they're not allowing us to come together. It's just that nobody is grabbing this opportunity to say these people don't know what the heck they're doing. They're not sick, they're traumatized. Something needs to happen and so there's anger at the world.

There's a lot of anger at the Arab governments. I have a lot of anger at Hamas. I have a lot of anger at the Palestine Authority. You look at the lives of these people that are being wasted. I have a lot of concern about the young Palestinian life I don't want to lose. I want these kids to experience the Palestine experience, not the physical place, but the home. And my home was definitely a Palestinian home, but probably if you looked at it, it would be any other home. But it's a loving home. I didn't have to worry. I didn't have to be concerned about food. We did not have to be concerned about somebody breaking into our house. There was nothing. There was a

very strong sense of safety. And I look at kids and I know that they can't. I find myself getting involved with music and the arts to try to get music to kids over there, to encourage, raise some funds, to get them to do their own… because I feel… or creative, is there any way we can help them be creative. Just let them. Let them be. But I know that Palestinian psyche is not normal. I don't want us to be like the Jews, and live our lives as victims. I don't want the sense of victim, victim, so I get upset when the world looks at the Palestinians as nothing but a cause, and a tragedy, and a Nakba and this and that. We are more than this. We've got a history. We've got a culture. We've got tradition. We've got stupid things. We've got fun things. We've got food. We've got land. We've got families, the whole thing. We're all of that.

And a lot of times I'm angry at a lot of Jews who take on our cause with such venom about Zionism and about Israel that they refuse to see that I need them to be gentler in order to give me access. I need them to take my voice in a more loving way. So it's obviously your issue, whatever it is you're angry with, you're betrayed, and so you are working out your betrayal using me as your way to work things through. Just like these governments, Arab governments, using Palestinians to get their way. I don't want that. I like the firm, speaking truth to power kind of thing. And I don't want it all sweetness and gentility and it's all dialogue and all of that. That's not what I'm talking about. I want the voice to be authentic, true, just as I have spent so much time embracing and accepting the trauma of the Jews and understanding, finally getting, their fear. I don't excuse them for this, it doesn't help. But I understand. To stop being worried about a Jew telling my story, if it's done in the same way that I would tell their story because they see me as themselves. And I've always said that I had to deal a lot with the other, and my view about the other is when I look into your eyes, who do I see, really, except my reflection.

And so, this is what keeps me awake. This is what bothers me. It's not the trauma of [?], because I really was not traumatized. I look with yearning and I think fondly of the people I knew from the camp. I went back and lived in Jabalya camp [refugee camp in Gaza] for about five days, not lived but stayed with a family for five days. I took a group from here in '91, so it was during the First Intifada and my fear there was, "Will they ever accept me as one of their own, or have I become Americanized?" And at the moment you're there and they embraced me, and I said, "Of course! I am one of them." So I think of these people, even though I have family in Gaza, I don't know them but I have family. I don't think of them as much as I think of Jabalya, because I knew families there. These are the things, I get concerned about the Bedouins in the Negev. I mean my heart breaks for these people and I just get angry and I want to do something about that. So the more inclusive, the more you bring in people into this, it ceases to be just a Palestinian problem, the better and the worse it is, because you're taking on now the bigger, but then you're also taking in more people that are getting the story out, are getting the voice out. And frankly my dream in life is not to worry about Palestine any more. I want it dissolved so I can just go pursue other things.

AR: Where do you consider home?

WA: Ann Arbor. In one of your questions on the forms, it said if you were allowed to go back, would you go back? And I said, "Yes I will," only because I want to make the choice, even though I came as a choice, and it was my parents' choice, but I want to go there and I want to make the decision whether I want to be in Palestine or not. The place that I yearn for, believe it or not, is not Nablus, is Haifa, Yaffa, because I think they're gorgeous. I love the two places there. I love the Galilee and I love the Negev. There's something magnificent about them that I

yearn and I have finally realized I am not ready to give that up. So I'm just going to have to continue to work to bridge whatever we can so that we share it.

But home for me is Ann Arbor. This is where I have my community; this is where I'm not one of those people who…I've taken the journey where I had to cut the umbilical cord. I did that in '81. I knew that I was living with the excuse, I couldn't integrate here because I was holding onto there, that's home, I'm going to go back, back, so nothing here was real, nothing was permanent, nothing was this and that. So I went and did dramatic journey of going to town, and walking around my house, finally going into the house, cutting the umbilical cord, looking back and said, it's somebody else's home. And home will always be, Palestine will always be [touches her heart] here. And I may refer to it once in a while, back home kind of thing, but in reality it isn't. And it's not America, it's not that, it's really Ann Arbor. This is the community here. I probably would retire and maybe die here. But I will go, and if I have to live there for a couple years because I'm needed, I would do that. I definitely would do that. But I also, I would love to do other things. Would love to.

AR: Thank you.

WA: It's not trauma I'm sorry.

AR: No apologies.