Video interview at Boston College
By Alice Rothchild

Salma Abu Ayyash transcript

AR: Why don't we start with you telling me your name and where you were born.

SA: My name is Salma Abu Ayyash and I was born in Amman, Jordan in 1968.

AR: Where was your family in 1948?

SA: In 1948 both my parents were in a village called Bayt Ommar outside of Hebron. It's in what is called now the West Bank.

AR: And what happened?

SA: In 1948 they were pretty much on the radio listening to news all the time. I don't think the village was under attack. And so they were sort of bystanders watching what's happening and what's unfolding to the rest of Palestine.

AR: Did they tell you any stories about what they saw?

SA: No, it was mostly just those who had a radio. I shouldn't say watching 'cause they couldn't watch anything. They were just congregating in places where people had radios and listening to whatever reports that would come out.

AR: And can you describe the village and what they did there?

SA: The village is an agricultural village and up until now it's mostly farmers. There's beautiful land surrounding Bayt Ommar. It's very fertile land. There's a lot of aquifers, and it's in the Hebron area, which, I don't know if you've been there, but it's really very pretty and very fertile. And so they were all farmers. My grandfather from my mother's side though, bought a truck, a big truck at some point, and he started traveling across the Arab world bringing merchandise, mostly fruits and vegetables from Bayt Ommar in Palestine into other Arab countries. But in different seasons, like he would be a farmer for awhile and then he would be driving his truck for other purposes. My other grandfather just owned land. And everybody, I mean, both sides of the family, they had ten children and they all worked the land.

AR: And after '48…

SA: I mean, they continued their lives. I mean it wasn't, I remember my grandfather from my maternal side talking about living through the British Mandate and then going from one occupier to the next to the next. And during the Jordanian control of the West Bank I think there wasn't anything devastating happening to them. Life continued and

they were still farming and working their land, etc. There wasn't anything devastating in any sense.

AR: British mandate?

SA: Well, my maternal grandfather was very smart, very good with languages, and he learned English very quickly, and as a young man, he, not officially, but he was interpreting for the soldiers, etc. And he is a very gregarious person and people loved him. So he spent a lot of time talking with the soldiers and officials there. He didn't have anything good to say about them, but he sort of was in their circles. He wasn't at all enamored by their presence or anything of the sort. It's just that they lived under colonization basically and they were not treated well. They were looked down upon. The way they dressed was scrutinized and I think at some point my grandfather started wearing regular pants and that had him score with his British people he knew.

So these were just some little, I really don't know exactly what was going on. Actually my grandfather used to tell a story when I was younger, and this is why I like your project. And we would just listen to them and a lot of them would forget the details of… And then when I was old enough to realize that I needed to somehow record that history, he passed away and six months later my grandmother passed away. And my other grandparents had already passed away. So there is a lot of lost stories that I didn't get to hear. And I'm sure their life under British colonization was not easy.

AR: Do you remember any vignettes or any details?

SA: Any details? Well, grandmother, my maternal grandmother was from Argentina actually. My maternal great-grandfather, due to poverty, just hopped on a boat, him and his brother, and they didn't know where they were going. This was in the early 1900s, they just wanted to make a living. Things were very, they were very poor and situations were dire, and I mean they were under colonization. So they ended up…

AR: They were under the Ottoman Empire?

SA: I don't know exactly when they left, but they went to Argentina and one of them stayed. So we have family there that we don't know much about. And then he lived there for awhile and then came back with his wife and six children. And my grandmother, who was thirteen at the time, had a lot to say about her transition from Buenos Aires into Bayt Ommar, the culture shock basically. She talked about sailing in a boat and leaving their dog who swam after the boat for a long time. And then arriving in Bayt Ommar and basically going into, they arrived at night to the village, and they had no clue where they were.

But all she remembers is, I mean, they were farmers and people used to live on the second floor of the barn and the animals would be at the bottom. So she's a city girl and she was totally not happy with where she was. And they had to learn the language. And her mom was a nurse and she was very well respected in the village because she acted really like the doctor in the village. She taught people how to iron. There's a lot of stories about my great-grandmother from my maternal side. I mean, people used to swear

by her name. She was very well loved. And she did a lot of herbal medicine, and she really got to know the flora of Bayt Ommar. You know, she was definitely someone that people still remember to this day. And my grandmother, when she was I think 19, got married to my grandfather who was very handsome and very charming. When you look at their wedding pictures and stuff, they seem to be happy and some photos from like early '40s, I have some of these photos if you are interested. I mean, it seemed like they had a nice life and they were happy together.

AR: Why did he come back?

SB: My great-grandfather, I think it was, this great-grandfather actually committed suicide. He was manic-depressive from what I've heard about him. And he probably was depressed there, or who knows, or missed his family and had to come back. And brought everybody with him, which is quite a transition for the whole family. They spoke very little Arabic. So my grandmother, when my husband met her, who grew up in Brooklyn, he said, "I never thought I would meet someone who speaks Arabic with a Spanish accent." So he came back probably for, because he missed his family, because his other brother remained. And that's one long term project that I have is to go and find that other brother and see how they fared out basically. And also my great-grandmother had two sisters that were still in Argentina. And people don't have any contact. I mean we have names but we don't have addresses or anything of the sort.

So she got married to this guy and so my grandfather from my maternal side was very, as I told you, he's very talkative. He got everybody's attention. So I never heard my grandmother until he died. So there was a period of, until actually he got a stroke. He got a stroke first which affected his speech and that's probably why he passed away; he couldn't exist without talking. And that's when she wouldn't shut up, and she started all her stories about coming to Palestine and the trip and enduring all of this and everything. And this I remember because I was old enough. But as I told you, I missed out on a lot of my grandfather's oral history and all of that. He used to tell us a lot of stories about traveling in the desert 'cause he would be on his truck meeting all of these Bedouin people and you know, some funny things.

He was a trouble maker. But there is something, the political oral history of what they've endured and all of that, they weren't interested. I mean it was like it was too painful for them to talk about these things. And even my parents, this is something that as an adult I really was upset with them about. Like, why didn't you tell me this? Why didn't you tell me that? Why did I have to learn this from this book and then find out that you were there during that time?

There wasn't a lot of communication about the Nakba [1948] or the Naksa [1967] or any of that stuff and… well, you know my father is a political figure and he basically said, "Well, I lived in Bayt Ommar and I used to read Shakespeare using the kerosene lamp, and I taught myself everything, and you need to teach yourself everything and whatever."

It's like he was defensive about it, that I needed to learn all of that history on my own. But it wasn't really the history that I was looking for, it was more the stories, like you know…And not necessarily about the occupation and Nakba, but just then about life. It just seems that it's something that they wanted to share in anyway. I just recently

learned, for example, that my grandfather from my paternal side, who was this incredibly tall person, very handsome, and apparently had owned a lot of land and he had a lot of... To this day the Abu Ayaash in Bayt Ommar have a lot of say and people respect them. He was very much into education and into educating his female daughters.

So in Bayt Ommar, at some point when my one of aunts, the eldest one wasn't interested in education and he forced her to go to school and she didn't want to learn anything. The one that came after, my Aunt Ghuzlan was/is brilliant and she's very smart and she wanted to learn, but the school for girls only went up to fourth grade because there was no interest. After the fourth grade, most of the families just took out their girls out of school. He forced the teacher to hold a classroom for my aunt all by herself, until she got to sixth grade and then she could move on to Hebron to go to the other school. She was the first one from Bayt Ommar to actually finish her high school education and to get a university degree. So this stuff I only learned last year. And it's like these kind of stories, I don't know if people just don't spend enough time with each other telling, you know people are so separated, there's so much going on, but for me as an adult, these are the kind of stories that I look for and that I really want to know.

AR: Did they ever tell you what the house looked like?

SA: Oh yeah, yeah. I visited the house. I have pictures of my son actually there. The house is still there, the old house from my paternal side, the house is still there. One of my cousins from that side is living in parts of it and they are renting other parts, but it's really beautiful. My grandfather built it, and it has the rooms, the rooms have the curved ceilings, high ceilings with a lot of enclaves where you can put things, big windows and a huge door with a big key that still is operating. And again, the animals used to be down below and the family was upstairs, and they had a long balcony that was surrounding the house on the second floor. And we have some pictures of the family just sitting there. There's a picture from my dad, it must be like the '50s, and he's wearing a skirt pretending to be a girl.

I love that picture. But if you look at these pictures, it's amazing to me to look at the photos of these people. They're in '50s and the '60s I guess, in short sleeves. Nobody is covering their heads, even the women in the traditional dress, nothing on their heads. It just seemed like they, even under those really dire situations, they still lived a different life in terms of their openness, in terms of…

When I go to Bayt Ommar now it's just so down; it's just so miserable. Everybody's dressed in black, everybody's covering their heads. It seemed like even though it must have been harder in terms of economy, in terms of whatever, or maybe it wasn't that harder. But the whole Arab world suffered from that. I mean, I look at images of people in the Arab world from the, we just screened a film about Gaza. This guy was looking at the studio images from Gaza in the '50s and the '60s. Women in miniskirts and, not that this is a sign of anything or progress or whatever, but there wasn't a lot of repression in that society.

AR: What was the role of religion in your family at that time?

SA: None. None. My family, all of my elders, all of the elders in our family, would just simply become religious as they grew older, which is just as it happens here. People sort of go to their churches or whatever when they're older, they turn to, and that's, you know, neither side of my family was in any way devout Muslim. They were, I mean, I have an uncle who is a Sheik and played that role all his life, and he was sort of the unofficial mayor of the village and people went to him to resolve their differences or whatever. He was a very devout Muslim, never asked a single one of his girls to dress a certain way, shape, or form; never told anybody they needed to pray or fast. His religion was his thing and it wasn't imposed on anybody in the family. So both sides of the family, as I'm growing up, I had no sense of Muslim, Christian, or Jewish even. Jewish was more a political thing. It wasn't a religious thing. But religion wasn't a part of my upbringing, even in the village of Bayt Ommar, when I used to go there in the summers.
But now it's just amazing how people are. Religion is their only recourse, young, old. They really have become more, I guess because they really find no other recourse, there's nothing else to turn to but God.

And so you go to our village, you don't see the beautiful dresses, you don't see a woman with her makeup, or her beautiful hair or whatever. Everybody's covered, everybody's in dark colors. Very few people wear the traditional Palestinian dresses. They're wearing the long dark robes now when they're walking in the streets and what have you. So, that's very sad for me to see, from photos from way back, from me experiencing the village as a young person, and now going back to seeing it, it's really very depressive. Even visually, just visually it's very depressive.

AR: So historically we have your family's there. So how did your parents move?

SA: So my father was top of his class. And he graduated, not of West Bank, East Bank and West Bank.

AR: What school did he go to?

SA: Alright, so he was, he graduated, we have an official exam called Tawjeehee, during the Jordanian control of the West Bank. It was a unified examination. So he graduated first, top student on both. As I told you, he has this, I don't know where he would find books, he would go to Jerusalem or… and find all this. So he reads Shakespeare when he was sleeping next to a cow on a kerosene lamp. He keeps reminding us of that, that he found his own way. He could find the books he needed to read at the time he needed to read them. And then, so he got a scholarship to go to the American University of Beirut and again he graduated top of his class.

AR: Paid for?

SA: By the American University of Beirut. And he graduated and applied to Georgia Tech, again through connections from AUB and he got a full scholarship to do his Masters there, and that's when he got into the civil rights movement. And he met Martin Luther King, and he actually talked to him about the Palestinian situation. And he used to go to all their rallies and stuff like that in the '60s when he was there and then he…He

was a civil engineer all through. And then he started working in Atlanta and then applied to do his PhD and got accepted to Stanford.

And at the time he was seeing an American woman and my uncles were not happy about that, his older brothers. So they basically told him, your father is dying, pack up your stuff and come to see your father. And he arrives there, his father wasn't dying, and they take his passport away from him. But he could have reclaimed it and went back, but having made that journey back he realized that he had gone too far. Not intellectually and whatever but, you know how you get attached to geographical situations and your heart is somewhere else. You get used to that or whatever, and he had gotten used to living in the States and was ready marry this women. But then when he got back he realized that this is where he needs to be.

So he dropped everything in the US. He had a green card actually. At the time he had a green card and he dropped everything and found work in Amman, Jordan and he used to travel every weekend back to Bayt Ommar.

And you talk about the changes during the Jordanian control versus the Israeli control. It was a weekend trip to go back from Amman to Bayt Ommar, which now takes a whole day of traveling with all the restrictions and what have you. And he met my mom on a bus in Bayt Ommar. And my mom at the time had just finished her high school and was training to be a teacher in Khalil, in Hebron. And my mom was, still is, I mean she's an older woman now, but she's stunning. She's very, very beautiful. And she wouldn't speak to him on the bus because her mom taught her not to talk to strangers and what have you. And so he would send these emissaries to her. And finally she agreed to speak to him if he would come and meet with her, etc. at her family's house. So he came and met my grandfather and he proposed right away and she accepted. So they were engaged, so this was '66 -'67.

AR: How long had they known each other?

SA: Not very long. I mean, my father is incredibly handsome and my mom is, I'll show you pictures of the two of them. They could have been like movie stars. Both of them were very beautiful. My father's very tall, broad shoulders. And he was the successful engineer, the only one who, not the only one actually. All of his brothers went to study engineering too, but there was this… He was the first to actually go to university from Bayt Ommar. So he had some record there. So he was a good catch. There was no issue. It was a blessed marriage from both sides.

I would like to speak about my maternal grandfather's house now. I'm just thinking of them on the balcony there. That house is Palestine for me. It's where I basically spend most of my time when we would go back in the summers. Because my mom… Well, I guess maybe it's more appropriate to go back to the other story. They get engaged and he goes back to his work, and then the war in 1967 starts. And he was terrified that they would be separated. There was no telling what was going to happen, so in the middle of the fighting he crosses the border, and he goes in, and he brings the Sheik and they do their Ketubah, or whatever you guys call it. And they get married officially, but my mom never had a wedding. She left Bayt Ommar, apparently in a sleeveless dress and a torn pair of slippers. So they write their book, she says goodbye to her family, and they go to Jordan.

AR: How did they get there?

SA: They managed with cars and taxis. I mean, the war was happening when they did that. So they go over to Amman and my mom never forgave my dad for that because this action actually had them, not lose their right of return, they couldn't exercise their right of return. Because when they did the census after the '67 war, if you weren't physically in the place where you were, you had no right to live in that place. So, that was devastating for my mother. My father was sort of a cosmopolitan person who's traveled all over the world. He sort of embraced life in Amman and everything. He was working as an engineer and everything. So they were refugees, but not refugees that lived in a refugee camp. We lived a privileged life there because of my father's situation.

AR: So what did their parents feel about this?

SA: I don't know from my paternal side what they thought. My paternal grandfather had little communication with them because he was very old when I was a teenager. I remember visiting him as he was sick. I mean, he had suffered a stroke when I was very young. He used to visit us in our old house, but he was a very stoic person. Apparently he was very funny and had this sense of humor, but I never experienced it.

I remember one story when my sister, middle sister was born, I was very jealous and I took her as an infant and I was putting her in the toilet, trying to wash her like she was a doll or something. I remember my grandfather coming with a stick and just going at me, "Don't do that." And he's laughing and then he's calling to my mom, "Come watch Salma, she's going to drown your daughter." I remember that story. I remember him laughing, but that's the only time I remember this guy laughing because he was very, a very stoic person.

For my mother's side, I know my grandmother always lamented this. Like cursed Israel for taking her daughter away from her. But in the end all of her daughters had to leave because life in the West Bank was, it wasn't possible to make a living there for all of them, so all of them married and ended up in different parts of the world. Like one was in Saudi Arabia until they were kicked out after the Gulf War. Palestinians were kicked out of Saudi Arabia then. And two of them were in Jordan, my mother and another sister. And there's another one that was in Saudi Arabia but somehow managed to stay because of her husband's connections. And one is in the US. I have an aunt in Houston. There was only one aunt that actually stayed with her. So out of her six daughters, she lost all of them. And it's mostly because, and that one aunt that remained in Palestine, her husband is a farmer. Their lives are hell between raising their kids under occupation, not being able to sell their goods anywhere. Palestinians can't market their goods even in Jordan. So they paid a heavy price for staying in the West Bank.

But all the other daughters were far away and they would come back in the summer with their kids. So you can imagine what an amazing meeting place this house was for us when we were kids. This is where we got to see all our cousins, where we were free reign. You know, we just went out in the mornings roaming the fields. It was wonderful for us. So my mom, she lived in Amman, but her heart was always in Bayt Ommar cause she was a village girl. She never liked the shi-shi life of Amman and she

maintained her village accent. She never really spoke the way Ammani people speak, until this day.

AR: Where were they living?

SA: We were renting a place when we were young and then my father was, there was a little, he built his own house and we own the older house now in Amman. So any chance she had she would cross the border and go and see her family. And when we were in school, I remember a story. I have an aunt who's the one in Houston, she's only three years older than me actually. And she was really, really young. Her brother is about, must be about six at the time. My mom traveled with me as almost a newborn, because both of them stole me and hid under the bed. And they were fighting, "She's mine," "She's mine," "She's mine," "She's mine." And my mom was freaking out looking for me, and she finally found her two younger siblings with me in the middle, wrapped. She traveled with us every chance she had at various stages.

AR: Any stories you have about travel, what it was like.

SA: Yes, yes, I mean I can tell you horror stories, especially for me growing up as a child, it was really awful. Now it's a little better. They're still brutal and they're still humiliating. I've experienced, it was hell for me getting in. I wasn't allowed to get in for a long time and this year I managed to get in and it was still a humiliating experience. But back then, we used to have to strip naked. We used to actually, there was no machines I guess that they were satisfied with at the time, so they used to have us strip naked. I remember being with my mom and my younger sisters in a little booth with us naked waiting for our turn. There was a curtain that the soldier would just open, go in with her machine, and then tell us to get dressed and get out and it was really humiliating for all of us.

We had to wait in the sun, both in the Jordanian side and the Israeli side. They didn't make passage on either side anything humane or comfortable. But on the Israeli side especially, long, long hours. Busses used to not be air conditioned. People smoked. And you would get on a bus first thing in the morning; try to get there as early as you can. And then you would sit on the bridge for hours until the Israelis let you in. And there's like flies and smoke and hot, especially in the summer. So it wasn't an easy trip. It wasn't an easy trip. But the final, we knew we were waiting for it, it's like this slow ascending into my grandmother's house, grandparent's house. My grandmother's house in Bayt Ommar is on top of a little hill. And it's a beautiful house compared to everything around it. And there was a lot of forests and vegetation. And now it's all gone. But it used to be heaven for us.

We knew what was waiting for us, so in the end it was well worth all the struggle. And what's funny is that' til this year I experienced the same thing. When we drive up that hill, we all start crying. It's like, I'm almost getting tears now in my eyes. Just the end result of driving up that hill called Aseedah, the hill, where my grandfather's house was. It's just… and we knew that my grandparents would be sitting on these little stools on either side of the gate waiting for us.

They knew roughly when our arrival time was. So you'd go roughly up the hill. Everybody's crying and you see these two old people waiting there for you. It made the trip well worth it of course.

AR: What did you do?

SA: Oh of course. I mean, we knew there was some special feast waiting for us, and it's just for me, it was my little heaven. This is what I looked forward to. When we got older and became more, I would say between like 14-18, we started wanting to see other places. And we went to Greece and whatever, and we would just go for a week to Bayt Ommar. Teenagers. So I went through that phase where Bayt Ommar is too boring, but right after 18, and I can tell you about that trip, it was right before the First Intifada, I switched back. I switched gears. I got over my teenage years of rebelling against going to Bayt Ommar. But as a young kid, this was our summer camp basically. This is where we just went every summer. But in terms of crossing the border, one of the trips that I remember the most was, this was the trip when I was just out of first year of college.

AR: Where did you go to college?

SA: I went to Syracuse University in upstate New York. So I came back after my first year of college, and my grandfather was visiting us in Amman, and I decided to go back with him, to cross the bridge with him. At the time it still wasn't easy, so you went through the whole crazy process. Including, they had you take off your shoes. But it's not take off your shoes, put them on a belt, and put them on. They took them somewhere to search them. And then there was a window where everybody would wait for their shoes. And they would dump all their shoes out of that window. And people would just attack because shoes get lost and they've been waiting for them. And that scene is, in my opinion, one of the most humiliating scenes. I mean, we never, my mom would just hold our hands and let us wait until everybody, you know because it was deadly. Everybody just like attacked to get their shoes back.

And that year, both my grandfather and I were sitting on a chair waiting until everybody cleared, and he only could find one of his shoes. So we went back, he was barefoot going back to Bayt Ommar. And you know they, you wait your turn forever and then they bring your suitcase and they used to go through everything: your pictures, your clothes. They would just touch everything with their fingers. And you just stood there watching them. And they would just throw things that they didn't like in the garbage just like that without asking you, without asking you what's in it. They would just randomly throw things in the garbage. Now it's gotten better and they don't do that kind of stuff unless they really want to target you. But these are my memories of crossing.

I mean, my experience with Jews, we called them Yehud because that's our only, I mean, coming here I got to meet other kinds of Jews. But my experience of Yehud was soldiers. I mean, there was one woman, a Jewish woman who lived in our village. She was married to a Palestinian. Yeah, we actually have two now. And she was something out of this world for us, this Jewish woman. She converted to Islam actually. But she was still to us Yehudia. She was the Yehudia who married the Arab. It's just amazing how we really had no contact with them except for soldiers.

So anyway, so the house is there now. It's completely rundown, and it's like the saddest thing because due to some family feuds, some really ugly patriarchal decisions. My grandfather left the house for his girls. He said, "This house is for the girls in case time treats them badly" (I'm transliterating from what he said.) So if a girl, one of his daughters gets divorced, her husband dies, this is her shelter.

We used to come from Amman and go straight to Bayt Ommar and just spend all our time there. I don't know how it's like, but I think for most people you're closer to your maternal side of the family than your paternal side. So we used to go and do our due diligence. Go visit our other older uncles from our paternal side, whatever. Have the meal with them, kiss my grandfather's hand, whatever, and then run back to my maternal grandfather's house, yeah, maternal house. And it's what Palestine is for me. It's where I spend all my time. Every room has all these memories. They had two rooms, one for the girls and one for the boys, and there are ten of them.

So my aunt's room was beds all around the peripheral. And when I was growing up none of them were married of course. And they were all so beautiful with this beautiful long hair, and they dressed so beautifully, and they smelled so nicely. And they had all these magazines with all these love stories. It's like a movie but it's in a magazine, stacks and stacks of them. So in the summer, just being in that little heaven with my aunts. As I told you, some of them were close. Because my grandmother gave birth for awhile, my mother's the eldest, so the youngest one was only three years older than me. So just being around these women… They were all like mothers to me. It was amazing for me to be with them. They would have the radio all the time. They would do their chores in the house or whatever. And we used to go and pick fruits if it was the season for picking fruits with them.

First thing in the morning, hop on the tractor. Go pick up fruits with them, come back. Lunch would be ready. In the morning my grandmother always baked her bread. 'Til the day she died, she baked her bread on a daily basis. Just the smell of that bread. I mean, when I walked into that kitchen, that smell came back to me. Anyway…[crying]… The house is in ruins now…I wore makeup for the first time in months. Is it still OK? So it was very painful being in that house this summer.

AR: Do you want to talk more about what life was like in Amman?

SA: Life in Amman, yeah. It was kind of schizophrenic because here's this part of me that says, I'm Palestinian. And then I go to Amman and there's a denial of my identity.

AR: Do you want to explain the Jordan-Palestinian situation?

SA: OK, Jordan-Palestine situation… So there was a law in the '50s, no, I can't remember when that law happened. It was probably after the '67 war. So there were a lot of refugees from the '67 war that came to Jordan. And Jordan is, by some accounts, 70 percent Palestinian. There was a law that basically gave us citizenship, those refugees that were there. [Palestinians were granted citizenship in Jordan in the early 50's during the first wave of refugees from 1948.] My father was one of those people who basically had that citizenship. So technically we were Jordanian. We had Jordanian passports and we lived there as Jordanians.

But in the ‘70s there was Black September and we had a civil war between Palestine and Jordan where they wanted to kick out the PLO. King Hussein, under pressure from Israel and the US and whatever, wanted to kick out the PLO from Jordan. And then after that they went to Lebanon and with the Lebanese war, Israel kicked them out of Lebanon. And they went to Tunis and after Tunis they ended up in Ramallah where they can be really controlled I guess, under occupation. So Black September, I have memories but I don’t know if they’re from what people told me. I was born in ‘68 so it’s not possible that these are my, it could be, I have no idea.

Like for example, Leila Farsakh is a friend of mine, and we were in the back seat of my father’s Citroen during the war going from one place to another, and she remembers that and told me that story, and now I’m convinced I remember being in the back seat with her. But I have no idea. I don’t know if these are…I have images of the shelter where we were staying at. And I have pictures of my mom right after that war. It says on it 1970. I’ll show you that picture. I’m a little girl standing in front of her. So it could be from that, these pictures that I remember these stories and these images, or not. But I still have books in our house with bullet holes in them and gun powder. And my mom told me that the Jordanian army stole all her jewelry. And my father was fighting. He was fighting during that war.

AR: As a member of?

SA: PLO. I mean he’s, my father’s a member of the National Council. He’s always been all his life. He’s not Fatah anything. He tried the Communist Party for awhile but it didn’t work for him. They had this motto that, “We’re all workers: Jewish workers and Arab workers unite.” It didn’t seem like that was…Because in Israel they were laborers and they were Marxists and what have you, but we were something else for them. So he didn’t think that that would work for freeing Palestine. So he’s always operated as an independent.

AR: You said he was a fighter.

SA: He was fighting the Jordanians. The house where we lived at the time was in Jabal Hussein. There was a lot of fighting there. It was right near our house and our shelter. So my father was not with us during the war. It was my mother and myself and my baby brother. So they, at some point, I don’t know if it was after, somehow she was not in the shelter. Or they came and they took us out of the shelter, brought her upstairs. We weren’t with her so they might have just grabbed her to take her upstairs to the house. There were other neighbors with us. It was a whole building. The shelter I remember because I grew up in that building. It was a just basement room, just an empty basement room with slit windows. I don’t know if it was a shelter. It was just a basement room where we hid basically in that building. She told us, there were bullets in all of the art that was on the walls. They fired bullets through all of the books that my father had. So if you come to our house there are still books you can open and see gun powder inside them. And there were bullet holes in our balcony. Until we left the house we were always, “Look at the bullet holes, can you see we have a bullet hole in our balcony.” To show the other kids.

The soldier was about the rape my mom. And as I told you, and I'll show you a picture of her at the time, she was stunning, she was beautiful, and this Jordanian soldier basically unzipped his pants and he was ready to rape her. And she cried and cried and told him, "I have kids downstairs." And then she told him, "I have my period." And in Islam, you don't touch a woman with her period. And she didn't have her period, and that's what saved her. But this guy was about to rape her.

And there are horror stories about how Jordanians and Palestinians turned against each other. But at the same time, there are beautiful stories about how Jordanians hid Palestinian fighters and Palestinian families in their own houses. So you have the military operation and you have the civil war going on. But these are people who are neighbors. These are people who lived with one another. And the crazy thing is, I don't think Jordan ever healed from that war. There isn't a single monument that basically addresses that issue that says, "Yes, we are two people who fought each other, who killed each other, who spilled each other's blood, but we are neighbors, we are in the same country." There was no healing after that. There's still a lot of bad feelings.

So for me growing up in Jordan I felt that it is a country that rejected me, that didn't want me. The Palestinian cause in the Jordanian curriculum, it's like two pages. We spent 15 minutes on it. And talk about me, other than a few stories here and there, I knew nothing about my history, because my parents just, my mother didn't want to talk about it, and my father was always too busy with his own political.

So they set good examples for us. Like my mother did what was most important which was take us to Palestine every single year, more than once a year. And my father was in the news, he was in jail, he was head of Palestinian labor unions. I mean, he was a very prominent figure, and I respected that so much. But he didn't have time to sit with us and educate us about this. And my education about my history and what's happened to my people only came afterwards. When I came to this country is when I started picking up books and reading and investigating all of that. I lived it, but I didn't really have all of the details.

AR: Tell me about coming to this country.

SA: Coming to this country, OK. I was 18 and I was determined to come to the States because I had some cousins who went to the States and because my father went to the States. I graduated, I had excellent grades. I could have gone to any university I wanted.

AR: Your family expected you to go to university?

SA: Yes. Definitely. So I got my grades, and in Jordan the way it happens is, you get your final year grades and then you wait 'til your names get published in the paper. The Jordan University and Yarmouk University, two major universities there, would publish the names. Actually, the Yarmouk University probably wasn't around when I graduated. It was the Jordan University mainly would publish names of the students and based on your GPA, you would be placed in different majors. So you really had no choice. You could step down. Based on my GPA I couldn't be a doctor, but I could be an engineer. So doctors were like the 98 percentile and above. I had 96 so I was placed in, and also different disciplines. I was placed in the electrical engineering department. I could

move down to this and this and this…engineering…So it was a hierarchical system where this is the best you can get. And I don't know based on what, art and history and social sciences, which I wish I had gone into now as an adult. I wish I had more of an education in that area, they were at the bottom of the line.

I was 18 and I got good grades, and I went to an office called the Amideast which helped students apply to universities in the US. I borrowed money from my mom and I took my SATs. You fill up a general application with them and they can apply to different universities for you. I did my TOEFL and SATs and everything, unbeknownst to my father because he was totally against me going to the US.

AR: When did you learn English?

SA: In high school. I mean, Jordan is a British Mandate, and from first grade you learn French and English and Arabic. So we're fluent in all three languages. Now I have to retract. I went to a Catholic school, a private Catholic school. Public education in Jordan is, really suffer. There's a big problem with public education. They don't start teaching English until sixth grade. So I went to a private school, and Catholic school because of the missionaries. The missionaries came to the Arab world and set up all these schools. So there are 90 percent Muslims going to the Catholic schools because they offer the best education basically. And then my father won't hear of it, "No way, you're not going to the US. The furthest you would go is…" He wanted to send me to tutorial college in England. To live with a family, you know, not to live with students, where I would have tutors and then I would do my A levels.

The idea of doing more schooling and not being in a university, I totally rejected that. So I remember I was in Tunis in a basketball tournament, which is the only tournament he would actually let me leave the country for. I was only allowed to do local stuff. Whenever the basketball team traveled I wasn't allowed to go with them. But that last year maybe he felt he had to be a little lenient. He let me go to Tunis.
We were in a dorm with horrible food and cockroaches flying, and I was miserable. And I get a call from my father and he says, I thought I was going to the Jordan University. I was resigned that this is what's going to happen. I couldn't get my mom to pay for applications so I didn't actually apply anywhere. I just filled in the general application for the Amideast.

So mom told him that this is happening, that Salma actually took her SATs, her TOEFL, etc. And at the time, my aunt, who I told you my grandfather opened a classroom just for her, she went to my dad. That was the year they came back to Jordan. They used to live in Saudi Arabia, and all of her daughters went to study in the US or Canada, actually, the US and Canada. And she went up to him and she said, "You're depriving Salma of an education. Here, my daughters went, what's wrong with it?" She basically guilt tripped him.

So this, we're talking July of 1986. And I was in this basketball tournament. I have no idea what's going on. And he calls me on the dorm room and says, "OK, you're going to this university. It's called Saracrusa." I'm like, "What, what are you talking about?" "Ok, your aunt convinced me. Have a safe trip and I'll talk to you when you come back." So I come back and I had a month to basically get ready to get my stuff

together and go to Syracuse University. And Syracuse had, they had a relationship with that office and that's the only way I could get in so late in an American university. It's not a bad school, but it's not a school, I got in UCLA and there's another school, an engineering school. In January I got admission to these two schools, but I had no clue what the difference is between. I had no idea what these universities were about and I had an incredible culture shock coming here. I contemplated suicide one day. I was on the eighth floor of my dorm, and I looked down, and for the only time in my life I ever… I was so miserable. I would call my parents and I couldn't say a word. I would be crying.

It was really hard for me going from a culture where I wasn't allowed to talk to boys. My father, although he had seen the world, he still was a village guy. He still wanted to raise me as if we were in Bayt Ommar. So he would come to my basketball practices to make sure there were no boys. I was the only one who was not allowed to attend the graduation party because it was a mixed party. And then he sends me off to this unknown place. Boys were attacking me. There were all these guys knocking on my door. And I did not know how to talk to boys. I had no training other than my family members and friends of the family. I didn't know how to handle the boy who was trying to ask me for a date. I mean it was ridiculous. I mean, I would like put my hood on and try to look, you know, and just go to my classes.

The amazing thing is, the crazy thing was, I was the only girl in the class of 40 of electrical engineers. And school to me was like first year, freshman year US university, was a joke for me. I had already taken all of these classes. I knew calculus. I knew chemistry. I knew biology. So I was not only the only girl. I was also the one who aced everything. And all these guys were knocking on my door asking for help on homework, to pick on me, I don't know. It was hell.

To me it was just hell. I missed my family. I had, initially because I was so late in applying, they put me in what apparently is the closet room in our floor. It was this little room where nobody was, like you had to walk a long distance to get to my room. I was away from everybody else's. There was a bed; it was like one-third the size of this room. This girl that was in my orientation, she was from Haiti. She would come and visit me, and she said, "You need to go to the admissions office and tell them because this is…" Because I was miserable, I was alone, and I just like had no…

And then they put me together with a roommate who, an African-American who was very sweet to me and everything, but she was a sophomore and she was like, you know. She was a model too, and she had her own guys knocking on her door. I mean it was…To me the culture shock was just incredible. I think I gained like 20 pounds. My stretch marks bled. This is how quickly I gained weight just from, I was binging on food. It was hell for me being there. But then, the second semester when I got accepted in these other universities, my father called me and he said, "Well if you don't like Syracuse, you got accepted in these other universities." And I said, "No way. No way I am going to go through this whole process in another new place again."

So I stayed in Syracuse. And it got better because I got to meet some Arab friends, and really got to be very good friends with a lot of the guys in my department. Soon after the first semester I was fine. But my first semester culture shock was, I couldn't describe it to you. I mean, going from, I mean, my father as I told you was cosmopolitan and he's whatever, but he's still a village guy. And when it came to me,

raising us, the girls, whatever, he used his old standards. And then he throws me in Syracuse, upstate New York.

AR: So then what happened?

SA: So then what happened? You mean in Syracuse? I finished my undergrad. And unfortunately I had a boyfriend there who only I knew from his grades would only get accepted in Syracuse so I stayed with him, biggest mistake of my life, and did my graduate work there, came here for a summer job, met my husband. I had no intention of staying in the US. I really, my plan was to finish my PhD and then to go back home. But during the summer job, I was really tired of my advisor, tired of my, I needed a change. I met Andrea. He has a daughter from a previous marriage so he couldn't move. He had to stay in Massachusetts. So I ended up staying and worked as an engineer for awhile, and then tried to finish my PhD at BU, then had my son and I dropped my PhD again. And then decided that I can't be, I can't do what I want to do in terms of my activism and also work as an engineer and have a family and do all of this stuff.

When I worked as an engineer, I used to work from 9 to 9 and then come home, have a late dinner with my husband. Then each one of us would log on and get on the computer. Being an engineer in this country is completely different than being an engineer anywhere else. Engineers everywhere else are more involved in the political process, they're union heads; they're the shakers and the makers. They're expected to be that way. In this country if, I remember I sent an email to ask, it was during the Gulf War, something about children, helping Iraqi children or whatever. And I got so much. I mean there would be emails sent about rifles because we had a lot of people from New Hampshire working with us, and NRA and all of that crap, sorry all this stuff. And we also had people sending inappropriate jokes on that list, but when I sent that one email about Iraq, everybody was talking in the spring about it. I was getting all these dirty looks, like this was not appropriate. So I really couldn't be myself in that environment. And it's very stifling working with engineers. All they wanted to talk about was work, and really I felt like I was like a machine.

So I might go back to engineering when my son is older and I need to earn a good income. I do translation work now as a freelance translator, and I taught high school for awhile. And I am happy to have that flexibility with time. I'm lucky that my husband can support the family while our child is still young, and I'm doing all these other kinds of activism. So that's where I am.

AR: What's your husband's background?

SA: My husband is, he was born in Sicily, in Trapani outside of Sicily, came to the US when he was really young. So he's an immigrant to Brooklyn, New York. His parents were in the garment district and you know, he was very poor growing up and he went to RPI [Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute] and did his engineering work, all scholarships. He's very smart, managed to get an education, a good education. And he's been working in Massachusetts since the '80s, but I mean, engineering. I was good in physics. I mean, I went to engineering because my physics teacher said I have to go into engineering.

But in Jordan you don't get exposed to anything in any way. I wasn't exposed to drama, to social sciences in any way that was meaningful to me. I love acting, and it turns out that I have a knack for it. But you know, I'm almost 40 now, what am I talking about, When I was almost 40 I discovered that. I'm 42 now.

So you know it's, I did fine with engineering and I could do it, etc, but my heart was not in it. My husband is a true engineer. He's sort of an interesting geek. He's an artist and all of these things, but he is very much interested in the science and everything, in a way that I did it, but my heart wasn't in it basically.

AR: And what was it like for your parents…

SA: That's actually… In retrospect I wish my father didn't send me when I was 18. I think that, I appreciate my aunt intervening and I think that it was a very good experience for me in terms of maturing, in terms of growing up and being independent, etc. But I lost some formative years. I was away from my family like from 18, and then because I ended up doing my graduate work, until now. My younger brother was only 10 years old when I left, I missed his childhood. So when I weigh things, I wish I stayed. I wish I'd stayed with my family because I miss them a lot and I feel like I was extracted too early from that place. I don't mind my life here. Cambridge is great and my husband. I have a life here and this is sort of my second home. But I feel like I was extracted from that nest too early.

AR: Did they talk about what it was like for them?

SA: For them. For my mom it's hell. She used to have nightmares. She still has nightmares about it because I started a tradition in our family. I left to go to the States and he couldn't say no to all my other sisters. So all three of us, the sisters, are married to Americans and living in the US. So my mom, the year I left my mom actually had, I told you my great grandfather was manic depressive. We have depression in our family. And that was the onset of her depression, me leaving the house. And she only kind of recovered like in the past few years where she has been able to sort of function and go back to her old self or whatever.

But my departure from the house…Her phone, she was always crying my first year. And when I came back it was very hard. It was an ordeal, going back and coming. It was very emotionally hard for her to let go of me. And then four years after that, my other sister left. And then the third one left. So 'til this day she curses my father for doing that. And most importantly is she really had her first attack, her first nervous breakdown in the beginning of almost two decades of mental health issues, you know, severe clinical depression that winter, in December of the year that I left. So, I don't take responsibility. I don't feel guilty because at the time I didn't know that this is going to cause her that. And even for a long time I was sort of in denial about it. Whatever. But now, looking back, I really think that me leaving the house was the onset of her depression.

AR: When did you first meet a Jewish person that was not an Israeli?

SA: Oh, that's an interesting story. So I was in Syracuse as a graduate student, my first year as a graduate student. That was the beginning of my activism too. I joined the General Union of Palestinian students which was, GUPs, was very prevalent back then. In the mid '80s it was the organization to join if you were a Palestinian activist. It was very socialist. It was PFLP, not Fatah or whatever. It was a really interesting organization. Unfortunately it no longer exists or is not active. My first year as a graduate student I got an award as a teaching assistant, like best teaching assistant award or whatever. We went to the President's house, and we were being honored. And that's where I met Dorit. Dorit was an Israeli woman, Jewish and it's funny, we have this radar for each other, Palestinians and Israelis. We could somehow, I felt she was Israeli, she felt I was Palestinian. I don't know how to describe it. But she came up to me and she started talking and she told me where she was from, and I don't think, I think she was more interested in me than I was in her. I just shut off basically. And then forgot about her, didn't see her again.

A few months later I was at Jane Campion screening of one of her films, "Angel at My Table." Is it "Angel at My Table?" It was a beautiful film, I can't remember the title. But it was only five women: This Yugoslavian, this former Yugoslavian woman. She's a Serbian woman that I shared an office with as a graduate student. And there were two other women there, and there was Dorit. The projectionist let us in for free. So there were only five women watching the film. She sat next to me, and after the film we started talking, etc. And she was making a lot of effort to somehow tell me that she's interested in me and interested in knowing me, etc. So we decided to meet and we started talking about things. And it was very hard in the beginning because I remember one of the first stories she told me was about walking her dog in a park in Syracuse and seeing this family from far away that looked like they were Muslim because the woman was veiled or something like that, and how terrified she was. How she had to change her path and go to a different direction. And that was extremely offensive to me.

She lived in Jerusalem, so I asked her, "Did you ever meet an Arab?" And she said, "No. I never talked to Arabs, I never talked to Palestinians, other than a vendor that I would buy a ka'ak, a Palestinian bagel from or whatever." She never actually did that. So it was a long journey for us. And Dorit is now an incredibly, she's one of my best friends…She is my best friend. If I have a fight with Andrea I call Dorit. Although I haven't talked to her in ages because of the film festival, but she's really, we're incredibly close.

And during Oslo she came to visit my family because Israelis could actually come to Jordan. And that was really hard because my mom basically didn't want her in the house. It was very hard for my mom to have an Israeli in the house. My younger sister flipped. She was very angry with me for bringing an Israeli over. Especially because my mom was still going through her depression still or whatever, so they thought that I was bringing… It's not that they hated her or anything like that. It was just too much for them to have an Israeli living in their house, using their towels, going to their bathroom. It was just too much for them.

Over the years, my father was OK with it. He loved meeting her and as I told you he's…Politically he's been able to meet with Israelis. To him it wasn't… But I don't blame them. This is the enemy. There was no human contact. There was no sharing of anything. I had the privilege of meeting Dorit in a place that was neutral, relatively

speaking, where it wasn't Palestine or Israel, or Jordan, or what have you. And we could somehow meet as human beings, as two women who were interested in film, who were interested in women issues, who were interested in Palestine. And she's a wonderful woman. She's somebody that I cherish and I enjoy her friendship. But because of our history it took us, it took me a while; it probably took her a while to actually bring down the wall, to talk about things. So that was my first.

AR: When did you first learn about the Nazi Holocaust?

SA: Nazi Holocaust. Um. It's a word that I've heard before. It wasn't something that we learned in school. Education in Jordan was incredible in terms of the sciences. But in terms of really giving an education as a human being, as a well-rounded person, zero, zilch. I mean it was horrible. So the word Holocaust existed in our textbook. We were told it happened, because that was part of the one-two-three, this was the modern history of, modern history was like a chapter. So it was all highlights, headlines, and dates. So we just had to memorize dates: and then this happened, and then this happened. There was no analysis; there was no discussion, there was nothing.

Just like I learned nothing about the Palestinian cause, I learned nothing about the Holocaust. I'll have to say that I didn't get to actually… This might be embarrassing, but the first film, the first real encounter with the Holocaust that got me interested was "Schindler's List." I went in the early '90s to watch it when I was a graduate student. And in the meantime, Dorit started telling me things because she has people that are Holocaust survivors and everything. But I refused. For me, it's not my problem. I didn't do the Holocaust to you, why do I need to learn about the Holocaust? So there was this rejection of, I didn't do it. I had nothing to do with it. Don't even bring it into the discussion. It has nothing to do with Palestine and you cannot justify the destruction of 500 villages.

That was, and still is, my attitude. But at the same time… So I softened after Schindler's List, which is a film that has a lot of issues, a lot of problems. But somehow it got me, it broke down a wall for me and I decided that I needed to learn more about the Holocaust. I mean, I hated the film in the end. The film was, to me I felt like it was a trap. Here's a wonderful film about this wonderful human story and about the suffering of the Jewish people, of people, of people that were treated so inhumanely and so disgustingly. But in the end you have, the film turns, it's all black and white and then it turns into color and you have this guy talking about frigging Israel. And I felt like somebody threw a bucket of water over my head.

I felt deceived. I felt like I was trapped, there was a trap set for me. But nevertheless, it's such a cheap shot from Spielberg to do this, I still recovered and that was when I softened. And I started looking at images and random pictures and just started learning a little bit more about it. And I still don't know enough about it, but I know enough to know, I acknowledge that this is something that happened to a people. People, period, but not a people that I'm somehow, whether I like it or not, I have to deal with, OK. It's a tricky issue for me because the Holocaust, there is a Holocaust industry and Israel uses it as a pretext. And it's the silencer of a lot of people.

But the Holocaust is over. There might be a second Holocaust if Jews don't realize what they're doing to Palestinians, because there is a lot of hatred now. There's a

lot of criticism of Israel, and Jews that support Israel and have sort of neglected the Palestinians. And have refused to see the Palestinian quote, unquote, Holocaust. I mean, Gaza, the burning of children with phosphorus. No two events are equivalent. The Holocaust on its own. But there were other Holocausts during World War II. There were so many other devastations, whatever, this sort of monopolization of suffering. You can't talk about other, and why are Jewish in the state, in Massachusetts, in Boston, so opposed to calling Armenian [genocide]? Why? It's like, why deny another person their right to be acknowledged as a victim of another oppression and violence and what have you. It was an incredibly viscous thing. It was a failure of humanity.

It was everything that you want to say about it. But at the same time, you know, this should be, like Norman Finkelstein, he says it's because of what happened to my family, it's because of the Holocaust, it's because of what they suffered that I cannot forget the Palestinians, that I cannot support Israel for what it's doing to the Palestinians. So in a sense it's something that I didn't want to deal with because I felt that it was misused to justify the creation of the State of Israel. Nobody asked the Palestinians in 1947, "Do you want to share this land?" Nobody asked us, OK. And there were 500 villages that were destroyed. And most of the Holocaust survivors didn't want to come to Palestine. They all wanted to come to the US. The Zionist movement pressured the US to not let them in and bring them to Palestine. They were European Jews. What did they want with this frigging Arab land, this land in the middle of the Arab countries?

So there's a lot of manipulation of the Holocaust. There's a misuse of the tragedy. It's not a tragedy, tragedy is sort of like something that God willed. It's this incredible horror these people inflicted on Jewish people and on other people. So, I don't know what else to say about it. It's something that at some point in my life I realized I cannot ignore, that I had to learn. I would have, but I resisted because of the history. I would have done it during the time when I was reading these books about all sorts of things. And I would have, but I resisted it. And then I sort of softened and realized that I needed to learn that history because whether I like it or not it's become part of my history.

AR: And where do you call home?

SA: Oh, I am totally homeless. I am like. I had an amazing experience in Jordan this year that was incredibly humiliating and I still need some space and some bandwith in my brain to write about it...I officially became Palestinian this year. For a while I was entering as a guest, so my family would ask for me for a permit, for permission. They would send me the Tasreeh (permit) and I would go. This is how we've been managing over the years…Then I got my American passport. Through my American passport I was able to travel. But as you know in 2006, they started turning back Palestinians with foreign passports for no reason. Go back, go back, whatever.

Amira Hass wrote about it in "Haaretz," and there was a state department case basically saying, you cannot deny our citizens entry because we let your citizens in. But it was such a random policy with few people. You never knew what would happen. And for a few years they would just turn me away. And technically I did not qualify to get the identity card from my father…I won't go into the details but through some arm twisting, whatever, I managed to get my identity card this year. I forgot, what was your question?
AR: Where is home?

SA: Where is home? So, before that happened, this year my license, my family book which is another story that I would love to tell to you one day. It's a family book that I am not allowed… It's a family book that took me a week to produce. After you get married you're supposed to get your own family book where you register deaths and marriages and what have you. It took me a week to do. I had to get my father to come to sign off on everything because my husband is a "foreigner." Women there, they're not… There's a long way for Arab countries to go as far as women and their independence and what have you. So now I have a family book. I'm registered as the head of the family because my husband is a "foreigner." And then when I was done, they stamped every single page, "cannot add husband and kids because the husband has a different nationality." "Cannot add." Every single page.

So I have a family book that I can't add my family to. So my family book, my identity card, my driving license, my passport, and something else, there was a fifth. Everything was expired this year. I had to go through, like it was a bureaucratic nightmare doing all of this. I finally get to the point when I'm renewing my passport. This year because of Netanyahu's proclaiming Jordan as the alternative country for Palestinians, Jordanians are clamping down on Palestinians that actually live in the West Bank or can live in the West Bank.

So if you are a Palestinian that has a life in the West Bank, your Jordanian citizenship is taken away from you. So in order for me to renew my passport, given that they know that my father is born in Palestine and my mother is born in Palestine, therefore I'm Palestinian, they had me go through this gruesome process of proving that I don't have an identity card. But half way through the summer, I managed to get my identity card. So crossing back on the border they gave me a piece of paper that basically states that I live in the West Bank. I said, "I don't live in the West Bank." They said, "Well, you have to prove it to us."

So I had to go through the most humiliating process of proving to the Jordanian government that I'm still Jordanian, that this country where I was born, that I still deserve to carry that passport. The whole process, every single officer that I had to see… It was the most humiliating… It just took me days. It was the worst, in terms of bureaucracy. I had to go to my high school and get records from first grade to prove that I actually went to school there. And I had to prove that I lived in the US. So it's OK to live in the US but I couldn't live in the West Bank. So if I lived in the US I could keep my passport, but if I lived in the West Bank they would take my Jordanian citizenship. So I had to go through this gruesome process. And through the whole process I would say, "I have my birth certificate, here, I was born in Amman, Jordan in 1968."

"Oh we don't need that, that's irrelevant." That was the fact, that I was born here was irrelevant. So then I had to get all these stamps and go, whatever, it was a nightmare. So by the end to that process I really felt de-rooted. I felt like, when I go into our home in Jordan, I feel I'm safe. This is my home. But being in the country of Jordan, they don't want us. They talk about Jordan first and everybody's citizens and whatever, but then they make you go through this process where you are completely disenfranchised and felt like you don't belong. And that day I happened to be… At the end of the day when I finally got my, the papers, actually I still don't have, I filed everything but I don't know yet if… Most likely they will let me keep my Jordanian passport.

I went to see, there was a high school reunion, and there were some of my friends are Jordanian, and they asked me the wrong questions. "So Salma, how are you? How do you like being back in Jordan?" And I gave them a piece of my mind. I cursed Jordan. I said, I used bad words. I was coming right out of that experience. And two of the women there, both of them married to minister's sons, were very offended. And they said they got goose bumps. "How dare I criticize or curse Jordan?" And I said, "Well, if this was really a country to be proud of, then we should be allowed to curse our country, this is part of…." Whatever.

So I told them what happened. I told them, I said, "I know when your birthdays are? I'm older than you. I was born in this country before you. OK. I was born in this country like you were. And I had to go through a whole week of hell to prove to them that I still deserve to live in that country." So this experience sort of re-emphasized to me the fact that Jordan is not my country. Jordan is the place where I grew up but that's always rejected me. I mean, I know stories from friends who have gone to college there and now the person doing registration wants to know where your parents are born. If you're Palestinian you won't get the class. If you're Jordanian you have… And you know, all of the scholarships and the financial aid and whatever in the university system, it went by family name.

So Jordanians were always favored to Palestinians. And I told you about the civil war and sort of unhealed wounds. And you know, the queen is Palestinian, but she's a pretty girl, that's why he married her. He didn't marry her because she was Palestinian. You have a few ministers that are Palestinian but it's more like tokenism, it's nothing really. Jordan never felt like a home because of my connection to Palestine. And then I go home this summer and my grandparent's house, my other shelter, my other refuge is, it's in a state that I can't describe to you. I didn't bring in my video camera because I was afraid. I didn't want to give the Israelis any reason to turn me back. So I had a camera, just like a photo camera, that had an option to film a little bit and I filmed a little bit in that house. It's like a haunted house. I mean, it was a nightmare for me going back to that home and finding it like that.

And for me Cambridge, it's home because… One summer we were in Jordan, and my son, who loves going back to his grandmother's house. And right before the summer breaks he starts, he puts a calendar and he's counting the days 'til we leave. And I go the whole summer. We live in an apartment here, we don't have a garden, so there he can be free and what have you. So one summer at the end of the summer, Giacomo just felt anxious. And he kept telling me, I want to go home, I want to go home. And I realized that home is no longer what I define home. Home is where my child thinks of home. And that was sort of a defining year for me to sort of accept Cambridge as a new home for me.

And Andrea used to be offended because I used to always refer to Jordan, when I go back home, when I go back home. And I never refer to Cambridge as home. And now I do because I realized, it's not about me, it's about Giacomo. It's about where he thinks is home. But it's you know, it's hard because I have people that I love and I want to be with in all three places. And none of them are totally accessible to me. Being in this country is also hard because, you being so wonderful and you filming me telling my story, but not everybody's interested in my story. Actually I have to go through a lot to

get people to hear me and to get through all of the mis-education and propaganda that they've been reading about Palestine and Israel and what have you.

And the more offensive thing is that a lot of people when they meet me, they don't think I'm Palestinian because I don't look like your typical Arab person. But then when they do it's different. So my experience in this country in general, I'm accepted as long as I'm integrating into that society and being part of them. And I can't. I told Andrea, I'm homesick, and this is not where I wanted to be. And the only way I could actually be here is if I asserted my identity as a Palestinian and did a lot of work for Palestine, and doing the kind of activism that I do that takes up most of my time. But that's the only way I can be here. To sort of defy all of this and be who I want to be in this country. I mean, I do a lot of other things as a citizen. I am very active in my son's school, and I do everything.

I want the society to accept me as who I am. And to know where I come from and what my story is. And what they're doing to me, as tax payers who contribute to my occupation and all of that.

So, it's difficult being here; it's difficult being in Jordan. And, as of this year, I can technically move and live back in Palestine. But it's not a life that I think, I don't know if I can take Giacomo. I'm speaking from a privileged position. I have cousins who live under the Israeli occupation on a daily basis. But I can't take my son and live there under the condition. I mean, Bayt Ommar is surrounded. It's surrounded by the wall from one side, by Carmei Tzur from one side, by another Kiryat Arba from another side. And we have a fence with the biggest tower in all of the West Bank, and a gate. So there's a gate to my village. I don't want to go and put my son in a prison basically. So I can't live, I'm not rooted fully in any of these three places. I don't really have a home that I'm just, I'm comfortable, I'm here to stay. I'm constantly thinking about, when is a good time to take Giacomo and go somewhere else. But it's hard because I have very good friends now, a lot of American friends. Giacomo has a lot of friends. I mean, whether I like it or not, this is a home. But it has its own baggage I guess.

AR: So, how do you give your child a sense of being a Palestinian? Or do you give your child a sense…

SA: Well, it's not something that I do consciously. It's something that he gets by osmosis I guess. I mean, it's funny because he thinks every time I'm out of the house, it's the film festival. You know, even to meet a friend, you know, "Did you have to go to your film festival thing last night?" Or whatever. So he knows about my film festival [Boston Palestine Film Festival]. He's heard me on the radio, he's seen me on TV, you know during certain events, like during Gaza and what have you, I couldn't hide him from that 'cause I was hysteric and crying almost every day and I mean I tried not to have him be around me when I'm whatever, but he could tell that I'm very sad about it.

And he drew a picture once, I don't know if I still have it, it was on his white board, I took a photo image of it, and he had all sorts of stuff in there about Gaza and no weapons and no this and no that, and I have to constantly explain to him, like when he talks, he would say "an Israeli" and I have to constantly tell him, "It's the Israeli army," you know, although when you think about it, all of the Israelis have served in the army, but I keep wanting him to distinguish that it's not the people, it's the system, and it's the

army and it's the whatever. And you know he sees my friends and my activist friends with their Free Palestine tee shirts and this and Handala [cartoon character of refugee child who represents Palestinian resistance] and you know it's in our house.
I never sat with him and drilled his brain with things, it's just stories come out.

I tell him things; he's gone to Bayt Ommar with me a few times, a couple of times, and I show him pictures a lot of us, him on my grandfather's tractor, and I keep wanting him to remember these cause I haven't been able to come back for a while. I did for a short period when I had my American passport with Andrea and Giacomo, so we went in a couple times, and then now with my ID card maybe next year I'll bring him in, although Bayt Ommar is a scary place. It's really, I missed an invasion into my aunt's house by seconds. The tower is at the top of the hill and my aunt's house is just next to it, and apparently kids… the front yard of that house to throw Molotov bottles at the tower, but I mean, my uncle and his daughter were in the house and he was on the computer facing the front yard and there was nobody throwing anything.

And four jeeps came and there were like soldiers and they put the gun in his chest. My cousin who was with him was hysterically crying, and I missed that by seconds. I don't want Giacomo to... if I can help it, any mother who can help to protect her child would, and I struggle with this, because I feel like, well here are my younger cousins. I wished I had a camp, because everyone single child had something to tell me about an encounter with Israeli soldiers. Most of my family members have been prisoners in their own houses when Israelis would just come.

Like one cousin of mine was telling me that she was just in her house cooking and all of a sudden these soldiers came in, they locked her in her room and they took a nap in her living room for a couple of hours and she wasn't allowed to leave or do anything. And another cousin was telling me about how she was trapped in the house with her sister-in-law and their two younger children for hours because they were setting a trap for some people who threw rocks and what have you.

And this is because of Carmei Tzur. Carmei Tzuris on Abu-Ayyash land actually. The first piece of land they took to build was my family's land. And they're there to protect the settlers, they're there to protect, you know, the settlements there. And Bayt Ommar is a prison. So there's no way I'm diverging, I guess for me to take Giacomo and have him live in that horror. But I will take him back to visit, and just to keep that connection. And he knows, he says, I'm half-Palestinian, half-Italian, but mostly American, that's how he defines himself.

AR: Does he speak Arabic?

SA: Now he goes to Arabic school, which is a nightmare because you know I lost that window where it would have become a natural process for him. So he knows a little and when we go to Jordan he picks up a lot, but he refuses to speak it because you know, he wants to be American too. It's funny, he has a Handala tee shirt that he wears in Jordan but he refuses to wear it to school here. So you know, I'm putting this big cross on his shoulders and that for me is very hard. I don't want him to put up with the anger and the frustration that I had about the whole situation but you know I can't help it, I mean we're still living in the same situation that I was living. He'll deal with it in a different way I'm sure, I mean he'll have his own way of handling this. But he feels an extreme sense of

injustice about, already, the situation. And he feels that a part of him is not being treated the way other human beings should be treated.
And it's interesting because it's given him, first of all, he is against the Iraq war, he is against all war, his politicization…

Obviously I have an effect on him, and I have to be careful about how, you know, cause I have a lot of anger and I don't want him to have anger. I want him to, I mean I want him to be angry, it's OK to be angry, but I don't want him to have… it's difficult being Palestinian and it's difficult feeling that you're being treated so unjustly. It's not easy being in that position. I don't want him to be in that position, and I don't want him to feel victimized all the time because**,** you don't want to have that chip on your shoulder all the time. So I don't know what to do about it, and he is a child as I said and sometimes I overanalyze these things and I think too much about what's in his mind. But he's thinking about bionicles and computer games really most of the time, not about Palestine.

AR: And you said you had a story about Israel '48 [Israel within the Green Line]?

SA: Yes, so in 1987 was the last time, no the time before last maybe, maybe I went in a couple times more, but it was very easy for Palestinians to take Israeli buses and just go on tour and go wherever you want. And as I said, I never felt comfortable traveling in Palestine. It's my country but I never felt that, I didn't wanted to deal with Israeli soldiers or Israelis. So we would go from the border to Bayt Ommar. We would go to Hebron to buy stuff and whatever and visit the Haram Ibrahimi, etc., We would go to Jerusalem and go to Bethlehem. But it just, I went to Ramallah once all through my, it's just we were confined to that place, this is where we were. Palestinians did not go all over the place to go and picnic in Jenin or to go picnic in Nablus, so I didn't know Palestine. I only knew what my mother showed me, which was the surrounding areas. So in '87 my grandfather said, "I want to show you Palestine."

And we hopped on a bus, and we spent a whole day from one place to the other, like from early morning, came back in the middle of the night to Bayt Ommar. I saw Akka, and I saw Jaffa, and a little bit of Tulkarem. Like he took me all over the place, it was just like, we were in a taxi mostly seeing things from either a bus or a car and Karmel. I didn't go Nassra, but I saw a few places and I just was flabbergasted. But it sort of gave me the freedom to **…** to say to myself that you know, this whole thing is Palestine. It was divided in '47 but it's all Palestine. And somehow that trip was significant for me, that I should feel free to go travel to Haifa. My grandfather used to go and they used to go to the sea, and now do all of this stuff. I went a couple of times and I was not allowed in, and my….was short, so I never saw 1948 until this summer where I sneaked in on a bus?

AR: How did you do that?

SA: I can't tell you because then I'll get the people who sneaked me in, in trouble.
And basically, they talk about the security wall and the apartheid wall and what have you, I premiered a film at the film festival that showed how easy for gay Palestinians to go back and forth into Jerusalem to... And I mean the wall is not finished to start with, it's

not for security; anybody can breach that if you're willing to take that risk. And that's the thing.

If you're a suicide bomber, you're willing to take that risk and you could do it if you wanted. But it's not the wall that's stopping them. So I sneaked in the bus and we toured different places, destroyed villages and what have you. At some point I was just exhausted, I was staying in Ramallah with friends and then not sleeping enough, etc, and then we were in Jaffa, which looked like New York City to me, whatever. This doesn't look like Palestine to me, but we met with people, we met with Zochrot and some incredible Israelis that are doing amazing work about 1948 and remembering and the history and..

But so we were traveling from Jaffa to go to Haifa, and I was very tired, and I was talking to somebody behind me who wanted to start her own film festival and she was asking me about the ABCs of how to do it and blah, blah, blah. And then I turned around and I told her I'm really tired, I need to just close my eyes. So I close my eyes and I fell asleep and I was so exhausted that I went into this incredible deep sleep.

Like I woke up and for a long time, longer than I could, I mean this has happened to me in the past where you wake up and you don't know where you are, but this was extremely long. I really had no idea where I was, so my instinct was to open the curtain of the bus and look outside. And I saw these green fields, people playing Frisbee, and then all this like industrial stuff, and I felt like I was in Europe. I felt like, "Am I back in Boston?" or something like that. I really had no idea where I was. And then I look to my right and there's this woman, this friend of mine, and then it immediately dawned on me that I was in Palestine, I was in '48 Israel basically and there was nothing about it that I could claim to be mine, that I could recognize as Arab or as Palestinian.

They had completely transformed. We were apparently in Ramat Tel Aviv; you know, very modern and whatever, so I start crying hysterically, and everybody's like on top of me, didn't know what was going on or whatever, and I was like, "Just get away from me, just let me be." And I just didn't know where I was, there was nothing there that they had left for me to recognize as Palestinian, and as I was saying this to myself, I saw there was some modern building but it was built on big blocks that looked like they were part of some old house, and I just started screaming, "This! This is Palestinian! These rocks were Palestinian!" And it was ridiculous.

It was just so, it was, you know, it was just . . . for me to… I don't know how to explain it. Because I hadn't been to '48, I hadn't realized how much it has been transformed, and I have that connection to 1948 by virtue that it was all Palestine, that it was all part of this area where… I mean we visited destroyed villages, we visited all these things, and not being able to see anything that looked like it might have been from Palestine was devastating for me, it was…I'm a passionate person inside but I don't cry hysterically like that, it was an experience that I had never had before.

So and then we went on to Um-Al Fahm and all of that, that whole trip was very transforming basically because it sort of re-established my connection to that land, seeing those villagers talking about …**,** showing me where their house was, where their school was.

We had a native Indian [Native American] with us who was traveling who could really relate to that story and he started chanting afterwards this song that was incredible, it was… I mean we all started crying when we were singing it on the ruins of that village.

But then I asked him later on, “What was that song?” and he said, “It’s a song of remembrance,” And it’s basically, you sing it every time you want to remember something and every time you sing that song you repeat all the things that you want to remember and he never wanted to forget being there, so being in ‘48 was, it’s not like reading about it in books. You get to experience it with the absence and the remains and the presence of the Palestinians in the cities. Like I was very happy to enter Haifa because there were Palestinians and I could see Palestinian restaurants and whatever. But there are areas that are completely cleansed from our existence, and as I said, reading about it in books is really different than being there and experiencing it. That’s it.

AR: Anything else you want to say?

SA: No, just thank you.