Video interview at Boston, Massachusetts
By Alice Rothchild

Abdelfattah Abusrour transcript

AR: Tell me your name, where you were born, the date of your birth.

AA: Well, my name is Abdelfattah Abusrour**.** You can call me Abed. I was born in Aida refugee camp on the August the 12th, 1963.

AR: And where was your family in 1948?

AA: My father was born in a village called Bayt Nattif, which is 17 kilometers to the southwest of Jerusalem. My mother was born in a village called Zakariyya, which is not far away from there as well. So they were living in Bayt Nattif until the 19th of October, 1948.

AR: And what were they doing?

AA: My father was a merchant. He had a grocery store selling cereals and selling cloaks. They had sheep, a lot of sheep and goats and animals. They were doing a lot of farming for cereals: wheat, barley, and so on. My mother at that time didn't work, but when they moved afterwards, running away from the village and so on, she become a midwife.

AR: So did she have children when she was living in that village?

AA: Yes. My eldest brother was born in 1945. My second brother in '47, and then she had a series of children born and dying. She gave birth to 14 and only four lived. Ten boys and four girls, only four boys lived and I was the youngest and I have another brother who was born in 1956 in the camp and I was the last to be born, the last to remain alive.

AR: So what are the stories of exactly what happened in 1948?

AA: Well, according to my father and my mother, on the 19th of October, 1948, the village was attacked by Zionists. There was some resistance during the previous days, and then they came and of course started shooting. People fled a little bit in the villages around. They stayed around two months in the village of Bayt Umma, in the lands of Bayt Umma, and every time they tried to get back there was the Zionist troops shooting at them. So, after two months in the rain, mud, in the fields, my father rented a room in Bayt Sahour, in the east of Bethlehem. And they stayed around a year there. And then the UN started renting lands for 99 years and so one of my uncles had just registered all the family in Aida camp. So at that time, Abusrour family made up like 70 percent of the Aida camp.

So all the family moved in 19-, almost 1950 to the camp. And they shared big, big tents so there were like four, five families, three families living under the same big

tent. And they have there even some goats and some sheep and one of my sisters, in fact, was killed with the sheep.

They stayed under the tents for about six years. And seeing that the situation was not as temporary as it was supposed to be, and the UN Resolution 194 was not respected by Israel, so then the UN, UNRWA, [United Nations Relief and Works Agency], started building, what they called shelters, which were small rooms of nine to twelve square meters with like the front part was two meter- and-half high, and the back part was about two meters high. So the roof was like in a slope in order to make rain or snow or whatever not to stagnate on top of it. They were built as a temporary situation as well because the thickness of the wall and everything were like between seven to ten centimeters.

They had one room for families with six members or less, or two rooms for bigger families. I remember at the time we had public toilets. So there were like two cabinets on four parts of the camp. One for females and one for males, and people used to go there. And then there was four water distribution points as well. Talking about late '70s until almost… Before but that people used to go to find water from far away and find wood for the fire…

AR: They were cooking outside?

AA: They were cooking outside and then they built small kitchenette with the roof and the sink. So it was a separated part. And then some families started to build their own WCs so it was also an outdoor built with bricks and then also the roof was in zinc. And this remains almost until the early '70s, mid '70s. And since the families were growing, there were about 800 people living in Aida camp in 1950, so families started growing and these temporary shelters became too small or started to crack down and so on.

So either families agglutinate one room next to each other or just destroy them and demolish them and build anew. So actually the spaces we had, we used to have in the camp, have almost disappeared. I mean, when I was a child ten,15 years old, we used to have football competitions, soccer competitions, between the northern quarter, southern quarter, eastern quarter, and western quarter. So we have like free spaces which we used like playgrounds. They were small but, I mean, we were using them.

The fields around the camp, which in part were property of the church, Armenian church, were also open spaces so, and the olive groves we established like a playground and there were big holes in the ground, when they were filled with water we used to swim in them. They were our swimming pools. And also, when I got to the university I hoped to make a plant classification book, so I was taking a lot of photographs of plants, flowers, and so on, searching snakes and serpents, and lizards and so on. So a lot of my pocket money, whatever I had, was going to films and to painting in fact.

AR: What what's your earliest memory of being in the camp?

AA: Well, I guess my first memory comes when I was four years old during the war of '67. I remember we had a veranda in the front of the house and the sky seemed like full of planes. My mother was putting water in a jug. And we had a cave behind the house, and most of the camp was hiding in that cave during that time. And I remember that we,

as children, were covered with blankets, put aside with the mothers. And the men were on the opposite side with a space that was open and were looking at the planes in the sky.

The second memory is the first curfew in the camp in 1968. And there was an Israeli soldier posted just in front of the house. And he was, strangely, a Jewish, an Iraqi Jew. He was like, I don't know, in his late 50s, 60s. And we were playing with my brother with a football and then, I don't know, he like hit it so hard it jumped over the small wall, the stone wall that we had. And so he's trying to go out to find it and there saw this Jewish soldier. So these are the first really souvenirs I have of the war and of the Israeli soldiers.

AR: So with the Israeli soldier, what was that interaction like?

AA: Well, in fact what happened is that my mother tried to ask him that we can take the football. And he agreed and so when he started to speak Arabic, so my mother felt like, he's Arab somehow. So I guess, strangely, she said, "Would you like a cup of tea?" or something. And he said, we are not allowed to drink anything from you, or something like that. He wasn't really bad, but later the souvenirs of the First Intifada and different curfews also before the First Intifada in the late '70s, '80s, different curfews in the camps and so on, we have seen different types of Israeli soldiers coming in the camp.

AR: So can you take a particular curfew and describe exactly what happens?

AA: Well at the certain time there was some of the young people when they throw stones at the soldiers, when they come in with their jeeps and so on. I remember at a certain time I was in first, second year in the university for about six months. Every Tuesday there was an incident like this and every Tuesday they asked all the young people from ten to 17 years old to get down in a space in front of the camp, stay all over night, to confess who was throwing the stones.

And at a certain time they took all the university students to the detention center in Bethlehem and all the other people walk them to what became Muqata, the military police station. They kept us for two days at that time. And then they released everybody. They second thing was during one of the curfews, they were going into each house, reimbursing everything in the kitchen on top of each other, the rice, the oil, the everything. And one of my nephews was sleeping and then they started hitting him with their boots. And so my mother tried like to defend him, and one of the soldiers hit her with the back of the lower side of his M16 on her back, hip. And so she suffered a lot. Her foot was almost paralyzed for a certain time and she had to have many surgeries. But later on she like was pulling it and not really able to walk properly without a cane and so on.

AR: Do you remember your feelings during this time and how you understood the conflict, how it felt to you?

AA: Well, I was full of anger. I can't say I have hatred because my parents were never people who liked to talk with hatred about anything. And I remember even my father when we like wanted to talk badly about someone who deserved to be talking about it

badly from my point of view, was saying, "Shut up, he or she is better than you." And even when other people tried to talk badly about any other people, he was saying, "Please, change the subject." He never tolerated that people talked badly about any other people. And it was all, I mean, this peace inside them.

However, my mother was more interactive than my father. My father was stuck sometime, I felt, with these memories of 1948, he was so much afraid that we go out at night, that we be arrested, that we have participate in any political demonstrations and so on. We didn't listen to him every time of course, but we never like thought that the violence in a way is the solution.

As Palestinian of course, I said and I still believe that, we have to resist the occupation in all the means because it's an illegal occupation and with all the empathy and sympathy to the Jewish history and all they have suffered, we were not part of it, and we can't pay the price for the crimes of the others. And we cannot repair an injustice by making another injustice about us.

AR: So what did you do with your anger as a teenager?

AA: Well, mostly I was oriented to words, arts. So I was doing a lot of photography, a lot of paintings. I was a member of the Palestinian Union of Artists since '81, '82. We had exhibitions and we had Israeli soldiers attacking these exhibitions, confiscating paintings, destroying paintings. In 1984 in Birzeit University there was an exhibition. I had two of my paintings taken.

AR: What were they paintings of?

AA: Well, one was of hands with chains with the "V" victory. The other was a dove dressed like a Palestinian keffiyeh, dying, with blood. So I mean, this was a very terrorist action apparently toward the Israeli soldiers who attacked the exhibition. I tried a lot to work, I was never a member in a political party or registered in any organization. For me, looking back at the years in the university and what was happening, sometimes I felt that the priorities have changed, that sometimes the priorities of the party are more important than the priorities of the country.

'nd for me, I am Palestinian and I am a human being. I reclaim this "Palestinianity," if you can say it, and this humanity. And for me, every Palestinian is the same in the sense that we are all equals and we deserve to work for Palestine and it's above all the other causes. So that's why I work with everybody in a sense. And I cannot say that we can accept labeling Palestinians as terrorists. People who are under occupation cannot be labeled as terrorists. And people who are pushing people to be in this cycle of violence with their complicity, with silence and injustice, and accepting the new realities on the ground, are people who are pushing people towards extremism and pushing people towards despair, in fact. Because when a guy who is ready to sacrifice himself and go and explode himself or whatever, he is better alive than that, because these people can do miracles. If they have such an extreme love for their country or for their cause to be able to do that, then they are better alive than that. These people don't deserve to die.

And we as human beings, again, whether we are Muslim or Christian or Jewish or

Hindu or Buddhist or Atheist, or whatever we are, we are all human beings. And we are all equal partners in making a change and leaving a better heritage for our children and the generations to come, a heritage that we can be proud of, a heritage that human values, human rights, peace, justice, freedom, love, are the same for everybody. Nobody is more equal than the others. Nobody is above the law or above these values. And unfortunately, most of the time these values are violated by those who pretend defending them.

But because I usually say we do not have the luxury of despair, we cannot just say it's hopeless or we can't do anything. So everybody is a change-maker and everybody has to make the change he needs to change to be proud of in front of his children and grandchildren, if Allah grants us life here.

AR: To go back to your parents, did they talk about what happened in '48, did they share some of the trauma, did you get stories about that?

AA: Well, mostly from my mother. My father really, like, I felt that he has this hope shut off. That he was still living with this Nakba and still afraid that the Israelis will go, come and chase us another time and another time and another time. He didn't want to invest anything like rebuilding the house or whatever, because he's sure, we don't know what will happen. I mean, they were among the richest family in the village. And coming to the refugee camp and he rented a shop and start selling tissue, but I, when I was going there to help him sometimes I felt that he's just doing that to give himself the impression that he was alive, that he's working, but most of the time he sold things even cheaper than he bought them, or the same price. He was not making any benefit. And I felt that he is really just doing that with pride to think that he's doing something.

My mother was much more interactive and much more entrepreneur and she really worked hard to make the home suitable for living, and she learned to be midwife and she was illiterate. I mean, she couldn't read or write, but she was willing to learn and she tried to learn and she learned how to do the needles and how to do all this stuff, what medications to be given and what not. And even at a certain time in the school, some of the teachers were asking, who was the first midwife in Islam, and the kids said Um Zachery**,** my mother. So she was really great woman and her funeral, it was a big, big, big funeral. A lot of people came.

And I guess if she was given a chance, if she was born in another country, she would have been a great actress because she used to imitate people, she used to make jokes, and she was a really great woman.

AR: How did she deal with all the children that she lost?

AA: Well that was, I guess sometimes when she was angry against me, she said, why God didn't take you and leave me a daughter, or something. So she missed having a daughter. She gave birth to four and some of them lived like for seven, eight years. And they died of disease and, I mean, there was no care really at that time. But she always, whenever my brothers, all of them of course are married and have children, a lot of children, she was hoping that one time that I would have a daughter as well because she said, "If God loves you, you will have first a daughter, because they are the most tender

and passionate and loving. And you will find them when you are old somehow."

We tried to be there all the time, but you know it's really difficult so and probably the difficult thing that I was there when they died, both of them. My father died in 2006 and my mother died in 2003. And while I was at their house staying because my wife is from East Jerusalem and I didn't get the permit until six years after our marriage, so it was always difficult to sneak around to go to Jerusalem. But I mean, it's kind of a blessing and kind of unfair thing that I have to be the one who announces this for my brothers and family. I have a brother who is exiled in Jordan since 1972 and he couldn't come to the funeral. So…

AR: Why was he exiled?

AA: Well, in 1967 when this war started he was in Jerusalem. He was studying at the Ibrahami College in Jerusalem and so he saw people fleeing with the '67 war and so he went to Jordan. And then, few years later we could have a permit for him to come back, and he came back and he remained a few days with us and then the Israelis asked him to come, to give him his ID card. And they took him and never returned. So two months later we knew the, by the Red Crescent, Cross that he was in Hebron jail. And he was accused of being a member of the Popular Front of the Liberation of Palestine. He didn't confess anything, he wasn't judged, and six months later he was put on the bridge in Jordan and kicked away. Until now, we don't know what happened. He didn't confess anything. Every time we presented a permit for him he was refused. I mean, Arafat came back and he was never, but he was teaching in UNRWA school and you know the Jordanians also at that time, if he has been active in any way, they would have at least asked him to visit them to see and to interrogate him.

But he was never interrogated at that side. So he was not politically active, and he was not a member of any organization. He wasn't with the PLO. He was not carrying guns. And he was always a teacher in a UN school. So that's why it seemed bizarre. And until now, I don't know and I don't understand why they refused to give him a permit to come back.

AR: So you said that you went from being in this camp with all these kids to being in a university. How did you make all those steps? Your mother couldn't read.

AA: Well, I guess for Palestinians in general and for my parents, this was the arm of resistance that they wanted to offer us. Education was an important tool that they see their hopes and dreams be fulfilled. My mother, a lot of times said, "You don't know the chance you have. I would have loved to go to study and to go to school and to go to university." So they invested a lot of their time and their energy. I mean, they weren't thinking of taking a vacation and go to the beach and visiting Europe or whatever. All their money, all their economies, goes to the education.

Even in a recent tribute, 70 percent of the family budget of the Palestinian family goes to the education of their children. So they invest a lot in the education of their children. Nobody wants to see his children dying and staying unemployed and so on. So they invested a lot on that. And I guess, well my family situation wasn't that good in financial level. So fortunately I had good grades and I got a scholarship to the

University.

AR: In the UNRWA school?

AA: In the UNRWA school you don't pay, so it was a symbolic fee and then the public school we had, in fact at my time there wasn't a school in the camp. It was in Bayt Jala. We had to walk about one kilometer and-a-half, about one mile to go there. My eldest brothers were going barefoot. They didn't have even the money to have shoes. And I remember we had these plastic sandals and shoes in the summer or in the winter when water comes in or when sweat goes on you, just you walk with the sound, "Pagk, pagk, pagk." So it was really an interesting experience.

AR: How many kids in the class?

AA: Well there was about 40 to 60 in the classes, in each class. But there was a lot of activities and children wanted to learn. It is not like today where there is a lot of things that distract children from learning and a lot of videos and internet and satellite channels and so on. We used to read a lot, now it's almost a habit that disappeared with all of this attraction on different levels.

I mean, we had a lot of hopes. We do still try to keep it alive, but I mean, you see a lot of focused people. And killing the human being inside with these new realities on the ground, pushing them to think that, well, I hope that the checkpoint would be open. I hope that the checkpoint would be easy to pass today. I will not, I hope I will stay a little bit and not six hours, and so one. So the dreams of people become so banal in a certain sense, that the illegality of the situation becomes something that you cohabit, I mean, used to, which is abnormal of course. The most irritating thing for me is when people ask a Palestinian, "How do you tolerate what's going on?" and he say, or she says, "I'm used to it." This is not normal to be used to such situation.

So that's why we try to, with the Al Rowwad and so on, to try to build: that's not normal and we should not accept this, accept realities on the ground that are always renewed and renewed that push you to make sails even on your dreams, on your rights as a human being. So I guess, for me, the chance to get to Bethlehem University and be able to study almost freely, what the scholarship I got every semester with the good notes, until in fact, the third year where I got a scholarship to go to France. I was start learning French at the University.

And so one of, we needed of course for everything to get the permit from the Israeli military. So we need to go like sometimes to sleep overnight at the doors of the office to be able to get to have the tour and to be able to get in. So, I applied many times for the permit and I was never accepted. Even the French consulate intervened; the Mayor of Bethlehem intervened, without any success. And in the interrogation the Israeli military was, his name was Captain Karim. They use Arabic names most of the time although they are not Arabic at all, said, "We have a file like this on you." He has a big file, a big pile of papers. I said, "Well, if you have that and I am so dangerous, then you should put me in prison." He said, "Well, it might come." "Well I see you are a security of your country, you should put me in prison." He said, "Because the security of Israel concerns you?" I said, "Of course it concerns me, if it concerns my own security." So he

was so angry… "Go out, you will see France on TV."
I said, "That's fine, OK, [Arabic expression]."

So I don't know, it took a year, six times permits, and then the sixth time I just throw the permit and waited. And one year later almost, some people from the camp said, "We heard your name," so at that time they were, when they had the permits that they just called for people who were in the crowd that they have now. So of course I wasn't going any more after one year. And so I guess what they did was, well, that they were sure that this scholarship was over and so I just need to be more frustrated that they gave me a permit after the scholarship was over.

But in fact it wasn't off. I mean, I did very badly the semester afterwards, and I lost my honor degree, my honor level at that time, but I worked hard on the last semester but I wasn't that good. So I had to pay for this semester.

AR: So what was it like to go from Bethlehem, (to being in a prison,) to going to France?

AA: Well, when I got the permit, then the French consulate said, "Well, the second year was to send three girls in fact." So they said, "Well, since you got the permit we can send two girls and we can send you." And that was a month to learn the French. So my French teacher said, "So why don't you ask for a scholarship to continue your studies, since now you have finished your fourth school." So the Israelis, without having the purpose to do so, served me in a sense that I had finished my studies so I could ask for a full scholarship to continue my studies in fact. And it was the last thing I think about, France.

We speak English at the University, so it was like a dream. So I asked for a scholarship and then I didn't get it in fact. So when I was in France for the smaller scholarship that I got to learn French, I asked my family if they can support that I study French for a year and then we will see. So they said, "OK." So my brother supported me in this because we were not allowed to work at that time in France.

And at the same time I applied for another scholarship. And it was like a miracle, in fact, because until the last day I didn't get any confirmation that I will have the scholarship. So I was calling people I will pass to say goodbye and I am coming back, returning to Palestine and so on. And finally the family of my teacher, who was in France, said, "Oh, we received a message that you should go to Paris to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that you have this scholarship and you should fill the demand and so on."

AR: So what did all this feel like? You are giving me the facts, what did it feel like?

AA: Well, I guess it is really was amazing that I had been somewhere, that somehow led to this, with a message somehow. I mean, it was in part, an extremely important experience for me. On one side it permitted me to look to ourselves from outside, and to see what the others think about us.

AR: What did you see?

AA: Well, in fact, I saw from outside that we are imprisoned within our own system, and with what the Israelis want us to be in, and not to see what is beyond that. They have

been like conditioning us to things, and pushing us to worse things than they wanted to push us to, to become accustomed and used and make [?] on our lives and things that impossible to do anything. It's impossible to reclaim your right as a human being. And then, the same time, how the others look at us as terrorists because we are Palestinian and we do not exist. I mean, the first time I arrived to France to do my residency card, we used to travel with an Israeli travel document in which it mentioned Jordanian as nationality. So we are not recognized as Palestinians. So at the prefecture, the police center, they put on the residency card, "Jordanian refugee under Israeli mandate." So I was so angry, I said, "What? I am not a Jordanian who fled the dictatorship of Jordan to be in the beautiful democracy of Israel. I am a Palestinian refugee under Israeli occupation. You can put that if you want, but not Jordanian refugee."

So after a big debate and discussion with this lady, the director of the police center said, "Well listen, Monsieur, come back tomorrow." So I come back the second day and they put, "Nationality: to be determined." So…what? Am I an extraterrestrial or a ghost? It's really incredible.

One time in the Metro, on the subway, I was sitting with my Palestinian kaffiyeh around my neck and suddenly there is a lady looking at me, looks at me and says, "I am next to a terrorist." So I thought she was joking. I said, "Why do you say that Madame?" And she said, "Because you are killing people and doing this and exploding this and so on." I said, "Well, why do you tell me that? Do you see that I am carrying or killing people and so on?" And then she said, "Oh, maybe it's not you, maybe it's the Syrians, or the Libyans. Oh, you speak very well French. In Israel they learn good French?" I said, "Well, I learned French at Bethlehem University. It's a Palestinian University; it's not an Israeli University." And so little by little you see how these people don't know anything about anything. They are just fed up with these news and stereotypes and pushed. And then she said, "Well, goodbye, wish you luck," and she left.

And there was a guy, an African guy, facing me. He was looking at me and he said, and after she left he said, "How could you tolerate this and be so patient with this lady?" I said, "Because, if they don't know, they don't know and you should try to make them understand. Sometimes it's successful and sometimes it's not." Some friends when they presented me said, "Abed is a friend," and sometimes they said, "Palestinian friend." So I said, "Why don't you say that I am Palestinian most of the time?" She said, "Because there are people when you say Palestinian, and it's like saying bomb." And so there was a lot of this agony, sometimes, that some Palestinians, I always said I am Palestinian. I have nothing to hide. But some Palestinians in different countries, sometimes they were afraid to say that they were Palestinians. And this is really incredible. You are not accepted as human beings. You look at the computer programs and the countries, you search Palestine in vain and you don't find it.
When I came for the first time to the United States…

AR: Would you tell that story…

AA: When I came for the first time to the United States, there is this immigration office of course, and asked name, Abdelfattah Abusrour. They took that. August 12, 1963. Place of birth: Bethlehem. Country of birth: Palestine. Ah, there is no Palestine on the

computer. So where is that? Well, it's called Palestine. At that time in '63 it was under the Jordanian control but it was called Palestine. "Oh, so it was the Jordanians?" "Yes, it was controlled by the Jordanians at that time."

So he writes Jordan, country of birth. Father: Abdul Karim Abusrour. Place of birth: Bayt Nattif. Country of birth: Palestine. He was born in 1910. So, it was the Ottoman Empire at that time, but it was called Palestine as well. So, "I told you there is no Palestine on the computers." So, OK. "I don't know, where is this village now?" "Well, it was occupied and destroyed by Israel." "So where is it now?" "It's occupied by Israel." "It is in Israel now?" "It's occupied by Israel." So he writes Israel. The amazing thing is that the computer did not explode because it has created Israel in 1910 while it was founded in 1948 under UN resolution. And Palestine would explode the computer if it was there.

AR: So what are you feeling when you are standing in front of this immigration officer being kind of evaporated or humiliated?

AA: Well, I feel really a lot of anger and frustration and this…I mean, you have… Now we have Palestinian passport and it's travel document, like passport and under it a travel document. You have this. You recognize this as a passport for traveling. You recognize that there are Palestinians who are negotiating with Israelis to make something, a peace process or whatever. And you try to push forward in a way. And you don't recognize that I exist as a Palestinian, as a human being? My country and people are not recognized as people who are, can claim that they are Palestinians. So it's really the paradox of things that you cannot understand how these people operate. They are caught in a system where the computer is telling you if you exist or not exist. And are we such subjects like ghosts. I don't know. What people see when they look at us?

Do we have tails or horns like the Jews were presented in the old paintings? Are we such invisible people and all the history you look, even Shakespeare wrote Palestine in his plays. So how come we do not exists as human beings, and as a country, and as a nationality, as people? It's always difficult and this puts people to different pressures because what should we do to make ourselves known as human beings?

And even when we try with this like, the beautiful resistance, I started in 1998 with Al-Rowwad Center in Aida Camp, trying to make art as a way of self expression; to keep and defend there's humanity in us and to give a voice for those children and youth and young people to express themselves in such a beautiful and human way, and non-violent way. Sometimes different groups try to prevent us from being allowed to perform or to present this other image of Palestine other than the images that are being shown all the time in the media that we are a people who are only capable of throwing stones or are born with genes of hatred or violence. And this beautiful, human, civilized, non-violent way of talking and showing Palestinians as human beings is not allowed. And we are pushed and all whatever you do you are a terrorist so go and explode yourself. And then everybody would be satisfied. We refuse that.

AR: You mentioned in passing that your wife was in East Jerusalem and you were in Aida Camp. Can you explain the details of that and how that evolved?

AA: Actually, as I said, Israel has been conditioning the life of people in a way. And so East Jerusalem is segregated from the rest of the West Bank even though it was occupied in 1967. So people who are in East Jerusalem and these zones which are controlled by Israel until now were occupied after '67, have a blue ID card like the Israelis. They are not Israeli citizens but they have this Israeli card that they are residents in Israel, as they call them. So they are not considered as citizens. And if by chance they got married to someone like me from the West Bank and they chose to live in the West Bank, then they will lose this ID card, and they will lose their work, and will not be able to go back to Jerusalem or to enter beyond the checkpoints and the wall actually. So what we have to do is that we should rent apartment in Jerusalem, because for us it is important that Palestinians stay in Jerusalem as well and not to empty it as the Israelis want us to do, or push us to do, with these high amounts that they reclaim if you want to have a permit to build a house or whatever. And so we had to rent an apartment, to register all the children in Jerusalem schools, to pay the taxes like the Israelis do, though we don't have the same services as the Israelis.

So when you come to an Arab neighborhood you will see it dirty, not well cleaned or prepared, garbage isn't picked up and so on. And you will go to the Israeli side, the Jewish Israeli side and see green, water, and flowers and so on. Though it is the same municipality. But of course the service are not the same.

So my wife is from East Jerusalem. She is from Ras al'Amud and Silwan. So this is also a name that are heard recently in the news with the Israelis wanted to demolish 80 houses in that area, in Al'Bustan area, in Silwan. So we had to rent an apartment, and it took me six years to get the permit to be able to go to my house, which we rented. Of course I did go during these six years, a lot. And I have witnessed the progression of the building of the wall from mass of dirt, to cubes of cement of one meter high, to two meter high blocks, to four meters, to twelve meters now in Abu Dis. So we're going all around. Instead of the ten kilometers, ten minutes ride, it's like an hour ride now. And going through the checkpoints, sometimes running through the hills and the valleys with the closures that have been like preventing people from passing anywhere.

And during the 2002 invasion of Bethlehem, I stayed in the camp for 43 days, for the full 43 days, because also it was important for us. Al Rowwad was transformed into an emergency medical clinic and intermediate center. And we have to work hard to be able to help the population on different levels during these 43 days of curfew. So, a lot of times I was not able to be with my family, to be with my children, and this is also a lot of people have lost their ID card. I mean, my sister-in-law, eldest sister-in-law who was married in Jerusalem, in Ramallah, lost her ID card. Her second sister who lived in England with her husband and she had a British passport, when she came back they took her ID card and said, "Well, now you are living outside, you cannot have, be a resident here." And these laws, of course, are apartheid laws. They are applied only on Palestinians.

The Jewish settlers are living in the West Bank. So they are protected by Israeli law, are not considered as Israelis who are living on the West Bank so their ID cards should be taken away like the Palestinians who are living in the West Bank. So I guess these segregation laws that were built made a lot of life difficult. I mean, in the old city, people, five to six families living in the same quarter or one room.

A lot of people tried to keep their house in Jerusalem, well, though, they have built like palaces in Ramallah or Bethlehem or the neighborhoods. And they cannot live there because the Israelis would take away their ID cards, and trying to evacuate the city from its Palestinian inhabitants to take control and say this Jerusalem is the eternal capital of a state of occupation. The settlements also which were built, the new colonies which were built in East Jerusalem, I mean Ras al'Amud is a quarter where there is a new colony which was built in [19?].

AR: So can you describe your house and what is built near it and what does it all look like?

AA: Well in fact, the apartment we rent and my parents-in-law house, the colony is in between them on the main road. And you have the Jewish cemeteries also all around. The Jewish cemeteries were lands in fact rented for 99 years from the Ottomans and then they became like property of the State of Israel. So, as people say, we are surrounded by the dead and by the living on these two sides.

But there was a big confrontation at that time and the checkpoint between my parents-in-law house and our house was a big headache because sometimes the line was like 300, 400 meters long, and my wife need to pass the checkpoint to go to her school to teach and to put the children in the kindergarten or in the daycare. And for me it was good because I didn't need to pass the checkpoint to go there. I needed to go to Bethlehem by Abu Dis so it was less trouble until they moved the wall up to Abu Dis and then it became impossible to fly above the wall.

But one of the incidences that I have- my children, my wife, driving the car with our two children, one, Kannan was one year-and-a-half and Adam was like a few month old. And at certain time the Israelis wanted every driver to, like few meters away, get out of the car, show he doesn't carry anything, show his ID card, and then get back to the car and drive. And every single person in the car should get out.

So the soldiers ask her to get the children out, to ask the children to be out. She says, "Well, they are children. They are infants. They can't go, walk." And he was like: "Get them out!" And so she had to show him that they are children, they are not people who could walk and so on. So it was incredible experience for her. And every time, every day she had to pass by this.

So after they built, completed the wall around Abu Dis and then it became impossible to pass through, six years later it finished and I got the permit. But I was captured many times.

AR: Describe a capture.

AA: Well, the soldiers would be hiding between the trees, behind road turns and so on. And just when you try to pass, they grab you and, it depends on the situation. Some soldiers hit you, some people take you to prison in what they call the Muscuvite compound in El Muscuvia, in East Jerusalem. And sometimes they see that after four years I got the permit from the Minister of Interior that I can live in, with my wife, in Jerusalem, but the military didn't follow to give the permit. So I show them this paper and I say that, "Well, for me I am a resident. So if your army is problematic with that,

it's your problem not mine because for me I am allowed to be here." And there was big debates, so every time they make me sign on if they capture me another time I would have to pay 10,000 shekels or be put in prison for a certain few months or so on. And I put always, I don't recognize this as a document, and he writes, the soldier said, of course he writes in Hebrew, but the soldiers tells me that he write this. I don't know whether it's true or not, and then I signed.

So it happened with me three times or four times that I was captured under such circumstances. One of it was a little bit violent with the soldier, but other times they just were writing the, how you call it, the report and the bill. But I mean you see a lot of people who are, like the school children who try to go from one side to the other because they have their school in Jerusalem and they live in Abu Dis or Al Eizariya
People who have to go to the hospital, Al Mokassed, the Palestinian Jerusalem hospital, the other, Augusta Victoria Hospital. Workers who have like bakeries and so on who have their bakery on the Palestinian side and their shop on the Jerusalem side or vice versa. A lot of stories you meet, a lot of people waiting, and a lot of women with their children waiting, a lot of school children waiting. And it depends of whether the Israeli soldiers allows you to pass or don't allow you to pass. And sometimes you, we try always to find ways around these checkpoints. And sometimes the soldier will tell you, from here you cannot pass, go and pass from there, and so on. So you can see that it is not security reason, it is really humiliation reasons.

Sometimes you can feel that the soldiers are seeing that people are crossing from that side, either from Bethlehem side or from Abu Dis side. And some people, they of course, they start to chase you away and run behind you and sometimes shoot in the air or shoot at you. And it has been incredible times between '96 and '98, a lot of roads.
I mean, I discovered villages that I did know what existence of. I was working in Ramallah, going from Bethlehem to Ramallah, and you just go, avoid the main road because most of the time it was blocked, the checkpoint was blocked. And you go through hills and valleys and roads. I mean the taxi drivers were like suicide bombers, or whatever. They just drove like fedayeen in the belly of the beast. And they had to rebuild their cars every week or so. It was incredible.

AR: How did this affect your children, seeing you come back and forth?

AA: Well, to tell you the truth, like the 43 days of siege of Bethlehem for example, when I returned to my house in Jerusalem, I mean the children took like two hours to be able to hug me or to come recognize me at a certain level. They were just like afraid. And it was really difficult because when you come to the house after five or six hours driving to get back home and your children come like to play with you and to jump on you and so on. And you are so angry and so you cannot tolerate even that somebody speak with you. Not to be a parent, to simply not to have the love for your children and to try go beyond this emotion and I feel that, well…

So I guess when you come after five or six hours of trying to reach your home and your children try to come with this joy of meeting you and jump on you and so on. And you are so angry, so pissed off that you can't even believe that somebody will talk with you. To really give them back this love and be a parent, a normal human being. Just think how lovely to meet your children. Not to be able to think, it's a holiday and you

want to go to the sea…

So when you have a weekend or a vacation and you think, oh that's a good time to go to the sea, to go on a picnic and so on. But ah, you don't have a permit, so how can you go? How can't you go? So the simple things of life that you with your family just want to go and have a good nice day on the beach or whatever, impossible, because you are not allowed to, because you don't have a permit to do that. And little by little, in 2003, for example, we made our theater tour in France, and said, maybe this is a good time to have a few days later also with the family and so on. But we have to travel together because people who have a Jerusalem ID card or Israeli ID card have to pass through another point than the Palestinians who do not have that. And as a Palestinian I can't use the Israeli airport, so I have to travel through Jordan. And even if they travel through Jordan, we cannot pass through the same points in the bridge on the Israeli border.

So it's always a headache that you have to prepare, how can you do this or that as a family? It is, I mean, how can you live normally under such circumstances? How can you say that, well, Israel has the right to exist as a country of occupation and oppression? Nobody can accept a situation where those who were oppressed yesterday are becoming the oppressor today. And they are committing the worst crimes against people who have nothing to do but happen that they are on this country that they proclaim 5,000 years ago that they have the right to be here.

It's difficult to accept injustice as a way of living. It's difficult, and it's impossible to accept realities on the ground as they tried to do them and to build new colonies and the new facts and to change names of villages and streets become Hebrew names, and to try to erase a history, try to steal even the cultural issues, the food issues. The hummus and falafel becomes the traditional Israeli food. What are they doing? Are they in lack of culture and the lack of heritage that they want to steal ours? The embroidery, the Palestinian embroidery, stealing it as part of the Israeli heritage. Dressing these hostess of the air with Palestinian embroidery dresses in El AL or whatever as people told me, to say that this is theirs. Presenting the Palestinian folkloric dress of Bethlehem in the book encyclopedia and put Israel under it as the name of the country of issue.

So it's not acceptable for people to live under such circumstances and to see their history, their culture, their traditions stolen little by little. And they are the ones who are alienated and become without a nationality, without a face, without a name except the images that are portrayed by the media. And every time people talk about human issues, beauty issues, culture issues, you should struggle hard to find something about it in the media or people who are producing a film or who are permitting this other side of Palestine to appear in the media.

Why? I mean, you will find the most frantic human rights activist will work on China, on Ecuador, on Salvador, on Chile, on Nicaragua, on Rwanda, on South Africa and so on. But, when it comes to Palestine and Israel it's a taboo issue. We cannot go against Israel. Israel cannot be criticized or otherwise you are anti-Semitic. Why? Is Israelis the representative of the Jewish people and the Jewish history. Israelis are stealer of Jewish history and Jewish people. Israel is an exploiter of the Holocaust memory and the people and the memory of those people who suffered in such circumstances. And they are using such a heritage to make ugliness and injustice against others who have not

a hand in whatever happened to the Jews.

AR: When did you first meet a Jew who wasn't an Israeli?

AA: I guess it was when I was in France in 1985-86 most exactly. I was in Paris doing my Masters degree and of course the university I went to, the director of the laboratory, Marcell Dajukavitch, his name was, was a Jew. My advisor was a Jew, Henry Stern. And a student, a colleague of mine in the laboratory was a Jew. His grandfather was a Palestinian Jew and he suffered from the occupation of 1948 as my parents and other people. And he was forced out of the place he was in and not allowed to return to because Israel did not want to create a precedence where they returned people to their villages, which is a case also of the Palestinians of '48 now which are called the displaced of the interior.

So the amazing thing is that this Jewish Palestinian, the grandfather, immigration to Tunisia, stayed there. Then the father of this guy goes to France to study and stays in France and marries, and gets married with a French woman. And then he is born in France. But what astonished me is that he went back to Israel to do the military service in Israel. This guy! So it was a strange story, but he told me the history of his grandfather that he was so angry against the Israelis and how could the Jews do this things with the Jews themselves and push them away and treat them as nothing?

There was a lot of racism between the Jews who came from Europe, the progressed Jew, and the Oriental Jews who were considered second class citizens and so on. So they suffered deeper in such circumstances. And I remember also Jews from Hebron, Palestinian Jews from Hebron, when they left, they gave their papers of property in Hebron to the Palestinian municipality of Hebron because they did not recognize Israel as their state and they were Palestinians, and they said, "We are Palestinian Jews." The same thing with the Samaritans in Nablus as well who refused to go to Israel and recognize Israel as their state and they stayed Palestinians and they have their representation in the Palestinian parliament and so on, and stayed in the old city of Nablus.

And then of course a lot of Jewish French, Jewish Americans, Europeans, and so on started to open their eyes little by little. Not enough, unfortunately. But again, the amazing thing is that you will find a lot of Jews who are among the most active on human rights issues. They will touch and talk about any issue concerning human rights. But when it comes to the Palestine and Israeli issue, they block. Even John Paul Sartre once said, "Don't forget I am also a Jew." So it's amazing how they can just have this block when it concerns the injustice that Israel is committing and the crimes that it's committing in their name as Jews. "Never again, never again," but they repeat it all the time. And how can injustice appropriate in such a way? I don't know.

AR: And if someone said to you, where is home, where is home for you?

AA: Home is different parts. For me, Bayt Nattif is home. For me Palestine is home. For me, where people are treated as human beings is home, family, children… So it can be anywhere and it cannot be with excluding Bayt Nattif. The right of return to this village and to the land and to the demolished house that do not exist anymore. A house

where we still have the rusty old keys in our house for these doors that do not exist anymore.

Realities on the ground are, I have a beautiful house in Bethlehem. It took me eight years to build it. Even if I have Buckingham Palace, that doesn't mean that you forget your right as a human being and the right to be whereever you want to be in a land where your parents lived. I mean you can be born in Truro or wherever, or Sharon village, and this beautiful house in Brookline and have a summer house in Miami and have a winter house in Jericho or wherever, but Sharon is your home and you reserve your right to come back whenever you want. And nobody has the right to say, well, you can't come back to this place because it's ours now or whatever.

How can people come to a place and live in a place, take the property of the house, and all the stones, all the walls speak Arabic as we say. And they don't ask themselves, who was there, how did we have this house, how did we have these lands? Why these people are so angry against us just a few meters away? It's difficult sometimes to find a justification for the attitude of Israelis. It's difficult to understand that they say, we did not know. Well, yes, you might not know for a certain time but when things happen and continue to happen and always referring to recent stories as the problem when you spoke about suicide bombers.

When did suicide bombers come in history? '94 after the massacre of Hebron by the, as they say, the crazy Jewish guy who just came in to the mosque and killed 29 people in the prayer of the morning. Was that crazy? So then pushing Palestinians to go and exploded themselves. And then it became the problem that suicide bombers are the problem? Not the '48 problem? Not the massacres against entire Palestinian villages? Not pushing people to despair and putting them in refugee camps and alienating them day after day and pushing them to bantustans and dividing the lands and confiscating lands and building colonies? This is not a problem?

We used to live happily ever after before. And put in checkpoints, building walls, segregating people, dictating the code of conduct on a social level, even that if you are from Bethlehem you should not think of getting in love with someone from Ramallah or someone from Nablus because then there is the wall and there is the checkpoints. And how can you visit each other, how can you visit the family, how can the family visit you? This was an issue. I mean it took my family over three years to accept the idea that their daughter would be getting married from someone from Bethlehem because they have the previous experience of someone from Ramallah who married their eldest daughter and took sometimes months to be able to visit. And this is 15 kilometers away, less than ten miles, nine miles, eight miles, impossible to visit each other. So killing this social tissue, dictating people who to love and not to love.

And, I mean, during the Second Intifada between 2000-2004, you could hear during the curfews, announcements on local TV's and local radio stations that family X and family Y invites you to marriage of their daughter and son on the first lift of curfew. You do not choose your date of marriage. You cannot say that you only choose this day to get married. Or University of Bethlehem or the School of the Frere invites the students to pass the first exam on the first lift of curfew, the second exam on the second lift of curfew. As a student, a Palestinian student more precisely, you should be super intelligent, super ready to pass any exam at any time when the Israelis permit you to pass it. You don't know when this would happen but you have to be ready all the time. Super

minded human beings we are.

So how can people live in such incertitude? You're never sure what will happen. You go to work, you come three, five, six hours before the rendezvous because you are not sure that the checkpoint will be open or not, that you can pass or not. A lot of people have stopped working in other cities because either the employers are afraid of that their employees come late or they can't support it economically under such circumstances. So people are now imprisoned within their own cities, even within their own refugee camps, or their own villages. They can't go and work in Ramallah if they live in Bethlehem, otherwise they should rent or buy an apartment in Bethlehem or in Ramallah if they are there and move all the family.

AR: What has been the role of religion in your family?

AA: The role of religion? We are Muslims. We are practicing Muslims mostly. And I guess one of the important issues about religion is the heart of the religion itself. My family and all of my brothers in fact, looked at religion as the heart of things, as a way of living and a way of communicating with each other. For me, Islam is one of the most tolerant religions, and as we say, Judaism is a materialistic religion, Christianity is a spiritual religion, and Islam has put these two together and find a balance in between the material and the spiritual. So the most commandments, I mean, in Islam it was, and they were towards peace. Peace within and peace with the other.

When the Prophet says, if you go in war you don't kill a woman or a child or an old person or you don't cut a tree, you don't kill an animal. I mean, even at that level it's a code of conduct, a way of living. You don't go and kill people because you like to or you want to or because they are the enemy. You have to be kind with people; you have to be integrate with yourself. I mean, you cannot go and pray in the mosque and do the Ramadan while your neighbors are hungry, and you are coming out of the mosque and speaking badly about these people. That's why for my father it was cut off, you speak badly please change the subject, or go away. Don't speak about this.

If you have a meal, a good meal, a good dish, you made a celebration, then you will offer the neighbors. The Eid of sacrifice, for example, where a Muslim slaughter a sheep or the animal and then they divide this in three parts- one part is for the family itself, the other is for the neighbors and the bigger family, and the third part is for the poor people. Even when you have a child, it's the same. You make this sacrifice and you partition or you cook the meat and invite people to come and eat. So it's always sharing, it's always opening to the others. I never heard, and I myself pushed toward, like we are the good ones and the others are the bad ones. We usually always, you know even sometimes it's hard for me, but when the Israeli soldiers at the checkpoint ask for my ID and I give it to him and he give it back, I say spontaneously, "Thank you." And sometimes I need to struggle with myself not to say thank you for him because he shouldn't be there. He shouldn't be asking me to take my ID card on my road in Palestinian land and so on. So sometimes you find, you try to fight yourself not to be human in a sense, and respond in a natural way, which is difficult, I mean, because you are not in control all the time to say, maybe you should do this or do that. We remain and we try to keep ourselves as human beings. So I don't think that, on the level of Aida Camp even, I mean, you don't see the difference between people: this is Hamas, this is

Fatah, this is FPLP or FDLP or whatever. People have lived together, so the social tissue in itself is… makes it like it's a family relation and not a party, political party relation.

And to tell you the truth, sometimes when some Jews during the tours try to say, "You teach your children hatred," somehow the Israelis are doing amazingly alone in pushing people to hate them. Sometimes I think, why, why do Israelis hate themselves so much that they push everybody to hate them with what they are doing? Because, it's amazing I mean how can people arrive, reach this point that they can justify anything, killing people, using methods that are beyond imagination to humiliate, to kill, to erase, to clean, to ethnically clean areas, in the name of national, national lands or whatever?

So I feel a lot of time pity for these people, that they have such hatred that they don't have any place for love in a sense. When people say, "I was in London last week in a series of conferences and we had these Zionists or Zionistic Christians," I don't know, "You should lock your children in their houses. You should not send them in the streets." Well, even those get out. I mean, nobody is teaching these children, no mother is bringing her child to life in order to see him in a coffin and buried.

We should not bury our children, our children should bury us. And so I cannot accept that a Jewish mother or a Palestinian mother or a Christian mother or whoever mother just want to feel proud that her son is dying for the cause. Unfortunately some Palestinians are like trying to be proud that they have. But when they go in the night to their beds, do they feel happy that their child was killed by Israelis or he exploded himself because of this cause? With all the pride, I mean, yes we have to resist the occupation, but a death is a death, whatever it is. And a loss is a loss. So nobody feel happy about losing anyone. Nobody feel happy that his son or his daughter has sacrificed themselves for the beauty of the cause. We are human beings and we still feel there's a humanity.