

Video interview at University of Detroit
By Alice Rothchild

Yusif Barakat transcript

YB: Salaam Alaikum.

AR: Salaam Alaikum.

YB: Shalom. Peace. My Name is Yusif. I am a recovering linear thinker.

I want to thank you for doing this and for your first book. And thank your mother, for her book, because I think we should remember all Holocausts including Palestine, and the Armenians, and whatever Holocaust takes place, we must wipe out this inhumanity. And I want to thank all my Jewish brothers and sisters who are supporting the Palestinian cause. Even if I were not Palestinian, I would still declare myself as one in solidarity with the people, with the oppressed people all over the world. As you see on my button here, we're all one people. There's only one humanity on earth. When they talk about this race and that race, there's only one race, and that's humanity. And I'm grateful for the people that have been in the forefront of helping.

I'm also very disturbed about the other Jews, who continue to support blindly. You know, Hitler said to his people, "My country right or wrong." And when the FBI were at my house a year ago, they told me that I was a threat to American security, and they spent an hour in my house, and walked out with their tail between their legs. I told them, I said, "My country, when right support it, when wrong fix it." And America is dead wrong in what it's doing. And Israel is dead wrong in what it's doing.

AR: Can you tell us about your Nakba story?

YB: Before I do that, I just want to give you this little present. It's a poster of all the world religions, well eleven of them, there's one blank in case you don't fit in one of them. And in eighteen languages, it says there will be peace on earth when there's peace amongst the world religions. How ironic that the very moral imperative of all religions, to teach peace and love, are the ones that are warring. It doesn't make sense. And I have some other information, articles that I wrote and other things that I would like to share with you.

I was born in Haifa, in Wadi'l Saleeb. I used to cross the Jordan River on horseback as a child. My father would lift me up and I would pick grapes off the vine and oranges off the trees. I used to be a shepherd boy. We had a very peaceful life at the time. I used to play with Jewish, and Muslim, and Christian children. We never even identified what each other was. We just played.

AR: What year were you born?

YB: In August 21, 1935. I remember when they would turn on the sirens. They had these dungeons and they would send everybody down into the dungeons.

AR: Was this the British?

YB: Well, I was eight or nine years. What I do remember is that I refused to go down into the dungeons and they couldn't catch me. I would just run between the different places. And I would be walking down the street and Haifa is a port and the ships would come to the port. They would have these troops, with helmets. And I remember, it would say "MP" across here, with tanks, guns, and they would just take them up to Mt. Carmel. And I believe, well you know, the Balfour Declaration, 1918, the Zionist manifesto from the Nile to the Euphrates, so this was intentional. It had nothing to do with Hitler, that was just the icing on the cake. The issue that they were in the guise of taking over Palestine, from the beginning. So they hid all these military people and then when the time came, they swooped down on us.

I remember my first cousin, my father's sister, she was married to an Egyptian, and he worked for the British. And he let us in the back door and give us little, the end pieces of loafs of bread. He would toast them and give them to us. That was so wonderful for us. And I remember the soldiers playing tennis and sometimes the ball would go over the fence and we'd chase after it and throw it back to them. So my memory is very vivid. And I love being in Haifa. It's the most beautiful city and I used to take the bus to the outskirts of Haifa and wait at the train station and my father would be coming from work. And I'd jump on the train and I'd go up and down till I found him, and ride back to Wadi'l Saleeb.

So, my memory is very vivid and it's atrocious that they did this. Right on my twelfth birthday, I was put on a ship. The difference for me, from other Palestinians, is that my father had been in this country at a prior time, in his younger years, and he obtained his citizenship. So he registered me and my three sisters as American citizens, so I got on a ship and was flung across two oceans and there was Ellis Island, the Statue of Liberty, the New York skyline.

For a twelve year old shepherd boy, who couldn't speak English, that was extremely traumatic. And I think at that time, I felt something come into my heart. Now I look back at it and I realize that, spiritually speaking, I declared myself for world peace, for humanity. And I've been working towards that ever since. And people here that know me, know that I do that.

So I came directly to New York, got a train, and came to Detroit, Michigan. Just the other day, I was driving by the train station, the old train station, and it's been abandoned now. What a beautiful building that is. And I immediately went to work delivering Detroit newspaper routes. And I had three paper routes. I still presently hold the highest single circulation for any newsboy, at a 171 papers every day, seven days a week. And snow and rain, and I did that for two years and I brought the money and I dropped it on the table. And my father counted money to give me to buy the papers and then he kept the rest.

And then at age 14, I went to work for the Western Union. I was delivering telegrams on a bicycle, from four in the afternoon until ten at night, six hours a day on a bicycle. My father took me once in a while to do the route and he clocked 30 miles, so I would ride 30 miles a day to deliver telegrams.

And at the age 16, my father took me to get my driver's license and he gave me the keys to the car, and said, "From now on you're my chauffeur." And in January, just a few months later, he died. Just overnight. No warning. Just was healthy, and just died. And so I lied about my age and went to work at

Ford Motor Company, the very same factory where he was working, so I literally took over his job and took over the house. And I worked midnights and went to school during the day. And during the summer when there was no school, I drove Checker taxi cab in Detroit.

I've been here 61 years, I'm 73 years old. And I have had a very exciting life, in that I've been there, done that. I was elected County Commissioner in Oakland County, served for two years, got a lot of headlines for the ideas that I have submitted. I ran for the US Congress in 1972 during the embargo, the oil embargo, and I was less than 1%. Some of the people here were helping me during my campaign for the congress. And I came within less than 1% of being a congressman.

And I told the FBI at my house last year, I said, "You know what, if I had gotten elected, at that time I would have been the first Palestinian in Congress. I would have made it my business to make sure that the Palestine issue is forefront. I would have gotten so much global attention. By now, I could have easily been a Senator and could have been a candidate for President." And the guy said, there were two of them, and one of them said, "Oh, you can't, you're not an American citizen," so I told them the story of why I was natural born. And I said, "Let me tell you something. Had I gotten elected, as President, I would have been your commander-in-chief. And how dare you come into my house and look, does this look like a terrorist camp or is it a place for peace?" I said, "How dare you come investigate me, I could have been your boss." So, when they left, they were apologetic, and they said they were in the wrong place.

AR: Can I ask you a question to go back to the Nakba? Can you describe what it was like to be on that ship, as a young boy, coming to a country that you didn't know? To get on the train? Give us a sense of what that felt like.

YB: You know, I believe that I am in this incarnation for a mission, so I think all of that was part of my trajectory to gain the kind of spirit that I needed to do the work I am doing. I am making a movie that has a global-local healing, because while I'm a Palestinian, I rise above nationality and patriotism and religiosity. I just believe that all people should be free and all people should live.

So, at that time, part of me, was very excited. I ran every part of the ship. My mother was going crazy, because she had all the girls with her, but she could never find me. She'd come looking around for me. It was a huge ship. I remember just, in fact, the drinking fountain. I would push down on the button and I saw this little beads of water, because it was refrigerated. It's like, what is that? I would push it and pssshhh, and it would be in my face. So it was, one would think of ships now in which you had a cabin and a window and all. We were in the very guts of the ship.

AR: Steerage?

YB: Yah. And then there were bunks and bunks and bunks. There must have been eight or ten bunks, with a ladder. And I would crawl inside the bunk and the other bunk would be almost in my face. It was a frightening time. I mean, Ellis Island. Just looking around and seeing all these little colored things going across. I realize now that they were the bridges and they were the multi-colored cars and taxi cabs crossing the different bridges. It was like taking you to some outer space experience where you know, it was very frightening.

And then when I was on the train, I met some kids there. And of course, I couldn't communicate with them. But I stood there and watched them. And they were folding things and doing stuff, so one of them pulled out this sheet of cardboard, and gave it to me. And I studied it, I couldn't read the instructions, but I realized that if you cut out these pieces and folded them in a certain way, it was a train. So, on the train, I built this train and they couldn't believe that without any assistance that I did that. But unfortunately, I would have kept it till today, but I was so excited by the time we got to Detroit I forgot and left it there.

AR: And how did you learn English?

YB: In the streets. Kids would push me around, laugh at me, because I couldn't understand. So every once in a while, I would catch a word, and then, like I'd learn pencil. This is a pencil. So I'd go up to the kids and I'd say, " [garble]... pencil, [garble]... pencil." And the kids would say, "What?" So, I'd just use the word, and then they'd say, "Oh, you want a pencil." So, they'd give me a pencil. You know, when you're young, it just comes to you.

I remember one of the teachers wanted to make a nice example of me to the other kids. I hope the ladies here don't mind this story. She wanted, because I was a polite old country boy, and the kids were riotous, you know. So she would say, "Class pay attention. This young man is unique." And, you know, the word is an F-word [in Arabic]. I'd say, "No 'nique, no, no." "Yes, you 'nique." I'd say, "No." So, she accused me of the F-word, and you know, how could I do that?

When I was delivering newspapers, the lady would come to the door, I mean a young lady would come to the door, and she'd give me the money and she say, "Wait we're going to give you a tip." And she would holler back to her grandmother, "Atee Bakshish". No, no, he don't need it." They'd be speaking in Arabic. So I'd start to walk away. And the girl would say, "No, wait, wait, we're going to give you something." And then finally, I would peek my head in the door, and I would speak in Arabic, so they would realize that I was understanding. So, I had a lot of fun in the bilingual thing.

Shortly after that, I finished high school, number 11 out of a class of 144, having worked midnights. I got transferred from the Ford Company in Highland Park to the foundry in Dearborn. I grew up in Highland Park. Despite the fact that I worked midnights in the foundry, I still had a good grade average all through it. And then I tried to go to college, but I was just too burned out. So at that point, a Greek friend, he said, "I just joined the Air Force." I said, "What is that?" So, he took me over there. And he said, they would pay for my family like my own dependents. So I said, "Take me away." So I went back to that same train station, and got on a train, went to Texas, served four years. It was three years in Germany and learned German. It's been an interesting life.

AR: So, my last question for you is where do you consider home?

YB: Home is where my heart is. You know, ten years ago, I bought my first house. I always rented, because in my mind, I always felt like I'm going back. This has been the first time that I feel like I belong here, but I really don't. I don't belong anywhere. I'm a global citizen and I belong to the world. And you know, how priests don't get married, because they devote themselves, and I feel that is my mission. I am here to help humanity. I was baptized in Mount Carmel in Mar-Ellias and I have the idea that we need to step aside from religions, the divine is internal, not external. We need to step aside from

wars and violence and come to a new understanding of humanity. Capitalism is crumbling and we need another form to bring humanity together.

AR: Well, thank you very much.

YB: My pleasure.