

Video interview at University of Detroit
By Alice Rothchild

Nimer Haddad transcript

NH: Well, I have a special sequence of my documentary film “Jews of Tomorrow” that I would like to share with you. The film was shot as a thesis of my graduation at Cologne University in Germany. I produced it in 1974, and I thought of a particular short sequence that is related to the conflict in Palestine/Israel. Here it is:

[Film playing in the background]

In 1973, there was a war in the Middle East and we had an energy crisis at that time. A lot of people in Germany, as well as in other countries were allowed driving their cars only every other weekend. So, I interviewed a German lady, about her reaction. “We have discriminated against Jews and persecuted them during the World War II. But now we side with them in Israel and that’s why we are suffering from oil shortages.” This is the sequence I would like to share with you. The most dreadful war that humanity has ever had brought bitter sufferings to many people. Millions of people were persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views. The Jews had been targeted most of all. They were arrested and like cattle deported to concentration camps. We all recognized the huge injustice that those people had to go through, during the Third German Reich.

But by the same token, we close our eyes and refuse to recognize that something similar is happening today in Palestine. It was the world’s energy crisis that directed our attention to the location of this crisis, to the Middle East. At the present time, we still have a whole people that is being oppressed and discriminated against, the Palestinians. The film goes on and my intent was to show you only the sequence when the Jews in Europe were discriminated against and persecuted during the World War II. Thank you for watching.

AR: And now we can turn to your story.

NH: What I wanted to achieve in this documentary film was to let the people know that we sympathized with the Jews and lived with them peacefully in the past. We find it very difficult to imagine that such horrible things could have happened to them during the World War II. But, as I said in the narration, it is also difficult for us to comprehend that the same people who suffered at the hands of the Nazis are making the Palestinians pay the price of a crime they had not committed.

AR: Where were you born?

NH: In Albassa village, in Northwestern Galilee.

AR: Can you tell me what happened in ’48?

NH: Fighting erupted in 1948. In May, my father sent us to Alma Alshaab, a village in South Lebanon. We crossed the borders on foot. It took us about one-and-a-half hours to reach that Lebanese village. But before I speak about that, I would like to mention that the population of Albassa was about 4,000 to 5,000 inhabitants.

Only few families remained in the village. The rest fled to Lebanon. We were forced to flee. I still remember as a little kid how one of my older sisters was seriously shot on her way from our uncle's house. She was only 15 years old. I saw neighbors carrying my wounded sister home. She needed immediate hospitalization. My parents were unable to take her to the nearest hospital in Acco city because the road to that city goes through the Jewish coastal city Naharia, which was blocked for traffic. The other alternative was to take her northward across the Lebanese borders to the nearest hospital in Sidon. That was about 40 miles far from Albassa village. In spite of the delay on the borders, my parents managed to reach the hospital in Sidon. Unfortunately, the wounded sister couldn't survive the internal bleeding. She died before the surgeon even started the surgery. This was a very sad moment to my parents who had to seat their dead daughter between them in the back seat of a car in order to avoid further delays in filling out formalities in such a case when crossing international borders. My sister was laid to rest in the Christian cemetery of Albassa village. Afraid to keep his family at home, my father sent us across the borders and the next day, he followed us. Most of the people fled because they were scared to death, after they had heard the news of Dayr Yassin massacre and the fighting in other cities.

AR: Could you describe Dayr Yassin to the people who might not know?

NH: In April 1948, Dayr Yassin village was massacred by the Jewish Irgun fighters. The slaughter was coldly planned to serve as a psychological shock forcing the whole Palestinian population to flee their country. The Irgun fighters systematically killed children, old people, women and men in the village, about 250 civilians. That abominable crime is well documented and known in history books as the Massacre of Dayr Yassin. The news about this tragic event spread all over the country and everybody heard it. The Irgun's message was clear: "You'd better flee before we force you to." Many people, the vast majority of the Palestinians of 1948, were forced to leave their country. And my family was one of them.

AR: Do you remember what it felt like? How old were you?

NH: I was nine years old.

AR: And do you remember what it felt like?

NH: Of course. We were terrified. But we thought it was a temporary exodus. My parents took only two suitcases with them and hoped to return home in few weeks. They never realized that it would be forever. They passed away in Debayeh refugee camp in Lebanon.

AR: So you went to a refugee camp?

NH: Yes, first we lived in the Rashideyeh refugee camp in southern Lebanon. Then, we moved to Debayeh camp in the outskirts of Beirut.

AR: Could you describe life in the camp?

NH: Well, it's hard to do. It was a miserable life. First, we could not obtain a permit to work in Lebanon. We could not go to higher education, because you were not Lebanese. That's why I went to continue my studies in Germany and later in the United States. Life was very difficult in many ways.

AR: How many children are in your family?

NH: We are three. I am the only son and have two sisters; one of them is still living in Amman, Jordan. As I mentioned, my older sister passed away as well as my parents.

AR: And you had how many rooms for five people?

NH: Here?

AR: No, in the camp

NH: Oh, we had only two small rooms.

AR: And you went to a school run by the UN?

NH: Yes, I was schooled by the United Nations. After finishing my high school, I followed a Teacher Training Program, and started teaching at the German Schneller School in Lebanon. Some years later, I resigned my job and went to Germany for further studies. I took up cinematography, film and TV science.

AR: And why did your family go to Lebanon as opposed to...?

NH: We were very close to that border. By the way, until 1925 Albassa was part of southern Lebanon. But after the First World War, the French and the British officers decided to annex Albassa as well as many other villages to Palestine. Their countries had in mind to give Palestine to the Zionists. Lebanon officially considers the villages along the borders as Lebanese. And about ten years ago, the Lebanese parliament claimed that the villages in northern Israel are Lebanese.

AR: And you had a refugee card?

NH: Yes, we had an UNRWA card.

AR: And what other forms of identification did you have?

NH: Well, I did not have a passport until 1987. Many countries denied granting me an entry visa as a Palestinian refugee. Wherever I go or want to go, it was very difficult for me. I'll give you one example. When I was studying in Germany, my class went on an excursion to Basel, Switzerland. We were about 40 students and three professors. The whole bus was stopped for three hours because of me. I had only a *laissez passez* as a Palestinian refugee. At that time, ie, in 1973, a Palestinian meant a terrorist. The Swiss authorities stopped the whole bus for many hours so they could contact the central intelligence services in Berlin to inquire about Nimer Haddad.

AR: And so what do you think the impact of that childhood experience has had on your life?

NH: Well, the contrast was sharp: I had a bitter life in Lebanon but it became almost normal in Germany. It tremendously improved when I became a US citizen. Then the door for jobs opened for me. I worked for the United Nations in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Yemen, Egypt, and Ghana, as a consultant and expert in AV communications.

AR: Can you describe more of the life you left behind? The life you had as a child?

NH: As I was a little boy. I went to the Catholic elementary school in my Albassa village. There were also other schools, one elementary school for girls, one public school for boys, a Catholic high school and a German Evangelical Carmel mission school. When I was a second grader, life was normal at that age and could not foretell what was going to happen.

AR: So, do you think your parents protected you from what was going on?

NH: Of course. One day, in May 1948, they decided to cross the borders to Lebanon, seeking shelter and safety, and hoping to return to their homeland when violence comes to an end.

AR: Do you remember having nightmares?

NH: Yes. Nightmares were frequent. One night, they really materialized: while we were still living in the neighboring Lebanese village, Alma Alshaab, in the middle of the night, my parents woke us up, because of the shooting from a nearby Jewish settlement, Hanita. We had to rush into the valley seeking shelter and safety. I was scared and unable to comprehend what was going on, why we are going down to the valley to hide in a cave..

AR: Your father couldn't work in Lebanon, so how could he get money for the family?

NH: He worked as an illegal laborer until he became an old man, unable to work. When I finished my school, I started helping my family financially.

AR: What kind of work did he do?

NH: He was just a daily worker.

AR: Like construction or farming?

NH: Yes. But, he owned 20 acres of fertile land in Albassa village and made sure that the day before he left for Lebanon, he went to Nazareth, and paid all taxes, so that he could get the land documents.

It has often been alleged that there was an animosity between Jews and Arabs all the time. I think this is a falsification of history. There was no such thing before 1948. In the past, the Jews of North Africa had fought on the side of the Arab Muslims when conquering Spain in the 7th century and lived peacefully among them for many centuries. Oriental Jews have lived peacefully among Muslims and Christians in Lebanon, in Syria, in Iraq, in Iran, in Yemen, as well as in North Africa. So who persecuted the Jews in the past? Certainly not the Arab Muslims, not the Arab Christians? I say this as a Christian. There is a misinterpretation of history and of the Bible. When you read the New Testament for the first time, you may feel antipathy towards the Jews, because this is the way the Gospels were written. And that's why Ashkenazi Jews of Europe, particularly in Germany, suffered discrimination and persecution throughout history and until World War II.

The irony is that Palestinians had nothing to do with that hatred. We lived with them peacefully in Palestine. I can give you an example. In neighboring Hanita settlement, there was a mayor whose name was Yohna who used to pass by our house in Albassa village, and all kids followed him because he rode a horse. He joked with us and we loved to follow him for a short distance; and then he would continue his trip to the Hanita settlement. He was a good friend of my older cousin who used to play basketball with him and other Jewish inhabitants. So, Mayor Yohna used to visit families in our neighborhood. My father, who was a farmer, knew him and other Jewish settlers and they never did any harm to him. So, the local Jews lived in peace with the Palestinian Christians and Muslims. The conflict started only when the Zionists in overseas, supported by western powers, decided to establish a racist homeland for Jews alone, ignoring the historical and legal rights of the non-Jewish population of Palestine.

AR: And can you say something about your family owning land in Nazareth?

NH: No, we had land in Albassa village only.

AR: Okay, in Albassa. And at this point in your life, where do you consider home?

NH: Well, to be realistic, I consider now the United States to be my home, because I got married and I have two kids, and we live here. I am pragmatic. I don't think that in my lifetime, I would be able to go back to Albassa. But, in order to solve this Palestinian/Israeli conflict we have to recognize two facts, namely legality and reality. I believe firmly that legality is on our side, but reality means we have to recognize that Jews are there to stay. Therefore, the question is how to reach a compromise so that both people can live together peacefully, either in two separate democratic states or in one democratic state as equals. I'm not talking here about myself and whether I would be willing to return to Albassaa village or not. But I think of my relatives who still live in Miilyia, Mazzreh, and in Tarshiha in Galilee who suffer of inequality and discrimination in their own land and are extremely afraid from deportation and expulsion in

future. Most of their land has been confiscated and they cannot live in their own homes, although they are legally Israeli citizens.

Some people like to consider Israel as the only democracy in the Middle East.. This is nonsense because it is a racist democracy for Jews only. As long as 20% of the non-Jewish population doesn't enjoy the same rights as the Jews and as long as almost four million Palestinians live under the longest brutal occupation in modern history, no one can justly speak of democracy in Israel.

AR: Well, thank you very much.

NH: Thank you too.