

Video interview at University of Detroit  
By Alice Rothchild

Hala Ajluni transcript

AR: Hello. So tell us your name and where you're from.

HA: My name is Hala, maiden name Khoury, and my married name is Ajluni. So I was born in 1929 in Katamon, West Jerusalem, I think I was the oldest of all the people that spoke today. As a child I grew up with my parents and three sisters. My father was a scholar, philosopher, teacher, and principal of schools. He taught at St. George Boys School in Jerusalem and Terra Santa. Later on, if you know it, 1938, he and another Arabic scholar, Khalil Sakakini, they jointly had their own private college, named "Kulleete AnNahda" in Upper Baka'a near Tallipote on the way to Bethlehem. That's what I remember. They had a boarding and day school for boys. They had field days and all that. And, of course, everything was lost later on, in 1948...

In between, I went to the Friends Girls' School in Ramallah. I was boarding there and had a wonderful time. And by that time, when my father started his school, he had to sell our house in Katamon. And I still remember all our neighbors; it was number 472 Katamon, Upper Baka'a. We lived a wonderful life as Palestinians. I had friends of the Jewish faith, Muslim faith, Greeks and Armenians. Thereafter, I went to the Jerusalem Girls' College (a British College) in Rahavia and we used to go by bus. I almost finished. There was no graduation in that year, in 1948. After the illegal immigration of the Jews that came into Palestine, we started seeing the Jewish school next to us with military training. We were wondering, "What is going on?" In classes, we had our routine English classes. We were wondering. At the time of the Balfour on the fifth or the fourth of November, you would hear people on the streets. And we were wondering. "Is God a real estate giving people our land?" We didn't think it will ever happen. Then from there, we heard about the Dayr Yassin atrocities, the killings, the pregnant women and all that. It was horrible. And prior to that there was the King David storming.

AR: Do you want to describe what that is?

HA: Yes. The Irgun, right wing Zionists planted a bomb in the basement of the King David Hotel and many people were killed. Somebody from my husband's family was one of the 91 people killed then. Towards 1948, I was an adult. When we saw that, I thought I should finish my education, so we had to go to Old Jerusalem in order to sit for our Oxford and Cambridge school exams. I got my marks later on. We had matriculation, in other schools, but being British, this test was required. There were only a few of us girls who had stayed. My grandparents had a home in Old Jerusalem, in Hart Al Nasara (The Christian Quarter). I have pictures that I can show you. I just made copies of them. That's the family of my grandparents, my mother's sisters. This is our house in Jerusalem. This is my grandmother and grandfather. They still have that house in Old Jerusalem, East Jerusalem. But again, we have no control over it. One of the things at 1944 after the Second World War was over, there was of course, the German colony in Lower Baka'a, not Upper Baka'a, not too far from us. My father always believed in education. He was the literary free thinker with Bertrand Russell, Toynbee,

all those. He was a very free thinker; he didn't believe in any others, not religions or others. And we were brought up like that.

My two older brothers, one of oldest, we were two boys and four girls and two younger brothers, the oldest was working with the Middle East radio, so he was transferred to Cypress by that time. And the other one, younger, he was given a scholarship to England and he stayed there forever and ever, until he passed away about three years ago in England. So what was left was the four girls and two boys. I didn't want to leave. When my father heard that they were selling things at the old German colony, he said, "We had the regular piano, spinet." The girls, we used to have a teacher that came to our home, so he went and bought the piano, it was a theater piano, I will never forget that. If I ever see it, I want it back. It was a pianola as well. It had a key on the side where you can dim the sound and it had two lamps with beaded lamps on each side, and you could play it as a pianola. We had Kowalsky come and lift it on that balcony, on there.

It was really hard, so when they were starting to snipe and scatter. One time our piano teacher was coming; a bullet come in front of her and she didn't want to come back again. They were afraid so. My father had to change the school because it was the last semester and put the students in our home, and we went to the school, the boarding school, AnNahda College it was called.

When it got really bad, more incidents, it was, the buses were all closed with, you wouldn't see windows; people would be in and they were all closed. So as they passed by, you were afraid more and more will happen. My father said, I was the one that, I went with him because my elder brothers weren't there. I went to our house, it's the second floor, and we were trying to shut the shutters. They were made from metal. And we closed. By that time we put the silver, crystal, and the china, whatever, into the attic. While we were closing we heard a bullet go just over our heads, zing, and it could've hit us. We could have gone at that time. So it hit the wall behind us. When I picked it up it was still warm. And we said, "That's the end of it." I said, "No. I want to stay." I couldn't leave in this situation. He said, "No." We had a DeSoto station wagon, then for the school, mainly. Somebody drove, my father didn't. When we left, it was the 15<sup>th</sup> of March, Ides of March. We all got into the car, I think one of our uncles, he was a younger man, he came with us.

AR: How many people?

HA: We were four girls, six with the two brothers, eight with my parents, and chauffeur, nine. We sat in the back, so we didn't take anything, very little. We had a summer home, like George was saying, in Birzeit, it was just a large room. The kitchen was outside and it was one acre of land. My father used to love planting. We used to go two weeks every summer to Birzeit. He planted all kinds of trees, all kinds of fruit trees.

My grandfather is still buried there in that house. But, because of that situation, he had to borrow money and he had to leave everything behind. My father said, "OK, let's go." So the car was ready. We took very casual clothes. The only thing, being in education, we had a barometer in the house, hanging. He said, "I'll show you." We couldn't go through Neviyakoub to Beirzeit

which would have been like 20 kilometers, not quite sure as much. But he said we had to take the other route to Taybeh down to Jericho, and from there we went to Birzeit. But at that moment he wanted to make it educational, so he showed us the barometer because the Dead Sea is lower, so low, he wanted to show us how the barometer works. Then my mother, said, "Wait a minute." She had a Singer machine with the foot, and she took one of the drawers and she said, "Maybe we will need something while we are gone." So that was saved, that's all.

My father, went early April, he went back to see what is precious and can be carried. All the doors were locked and all the sugar, the rice, we used to store them in big cases and we put them behind so that no one would steal them. But we went and never came back.

The first time I went, I wanted to see where we lived. We were of course, from America, we came to America. I got married in 1949 in Ramallah, we moved to Ramallah where my Aunt lived. I said, "You can't live in this house. It's taking longer than we expected." So we had to go there, we lived with my aunt.

After I got married my parents and my younger sisters and two brothers had moved to a renting house. My father started teaching at a regular school after what he did, and my mother started sewing and she did very nice work for people to make the money. After I got married, we, my husband and I, lived in Damascus for a while, for about seven years. He was politically active. Of course, the King of Jordan didn't think they were any good for him. So he had to leave and indirectly we stayed one year behind until we followed him to Damascus.

I taught at a school in Damascus, English language, and then I taught at the American Community School. We had no passport. My husband couldn't get a police report for his good behavior. As a result we had a friend who was a Palestinian that lived in America and he knew the consul and I used to teach their children and they knew who we were and they managed to make a special waiver, my husband's family lived here in Detroit, the US, for many years. My father-in-law had been here in 1910 in the states and then came back to Ramallah. And this is now where I'm still living, my husband passed away seven years ago. I have three children, have eight grandchildren, and three great-great grandchildren.

And thank God for everything. My heart throbs every time you see the news, the media, nobody can tell the truth here. They twist it that we are the terrorists, not the ones who have suffered. In more settlements and when you go back to visit, they ask you where you were born, weren't you born in Israel? No, there wasn't Israel when I was born. They make you feel mad just so you won't come back again. But we did visit two to three times. It was painful.

AR: Where do you consider home?

HA: I still consider, for me and my late husband, of course my children were born, no they were born in Ramallah. But they all are assimilated. I love it here. But in many ways, it's where my children are, I am part of them. But my heart is still where I was born, in Jerusalem, in Ramallah, in the Old City. And I go through the town and I remember, who lived here and who lived there and who was next door, and who was the next, and find my tears running down. And that's all. What do I do? What do I do? We need peace and justice. That's all we need to live

equally, like the rest of the world. No more killing. No more exterminating. The last time I went with my grandson, I took a cab to go to the Israeli part with the yellow license, so when I told him, it looks like this is new plantation. He said, “No, these are all the olive trees that were cut.” I thought it was new growth of trees... It was so painful. So painful...

AR: Thank you.

HA: I hope before I die I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. That's my wish. I'm 79, I'll be 80. That's my hope, that there will be peace. And it will start with me. I hope so.

AR: Thank you.