

Video interview at University of Detroit
By Alice Rothchild

Daphne Assimacopoulou Beardman transcript

AR: Now, Daphne. Tell us your name, where you're from and your Nakba story.

DB: My name is Daphne Assimacopoulou Beardman. I was born in Haifa. My grandfather had been a Greek doctor in Constantinople during the Ottoman Empire. He was sent to practice in various countries. One of them was Palestine which he liked and decided to retire there with his family towards the end of the 19th century.

My father went to the English Boarding School in Jerusalem and then graduated from the American University in Beirut. He married in his early forties the woman he had loved since she was a child. The two families met in Palestine. My maternal grandmother was Italian and my grandfather was Greek.

In '47-'48 there was more fighting around our house. My father had started building it in 1927. I went to the British High School. In '47 I was thirteen in sixth form. So I would have continued in that school, matriculated and then gone to Cambridge, or whatever. In spite of all the fighting and bombs we had celebrated New Years and Christmas and all the Greek friends who came to our house were saying we'll never leave, this is our home. We had our Greek club, our Greek Church. I was learning Arabic and English at school. But there was a lot of fighting.

One day coming back from school, I saw three young men walking, from my balcony, and one of them was shot right there. The two others ran up, managed to get a car, backed it up, and threw him in. That's one of the things I remember. Another was that we had to sleep on a mattress on the floor for about a week or more between many walls because we'd had a hand grenade thrown or something on my sister's and my bedroom. Shrapnel went through the ceiling and we had the pieces for many years in a vase, but I'm very upset that we don't have it anymore because we moved around a lot after that.

My father decided this wasn't a life. We escaped to a cousin's family just outside Haifa for a week. My father took me to the house to pack quickly, two suitcases for the five of us. My grandmother was living with us, and we just packed the two suitcases. We didn't want anyone to know we were leaving because the house would have been blown up. That was what my father was afraid of. He was a shipping agent at that time. He was waiting for a ship that would come to take us to Beirut, a Hellenic Mediterranean ship, because his sister was living with her husband, a doctor, in Damascus, Syria. So he didn't even tell Mrs. Emery, my director of the school, that we were leaving, that he was taking us out of school. I saw a letter afterwards asking, saying, "Where are the girls?"

On 28 January '48 we sailed away for two weeks, we thought. We left the decorated Christmas tree (our New Year's celebration then was with the old calendar). My mother locked up all the drawers and everything she could, and we just left, went to my aunt with nothing. No money to speak of, nothing. So there we had to stay for about a year at my aunt's with nothing, thinking that we were going back. A Jewish partner of my father's wrote, "Oh, don't come back, now everything is rationed, I'm taking care of business. Don't worry." Everything of ours had been stolen. It was chaos. Everything was looted. My piano was coming down from the third floor.

We didn't go to school. In Damascus we had a great time when we went only to the Greek school, played games, learned more Greek and, my father had no work. Then, finally, he had to, we had to make up our minds that no, this is where we are staying, we are stuck. We had no papers, just the British/Palestinian passport. We were given refugee status with a card that I still have. He found a job with the Red Cross. There were no English schools there. There were the Franciscan sisters, a very good educational school, which, of course, taught French and Arabic. They were so extremely generous and nice to our family because it was a private school and apparently we didn't have to pay much or nothing. I don't know. I know that they gave me piano lessons for free. I continued there, practicing at school. That was the following year. That was '49 or '50. And then he was sent off to Amman by the Red Cross.

We finally got a flat on his return. A basement flat and we had to start with spoons to everything to equip the place. I just discovered letters that he'd written to my mother every five days and saying you know, "Don't worry, go to the cinema with the girls, enjoy yourselves." He was an optimist though it just killed him losing the house and his life. He was 58 when this happened. He lived to be 98 because he was so strong and always wanted to go forward. For the first time he had to be an employee, working at the Red Cross, then he worked at another shipping company. We couldn't even leave Damascus. When we were at the French school I was with the girl guides and they were going to camp in Lebanon and they couldn't take me. But they did sneak me in. I was not allowed to leave Syria at that time and go to Lebanon.

AR: What were your papers?

DB: We were still paperless, just the refugee card, that's why. Eventually my father got his Greek citizenship, but he had never lived in Greece. We had only gone on vacation, on trips. Neither had his father lived in Greece. So we were there. We stayed there (Syria) until 1954 when I finished the French schooling which I started at 14. So, I got my French Baccalaureates there. The education was very good and I learned French in summer and with the lower grades while following my own level of classes.

AR: Tell me more about what life was like in Haifa and what it felt like to leave. What were the implications for you having to leave everything? What you had and what you lost?

DB: It was day and night, from having it all to having nothing, and starting from scratch. I remember well my home life, my walking to school, playing rounders, walks and picnics on Mount Carmel, swimming in Khayyat beach, spending weekends in the Greek monastery on Lake Tiberias, with my maternal grandparents in Nazareth, with an Aunt who was a teacher of piano, arts and crafts and needlework in Acre, and during WWII visiting a Greek cousin at the British base where he was stationed for a while. And so much more.

When we lost everything, life was made easier, I don't know if that is the word, because of my father's attitude and his hard working and his thinking only of the family. He never did anything on his own. And to get back, not to get back, to get his Greek citizenship so that

eventually if we saved enough money we could go and live in Greece. But first we had to be able to leave Syria. From Damascus we went to Lattakia [port city in Syria] because he got a job there and I got a job there. I had just finished French school.

Then I went and worked for UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works Agency] in Beirut for a few years. And then from there we went and lived in Greece in '61 only, so that was a long time after. I remember my mother's absolute devastation and crying when we got the letter informing us that we had nothing left in our home: her trousseau, whatever, lace, handiwork and so much more. She was crying and what my cousin told me, my father said, "Come on, come on, don't cry. Let's go to the cinema." I like to remember that, even though I don't think I heard it.

We also all enjoyed going to the Greek club dances and events. We had a good life in Syria eventually in spite of all because of the good school we went to, the friends and family we had there. And I do remember the sleeping on the floor in Haifa though. Those three men I'll never forget. Also, early one morning (that was when bombs were set in the Haifa market when all the farmers brought their wares) a window broke above my bed. I still have a scar on my arm from that.

AR: Did you have nightmares?

DB: I don't remember nightmares. I don't know why not. I don't remember nightmares. It was horrible, it was so much worse for my mother and father. What was even worse and extremely sad was that we had to leave my maternal grandparents in Nazareth and after a while we could not even communicate with them, except illegally through Cyprus. We never saw them again. My grandmother is buried in Haifa and my grandfather in Cyprus where he had eventually moved to live with my aunt who had escaped with her husband in April, at the height of the Nakba, in a truck at night with hundreds of others crossing into Jordan.

AR: You said you worked in UNRWA. What did you do there? What was that like?

DB: That was my first real job. Well, because I knew languages. I knew how to write and take shorthand in both French and English and both were needed, and Arabic.

AR: Were you working in a camp for UNRWA?

DB: No, at the main office in Beirut. I had a British female friend who was a photographer and was going around the camps photographing, she was in the Visual Department in UNRWA. I believe she has written a book and just before she died, preparing something about Palestinian costumes.

AR: Was that how you learned more about what happened in the camps?

DB: Also, my father had been, when he was with the Red Cross and he was a procurement officer I think, so he was traveling around the camps and was telling us about the powdered milk and the ... and everything that was being distributed. I, myself, never saw the camps.

AR: How did you end up in America?

DB: That's another story. That had nothing to do with Nakba. I met my former husband, an American, in Greece. I don't have anyone here except of course my daughters were born here.

AR: Where do you consider home at this point?

DB: Where my daughters are. Where my mother is. My mother's still alive. I'm going actually this weekend because she's in the hospital and she's living with my sister in France. She's 102. She has all her faculties which makes it a bit harder for her. We are very, very close, we always have been. Actually I lived with my parents in Greece during the '80s because they couldn't take care of themselves. And then I couldn't bring my mother here, even though that's what we both wanted, because of the medical situation here. I didn't have any health insurance and she wouldn't have had anything. With my sister in France she was covered. She still remembers everything.

Our lives were changed quite a bit and we considered ourselves absolutely as Palestinians. We spoke Greek at home, but our home was in Haifa, that was our life.

AR: Thank you.