

Video interview at University of Detroit
By Alice Rothchild

George Khoury transcript

GK: Do you want me to go right into it? OK. I was born in 1942 in Jerusalem, and the midwife was my aunt. She came over and she managed to deliver my mom and I was born then. And she filled up the paper and she went to the Jerusalem municipality and registered me as Jiryis Adeeb Khoury.

The next day somebody had an operation, military operation, and two British soldiers were killed. So what did they do? They surrounded the whole area and now, I don't remember this, I was told that. And then, so they surrounded the whole area and they had dogs with them and they prevented anybody from coming in or going out of a certain area because they know that the person who did it came from that particular area. And that area is exactly across the street from the Holy Sepulcher. And my dad, he had a box with some tobacco and lots of ammunition in it. And he was just wet from sweating because he knew he was had. That's it. He didn't do the operation but he had ammunition.

So he started running around the house not knowing what to do and didn't know how to get rid of the tobacco, which was forbidden, and the ammunition. So my mom was in bed and she said, "Well, stop this nonsense. Bring that box, put it next to me and put a blanket on it and put the baby on it and stop it. Just go sit somewhere else so they don't see you because you're too nervous."

And he did that and she put me next to her on the box. And a few minutes later, of course, they came in and they broke in the door and there was a little baby. So she was smart, she took a cross and she hung it right by me like a, with a, what do you call it, safety pin. When they walked in they said, "Oh, Christian family." And she said, "Yes, of course. And before that, mother was smart. She said, "Go through the magazines and find a picture of somebody British, anybody British. It doesn't matter whom." And he found King George. They took it off, she ripped it and they stuck it above my head.

And they walk in and said, "Oh a new baby, what did you call him?" And she said, "What else?" And I became George since. If you see my passport, my name is Jiryis, between parentheses George, but you don't see that. Because I went George in life but my official birth name is Jiryis. And all my brothers and sisters, seven, are Arabic names like Laila and Nadia, Nabeel, Suhail, Souad. They all have Arabic names except me. I am George. Very British. But that was the story behind my naming.

In 1947 we were in Al Lyd. My dad was a surveyor. He surveyed Palestine all the way from Al Bassa and Mi'yilia and Lubia and Samakh, all the way that area, all the way down to Jaffa and then Khan Younis and Majdal Ghazze and all the way to Gaza and Rafa. At any rate in '47 he was, not '47, '45. Somewhere, again, I was very young. But I remember that our next door was a woman that her name was Sameerah, living with a blind woman who is the mother of her, her grandma for her father.

And one day she said, "George..." Her father is coming at the bus station which was not too far from our house. "Go and maybe you can help him? *Tihmel bukjeH?*" [Carry the *bukjeH?*] A *bukjeH* means when you put your stuff in a bag and you tie it up and it becomes like Sindibad, you know. So I said, "OK".

So I went there and across the street there was like a coffee shop, lots of confusion. People were running around trying to take a taxi, trying to take a bus. It was really confusion, but it was organized confusion. Everybody knows where they want to go, but it's confusion. And here comes this bus and it was totally filled with people. There was no way you can come in or get out. So this man, who was Abu Sameerah, Sameerah's father, he wanted to get out. And the bus driver was very anxious to leave. And there were lots of military trucks, but they were British. Finally he decided, he took the *bukjeh* and he threw it out of the window and he stuck his head out and he asked a guy next to him to push him and the minute he was halfway, the truck came and hit him. And he was beheaded. And his head landed across the street in front of me. And I threw that tennis ball that I had in my hand. And I ran home not able to speak. And where is Abu Sameerah? And nothing. And I didn't speak after that.

AR: For how long?

GK: I can't remember because after that I developed fever. And I went in a coma after awhile and my dad took me to every very good Jewish doctor, and none of them worked. And finally they gave up and they said, "Just have him stay home because he's not eating and he's losing weight and dehydrating." And they forced some soup into me, but it comes right back. And well, the blind woman, she said, "Bring him in," after she knew what's happening. And they buried the man and all this kind of stuff, you know. After about a week, she said, "Bring him in." They brought me in and she treated me and I came back to consciousness, like two days after that.

What she did was olive oil. She used to heat it up a little bit and then she used to massage where you have glands, everywhere you have glands. Whether that's here, under the arms, between the legs, but the glands everywhere. But she rubbed them over and over. She was blind but I guess she has a good sense. She knew where she was at. And a few days later I was drinking soup. A week later I was playing in the street. And that was the story of Al Lyd.

When I was two or so they dressed me as Franciscan priest. Remember those with the robe and then we used to go up to something called Jabal El-Karmel [Mountain of Karmel] or something like that, Mar Elias [a place called St. Elias], and Haifa. We used to travel all the way there because I was the priest in that years.

And I remember that as a child and I used to come down as a priest, came with the kids and everything, but I was like a Franciscan priest. And in 1948, at the end of '48, we were in Jaffa. We were living in Jaffa. And I remember them very well. I was talking to Mike. It looks like we were in the same neighborhood but I never knew them, they never knew us. We were very close to the sea. And I didn't go to school, I was too young at the time. And then the other kids like my brothers and sisters would take me to the sea. And then all of a sudden there was, every night the male in the family was supposed to serve in the street, carrying a gun and serve the street. And if you don't want to, you pay two liras to somebody to take your place. Well that evening they wouldn't let anybody out, out of service. They said, you cannot give it up. As a matter of fact, those who it's not their turn it is, it is, they're to stay.

AR: Who is they?

GK: It was an organized group within Al Ajami, an organized group. They knew that the Haganah were coming. They knew. Somebody was telling them that tonight is the night. So we

all slept under the bed. Not over the bed, under the bed because there was lots of shooting. And that evening the room was filled with bullets. Actually one of them landed under my sister's leg. She was scratched but nothing serious. But it was so close.

Anyway, in the morning my dad didn't come in. He didn't come back. We didn't know where he was. And then we knew that the Haganah took over, like at least in that section. Trucks came, didn't look like military trucks. They weren't green or anything. They were just, like trucks, pickup trucks. And they put us in the trucks and we didn't take anything, just like Mike was saying. Nothing. As a matter of fact, the soup was on the *babur*, [three legged kerosene camping stove], you know where you cook your meal. You know what *babur* is? It's something that you put kerosene and you pump it and every time it goes a little bit *tenkush*, [to "poke", ie. open the orifice for more kerosene]. So it becomes round and sort of very nicely distributed flame. She left the thing on and finally she had to put it off because they put us on the truck. And "*Haabibi aravime*, [Go to your Arabic friends]; *Yalla* [Let's go]. And that's the exact word I remember, *aravime*. And I never knew what *aravime* meant until *aravime* [Arabic in Yiddish]. And then they took us to a distance and they let us down.

AR: The "they" here is the Haganah?

GK: The Haganah, yes. At least they said, these are Haganah. But they were Jewish, *Yehud*. We called them *Yehud*. We didn't care what they were because they were Stern Gang. I remember, Haganah. Irgun, I never heard of it when I was young. I only heard of these two. And they drove us past Tel Aviv and somewhere open. And they said, "Down." And we got down. And they said "*Imshi min hon*. Go, go, just walk that way." And we walked and walked and walked.

AR: So you were with your family?

GK: My mother and her six children.

AR: And you walked to where?

GK: We walked to some area which was just an open area full of, you know, like dusty and very hot. And there were some cars parked there. And before we left, my mom did two things. One thing I didn't see and one thing, she took my pants down and she put a belt on me and she put safety pins in the belt. Later on I knew it was money. She put money on every kid, with every kid. In case get lost, maybe that money would save him. And the other thing, she put something in her bra. And when we went to that area she came to a guy and she said, "Is that your car?" And he said, "Yes, that's my car." And she said, "I'll give you this if you take all of us to Birzeit." And he looked at it and he was just astonished what it was. It's called a *Bontatif*. What's a *Bontatif*? Something you put, like necklace. And she gave it to him and he took us all the way to Birzeit. I remember, me, I remember his car. He was from the Hoot family...And he took us all the way.

[I met a woman in the Detroit area who said during a conversation that her name is T. Hoot. I asked her if her father was alive. And if she may ask him if he had a black car in 1948. She asked her mother instead because her father just passed away in Detroit.] Her mother said:

“Yeah, when we got married he had that car”. So I said, I’ll give him anything if you give me back that *Bontatif*. But he said that he sold it the first day he got it, worth two bottles of whisky.

AR: So what did you find in Birzeit?

GK: Well Birzeit, they dropped us exactly at the border crossing there. And we walked through to the first door and it was belonging to Dar Nasir, [the Nasir family]. And we knocked the door and we said, you know my mother said, “I want to rent or live,” or something. We just arrived. And they gave us- Helen will know exactly what it is if I describe it. But it turned out to be next to Dar Nasir School. It was unfinished room. In other words it didn’t have a roof. And it has windows and doors but nothing as windows and doors, just the opening.

So we cleared the area and we slept that night over there like that. In the morning there was nothing. I mean no food, nothing. So we went to Dair El-Latin, [the Latin Church, ie. the Catholic Church]. It was Father Bozo. Father Bozo was there and he gave us *burge*. Who knows what *burge*? It’s a cracked wheat or some kind of wheat they smash it and it becomes...porridge. That’s it. We ate porridge for breakfast, for lunch, and for dinner for three months. The only protein we got was the birds that we hunted. That we took used rubber tires and we made slingshots and we used to go out and get the birds, the only protein for awhile.

Then my dad showed up. Well, I don’t know where he went. I wasn’t interested. And then he, we lived downtown by the *babor*, if you remember Hanneh where the *babor* is, where Masara is in Birzeit... It was a press, olive press. And we lived across the street. And the first, second day we were there, a man came hysteric. And he was running around, afraid. He doesn’t know what to do. “I’m followed, I’m followed, I’m followed.” “Who is following you?” He said, “They are following me.”

It turned out to be the Jordanian army of Jaish Abdallah, [the Army of Prince Abdullah of Jordan]. They were following him and he was from Al-Jihad Al-Muqaddas, [the Palestinian resistance army at that time, The Holy Jihad], so we hid him in our rented house. But there is like an opening in our room to the top of another building next to us. That building was a bakery and that’s where they stored the wood for that bakery. And they put him there and they closed the door and they took like a carpet, a prayer carpet on it. And it didn’t look like it has an opening. And the soldiers came looking for him. “We didn’t see him, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” And they sneak some food for him, etc. And in the meantime a man gave his clothing, *kombaz*, [male peasant outfit], whatever that is. You dress in *kombaz* and they sneak to him so he took his clothes off and he put that on.

And he asked for a cigarette and somebody sneaked a cigarette to him. He slept before he finished it and he turned the place on fire. So now our house was burned. If you want to call it a house, that was like an apartment, was burned that evening. And of course he miraculously, he escaped fire and he ran into the darkness and we don’t know where he went. He just ran away with the new clothing that he had.

And after that my mother used to have chickpeas, boil them, and make *belila*, [treat made from boiled chickpease, salt, etc], hummus. Yeah, called *belila*. And then we put it in the little cups. It’s not a cup, it’s a little piece of paper like this, you turn it around like that, it looks like a cup and fill it with *belila* and sell it for a half of a *piaster* which is like a nickle. And that money we used to bring it to her so she can buy something for us to eat.

AR: Time is almost up so is there any other...

GK: I'm trying to remember all the stuff that really left an impact on me. And then my dad built a house on a piece of land in Birzeit that he had and he built a little shack on it, like a house. And we lived in it for two years. After that he found a job in Amman, Jordan and we left for Amman, Jordan where he bought a piece of land right at the edge of the camp, Jabal Hussein Camp, Mayal Jabal Hussein... So we were part of the camp, technically. But we lived there for quite a bit, for a long time. And miserable living. Nothing you want to remember but you remember it. My grandfather, who is not a grandfather, the brother of my grandfather.... Well he came to me and he said, "You're going to be the next Khoury, you're going to be the next priest." And I used to listen to the stories that how God gave this land to the chosen people and this kind of nonsense. And I said, "No way, I don't want to be a priest. Not to serve a God like that." And I never became a priest, simply because I was affected by the whole story, didn't make sense. Why do you want to be involved in something like that?

AR: Where would you say home is?

GK: Home is Palestine 100 percent, and actually Birzeit, although we lived Jaffa, but I became part of the earth in a way in Birzeit. My mother used to give me, let's say two, three *piasters* and I would bring them to the butcher and I would buy the bones. She used to ask me to buy the bones. I'd buy the bones and I'd bring them home and she'd put them in a big pot and she will cook them and make soup out of them. And then when other refugees passed by, she used to have them sit down and put dry bread with the soup and they will eat. And then she takes, wash the dishes for the next coming people passing by. All day long she used to do that, especially in Amman. People didn't know where to go; people didn't know where to eat. There were no soup kitchens. Even in America there were no soup kitchens. She had soup kitchens. She made it on her own.