

Video interview at University of Detroit
By Alice Rothchild

Tahir Monsour transcript

TM: My name is Tahir Monsour. I'm one of the eye-witnesses to the Nakba. Without telling you my age, I was only twelve years old at the time in '48. I come from a village called Al Qubab. It's one of those villages, the 400 and some, that in 1948 were totally demolished. I lived through the exodus from the village in late April, early May 1948. I don't have the exact dates of what comes first except that it was already after the Dayr Yasin catastrophe. And the village comprised about 3,000 inhabitants, all farmland and orchards. We had a school. It was, when I started going to school, it was for four classes, up to fourth grade. And before the Nakba it was increased to sixth grade. So we did not finish the year in 1948 in the sixth grade because of the problems. The town itself, the village itself tried to defend itself because there was a settlement, a Jewish settlement called G- not far from us.

Al Qubab, our village, is situated, it's in the Ramle district near the coast. Biking distance because the workers used to go from the village to Lydda where the railroad is and Ramle where the offices are on bicycles and come back. It was like probably five, seven miles. The other side of it is Latrun. The road from Jaffa and Ramle to Jerusalem went literally through the middle of the village.

The village is situated on a gentle hill and the trucks used to come loaded with oranges from Jaffa, from the flat land going up to Jerusalem. And they go through the village they would be barely crawling because of the weight of the oranges. And they were slow enough that we used to almost actually outrun the trucks, that as kids, the road was also ours because there was no road to go to the school except the main road for the cars, for the donkeys, for the camels if there were any, and for the trucks and buses that go to Jerusalem from the coast. And we'd get some orange, an orange because you climb up, you hold your hand on the gate and the other hand you take the orange and that's all you can get is one orange and that's it. We had some of our oranges that way.

The fighting that I remember in that year, 1948, was more probing of forces from G- from the settlement. We had like a village militia, couple of dozen that bought their rifles from the British soldiers as they were leaving, getting ready to leave the Mandate. And I understand that they were charging for just a simple bolt action rifle a hundred dinar or 100 d- which is pounds sterling that is like 250 dollars. In those days that's a lot of money. So this militia was formed by a young man who happened to be my brother, my oldest brother. His qualification was, to lead the militia, was that he just finished med school at the AUB. He was able to buy a submachine gun, one of these small stun gun. I mention that because prior to our exodus from the village there would be attacks at night. And we can tell where Ahmed is because we can hear, his was the only big gun that was an automatic, you know that was rapid firing. And we were, I don't recall being scared. At twelve you don't scare easily, you're excited. Our house was a two story house. It didn't have glass windows. It had windows on the second story

especially. And we used to stick our heads out and look to hear where the sound of the firing come from and we know where my brother is.

My other younger brother, we didn't know where he was, but he was out fighting with some of the other villages, with their militias. I don't know how the word came to the village that had the people, the women, the children, the older evacuate. The word came that we should be evacuating and move east out of the village to safer ground. We started going. I was the youngest of eleven siblings, eight from one mother and three more from another mother, older brothers and sisters. We started evacuating. I remember walking of course. The road that went through the village was closed. You couldn't go west because that's where all the action is: Jaffa, Ramle, Lydda, and so on. We couldn't go north towards Jerusalem because it was blocked. So there was a trail through some gentle hills that go east towards the mountains, towards the hills. And everybody seemed to be channeled towards that direction. And later this is where Ramallah is. But Ramallah is many miles away and up in the hills. We headed east. My mother was leading the family to get towards safer areas. My father was not home. He had been, he was still working because he was working for the government and the government was still going 'til the fifteenth of May I think when the Mandatory powers ceased.

He was in charge of the railroad lines and so he stayed right 'til the very end. When he came we were already evacuated, when he finished his business. We didn't go, there were no refugee camps. People kept on, picture lines, large meandering through the hills, unending humanity in a line. All moving in the same direction and following what may be a foot trail where the people go from one village to another whether they use their donkeys and whatever. The first village we came to, I'm not sure whether it's S- or Al B- was the name of it. Some family from that village recognized us by the name. One of my uncles was like the registrar of the village and that area. He would register people who would come to have land dealings. So they knew of us and they said, "Why don't you stay in the schoolhouse?" It was a two room house. And the Monsour clan was pretty sizable, not just our immediate but the uncles and cousins and so one. And the two rooms were really jammed.

AR: How many people?

TM: Probably about 30 to 40 people. These are all cousins and aunts and uncles and not much uncles. I don't know what the uncles were doing because it seemed like all I recall is the women and the children and maybe some of the elder people. And they were going to lay there until the fifteenth because on the fifteenth, boy, the Palestinians you will go back to your house and everything's going to be just fine. Because people don't just lose everything they have. Somebody comes and takes it over. Well, we learned something, that there was a different story waiting for us to happen.

We didn't know where my brother was, neither one of my brothers, we didn't know where they were. The word came that my brother, not the young one but the one that was leading the militia, had gone back to the village because evidently they have attacked the Haganah or one of the three gangs Stern, Irgun, Haganah, anyway came to the village. They didn't find anybody there and they moved on the next village. As they were leaving they planted

mines around the town. And who knows about mines? Actually the village young men who were making up the militia, maybe some of them didn't even know how to read and write. So my brother was already being called Doctor. He just finished his MD, in fact he was in the same class as George Habash. George Habash is still around right? He died? So he read up on the mine handling and showed his comrades how to do it and we are going to work opening up safe areas for people to come back in. As luck would have it, he stepped on a mine.

Now there were no cars going by, somehow there was a truck that came through the village and they loaded him on the truck and they took him through Latrun, up the hills, ended up in Ramallah just to get some treatment for him. Of course what happens to you, the way they described his body was pretty well tore up, but he held on to life. He was still breathing as they entered Ramallah and went, in that town at time the school, The American Quakers school called Friends Boys School, had been closed because of the intensity of the fighting and turned into a first aid and hospital to treat. That was his alma mater as far as high schools. He went to school there for high school and went to AUB from there so he made the complete circle. He also shepherded, four years prior to that, shepherded a cousin of mine who was a good student to go to that same school who was already still in there in Ramallah. So he got to see him just for evidently, just minutes. Just to add to the reality of it, that's him. That's my brother Ahmed. I carry this picture, we keep it as did most houses of the village. They knew him, they valued him. In fact they knew his value to the community a few years before that. He and George Habash and a few of their classmates in Beirut came to the village one summer and dedicated their summer vacation to [Arabic phrase] to have literacy school for the adults because the adults were just farmers, did not have any chance to go to school. They needed to learn how to read and write.

AR: We only have a few more minutes, so can you tell me what happened to your family?

TM: This was the Nakba, this was our Nakba [holding photo of brother]. He was returned back to the village because they had withdrawn, the Haganah. Whoever came went back out and he was buried in the village. My father was strong enough. He took this Nakba pretty well. He was compensated for his services in the British Mandate government. He got some money, he and his brothers, I'm shortening it now. He and his brothers put the money that they got from the government for service rendered, put it together and we moved to Jordan and they started their new life. My mother who was a very strong person did not, could not take the thrust of what happened to them. She was mentally not there, would be quiet instead of the lively, steady person that she was before.

In '51, this was in '48, in '51 she died while she was still in that state of not recognizing anything. So the Nakba meant losing your home, your country, your reference for the future. At least the parents anyway, because all of my father's earnings, and he earned pretty good money, he was getting sixty dollars, sixty pounds per month, that's another two hundred and some odd, but he spent that all on his son educating him. And she could not take that and in our case, we moved to Jordan to a village outside Amman. That was on the orders from my father. It turns out that there were, we had some distant relatives in that village. It's called Sahab [?]. It's just

probably about 10 miles east of Amman. And we went there at least where somebody knows us. We got a tent from the United Nations. So we lived in the tent for the better part of a year.

And then my father bought a two room house there and pooled their money, he and his brothers, and bought a flour mill and we started life anew. But then they had this one young son, that's me, that was very good in school. And my cousin who was going to the Friends School had finished and he went and talked to my father. He said, "What are you going to do with Taher?" "What?" He said, "Well, he's got to go to school."

There were no schools in that village. There were no public schools in Amman even, I think there were some private schools. I know there were some private schools but I don't think there was public higher schools. He said, "We've got to send him to school." "Where?" Well the only thing is Ramallah. "You go back from Amman to Ramallah," and I was a boarding student, I spent the best four years of my life in that town. That's where my American influence started, where it enabled me four years later to leave. I finished my high school studies. Actually I didn't finish the high school itself, I skipped one year. And I was able to come to American with some coaching as how you would do it. The coaching was by a young, I've got to give him credit, a young American teacher was teaching us in that Friends School, Graham Miller, God bless him wherever he may be, from Nashville, Tennessee. He said, "What are you going to do when you finish high school?" I said, "Well, you know I'm refugee and I've got to work and help my family." He said, "Well what about college?" I said, "Well, college is for people with money. We don't have any money." He said, "You can get to the states, you can go to school and work, and pay for yourself. You won't even need any money."

I was seventeen. At seventeen we can shake the world by the tail. You're not scared. You don't play the game of what if, except my father did. Anyway, so I managed to convince him and it taught me how much my father, who had never spent a day in school, he was self taught to read and write... how he valued education. He was able to get me some money just to travel, to come to the states and I got scholarships and so on.

And the pleasant side of my life started when I got here. I have now, I do have three children, five grandchildren. I'm blessed and my wife is sitting there, sitting right there. And my eldest son is sitting right there, Jamil. And this is definitely my home, warm heart, warm feelings for just about everything American. Obviously not some of the policies but we're not supposed to feel warm.

AR: Thank you, thank you so much.