

Video interview at University of Detroit  
By Alice Rothchild

Hasan Newash transcript

Introduction to event

HN: My name's Hasan Newash. I'm the director, the janitor, the sweeper, everything for the Palestine Office. I'm probably, maybe 25 percent of the volunteering constituency too. We're a volunteer driven organization. We try to do things. And we are proud and delighted to sponsor this event. I think it's a cutting edge and I'll come to that in a second. But I want to thank sincerely the other sponsors who've made this happen. And the one first is University of Detroit, Mercy, let's see, U-D Mercy Arab Cultural Society and also the American Jews for Justice and Peace. And of course the Jewish Voice for Peace. All of them really deserve a standing ovation but I won't ask you for that, give them a wonderful hand...

To accent the importance of this event for us all, I want to give you an observation. I read in *New York Times*, a review of the work of Edward Said back in 1998, I think '99. And it stuck with me, the note that he said, and I can't recall the quotation exactly but I can paraphrase, that actually if a culture does not tell its narrative, it doesn't exist. As if it actually experiences cultural genocide. Think about it. That's true for species of course, no question. We have no history of them, they didn't exist. But so it is with our cultural heritage. And that's really, at the time I was an activist doing other things, I started then taking seriously the whole question of having us speak out and tell our narrative. That accents the importance of having us tell these powerful stories, especially in this format.

Where it becomes personal, it's real, it's not statistics. It is human stories that really happened to me, to George, to X, to Y, to Hala, I don't want to say X and Y. But that's why it's really important. And thank you very much for those of you who are participating in the interviews. And thank you if you who are doing the listening. These are powerful stories. And let me just end here. I'm told that you guys have been introduced to Alice and her work so I don't need to introduce that. And thank you very much for being here and doing this for us. And I'm really proud of your work. Thank you again.

Interview

HN: My name is Hasan Newash and I was born in Ein Kerem. I experienced the Nakba first hand. It happened when I was six. I remember after Dayr Yasin my father and my uncles came from the front. They were on guard at Ein Kerem with the rest of the young people. They load us, the next morning on a flat bed truck with some bedding to go to my aunt's house over, maybe about two or three miles away. And I remember that night there were about 30 people because there were three families. My uncle's, there were no men, there all women and children. I was at night sleeping in the sardine line. And I remember there was this 13 year old or so young woman who was in the middle of the night, trying to go to the bathroom and she actually stepped on me. And I was terrified. I thought she was going to crush me. My aunt was very hospitable, very giving, very loving, and found her funny too. She had to put up with all these people for about four days. And then when it became clear this was not any longer a safe place, I

guess they loaded us through Jerusalem on some armored vehicles in order to go to Jericho. And then from there they loaded us to Al-Sult, the East part of the Jordan.

It seems like, I don't know, it's hard for me to stay away from analysis as I am telling you the story because later on in Al-Sult, that's what I would call the watershed of what happened to me as a child to define the rest of the trauma, the rest of the psychological formation for me. There was an argument between my brother and my mother. My brother was injured in the war, and he came... That was another story of trauma, the screaming, of my sisters and all that. But just to concentrate on the psychological impact and injury of what happened to me I want to go back to that argument scene.

Because the schools were closed in the face of refugees in East Jordan, Transjordan at the time, so my brother who was educated, insisted that he would take us back to Jerusalem where he had some *wasta*, some insiders, to allow us to go to government schools. My mother was resisting saying, "Look, there are no jobs in Jerusalem." My father was a home builder. "You are not going to take my children away from me." That was the defining three days argument. That argument, every time I go to my counselor, to therapy, I end up sobbing and I'm resisting doing that now because that was the defining scene to subsequently tell me more or less who I am. Because later on I would live in my brother's household not realizing that I am living like an orphan, no matter how loving that is, my mother and father were missing.

On holidays I would get up and I am depressed and I have no idea why I am depressed, I am not getting up, not getting dressed, under eight years old. "Why are you not getting..., and..." I'd get yelled at. Later on, only 20 or 30 years later, I would recognize that I was really looking for my mother.

Essentially, I would live this sense of alienation and that kind of deprivation, in a sense, like I was stunted in terms of receiving of the love that I needed. This was never compensated for, to live the rest of my life like that, and in that kind of a sense - stuck in there to some degree. Angry, extremely sensitive, I would cry easily. I always felt very defensive, the whole thing- my life was just dysfunctional. To top it all I had a sister who was in her teens who was to come to help in my brother's household to take care of us and she used abusive language and her own frustration and all that, and I was at a vulnerable age to receive all that garbage. So consequently I, it took me years to undo that in therapy, undo the damage. Let me skip forward, and then essentially I, this whole sense of alienation, if it weren't for me being good in school, that was the whole compensation, if I weren't good in school I would be a criminal, I would have been a criminal or I would have been a flunky. Because my whole self confidence was eroded because of my sister and her awful messages.

But I graduated and I was actually one the top people in the General Matriculation Exam. I was fine. I always got those messages that, "Hey, you're good," and so on and that was nice. So I was offered a scholarship by UNRWA to go to AUB in return for, full scholarship to go, the whole thing, to AUB, in return for us to surrender our refugee card status, such that we would no longer be classified as refugees. And then we had a family meeting and we said, "No." Because in Ein Kerem we were fruit growers and trucks would come and load and so on, and we were, I wouldn't say we were very wealthy, but we were wealthy. We had acres and acres of land, fruit trees, grapes, apples plums, cherries, mishmash, apricots, everything. Everything we had in so many different orchards.

It's interesting that in 1948 that the orchards and all trees were really just overfilled and ripe, they were incredible, that year, I heard. But also we had olive trees, groves of olive trees all over the place. Of course, my mother was proud to, and she let us know it, she was sort of

snobbish – she comes from a wealthy clan in our town. Our town was half Christian and half Muslims. But she comes from a snobbish background so she would always flaunt saying, “See because of my good administrative skills,” we didn’t have to go live in a refugee camp. So she brought some money in, but she didn’t bring our birth certificates for example, I don’t know if they brought the house deeds – well maybe she did and maybe she didn’t but we never had to live in refugee camps.

But the trauma was there in a different way. The alienation was different. Now let me just skip forward. I became so sensitized to the whole thing of this such that I saw every movement in the world, in Vietnam, in Chiapas, anywhere, as if they were Palestinians. I recall in 1960s when I was opposing the war in Vietnam in a march in New York yelling “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?” and tears are streaming down my face. I felt as if these are Palestinian children that were being killed in Vietnam. And I still feel that way. It seems like analytically I end up that now my whole sense of activism is intertwined in my yearning to reunite with my mother, which never happened, reunite with my country and reunite with myself. That became sort of like my essence. That’s why activism is very difficult and it’s very taxing but it’s embedded, it is like intertwined, in my psyche in every which way. It’s not something like I’m doing anybody any favor being an activist, it’s just there and I do it because it’s a part of my identity.

The final chapter that I want to share is in the 1990s when I had been an activist and exposed a great deal, as supportive of the PLO work and so on, and I was scared shitless about going back under the Shamir government because I heard all these torturous stories and I was petrified to actually go back and visit. But imagine, I decided it just doesn’t matter anymore. Psychologically I resolved no matter what happened, I have to go back. As if I’ve become dismembered within, and I needed to go back to become whole. And so I decided to go. I played it low key. I went through and I am going through Ein Kerem. Ein Kerem, unlike other Palestinian towns and cities, did not get destroyed, they kept it as is, so you go through Ein Kerem now and you see the village as it was in 1948, they kept everything the same, did not allow any high rise buildings, nothing, and now it turns into a certain artists’ colony. All these rich, I understand, the leftist artists, anti-Zionist I was told, they live in Ein Kerem. Which is nice, in a sense, it’s nice! But here’s the thing, now I am going through Ein Kerem, the names are the same, every thing’s still the same and My God, I’m experiencing this surrealistic kind of walk from the virgin well towards my house, towards our house. Everything is the same, nothing changed. As if I was six but I’m in my 40’s now.

I was visiting with my daughter who is 16 or 17, so we go through this souvenir shop and I go down below street level about three steps and as if I’d gone through these three steps before, but I couldn’t recall why. The souvenir shop, I am astounded by the amber necklaces and wanted to bring back to my daughters who had stayed here, some of the souvenirs that the Palestinian Bedouins make. I think the Bedouins make. So my 16 year old alerts this Jewish woman who is part of our delegation who went with us through this Nazareth work camp, she says, God bless her soul she died not long after, she says, “Are you thinking of buying something here?” and I said, “Yah, why not?” She said “Munai, your daughter will be mad at you,” might be upset if I did. I thought that was strange, why, I mean, I am culturally just wrapped into the whole thing. So I went to Munai, my 16, 17 year old and asked, “What’s the story?” She said, “These people came and actually stole your country, took over your town, this woman came from Utah, she opened this shop and you are trying to give her money.” And I felt so ashamed, so embarrassed,

this wisdom from the mouth of babes! I mean, politically I am not stupid, I'm sophisticated, I just didn't get it.

Then, of course, I walked out and it was only about six years later my sister comes in, the abusive sister comes in, and of course I open up to her and blamed her, how awful she was, and she started sobbing. "But you don't understand, I had to become a mother when I was 15 and I didn't want to be a mother." And I started sobbing with her, for both of us. At the time I asked her, what was the place where I went to the souvenir shop; and she said that was Uncle Eissa's shop – they had some Arab things, rice, flour, and so on. I did go through these steps before. No idea. I did.

So now I make the trek to our own house, we had a two story house, the whole thing. I stood in front of the archway on the second floor and it says in Arabic, [Arabic words] "Whoever enters here is safe." And it's carved in the archway in some amateurish writing. And I recall my father is a home builder and so was my grandfather, so I wonder if that was my father's writing or his father's writing. So now I am contemplating, should I go ask the woman who was living there, some people are living there, I really wanted to, ask for permission to go, but then I said it doesn't feel right. I mean, why should I ask permission to go see my own house? That's vulgar. So then I thought, maybe I should just plop myself in the living room, just there, and come what may. After all that is my house. That was not a very wise thing given what the outcome will be with some Israelis I will end up..., I am with a delegation here. So I decided to leave. Walking away was really cowardice also! So there it goes. Not enough that I am traumatized psychologically, in these situations I am even more humiliated within. None of these choices was healthy. None. So I walked away and here it is, going back to US.

You ask me or you ask the interviewees, where do you feel home. I feel that that is home; Ein Kerem is home because in a sense, everything after I was six went down to hell. Obviously like you see, but as if there's no way of recapturing that. Therefore I don't really feel like that's home as such. I'm not saying that I don't want to return, definitely, of course I want to return, that's a different question. But do I feel home here? No. We always stayed in a rental house. My family stayed in a rental house. Always, somehow, as if we lived a transient mentality, that we don't belong anywhere else. I still live that. Although I have a mortgage and a home, etc., but I still live that transient mentality. And therefore my home is myself. It is really within. I am not attached to a place. I am attached to a concept. Home is having me relate to other human beings, having me relate to justice. Having me relate to do what's right and be decent. As if that's where I live. It's yet to be defined where my home is, I don't know. I guess I'll stop here.

AR: That was incredible. I just want to thank you. Thanks to everyone. It was a powerful evening. Let's keep talking with each other and especially listening.