

Video interview at University of Detroit
By Alice Rothchild

Jamilah Okab transcript

JO: My name is Jamilah Okab, I was born in Jerusalem, in West Jerusalem, I was born in 1941. It happened when I'm younger, I remember it, exactly when in 1948, my father came home and he told my mother that there is a neighbor across the street from us, was killed.

And he knew exactly why he was killed and he just warned my mother that we have to go. We have to move as soon as we can. So he just get a taxi, I remember that, and he said, by the evening, by 6 o'clock we have to go. So he get the whole family in the taxi, I remember running. I said, just can I take my doll? I love to take this little doll with me. And he said, just run and get it. And my mom, she has a baby 15 days old at that time. So she grab her jewelry, wrap it in the receiving blanket of the baby. She throws all in the car and we left. So we went to Syria. They took us all the way to Syria. On the border they won't let the taxi cab in and all these things so they have to take us in buses to tents and camps and we lived there for a few days.

And my father thought, we're going for a vacation so let's enjoy it. And he told my mother, I took most of what we have from bank...or whatever at that time. He took the money and he kept it with him and so he said, "Let's enjoy it. We aren't going to stay in those tents and living like that." So he rented a house and we lived in the house for awhile. So we're spending it as if we're going on a vacation. He said, "We're coming back to our home and furniture and everything, so let's enjoy Syria."

So we start traveling in Syria and enjoying things and thinking that's the only month we're going to stay. And things get worse. My mom used all her jewelry for renting the homes or food and everything and then the money is gone. And my father start finding jobs and no jobs. So things get worse. We stay two years in misery in Syria, so we said, we have to go back. So we went back to Jerusalem again and we lived in the family...

AR: So what year was that?

JO: Two years after, which like say, in the '50. And we went back to the family's house which used to be in the Old City. And at that time my father, they gave us the UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works Agency] card to live on. And somebody offer us, or they offer that either you take this card, we take it away from you and we give you a small home to live in or you can send your kids for education, we could do that. But at that time we're all young and none of us are eligible to go to college. So he accepted the offer to live in, to give us a small home to live in, us and another 28 families. So we live in an area outside the Old City called Sheikh Jarrah. And they gave us a small home, about maybe three bedrooms and a living area and a kitchen and so on. And they're all the same. They built them the same for 28 families.

AR: Who's they?

JO: The UNRWA. The UNRWA took that card from us and gave us those homes. So we lived in that house for awhile. After '67, another Nakba started. In '67 they came in and they claimed that this land, which they built those 28 homes, belonged to the Jews, the Orthodox Jews. And the Jews they have proof that they bought this land from the Turk in 1835. And they brought all these papers from Turkey showing that they owned the land. So they came and they told my mother that she has to move from the house. So she refused, or pay rent. They said, "We can't pay rent, we've been living in this house all these years." So they refused to pay the rent. So they came, they took all her furniture, everything from the house except the mattress, and she was sick at that time, and just a week later she passed away. So she passed away on only one mattress left for her in the house. And that didn't end on that. By that time the family and other families from the same project, they enlarged the homes and we built on them and so on.

So we have about three brothers living in this house now. And it's divided into three apartments. In 2000 they came again and they asked them to evict the homes one more time. And they refused. They said, "We own these homes because they took from us our source of income at that time, replacement in these homes. And like all of us, we've been in this house like 40 years. So you can't take away this home from us. So they forced the family, by force, evict them. And they took all their furniture and everything again. And they throw them in the street. No homes. So they have to be with friends and family 'til they start to rent a place for their family. And that then it's in 2002. So they went to court and they brought some paper work that whatever those Jews, orthodox brought they are not real documents. So they are false. So the court came and said, "Yep, they are false documents. You can go back to the house."

So they went back again to the house. And the house was destroyed completely and they rebuild it again and they fix it and they lived there after. March of this year, [2009] which is about a month ago, they've been hassling with them again and they sent them another eviction to leave the house. So they said, another company came in and they said, "We have proof that we own this land. Again. And you have to leave the house one more time." So now, the family living in the house, three families actually living in the house, and they have a Jewish organization for peace staying with them because they don't want the eviction to happen.

One of the projects, they evict her from the house, and she is living in a tent next to the house. And her husband just left three days after the eviction. He passed away. He has a heart attack and passed away. And it's every single day now. If you carry the Jerusalem newspaper, the *Haaretz*, any of the local newspaper, you see the story of the Hanoun family, which is my middle name, and the other families which they are evicted. They are having a protest tent, they are living in it. My family's still in the house 'til this day. [after this interview, they were evicted again]

I call them every single day to check on them and they're still in the house. They did not leave the house yet because they didn't evict them yet. But they're living under a situation that every single minute we gonna be moved today or tomorrow. So that is the story of my family. They live it now and they are still under the fear. Some people, the Nakba ended in 1948 and they went on with their life, but for my family they're still living another Nakba.

AR: Some questions, how many children in your family?

JO: There is ten of us. We have lots of sets of twins in the family. So there is ten of us. I'm the oldest of ten.

AR: You're the oldest?

JO: I am the oldest of the ten. I still have brothers and sisters who have, my brothers the ones who live at the house, they still have children like six and seven years old. And they're all living in fear. The school called them and tell them, "Your kids are not normal because of all your situation and the house." Everyday they are waiting to be evicted and thrown. This is the third time they get them out of their homes and they lived with family and friends and then again back in the house. And that's their situation. So the kids living in fear 'til now in the homes. And they don't know what going to happen to them.

AR: Do you remember why your family chose to go to Syria?

JO: It just, my father has at that time, he have the money and he said, "We'll go on vacation. It's only one month so let's enjoy it. We'll go on vacation and we'll back to our home and life and everything." So that's why he choose Syria at that time. It's a beautiful area so he just thought he'd take just advantage and enjoy it. He used to love life and loved to live and he wanted to enjoy every minute of his life so he just went to Syria at that time.

AR: And once it dawned on him that this was not going to be a four week vacation. Tell me what life was like then.

JO: That was the miserable part of the life at that time. No money. He lost everything we have. And we took with us at least at that time some jewelry and money and then we came back to a small house which the family used to own, my grandfather used to own in Jerusalem. So everybody crammed in that house, us and my aunts and uncles and everybody was living in that house. And that's why at that time when the UNRWA came and accepted offer for us for a home. So we accepted the offer and we moved. And the house was so small that we add on it and we enlarge it so to accommodate the whole family.

AR: So you see how the children today are being traumatized by this.

JO: Exactly.

AR: So do you remember as a child...

JO: Absolutely.

AR: What do you remember?

JO: I remember the one incident, it just like stuck in my mind exactly. When we were leaving Jerusalem, although I was young but I still remember it. We were stopped on the side of the

street, you know the driver, and he said, "Somebody's passing by." And they're carrying four dead men in blanket. And each foreman carrying the guy and the blood gushing from their nose and their faces. And this picture 'til now I just never, never forget it, seeing those dead people from the war and everything. They shot them at that time. And it's just a misery of when I'm a child all the time, I wanted to work hard to help my father, supporting the rest of the family. I went to Saudi Arabia and I work as a teacher there for a year.

AR: When did that happen?

JO: That's in '62. It happened in '62. I worked for one year. And I felt like I left jail to go to another jail, which is, I couldn't understand the life of the Saudi people there and the whole thing. I just couldn't take it so I came back to Jerusalem again.

And then I met my husband and we decided to go to Kuwait. And there I taught two more years with him in Kuwait. So we make money to come to the States to have the real freedom in here and to study and work hard in this country. So we came to this country and we made it here. But home is still home. Home to me is Jerusalem. Home is Jerusalem and Palestine. I love this country very much and I never deny the everything that we got from this country and whatever they've done for us for freedom. But home is Jerusalem.

AR: Can you just describe the house you had in West Jerusalem and the house in the old city?

JO: The West Jerusalem house, we just get a house, it's a beautiful, big house. I remember it, I was so excited to move into that house. And then when we went back to...

AR: How many rooms?

JO: About four bedrooms house and with a garden. I remember the flowers outside that house. It's beautiful. And then everyday we start to see that we cannot come out to the backyard because of the Haganah outside or we're scared from the British soldiers and this and that's what I hear. My father used to say that this is British and this is Haganah so we cannot go outside to the backyard.

So then, you know, that kind of reminds us of all of this beautiful house we used to live in and then we moved to the tents in Syria and then from there back to the old city in the smaller house we lived in.

AR: And the tents, the whole family was in one tent?

JO: Exactly. It's a huge tent. They have like everybody sleeping in it. Not just my family, many families. And they're sleeping on like cots, everybody. And each corner one family lived in. And that I remember for sure. And one time even... everything we have like the jewelry that my mom had and then he sold it and we rented the house but we couldn't afford to stay too long because we didn't have any money and nobody can work and you know at that time everybody was coming from Palestine and nobody have jobs so there's not enough jobs for everybody. So people couldn't work and that's why we didn't have enough money to live in Syria even.

AR: So, what were the changes you saw in your father?

JO: My father, the minute he worked very hard, in '67 and then one time after the '67 war he went back to see the old house we used to live in. He just wanted to see it and who lived in it and what's going on there. And he came home and he has a stroke after that. And he lived a few more years after. But he died at age 61 years old because the stroke he has when he saw the house. He came back and told my mom, "I saw they're living in it and they're enjoying it," and he was so sad that this house taken from him and that's when he had the stroke.

AR: How did this affect your mother?

JO: It affected the whole family actually, because brothers are younger than I am. I am the oldest of the ten in the family. And my brothers worked when they were very young. They have their own business as electricians and stuff like that. And they worked very hard to build the house and family. And my mother also suffered a lot raising the family after. I remember, she used to take my father's old pants and transfer them to clothes for us, to skirts and this and that, to make us live a better life.

AR: Are there any other stories you'd like to share? Any memories?

JO: It's just like we all used to, like, kids play with toys and this and that, my mother used to sit down to make dolls for us from old rags and stuff like this to make us feel that we had something, we have toys to play with. I used to make my brothers kites so they won't feel bad because I was the oldest and I used to make for them kites to go and share with the other children who can't afford to have something to play with. I was always supporting my mother with her younger children and my father all the time. Even when I get married, my husband has a big share of taking, helping the family. Also we worked very little here and we didn't have that much money but we both work hard to support my family at that time.

AR: Where are your brothers and sisters now?

JO: Now we have four of us in the US and one in Saudi Arabia and four in Jerusalem.

AR: Those in Jerusalem, are they living in the house that you were telling us about?

JO: Three of them living there in the house and the two girls, they're married and one in the Nazareth, close to Nazareth area and one in Jerusalem.

AR: Thank you very much.