

The Higgins Art Gallery & Museum, Bedford

Transcript

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Name: Siham Brown

Gender: female

Date of Birth:

Place of Birth Haifa

Occupation:

Date of Interview: 23st March 2017

Interviewed by: Carl Tosner

Length of interview: 27 mins

Transcribed by: Linda Dawes

00 mins

Could I start by asking you what do you feel about living in England?

Now very fine after 56 years I have been here, so it feels like home.

And you live in Bedford?

Correct

And why did you choose Bedford?

Because our family, my husband's work moved to London so we chose to live in Bedford for schools for the children.

And em when you first arrived in Bedford how did people take to you?

People were quite friendly. I think that is mainly because we were part of the community that have children and take children to school. So you meet people waiting for your children outside the school and so on. So from that aspect people were very friendly, you got to know people.

Do you think that's changed?

No, you know, I have lost my husband within, after those few years, after coming to Bedford but by then we already had a number of friends here, so it really feels good to be here.

If I could just take you back and ask you where do you come from originally?

It's a little bit not quite straight forward I was born in Haifa in Palestine, and we had to leave Haifa in 1948.during the troubles, and then we became really refugees in Jordan for a few months.

And then?

And then Mother had to find work. There was no work in Jordan and eventually we ended up in Baalbek in Lebanon, in a boarding School, where Mother got a job there and we attended school.

And why did you have to leave Haifa?

Because of the fighting and troubles between Arabs and Jews.

Ok and did that directly affect you or, did you leave so it didn't directly affect you?

No it affected us very directly, we couldn't find food and the shooting was just cross the road, everywhere bombs and guns. It was very very frightening. We were four little girls. My Father had just died a few months before that and there was no option we couldn't find food, there was no work, no money, so we had to get out somehow

And em from Lebanon what brought you then too England?

We were in Lebanon a long time. All our education, myself and my sisters, and then I started teaching in Lebanon. And then I met somebody from England here and we got married. I met him here in England but he came over to Lebanon and we got married and I came here as a married woman with my husband.

04 mins

You said you met him here. Were you here on vacation or?

No I was attending a course that the British council in those days were offering graduates from the university. So I was accepted on one of those courses. For the summer, only a month.

Did you leave family behind in Palestine?

Yes oh yes, my Mother came from a very big family and they all lived in Palestine. We didn't actually leave them they left us, because I had seven Uncles, and one Aunt who is still alive and still in Palestine, but all my Uncles left during then troubles in Palestine. But my mother couldn't leave ,we didn't have a car, she needed somewhere to live, and they didn't know where to live. So (em) eventually the British Army in their army trucks gave out a notice to say anyone, any Palestinian that wanted to leave, we will take you out to the borders of Jordan. They actually said to Oman but it never happened that way, they dropped us off before the Jordanian border. Just dropped us on the side road.

And did you ever make it to Oman or?

We did in a small farmers lorry. My Uncle was with us, one of my Uncles, and his family. He went round ,it was early evening he went round asking the people of a little Town called Nablus, and somebody said there is a man here who has a lorry, he's a farmer he might be able to take you, if you get a few people and he will take you altogether, and that's what happened.

Ok em If you can remember, can you tell me how you felt when you were getting into the army truck to leave?

I was just between 11 and 12 years old I didn't know what emotions or feelings I had. I look back on it all I can see is a little girl getting very excited in getting into this huge army lorry with a lot of people. Everybody with their split of suitcase, little kids crying, and my Uncle and his family ,they had a little baby a few months old, as well as two other older Children.(and em) Thinking about it now all I can see is excitement. Which was weird as there is nothing to be excited about, knowing what happened afterwards.

Have you been back to Palestine since?

Yes once when my husband and I organised a little tour of what is called now the holy land and we had twenty people join us and we went back to the usual places for tourists, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and all round those areas, but also we asked for the guide who were with us who provided the transport for us while we were in, well it is Israel now. We asked them specially to take us to mount Carmel in Haifa, because that is where I grew up as a little kid. And I wanted my husband to see where I was, and the rest of the group went on the bus and so Carmels on My husband and I walked up the road to our house. I was literally born there and grew up until the age of eleven.

08mins

And how did you feel when you saw your old house again?

I felt, there was no excitement there, I felt happy that my husband saw where we lived. I was just running because our house was on a slope it was on mount Camel so and the slope which in my younger days was just earth, you know, wasn't tarmacked or anything, but when we got there it was all properly done up and so on. It wasn't a

road that cars could go up but I was running ahead of my husband and I wanted to get to the house and it looked more or less the same as I remember it but it was really emotional being back there and with my husband .

Did you knock on the door?

We did knock on a door. It was where my Grandparents lived and I knew that my youngest Aunt had stayed on ,because the Israeli government any house what was emptied by any Palestinians ,they would take it over and the government would rent it, but because my Aunt was there and that building belonged to one of my Uncles. Most of my Uncles had their own big buildings / apartments and so on. So they allowed her to stay .They allowed my Aunt to stay and I thought my aunt was still there so I knocked on the door and there was this tall young man. He looked a man but he was only a older teenager, and he was my Aunts son, no my Aunts Grandson, because his mother is a German and he looked very European, fair hared ,blue eyes and I looked at him and said who are you? And he said I am Nadda`s Grandson, that my Aunts name Nadda, and he says come in and made us a cup of coffee /tea I can`t remember, and it was amazing going into my old Grandparents house. It looked exactly the same as when I used to go down. Because our flat being on a slope was the first floor on that level, the ground floor on that level and my grandparents was below that down the slope. So em I loved my grandparents and I remember I used to go down and see them. Lie on the couch and my legs against the wall for some reason.

Just to jump forward again to your time here. Were there times when you felt unaccepted by the British population?

Not really certain times. We started in London and we joined a Church which was close to us and people were very very kind and I did not feel a stranger, maybe because my husband was English and so on, but people treated me very much as one of their own, Neighbours and friends. But then we moved to Yorkshire, we already had one child, our daughter, so we very soon got into Schools, and Yorkshire was a little bit more difficult to get into the community. We were in Wakefield which, I don`t know, was a tricky place because we were a family we soon got again. No I never felt unaccepted a straight answer to your question.

12mins

I have always felt people accepted me, that may be because I have always spoken English. I did not have to learn English after I came here. I spoke English from a time when I was a child and whether that head anything to do with it I don`t know. No from time to time you see people saying you have a little accent I am not sure where you come from. That is as far as I am treated as an un British person, well non English person.

Did you become a British citizen?

Oh yes. In those days when I came to England it was such easier than now, because I had to wait one year I think and because I was married to a British, an Englishman, I was able to get registered very quickly.

That process then was very straightforward.

Yes and it wasn`t as expensive as it is now. I don`t know how much people pay now, but a lot of money.

And em what was it that em brought with you today as your special item?

Yes it is something that my mother brought me with her from Lebanon. It is a little pot that we make what we call Arabic coffee, some people call it Turkish coffee, but it`s a little pot that we brew the coffee. The coffee is almost pulverised, its much,

much finer than the ground coffee we use in percolators, French word for the other type *caffetiere*. I can show you as I brought...

Can you describe it ?

I will describe it to you. It is very very finely ground the distinction of this Arabic coffee is that it has cardamom seeds in it and they have a lovely taste and a lovely smell as well, and Lebanese coffee becomes Lebanese coffee if you add the cardamom pods in it.

And can you describe the pot you brought with you and the cups?

Yes the cups are of two types. I only have one type here with me, and they are without handles, they're rounded and a smaller base than the top and they are very much part of Saudi Arabian culture and when the servant goes round offering coffee he always does that with the cups to show that people can ask for coffee or more coffee. But you asked about the pot. The actual pot is that right. The pot again, this is not a typical one, it very much Europeanised. Most coffee pots or *rakheh* or *dallah* are brass lined inside so and they have a much wider base and narrower at the top. (And) The one I have here is not as tall as the usual ones. You would say this is about 5, 4 inches high the normal ones are about at least 7 inches high and they are brass with a long handle and again they are wider at the bottom and narrower at the top.

16mins

And why is it special to you particularly?

I don't know whether the shape of the pot does something, is useful. I don't know whether it is the right shape for brewing the coffee. What you do is you put the cold water in the pot according to the size of the *rakheh* you add three or four or five teaspoons of coffee, Turkish coffee, Arabic coffee and you put the cardamom if it's not already in the coffee, and I don't know if the shape has something to do with the kind of cooking. Because it is a Saudi, originally a Saudi pot and very often they are cooking it outside. When they are going out on their picnics in the desert and so on, they would have a fire, a coal fire or a wood fire, so they need a stable base to put the coffee pot on, and whether the fact, I am not a physics teacher or student, whether the fact it is narrower at the top helps the water to boil more quickly I don't know but they stand it and it is really steady on whatever open fire they have, and when the water boils with the coffee in it, they let it boil for about two to three minutes, maybe a little bit longer. (And) Most coffee drinkers don't add sugar to it, they drink it really, they call it plain, *sagga*, and it's very very bitter, but if you are a real coffee drinker you won't put any sugar in it, but I love it with sugar I can't have it without sugar, but I love this coffee.

Do you feel it's a connection to home?

In some small ways because I don't drink this coffee very often and when we were at home with my mother and parents at home, again they didn't drink it like people here drink tea or instant coffee or whatever, but when you have guests coming you always make coffee to offer them. You have coffee with biscuits or without biscuits but there is always coffee offered to your guests. So in that way I feel the connections especially when I have Lebanese friends visiting me here in Bedford. I always say would you like a cup of coffee and they understand it is going to be this kind of coffee.

Lebanon has a very highly developed cuisine

Oh yes

Do you still cook Lebanese food?

Yes it takes egh, Lebanese cooking takes a bit of time to prepare it and so on, but it is the best food in the world, I think. It is very tasty and very healthy as well. We use a

lot of rice in our cooking, and with stuffed vegetables very often and em yes it's very good and very tasty. My children like most of the Lebanese food. I never cooked it regularly because it was very time consuming to prepare it, but we always had some Lebanese food sometime during the week. Yeh

20mins

You said earlier in the interview that you are Christian, which to Western ears is quite unusual for somebody from the Middle East. Do you have contact with Muslim Arabs around Bedfordshire or?

Most of my friends in Bedford itself are Christians. I'd like to clarify one point about Christians, Christianity in Lebanon is very much an established religion and if you say I'm a Christian, it doesn't have the same connotation as people here understand. If you say I'm a Christian here people think or understand you are a committed Christian but in Lebanon it's something you put on your passport, you are either a Muslim or a Christian and it has to show on your passport and em but I have some Muslim friends here in Bedford as well. Some lovely housewife's that I got to know. We all meet together from time to time around a Lebanese meal which is a yeh and , Yes even in Lebanon we didn't have that feeling that we are Christians so we don't have much to do with Muslims so they were friends they were neighbours and we lived very peaceful lives.

When you look at Palestine today how does that make you feel?

That's a sad point because I can see how much people suffer and the people who suffered at the beginning are still the people who are suffering now. They have lost their homes they have lost their income and life has been very very difficult for them. Right we lost our home, mother and four of us the four sisters, daughters had to leave everything we never went back, lost literally everything. Mother had one little suitcase, enough clothes for two weeks. That's what every do say. You go out for two weeks you come back everything will be settled, we never went back. I lost everything but some people have a positive way of thinking and they just got on with life and made something out of their lives but a lot of people who stayed behind in a way have lost everything but they weren't able, they weren't given the opportunity to move forward and that makes me feel extremely sad and as I look at things now I cant see any solution. What's going to become of these people? Except fighting throwing bombs, throwing stones and so on.

Do you think there is any hope for peace there?

Not while Israel is of that mind, the Arabs, the Palestinians Arabs have no place in Israel. The Israel people are very much Old Testament people, this land is ours and you have no right to be there and that really twists my heart.

Almost the last question Em Do you have any regrets about coming to England?

No, No looking back towards Palestine I have no strong feelings about that. I did not even feel sad about leaving Lebanon, because Lebanon really became my home.

24 mins

I was twenty six when I got engaged and soon after I was married and came to live in England, so Lebanon was very much part of my life, but when I came to England I was very happy. I was in love with my husband we started a family and so life even though we didn't have much money, my husband was just starting work after university starting work and because I was a teacher I started teaching in one of the Schools as well. So no I have no regrets in coming to England .

If you could give one message to the European politicians today regarding the refugees coming from the same area.

Yes

That you come from. What would it be?

That's a lovely question, thank you very much for opening your country to refugees, because they are starting a new life whether they will have a chance to go back, for example the Syrian, they would love to go back, but they know that maybe they will never get back. But the fact that a European country, whether it is England ,or part of mainland Europe , the fact that countries have opened their homes, there facilities for them, looked after them, pay for their houses and so on, this is amazing. I would just like to add my thanks to many many other thanks, the way refugees have been allowed the come into these countries. The refugees themselves. I have been helping out with three families in Dunstable for the last seven months and they are so happy here, their children are happy, their medical needs are looked after and now we are having three new families coming to Flitwick not far from Bedford, so hopefully I will be involved with that as well. No it is amazing that people have been given the opportunity to find safe homes for themselves, especially from Syria.

Thank you

You are welcome.

26 minutes 24sec

End of recording