

Khalid Hamid

July 17, 2011

Ocala Islamic Center, Ocala, Florida

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for University of Florida

George A. Smathers Libraries

Edited by Jardee Transcription

Alhadi: My name is Esam Alhadi. Today is Saturday, July 17, 2011, and it is now

2:10 PM. I am here with Mr. Khalid Hamid and we are conducting this interview

in the Ocala Islamic Center, Ocala, Florida. This interview is part of the Arab

Immigrants Oral History Project of the University of Florida Digital Library

Collection. May peace be upon you, Mr. Khalid.

Khalid: And you too.

Alhadi: I want to start by asking you to share with us some personal details such as your name and place of birth.

Khalid: My name is Khalid Hamid and I was born in Selwad, Ram Allah Province, West Bank, Palestine. I am forty-eight years old. I have been living in America since 1995.

Alhadi: Can you please tell us about your history of education?

Khalid: I stopped at the seventh grade. I didn't have the chance to continue with my education higher than that.

Alhadi: Where did you go to school?

Khalid: I went to Selwad School.

Alhadi: Did you come directly from Selwad to America?

Khalid: No, I went to Spain, then to America.

Alhadi: How long did you stay in Spain?

Khalid: I stayed there about three or four years.

Alhadi: Why did you specifically pick Spain?

Khalid: I had two brothers living there.

Alhadi: When exactly [were you] in Spain?

Khalid: It was between 1991 and 1994.

Alhadi: And from there you came directly to America?

Khalid: Yes.

Alhadi: What was your first destination in America? Did you come directly to Florida?

Khalid: I arrived in New Jersey and stayed there for two weeks. Then I moved to Miami to join my brother who was living in Fort Lauderdale. I lived in Miami between 1995 and 1997. In 1997, I moved to Ocala where I found work. My family joined me and I have been living here ever since.

Alhadi: That means you are here with your family and you have a job here as well.

Khalid: Yes.

Alhadi: Why did you choose to come to America from Spain rather than going to another European country?

Khalid: We, as Palestinians, have a problem that is different from what other Arabs may have. It is the problem of colonization. My wife has a Venezuelan citizenship and my children as well. If she joined me in Spain, it would have been difficult for her to go with me to the West Bank because she doesn't have the appropriate documents that will allow her to reside and live there. I came to America because it takes too long to get the Spanish citizenship, in spite of the fact that I have the right of residence there. My father-in-law, who happened to be living in New

Jersey, arranged for us to come here. I came with my family to New Jersey. By coming here, my wife and children became eligible to have citizenship. This will give them the right of traveling between here and our homeland. My children were born in Palestine, but they were refused to be given a national number on the account that their mother doesn't have the Palestinian citizenship in spite of the fact that her father and mother are Palestinians. My children only had a birth certificate but no national number. Such a situation will make it impossible to acquire any ID or any documentation to prove their identity in Palestine. This forced me to come here to get the American citizenship like my children. At the same time, we wanted to enjoy freedom here. You know about the problems we have back home. Life was so hard.

Alhadi: After living in Spain for three years, you moved to live in America. In fact, you lived first in an Arab society, then you experienced living in a European society, and here you are, living in an American society. How do you compare life in these three societies?

Khalid: The difference is huge. You don't find that big a difference between Europe and America, but the big difference appears when you compare these two societies with the one where I was initially living. Life is life, but it becomes different when you have the freedom of speech, freedom of opinion, freedom of movement wherever you want to go and to do the work you want and love to do. The difference appears, for instance, like in the case we have in Palestine when you want to go even for a short errand, you will be stopped by too many check points. You have to show your ID wherever you go and get permission to do whatever

you want to do. This makes life extremely hard there. I haven't been to other Arab countries and I don't know how they go about with their life, but as far as we are concerned, we lack freedom, it is easy to be taken to a prison. If you are not in the real prison, then your limited right to move around makes you [feel] like [you're] in a big prison. For the Europeans, they have freedom and democracy and things of the like that we didn't have back home. When I moved to America, I found life here is harder.

Alhadi: You mean harder than how it was in Spain?

Khalid: Yes, because here you should keep constantly and hastily moving. What makes it harder here is that you always need to work more in order to be able to live comfortably. Europeans and American societies are both civilized, and although we as Arabs also have civilization, the West is more sophisticated through their democracy and personal freedom, which we lack back home.

Alhadi: There is the idea that the Spanish community is still keeping some cultural traditions of an Arab and Islamic origin. Did you notice such a thing there?

Khalid: Yes.

Alhadi: So one can notably feel this Arabic and Islamic influence?

Khalid: Yes.

Alhadi: In what terms?

Khalid: You can feel it in many customs in Spain. Of course Spanish people came from different ethnic backgrounds who spoke different languages. In the south, customs and traditions are similar to the ones the Arabs have. You can feel in that part that they deal with you as a human, not only as an Arab. Their skin color and

body features are similar to ours. You can find many words in the Spanish language that were originally derived from Arabic. The roots of the Spanish architectural traditions were founded by the Arabs. Many names sound very close to Arabic names. Five hundred years after Muslims departed from Spain, it is hard to say that the people there are still maintaining ties with the Arabs and Muslims. However, it is still possible to see some families keeping close ties in Spain, which is not possible to see here.

Alhadi: After arriving in America, you started in New Jersey and then moved to Florida, isn't that the case?

Khalid: I spent only two weeks in New Jersey, then moved to Miami, and remained living there ever since.

Alhadi: Why did you specifically choose Florida?

Khalid: I had a brother in Fort Lauderdale and it is natural for me to join my brother. It is fact that the reason that brings any one of us to America is not for joy and pleasure. The one of us comes here with a financial situation down to the zero. We come here with the hope that a relative or a closely related person will be willing to help us getting started and settled. Thanks to my brother who stood by my side and helped me, and after that I started working.

Alhadi: Do you have children?

Khalid: I came here with two daughters and a son and later on had another son here in America in 1996, and another one in 2010.

Alhadi: Just this past year?

Khalid: Yes.

Alhadi: So that means your family consists of....

Khalid: I have three sons and two daughters.

Alhadi: How old is the oldest?

Khalid: She is twenty-three years old, and the youngest is eighteen months.

Alhadi: May good keep them healthy. Where does your older daughter study?

Khalid: She went to Santa Fe College in Gainesville and will be done in one year.

Alhadi: What is she studying?

Khalid: She began with fine arts and she is still in the field, but she lately developed an interest in early childhood education. Next year will be her fifth year in college.

She is very smart and she is doing very well, thanks be to God.

Alhadi: Is she going to join another university after she finishes at Santa Fe College?

Khalid: No. She will be done and she will start looking for a job.

Alhadi: Does she live in Gainesville?

Khalid: No, she commutes between here and Gainesville. This year, she is taking many classes online. She goes to CFCC for one or two days a week because they offer the same courses she is taking in Gainesville.

Alhadi: Why did she pick fine arts to be her field of study?

Khalid: She has been very passionate about painting since she was a little girl.

Alhadi: I am asking this question, Mr. Khalid, because parents, myself included, like to see our children studying subjects that will help them to secure a better future. Do you have any say in what your children study at school? I am asking this because I don't think it will be an easy decision to make for an Arab father to let his child study fine arts unless he is fully convinced that this is what the child wants to do.

Khalid: This is a very good question. I didn't have the opportunity to continue with my education. For my daughter, I felt that she is gifted in drawing. I would love to see my daughter studying medicine or engineering so she will be able to make more money in the future. But, because she is gifted, I think she will do much better than if she studied something else. I looked at this issue, not from the financial return point of view, but rather from the point of where her interest lies. My second daughter studies math. That is what she wants to do and I have no objection to that. I know for sure that it is impossible for [any] one of us to force our children to study what we want. We should let them do what they want. We were prevented to have democracy in our days. That is why we should give it to our children.

Alhadi: We as Arab and Muslim parents have some fears regarding the relationship of our children with the surrounding environment. How do you see your children's relations and what role do you play in these relations?

Khalid: First, your relations in America or in any other foreign country depend on you. Second, for my daughter with her Islamic traditions and customs, I respect her because I know how she develops her social relations with other people. She puts on Islamic uniform. Some people may see her as somebody who is different. I always tell my daughters I love to see people asking them why they wear Islamic uniform, so they can get the opportunity to explain it. It is up to those people if they became convinced or not. I can say that their social relations are perfect. Sometimes I go to attend a celebration in the university. I noticed that my daughter, Wiam, always participates. People there like and respect her. Being

from oriental countries makes us sometimes feel that we are still backward. This is not true and we are not backward. People know this. We, back home, know about America and the same for the Americans who also know about our countries. Therefore, I shouldn't turn my back on people. I exist, regardless of the dress I wear on my head. If somebody sees me doing my prayers, he has the right to ask me about what I am doing because he may have never seen anyone praying the way I do, or if he sees somebody calls for prayers, he has the right to wonder why that person is shouting. My role is to help explain to him which will eventually help that person to know what you do.

Alhadi: Mr. Khalid, you are now here in the mosque, how do you see the relations between the Arab and Muslim community members here in Ocala?

Khalid: It is very good. I am one of the first Arabs who came and settled here. I have been here for fourteen or fifteen years. Here in the mosque, we are maintaining very excellent relations. We sometimes invite Americans—Christians or Jews—just to observe how we live, what we cook or eat, how we treat each other. All in all, relations between the Arabs here in Ocala are excellent.

Alhadi: This will lead me to ask about the contribution the Arab community offers to the Ocala, Florida, and American society at large.

Khalid: The first thing is that we are citizens here in Ocala. We offer employment opportunities through our work and business. We pay taxes and therefore contribute to the living standard in the area. This Islamic center organizes a gathering every Sunday for the Muslim youth who prepare food and take to feed about forty of the homeless people. We love to integrate with the community

around us and I really believe that our relations with the Americans around us here in Ocala are very good. This is a small city and most people know each other.

Alhadi: Now after all this long life experience in America, what do you think America has given you?

Khalid: It has been fifteen or sixteen years, and certainly America has given me a lot, and in exchange, I also gave to her. It gave me the chance to raise my children here and to educate them. This would have been difficult to achieve back home. I have my absolute freedom. It gave me the American nationality and the freedom to elect. In the same time, we also gave a lot.

Alhadi: What did you personally offer to America?

Khalid: I raised the country's population by one. I work and pay taxes.

Alhadi: The Arab and Muslim community here in America has, for quite some time, been looked at with doubts and suspicions. Do you think such an attitude could be justified?

Khalid: I blame the educational system here. Back home, they teach the children everything about other countries such as their locations, societies and populations. They teach them about the agricultural products, food habits, and everything that makes these countries stand out. Here, I feel that people, for instance, don't draw a distinction between Arabs and Afghans, or between an American, Palestinian, Jordanian, or Saudi Muslims. [The events of] 9/11 instilled an idea in the American people's mind that all Muslims are terrorists. In fact, the truth is exactly the opposite. Terrorists are well known, not ambiguous. Those who did

9/11 exist and are known. It is irrational to judge an entire population or a nation based on what one, two, ten, or twenty people might have done. Here in America, you may hear about someone who kills his own children. Such an incident doesn't give me the right to judge all the American people as killers. You will find in this society some people who trade in illegal drugs while others keep regularly going to church. In every society, you find a group of people who are bad, and others who are good. This also applies to the Arab nation. The problem the American society has is that as long as you are Muslim, then you are no different from Osama Bin Laden. This is wrong. In our religion, we are not instructed to go and kill others. If a person commits a problem, it is his own responsibility. What I hope is that the American people go to libraries and start studying about Islam, Arab people, and Muslim people. In my case, as a seventh-grade dropout, I can now speak and write in English and Spanish. I am sure you won't find this in seventh-graders here. It is important for them to learn more in order to be able to discuss whatever they want to discuss.

Alhadi: Mr. Khalid, how is your relation with the rest of your extended family members in Palestine? Are you in touch with them and do you visit your home country?

Khalid: I am maintaining strong relations with my relatives. We talk once a week, if not daily. I don't visit back home as often as I want. This is due to my own financial situation. Last time I went there with my family in 2006, it cost me about \$8,500 only for the tickets. I can't afford paying that much every year. Sometimes, my brothers come here. However, we keep talking on the phone or through Skype.

Alhadi: Does that mean your children visited Palestine only one time?

Khalid: The first three of them were born there. We went to visit in 2006. My wife went there for a visit in 2008. They liked it there very much.

Alhadi: Let us talk a little bit about the education system. Are you satisfied and convinced that the American education system works best for the Arab and Muslim children?

Khalid: This is an excellent question because I have a problem with this issue. I have two daughters who are college students now. The rest of my children do home schooling. I sent them two years ago to the middle school, but I discovered that the school has many problems. I realized that if they continued in that school, I will either lose them forever or I should find another way through home schooling. My son told me that drugs were found many times on the school premises, and in other cases condoms were found in bathrooms. I didn't like such an environment and therefore decided to let them do home schooling. They have been doing it for two years, and they are doing very well. It is hard for the child to be stuck at home all day. Such a situation certainly doesn't apply to all schools in America. The elementary schools that my children went to were great. However, they were still young at that time. Kids change when they reach middle and high school. My daughters went to high schools here in Ocala and they were very good schools, but it just turned out that the middle schools my kids went to were not good.

Alhadi: If you had the option to keep your children in the American educational system or to send them to an Arab Muslim country to get their education there, which one would you pick and why?

Khalid: I will choose the American system because it is stronger than what we have back home. Although there are Arab countries that are wealthy, they don't invest in education the way they do in other fields. Here when they discover that a child has any kind of gift, they help him to develop it. I don't know if they still, back home, hold a stick in the face of children or not, but I doubt that they help them to develop their gifts. This is at least in Palestine, but I am not sure how it goes in other Arab countries. Education there depends on memorization. In spite of the problems schools face here, the American system is still the best and the American government is capable of making things change.

Alhadi: These are the subjects that we wanted to touch on in this interview. We are very happy to have you with us. Thank you.

Khalid: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]