

Zafir Hamdi Elsabawi

July 17, 2011

Narrator's office in Ocala, Florida

Esam Alhadi, Interviewer and Translator

for University of Florida

George A. Smathers Libraries

Edited by Jardee Transcription

[Editor's note: at the end of the interview, the narrator's surname is spelled Al-Sabawi.]

Alhadi: My name is Esam Alhadi. This interview with Dr. Zafir Elsabawi is being recorded at his office in Ocala. It is now 11:00 AM Saturday July 17, 2011. This interview is part of the Arab Immigrants Oral History Project of the University of Florida Digital Library Collection.

Welcome doctor. I would like to start this interview by asking you to give us some personal details about yourself such as your full name, place of birth, and your educational history.**12:13

Elsabawi: My name is Zafir Hamdi Elsabawi. I am from Gaza in Palestine. I was born in Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. I lived in many places because of the war in that region. I also had my education in a number of places depending where we got settled at the time. For instance, I had my elementary education in Gaza, middle school in Saudi Arabia, high school and college of medicine in Cairo, Egypt. I had my medical specialty from England and finally I ended here in the USA.

Alhadi: Were you moving with your family?

Elsabawi: Yes. I was with my family all the time. After I grew up and got married, I moved out.

Alhadi: Where does your extended family live now?

Elsabawi: My father died. May God rest his soul in peace. My mother lives here in Melbourne, Florida, where my father used to live after he retired from his job. My own family lives here in Ocala.

Alhadi: Were the decisions of moving between Gaza, Jeddah, Cairo, London, and America yours or were they taken by your family?

Elsabawi: These were family decisions. They were motivated by their search for getting settled, education, and search for jobs and better income.

Alhadi: You mentioned that you had your elementary education in Gaza and also that your family is Sabawi. Does this mean that you were originally from Beersheba?

Elsabawi: Yes. Beersheba is very close. I had one of my uncles living there. They had land there.

Alhadi: How is your relation with your extended family in Gaza and Palestine in general?

Elsabawi: It is close to none. My mother, brother, and the still-living uncles are in touch with the remaining family members in Gaza. For me, I was hoping to go back and remain in touch with them, but after the events of 9/11, I decided to stay away even from making phone calls or anything that will drag doubts or suspicions on me.

Alhadi: This means that even traveling to Gaza became hard for you.

Elsabawi: Yes. This used to be one of my wishes to go back and see people there.

Alhadi: Does this mean you have never been back since you moved out of Gaza?

Elsabawi: I have never been back except for one time when I was still young. I went there for a short period to attend my sister's wedding and returned back.

Alhadi: Where were you at that time?

Elsabawi: In Egypt.

Alhadi: Was it when you were a college student?

Elsabawi: No, I was still a high school student.

Alhadi: That means you had your high school education in Cairo also.

Elsabawi: Yes.

Alhadi: Where in Cairo?

Elsabawi: My school was in an area called Misr Eljadeeda.

Alhadi: Did you go to Cairo University?

Elsabawi: It was Ain Shams.

Alhadi: Can you tell us about your decision of joining the school of medicine? Was it your decision or was it your family's decision?

Elsabawi: It was my family's decision. In Palestine, wars and the consequent hard life circumstances caused a heavy pressure on people there. This motivated them to care very much about their children's education to secure a good living and employment for themselves. I was one of those who were falling under heavy pressure that we should continue with our education, go to university, and obtain a certificate. Most people preferred school of medicine or engineering to secure a better future.

Alhadi: After graduating from Ain Shams, did you work in Egypt?

Elsabawi: I did one year of training. After that I joined two brothers of mine who are older than me and have previously moved from Saudi Arabia to England. My father used to work for many companies in England and that allowed my brothers to go there. I went there to visit them, and while I was there, I got to know a woman who later became my first wife who is now deceased, may God grant her soul peace and mercy. I went back to Egypt, but because of my status as a carrier of Palestinian refugee document, the British

authorities did not allow me to go back to England to see my wife. I still remember the words of the consul when she refused to give me a visa. Her words were literally, “You are a homeless, stateless person and for that reason you can’t go.” It was a very difficult for me. I left her office and sat outside on the street curb. I cried and prayed to Allah to ease things for me, and this is what has happened later on.

Alhadi: How did it become possible for you to get back to Britain and continue your education there?

Elsabawi: I managed to do that through the status of being married to a British woman. Things went smooth and finally I managed to get the visa. I went to Britain and stayed there for three years and finally I obtained a British passport.

Alhadi: Was that in London?

Elsabawi: I lived in a city north of London called Leighton Buzzard in Bedfordshire.

Alhadi: You remained there for three years?

Elsabawi: Yes, until I got my British passport which later has become a European passport. I lived there and also had my medical training in a very good hospital called Stockman. I worked with an excellent British specialist who taught me many things in medicine. It was hard to get my medical license that would have permitted me to practice medicine and secure stable income. During this period, my father moved to America as an investor. He obtained his residency here which helped us to get our green card. I left England after being there for seven years.

Alhadi: You remained in England for seven years?

Elsabawi: Not for the entire period. After I obtained my British passport, a Saudi student made some contacts with a Saudi hospital and that resulted in a job for me. When I was in

England, I obtained a diploma in thoracic diseases from the Wales University College of Medicine. I, my wife, and three children moved to Mecca. Later we had a fourth child who was born in Mecca and we named him Abdalla. The obstetrician was Sudanese. I worked for three years in Mecca, and after that I had to decide if I had to stay in Saudi Arabia or to move to England or another European country.

Alhadi: What about the decision of coming to America?

Elsabawi: It was part of my search to find a job in my field. I failed three times to pass the test that will qualify me to practice medicine in Britain. I tried a fourth time after I came back from Saudi Arabia, but unfortunately I failed again. At that time, my father started the green card procedures and I was called for an interview at the American embassy in London. They told me that my application will be cancelled if I don't show up for this interview. That forced me to move to here.

Alhadi: Did you come directly to Florida?

Elsabawi: Yes. My father started his investment business in Maine. Then he and a partner of his decided to move to Florida. He got settled in Melbourne where I joined him.

Alhadi: What happened after joining him in Melbourne?

Elsabawi: I tried to do the practice test to get my license. I joined an institute in Orlando to help me prepare for this test. I passed the clinical part. During that time, my father started to feel a bit uncomfortable with the presence of my children at his house and my wife felt the same. I had to choose between Gainesville or Miami to do the remaining part of the test. I came to Gainesville where I obtained a job in the hospital. This kind of job didn't require a certification. I rented an apartment there where my wife and children came and joined me.

Alhadi: I am interested to know about your current field of specialty in medicine which appears to be a rare field. Can you tell us about it and what is the term for it?

Elsabawi: There are many terms used for this field. One of them is the substitute or complementary medicine which is more accurate. I didn't go into this field because I was interested in it. It is because I was seriously in need of a profession after failing to pass the remaining part of the qualifying test. I started doing research at the Shands Hospital under the supervision of another researcher. I kept trying to finish the remaining part of the test, and during that time my first wife died. The situation became very hard with four children and a fifth one who was ten days old at the time. My concern focused on providing a living for these children. I later got to know my current wife who accepted to marry me and take care of the five children. She was working for the VA hospital.

Alhadi: Why do you think your patients select this kind of medicine and treatment?

Elsabawi: Their unsuccessful treatment attempts through clinical medicine lead them to loose trust in it. They either find their doctor to be always in rush, or never find the result they were expecting, or never feel improved, or suffer some side effects after being subjected to multiple surgeries and operations. This has led to a state of mistrust. The fast growing number of stores of organic food and herbs here in America is another proof that people are looking for alternatives. When I failed to pass the test, I followed an advice given by an Egyptian doctor to join an acupuncture school in Gainesville. I joined the school, got my training, and then moved here to Ocala to start my business.

Alhadi: How long did it take you to finish the study course?

Elsabawi: Four years, because I was doing it part time. They have different schedules.

Alhadi: Is it a private school?

Elsabawi: It is a private school. Unfortunately, there are no public schools that offer this kind of study. Maybe in the future.

Alhadi: Do you think that patients are now more willing to use alternative medicine?

Elsabawi: This is happening in a very notable way. In my case, thanks be to God that my background in clinical medicine is helping me greatly. This makes people feel more confident in my treatment. In many cases, I will tell my patients of something that their doctors might have missed. I will tell them very politely that they should go and consult with their doctors on this issue. This makes my work complementary to the clinical doctor's work, not competitive.

Alhadi: Does it ever happen that you may refer a patient to a clinical doctor?

Elsabawi: This happens a lot.

Alhadi: Does the entire treatment take place here in the clinic?

Elsabawi: Yes. But sometimes I may respond to what we call a "house call." In this case, I will take some equipment with me, but it is preferred that the treatment takes place here in the clinic. This kind of oriental Chinese medicine requires preparing some herbs after heating them with oils and also air-pressure cups. Therefore it is better if the patient comes here. It is hard to go to a patient who is being treated in a hospital for liability issues.

Alhadi: Let us move on to discuss other issues in the time that is left for us with you today. I would like to know about your relation with the Arabs who are residing here in Florida. Do you think that the relationship between the Arabic and Muslim community members is built on cooperation and caring?

Elsabawi: Yes. It is generally built on mutual respect and caring. However, most people are very busy from one another. We are a new generation here and we are busy with work and providing our children's needs such cars, a good living place, education and others. This is keeping everybody busy. It is also making their visits to each other less than what it would have been if they are living in their Arabic countries. It is also making them less connected, in addition to the competitiveness and jealousy. Also the 9/11 events created a state of mistrust to the degree that you don't trust if the person you are speaking to may be a true loving friend, or an agent or associate with any other organization.

Alhadi: I would like to ask about education. From your educational experience in Arabic countries, between Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, and later here in America, how would you compare the educational system in the Arab countries with the one here in America? Which one prevails over the other?

Elsabawi: It is very hard.

Alhadi: Your kids also go school here. This may put you in a better position to make this comparison.

Elsabawi: Although I feel that they were more serious and keen about education in the Arab countries, but their unprepared infrastructure such as poor labs, lack of computers and their backward technology made their system at a lower level compared with the one here. You can find some fields where the Arab education system is strong while the American system prevails in others. This makes it hard to make a judgment as to which one is better. However, name recognition and reputation is also playing a strong role in favor of the American system. It makes a difference for a doctor to say he is a graduate

of Cairo compared to another one who says he is a graduate of Harvard. Reputation of educational institutes makes a big difference.

Alhadi: Did all your children go to school here?

Elsabawi: Yes. Some of them have already graduated. The elder one is now working in Dubai.

It is true that the one of us tries to fulfill his commitment to religion and customs. You noticed that when you and Richard came in, I offered you tea. This is part of my tradition and nature. We always try to keep a feeling of belonging and love to his religion and his Holy Book.

Alhadi: Is this the reason that made your son leave America and go to Dubai?

Elsabawi: It was rather the difficult employment situation here in America. After he graduated, he had to pay back his debt to the university.

Alhadi: What did he study?

Elsabawi: He studied business in the University of Florida. After graduation, he worked for a bookstore in the university. It was very competitive and his earnings were so little. It would have not been possible for him to pay his loan back even if he continued to work for ten years. He went to Dubai, and in one year he was able to pay his loan. Another benefit is that he may get married there. If this happens, then his kids will be Arabic speakers, which means that the circle of life is making another round.

Alhadi: Doctor; apparently you live between the West and East.

Elsabawi: This is exactly true.

Alhadi: My question is What did the West—either America or Europe—give you, and what did you give to them?

Elsabawi: The West gave me a lot. It gave me settlement and a nationality, especially for a Palestinian like me who never had a nationality certificate. You remember what I told you earlier, what the British consul had said to me. Now I have both the American and the European nationalities. God has answered my prayers when I was sitting on the curb, and opened all the countries of the world for me.

Alhadi: Thanks be to God.

Elsabawi: It gave me feeling of settling down and personal security which I lacked when I was in the Arab countries. The political and economic situations and the living conditions were very unstable there. Here things are stable. This is my feeling here which made me think about other things such as promoting my knowledge of academics. These are the gains that the West has given to us. From my side, I have given back things to the West that are equal to what I have received, if not better. Here they lack some of the traditions that the Arabs have, such as giving to people without being paid for, or giving medical advice and consultation for no compensation. We showed them that after the events of 9/11 that we as Muslims do not accept these acts or those terrorists to be representative of our society. We offered them a service with full sincerity that does not totally depend on financial returns. Another very important thing that we have given to the West is that in my case as a Muslim, I can't build up my education, up-bringing and moral values or whatever material fortune I may have on an unrealistic and falsified foundation or by relying on the corruption of others. I can't, for example, see 100 of my patients a day and cheat them just for the purpose of completing my unfinished house. Such good acts will be notable and sensible to them.

Alhadi: A final question that you may refrain from answering it because it is a little bit personal.

This question is tied to your personal life and social experience. You got married to two ladies, a British and an American. From your experience, what do you think about the Arab Muslim western intermarriage? Again, you may choose not to answer if you want.

Elsabawi: Thanks to God, it was a good experience in my case. In some other cases such an experience may fail. This is because it requires a person who is patient, loyal and willing to put more effort in it, in order to succeed. He shouldn't enter into such a relation with agony and an unnecessary extra dose of self-esteem. It is hard and the possibility of failing is always there. However, if the person is prepared it will be of great benefit to him. In my case as a Muslim, I obey Islam which calls for marrying from people of different traditions as Prophet Mohamed, peace be upon him, says. It is always better when a marriage takes place between people who are not related. The difficulty comes when you think about it from the point of being married to a woman who does not speak Arabic and also when you think about the need of striking a balance between her, your extended family, and your customs and traditions. In the case of my first British wife, at the beginning it was not a big issue for her to publicly hug and kiss a man that she might have known before. It took time to understand and transform into my traditions. For me, I was also motivated by my desire to get the nationality, and for that reason I had to be patient.

Alhadi: Do you object to the idea that any of your children gets married here in the West?

Elsabawi: Not at all. My biggest concern is that the wife has to be a religious woman. Not necessarily a Muslim. I will be fine even with a religious Christian with moral values.

Alhadi: Thank you very much, Doctor, for this interview. We are very pleased to be here with you. I want you to just state your name in full so as to have it documented on tape.

Elsabawi: I will say it in the traditional Arabic way. My name is Zafir Bin Hamdi Bin Khaleel Al-Sabawi.

Alhadi: Thank you.

Elsabawi: Thank you. I wish you luck.

[END OF INTERVIEW]