

**Adel Yazji**

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for University of Florida

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Alhadi: Hello and thank you for being here.

Adel Yazji: Hello.

Alhadi: We are happy to have you with us today.

Adel Yazji: I am happy to be here.

Alhadi: We are here in Jacksonville, at the house of Mr. Wajeeh Demetree. It is now 3:10 PM and today is Saturday, December 3, 2011. I would like to ask you to start by stating your full name and also to tell us about the early stage of your life before coming to America.

Adel Yazji: My name is Adel Balace Elyaziji. I am originally from Syria. I lived most of my life in Syria. I wasn't young when I came here. My sister got married to one of my relatives who was living here in the States and moved with him here. She is the one who started the immigration application for me. It took about eleven years for the application to be approved, and then I came to America. I was brought up in Syria in the Alnabak area. It was a small city. The population of that town when I was still four or five years old was about 10,000-12,000 individuals. It had all levels of schools including elementary, middle, and high school. I went to elementary and middle school there. I did part of the middle school in a sisters' school and the other part in a public school. I obtained the baccalaureate certificate from a technical school in Damascus, the capital of Syria. At that time, there was only one technical school in the city of Aleppo in addition to the one I joined in Damascus. My school was called The Primary Technical School. I

learned that they lately opened many technical schools in Damascus. I don't know about these, but I know my Primary Technical School in Damascus, and that is where I obtained my baccalaureate certificate and graduated from.

Alhadi: When did you graduate?

Adel Yazji: In 1961. After that, I had a military training for nine months, and in 1962 I obtained a job with Damascus Electric Company. I stayed working with them until I came here late 1988.

Alhadi: Does that mean you have been living in Damascus all this period?

Adel Yazji: Yes. I have been working for the electric company the entire period except for two years of military service. I spent three months of my military service in Aleppo and the rest was in Alnabak.

Alhadi: Were you still in the army when the October war broke out?

Adel Yazji: The October war broke out only two months after I finished my military service.

Alhadi: That means you didn't take part in the war?

Adel Yazji: No. I had already finished my military service then. I continued to live in Damascus and I started a family there. I have three daughters and one son. Thanks to God they are doing fine and they are all married. My living conditions weren't bad at all.

Alhadi: How long have you been living in Jacksonville?

Adel Yazji: Since 1989.

Alhadi: What do you think you have missed most after leaving Syria and starting your new life here in the States?

Adel Yazji: Everyone who is away from his country will have a feeling of longing for his homeland. There I had my life-long companions, co-workers and school-mates. Those

will always maintain a special place in my heart and I have been missing them and feel it. It is rare for one of them to come here. As far as relatives and family members are concerned, most of them are here. My mother is here and all my brothers and sisters are here. I still have aunts back in Syria, but the majority of my family members are here in Jacksonville.

Alhadi: That means Jacksonville is almost like a Damascus neighborhood for you. Whenever you feel like chatting with somebody, you will find a person nearby.

Adel Yazji: True. Before coming here, I was an electrical technician in Syria. When I tried to find a job in my field of expertise here, I was shocked to know that it was impossible without being licensed. I told them of my experience in this field and the training that I had for six months in France, another three months in France in addition to other training courses in Germany, Austria, and Finland. All this was not enough to secure me a job here. They suggested that I should join a school and get a license from here. This was impossible for a person at my age and I had to find something else. Most of the Arabs here own or work in stores. This is true for 90% of them. Although I never had the experience of working in a store, my brothers taught me and gave me a cashier position in one of their stores. I began this type of work with an experience and punishment that I will never forget.

Alhadi: What happened?

Adel Yazji: I never, in my entire life, heard of something called “underage.” I sold a can of beer and a pack of cigarettes to a customer without asking for an ID. Ten minutes later, he and the police came to the store. The police officer asked me if I was the one who sold the can of beer and cigarettes to the customer with him. I told him it was me. After

further investigation and taking my Social Security number and identification, he told me I will have to show up in the court. I wasn't sure until that moment of what wrong I may have done. Later, my brothers explained to me the "underage" rule. I felt terribly annoyed. I went to court and I found that I was one of another fifty to sixty individuals who were there for a similar misdemeanor. I was fined \$150 for selling the beer and another \$50 for selling the cigarettes. This happened one more time when I sold a can of beer to another guy who I had no doubt was [over] thirty to thirty-five years old. He was way bigger and taller than me. It never crossed my mind that he will be less than twenty-one. Fifteen minutes later, the police came and I went through the same investigation again. Although I tried to ask him in front of the police to show me his ID to see if he was really underage, the police told me I would be able to check it in court. I was questioned about these misdemeanors when I started my citizenship procedures. Thanks to God, they didn't delay my citizenship procedures and everything went fine. I never had any other misdemeanor since 1989.

Alhadi: Such misdemeanors are very normal for those who come from that part of the world because they may have never heard of or had any experience with the "underage" rule.

Adel Yazji: I swear to God that I never heard of it. I blamed my brothers that they didn't alert me to this rule. I continued working with my brothers for quite some time given that I didn't have the money to own my own store. Before coming from Syria, I received my employment compensation payment. I left half of my payment for my family in Syria and brought the other half with me. It wasn't enough to start a business. My brother Adnan helped me to start a pizza restaurant with my younger brother. The misfortune continued. We opened the restaurant in a huge residential area that has no less than 1,000

apartments. Soon after we opened the restaurant, the 1991 Iraq war broke out. It turned out that most of those who were residing in the surrounding apartments were military personnel and they all got deployed to Kuwait. The rest of their family members went to live with their families. The area became completely vacant. This reminds me of the proverb that says, "He who is doomed will, regardless, remain doomed." Three months later our store was out of business. It was a very unfortunate financial loss for my brother Adnan. I went back to do the cashier work again for a long period of time. I also went back to Syria and spent some time there. I was also sick for quite some time. Thanks to God and thanks to this country for offering me the treatment I needed. With all due respect and love of my home country, I may not have had received the same treatment and care if I were still back there. Thanks to God, I recovered and became well again.

Alhadi: May God grant you more health and wellness.

Adel Yazji: Thank you. When I went back to Syria, I sold a store that I had there and used the money to buy a small store here.

Alhadi: What kind of store?

Adel Yazji: It was a small gas station with only two pumps. I brought my family from Syria to live with me here. Business started doing well and, thanks be to God, my life was back on the right track.

Alhadi: Are you still doing the same gas station work?

Adel Yazji: I continued doing this work for a while until I was notified that some drug sellers were using the vicinity of my gas station to distribute their drugs. This drove me crazy because my store dealt with the customers from the outside. Nobody, except those who worked for me, was permitted to get in. I told the law enforcement authorities that I am

not responsible for what happens outside my gas station. I was repeatedly threatened not to notify the police. One day the police caught three of them selling drugs and that same evening they were back doing business as usual. I asked a brother of mine to call from his phone to report the situation to the police and he also got threatened. I don't know how those drug sellers managed to know our phone numbers. I tried many things with the law enforcement authorities, but all these efforts turned fruitless. Eventually they had to close my store. I told them that I spent all my life savings on this store and that such a decision will have very devastating consequences on me and my family. They couldn't care less and the store was eventually closed.

Alhadi: When did this happen?

Adel Yazji: I am not sure if it was in 2003 or 2004.

Alhadi: What did you do after that?

Adel Yazji: Three or four months later, I found another gas station. However, the area turned out to be even worse than the first one. The employees were also terrible. I got rid of it. At that time, I was approaching the age of sixty-six. I decided that getting a retirement check every month should be enough for me. This is how I have been living since that time. Again, I am very grateful for this country. I had my early start in Syria, but this country took care of my health. I pray for it. I feel that I wouldn't have found what this country has offered me if I were living in another country.

Alhadi: Mr. Adel, you talked earlier about some training courses that you have attended in France, Germany, and Finland when you were still working for the Damascus Electric Company. I want you to tell us more about the nature of these courses and for how long did you stay in Europe?

Adel Yazji: I was one of five new technicians who joined the electric company that same year.

One of us soon left and the other four continued working. Soon after we got employed, the company sent us on a two-month French language course. After that, they sent us to France to have training with a French electric company that had a contract to provide the Damascus Electric Company with two power stations. The training was basically on operation, installation, and power connection. We learned a lot when we were there. We stayed there for five or six months and then returned to Syria. I became a co-supervisor in one of the power stations there with the French team. The French and other Arab employees were doing the technical work and I was supervising them. There was another co-worker who was also a supervisor in another station. This fellow is now in Texas.

Alhadi: Are you in touch with this fellow and did he find work in Texas?

Adel Yazji: He went into the air conditioning business. He and a partner of his are contracting for an American company in Texas.

Alhadi: This means he is doing well.

Adel Yazji: He is doing well, although when he came here he had no family members who came ahead of him like in my case.

Alhadi: Let us continue talking about the training courses in Europe. Would you please tell us about your trip to Finland?

Adel Yazji: I went to Germany to receive some transformers and generators. We spent fifteen days traveling in Germany and Austria.

Alhadi: Which German cities were you based in and which Germany? At that time there was a Western and Eastern Germany?

Adel Yazji: We were in Frankfurt in Western Germany. From there we went to Austria to visit a company there. The chief technical manager in that company was Egyptian. It was a worldwide-known company.

Alhadi: This sounds like a good experience of traveling in Europe. Have you ever been to an Arab country other than your homeland country?

Adel Yazji: Only to Lebanon, because it is very close to my country. I planned to go to work in the Gulf countries such as Kuwait and Qatar. They were looking for technical workers. However, their offers were not appealing for me compared to what I used to get in Syria. I would have gone if their offer was two or three times the one I was getting in Syria. I declined their offer and continued to live in my country and among my family and relatives.

Alhadi: How are your connections with Syria now? Do you still go to visit?

Adel Yazji: I still go to visit.

Alhadi: When was the last time for you there?

Adel Yazji: I just came back three or four months ago.

Alhadi: That means you were in Syria when the current events were unfolding.

Adel Yazji: I arrived in Syria when these events were just starting. Nothing was going on in Damascus.

Alhadi: I believe most of these events were taking place in the city of Homs.

Adel Yazji: True. We are originally from Homs. My village is called Zaidal which is located five kilometers away from Homs. We no longer have family members there except for a nephew. His father, who is my brother, died, and his son continued to live there. This nephew has a brother living here in Jacksonville. His sisters are all married and live here

in Jacksonville. I went to visit him in Homs. I was told that shooting and firing have become very common every evening. When it was 5:30 that evening, the shooting began and the streets were completely empty. The next day, I collected my luggage and went back to Damascus.

Alhadi: May God keep the country and people safe.

Adel Yazji: Amen. May God answer your prayers.

Alhadi: There are surely many events going on in Syria and other countries. We just pray for Allah to keep people and countries safe.

Adel Yazji: True. What we see on TV is utterly unacceptable. It seems that the ruler is not willing to relinquish power and the demonstrators are not willing to give up their demands.

Alhadi: Let us move to America. How do you see the American lifestyle and culture compared to the one you were accustomed to in Syria?

Adel Yazji: My answer about the American lifestyle may not make you happy. I wasn't young when I came here. I experienced life for forty-six years before coming here. I swear to God that I had never seen drugs in my life until I came here. Of course I heard people talking about drugs and hashish, but I never saw or knew anyone who was selling them in Syria. When I came here, I realized how terrible the situation is regarding the selling and distribution of drugs. If it keeps going like the way it is now, then it takes no less than God to save the future of this country. I worked with a cousin of mine in his store and I saw men and women who were on drugs. I talked to a lady and tried to give her advice. She rejected my advice and described me as a stupid and no different from an animal. I said to myself let her go to hell. This is the same among blacks and whites. They are all

having the same problem. If it keeps going the way it is now, then this country's future will be very dim. Even those who get caught don't get punished more than paying a light fine. They stay for a few hours behind bars and soon they get out and go back to the drug business as usual. You may not be aware of this situation, but I have seen cases like these when I was working. I would have not believed it until I saw it in their hands. It is the same for all of them, regardless of skin color.

Alhadi: Thank you very much Mr. Adel. We feel happy being with you and getting to know you.

Adel Yazji: Thank you. It was an honor for me as well.

Alhadi: I pray to Allah to grant you with health and strength and to keep you sound for your family and children.

Adel Yazji: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]