

**Ahmed Fakhouri**

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for University of Florida

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Alhadi: My name is Esam Alhadi. This interview with Dr. Ahmed Fakhouri is being recorded at his house in Ocala. It is now 11:40 AM Saturday July 17, 2011. This interview is part of the Arab Immigrants Oral History Project of the University of Florida Digital Library Collection.

Fakhouri: I was born in a small village in Tulkarm District called Irtah.

Alhadi: Would you please let us know your name in full.

Fakhouri: My name is Abdel Fatah Ahmed Fakhouri. I was born on April 27, 1921. I am now over ninety years old. I started going to school in my village. My first education focused on studying Quran and other basic topics. I then joined an elementary school in a nearby city called Tulkarm, followed by a secondary school. Then I joined a college in Jerusalem called The Arabic College. It was a well-known college because the students who used to join it came from all over Palestine. Palestine at that time was under British mandate. Selection of students for that college used to be determined by accepting the top two students from all secondary schools all over the country. The college was fully run by British administrators and it was following the British system. It used to offer a matriculation certificate. This certificate was higher than the same degree obtained from London. The reason was that students in London used to study six or seven subjects, while in our college it was nine or ten subjects. This is because

subjects such as Arabic and other related topics were also offered. Selection of candidates used to start when students were still in their second year of secondary school. After joining the college, students study for two years before obtaining their matriculation certificate. In addition to the matriculation certificate, the college also offered a sub-matriculation certificate for those who failed in one or two subjects. Those who obtained the sub-matriculation certificate had the opportunity to re-take the exam again. The matriculation certificate was given to all residents of Palestine including Arabs and Jews. The administration was fully British. The chief education administrator in the entire country at that time was a British man named Mr. Ferrell. The Arabic College was located only 200 meters away from the High Commissioner's Office. It was an excellent and well-known location. The college also had the best and top teachers in the country who really knew and understood their subjects very well. We learned a lot and benefited greatly from them. The matriculation certificate qualified students to continue their university study starting with the second year.

I finished my study in 1942. At that time, they opened an intermediate community college in the same college in Jerusalem. Students were too scared to join this intermediate section which, at the time, was a big thing. I studied for one year, then I received an invitation from the Egyptian University in Cairo. It used to be called Fuad University. The invitation was that we will be accepted and have a scholarship from that university in Egypt to study engineering on the condition that we should have already studied and have credit in the prerequisite subjects such as high mathematics, applied mathematics and many other topics. I

and another fellow with the name of Ahmed Hassan who is now a doctor in Toronto, Canada, felt that we met the requirements. We decided to meet with Dr. Ahmed Samih Al-Khaldi, the college principal. His son, Walid Al-Khaldi, is now a well-known name in politics. Mr. Khaldi encouraged us to apply, and because we didn't know what engineering was about, he said he would send us to meet with the country's chief engineer in Jerusalem. We went to meet this chief engineer, who appeared to be a very important person with a secretary and a state office. When he noticed that we were a little bit reluctant, he told us his own story. He told us that his father was a poor mine worker in Australia. He also told us that he used to go to school in the evening until he finished his studies and obtained his engineering degree.

Alhadi: Was he British?

Fakhouri: Yes, he was British, and all other officials were British because Palestine was under British mandate. He also told us that he will be retiring in two years and that we will be the engineers who will take over after his departure. We got very excited. He looked through our paperwork and found that our grades were excellent. The fellow who was with me ranked number 5 among all the students all over the country, and I ranked number 2. We felt very happy upon leaving his office, but also a bit conceited because of what we heard about the future that was ahead of us. We began to develop an idea about engineers that is different from the one that we had about engineers who, to us, were no more than drivers of locomotives. Some of the students didn't like the new idea of engineering. They

felt irritated and began to change their interest to other fields such as law and medicine.

Alhadi: How many students were there in the college?

Fakhouri: It was a small college of about 300 students. The movement we started was quickly spread and the students started to think about careers in fields other than teaching. This was against the college mission and objective of graduating candidates who were to serve in the teaching field in the country. Dr. Al-khaldi felt like crazy to see this movement growing and that his college that he initiated and that he was always proud of was losing students. He asked the two of us to come and see him. He asked us very furiously about the person who suggested that we should go to Egypt. We gave no answer. He simply said “No Egypt for you!” You are here on a scholarship from the British government and you have to serve as teachers for ten years in Palestine. We felt very disappointed, left his office, not knowing what we will do, but still determined to become engineers.

Alhadi: You were still determined.

Fakhouri: Yes, we were still determined and decided to work on this with secrecy. We knew that we didn't have copies of the certificates that we needed to send to Egypt. We pretended like we wanted to know what grades we had. We picked a time when Mr. Ahmed Samih, the college principal, happened to be spending three days on a farm of his, and went to his British secretary named Emil.

Alhadi: Pardon me for interrupting, Doctor, but why were you so determined?

Fakhouri: It is a feeling that we have to be engineers.

Alhadi: Did your family play a role in this?

Fakhouri: No. They even didn't know what engineering was. My father was illiterate and he just left these things in our own hands and allowed us to do whatever we wanted to do.

Alhadi: Do you mean that nobody in your family went to school?

Fakhouri: No, except for a very basic level of education. In the village I came from, I encountered many troubles to forge my way to continue with my studies, because people there wanted no more from us than being able to read the Quran and be able to read and write a letter. It was a big deal when they knew that I wanted to go to college. Now, there are nine Ph.D. holders from the same village I came from. Going back to the story of the college, we went to meet with the secretary, Emil, and told him that we wanted to see what grades we have like everybody else. He agreed that we should know what grades we have and gave us college-issued certificates, but asked us to bring them back by 5:00 PM. We took a cab and went to Jerusalem.

Alhadi: That is you and your friend?

Fakhouri: Yes, it was me and this fellow who is now in Toronto.

Alhadi: Sorry to ask one more time, but what is his name?

Fakhouri: Dr. Ahmed Hassan, and he was a minister in Syria. We went to a photography shop and took a photograph of the certificates. At that time we had all the documents we wanted, including copies of the college certificates, birth certificates and photographs. We sent them to Egypt, and kept waiting to receive a reply. The reply arrived one week later from the university informing us that our

applications had been received and they were being examined. This was great news to us.

Alhadi: Did you correspond with them in English or in Arabic?

Fakhouri: It was Arabic. It is a long story, and I can continue if I may.

Alhadi: Sure. Go ahead.

Fakhouri: The end of the academic year was approaching and we didn't know what to do. We didn't know if we had to leave, and we were one year away from finishing the intermediate level, which was a big thing those days. We knew that leaving meant losing our chance there. We simply didn't know what to do. Finally we made our decision to leave the college. We both went back home. My friend is from Haifa and I was from Tulkarm. We agreed that each of us would daily send a telegram to the university to check on our application. Thirty days later, and we were still sending these daily telegrams, but we heard no answer at all. We got worried and didn't know what to do. We then decided to go and see the ambassador, hoping that he will be able to help us.

Alhadi: Are you taking about the Egyptian Ambassador in Jerusalem?

Fakhouri: Yes. We went there, but the guard arrogantly told us that the ambassador is on vacation. We told him it is important to see him. He asked us to wait for a few minutes and went inside. He came back and told us that the ambassador's assistant wanted to see us. We entered and met him. He, a half-deaf person, was very nice to us. He asked us if we wanted to go to Egypt, and we replied positively. He asked us if we wanted to study engineering, and we told him yes. He told us that his son was going to graduate as an engineer in two months. He

said he wanted to make sure we were going there to join the college of engineering, not only to follow up on our applications. We told him that is exactly what we are going to do. He wanted to see our letter of admission and we showed him the documents we had. He denied that our documents were showing any final decision of admission. He told us that these were rather acknowledgements of receiving our applications. We cried, and explained to him that we had been sending one cable after another, day and night, but no answer ever reached us, and we just didn't know what to do. He felt sorry for us. He said he will give us seventy-two hours to get ready to go to Egypt in order to check on our applications and find out if were accepted or not. In case no admission was granted, we had to come back. We agreed, and signed to that effect. We both went back home. My father got very happy when he got the news. It happened that he was saving ten dinars that belonged to a neighboring woman who was using my father as a bank. He decided to give me the ten pounds to use on my trip to Egypt, but couldn't find them. They were lost. We didn't know what to do because with no money, it wouldn't be possible to make the trip to Egypt. He asked the Muathin "the man who calls for prayers from the top of the mosque" to announce that he lost this amount of money and anyone who finds it should bring them back. Ten minutes later, a woman came rushing to my father with ten dinars in her hand and gave them to my father. She said she found them on the street lying beside a rock. I went to the station to catch the train to Egypt.

Alhadi: What year was that?

Fakhouri: That was in 1943.

Alhadi: Was this the beginning of your trip to Cairo?

Fakhouri: Yes. May I continue?

Alhadi: Yes.

Fakhouri: The distance between my village and the train station was three miles. It comes from Haifa and it passes through our village and then to Cairo.

Alhadi: Does that mean the trip was all the way from Haifa to Cairo by train?

Fakhouri: Yes. The final station in Cairo used to be called "Bab Al-Hadeed."

Alhadi: Did the train use to go through Al-Areesh?

Fakhouri: That is true, and from there to Al-Qantara, then to Cairo.

Alhadi: How long was the trip?

Fakhouri: It took two days. My father and mother went to see me off at the train station.

My mother started to cry and my father tried to calm her down by reminding her that I was on my way to join a university which was a big thing in their simple mind. The train arrived, and my friend Ahmed Hassan was there. I took the train and from there went to Al-Areesh. On the way, we were talking about the good old, and sometimes difficult, days we had, how impossible it seemed for us, and later how lucky we were to get what we got. Somebody arranged with a friend of his to meet us at the Bab Al-Haded station in Cairo. His name was Sheikh Abdel Raouf who was a student in Al-Azhar at the time. On our way to Cairo, we crossed many vast and sandy deserts. When we got there we were all covered by sand, which made us look like fools. We arrived at Bab Al-Hadeed where a famous Statute of Ramses stood. It was shocking for us. The gentleman who was waiting for us received us and took us in a cab to the college of engineering to

check on our applications. There was a guard at the college main door who reminded us of the guard that we met at the embassy in Jerusalem. He stopped us and asked us what we needed. We told him that we wanted to talk to the secretary. He kept us outside until a permission of entrance was granted. When we went into the office, we heard people laughing very loud. We met a short man with a tall hat on his head to help him appear tall. His name was Mr. Anwar and he was the office secretary. This man never stopped looking at us and never stopped laughing. We were not used to such an act, which appeared to us a little bit bizarre. He asked me about my name, and I replied, and he did the same with my friend. He asked us if we were the people who used to send the daily cable checking on the applications. He also told us that he got so used to receiving these cables to the degree that when no cable arrived he would feel something was missing. We told him that we are here for the same reason, which is to check on our applications. He gave us the good news that we had been accepted since the first week we submitted our applications. He gave us our files and asked us to go to the building where the applied college is. This was the college where the students used to spend their first year of study because it had the labs. We went there and met with Dr. Ali Elwaleed who was responsible for the department where we were accepted. When we entered we found that he was a bit busy, but when he noticed our presence, he felt a bit scared of our appearance.

Alhadi: Is it because you were coming directly from the train station?

Fakhouri: True. He asked us what we wanted. We asked him about our applications.

He first gave us money and asked to go and buy sandwiches. We told him that we

were not concerned with sandwiches, but rather with our applications. He insisted that we go and get the sandwiches first, and told us that it is inappropriate to return a money gift back that has the picture of King Farouq. We accepted his offer, went and bought falafel sandwiches, and returned.

We took our files and went to meet his assistant who happened to be, contrary to his boss, a very tough and impolite man with name of Dr. Zaki Radi. When he knew what we were there for, he told us that he will accept one of us in the French language class and the other one in the German language class. We told him that because we only knew English, and because we were two months late, it will be hard for us to join a German or French class. He told us that in all cases we will lose this academic year. We insisted on joining the English class and he agreed.

From there we went to buy the drafting tools for the engineering classes such as the drawing table, compass, and other tools. We then went to the drafting lab where about 350 students were working at the time we arrived. We noticed that there were many geometric shapes on the board that we didn't know anything about.

Alhadi: Was all of this in your first day on campus?

Fakhouri: That was all during our first day. Because we were two months late, we decided not to waste any more time. We started fixing our drawing papers, but still didn't have a clue what was going on. When we left, we decided we should study hard to catch up. We spent all night studying. We lived on the first floor in one of the buildings. That first night when we were focusing on our study, we

heard a knocking on the window. When we opened the window we found a group of girls who were looking for boys. When we told Sheikh Abdel Rouf of this story the next day, he insisted that we should leave that place. He immediately went and brought a donkey-pulled cart, collected our luggage and took us to a new place where we continued to study day and night. We remained in that place until we finished our engineering study.

Alhadi: How many years did you spend in Cairo?

Fakhouri: It was five years until we earned the B.A. in engineering. We finished our study in 1948.

Alhadi: What field of engineering did you study?

Fakhouri: It was mechanical engineering. I was happy that I was done with Egypt because they didn't used to hire non-Egyptians, and also because of the cholera epidemic that was widely spread during those days and claimed many lives. We learned that the symptoms of this disease include feeling cold at night, then a person feels the need to use the bathroom, and then he dies. It was funny that we felt cold many nights, went to the bathroom many times, but managed to stay alive. I left Egypt in 1948 and went to Basra in Iraq, which was under a post directorate British administration.

Alhadi: How did you travel from Cairo to Basra?

Fakhouri: By plane. I obtained a visa from the Iraqi embassy, who agreed that I go to work in Basra, who, as I said, was under the British administration. It is true that a British man at that time considered himself like a god on earth. First, I had the desire to teach, but no teaching jobs were available except in Baghdad. I went to

the college of engineering in Basra and there I met with the very nice Irish college dean whose name was Richey. He accepted that I teach at the college of engineering at the university. I worked with them for one year and then moved to Baghdad to teach there. I was very fortunate in the teaching profession and I performed very well. Richey liked me very much and he wanted to keep me with him. I insisted to go because I wanted to continue with my studies. He asked me what I wanted to study, and my reply was that I want to continue with my engineering studies to get a Ph.D. He offered to help with getting me admission into London University. I agreed, and he fulfilled his promise by getting me into the University of London. I remember at that time a conversation that I had with a friend of mine who happened to be a graduate from the same university that I was planning to join. His name was Dr. Hilmi Samara, and he was a very intelligent man who earned his Ph.D. in mathematics. When I told him of my plans of going to England, he advised me that England will be a good place for me if I have the money. Otherwise, I should go to America where I can work and study. That was a good advice for me, because I actually didn't have the money because that year was indeed a very difficult year for me.

Alhadi: Let me ask you this question: After graduating from Cairo, you went to Iraq. Does that mean you didn't go back to Palestine?

Fakhouri: I went directly to Iraq. I couldn't go because of the revolution in Palestine and what also was going on in regards to the British, Jews, and the war in 1948. I was in a very bad financial situation at that time. My brother Mohamed failed his engineering study in Cairo and I had to find a tutor for him. Another brother had

a bleeding eye problem and I had to find him a treatment in Baghdad. Another brother was kicked out of school, and I had to arrange for him too, and support him to continue and finish his high school education. I also had to save money for my ticket and also for my living expenses after I arrived here. I found the best and only solution was to work, and for that I had three full-time jobs throughout the year.

Alhadi: Is this after you arrived here?

Fakhouri: No, I was still in Baghdad. I had an evening teaching job in a polytechnic school, another evening teaching job in a high school, in addition to my daytime teaching job in the college of engineering, in addition to some tutoring. I worked for seventeen hours every day. I managed to save a lot of money and I paid for all that I needed. I bought a one-way ticket and saved about 120 dinars. I transferred about 100 dinars through the Arabic Bank to New York and had the remaining 20 dinars as pocket money to pay for my road expenses.

Many things were standing in my way, but I was very determined to go to do my Ph.D. study. I resigned from my work in Baghdad and went to Amman to catch the plane from there to New York through Frankfurt. In Amman, I wanted to say goodbye to the minister of works, Hashim El-Jewusi, who was very famous at the time, and to thank him for offering me many a great help. When I met with him, he asked me about my destination. I told him that I was going to America to do my Ph. D. He tried to make me change my mind and stay in Amman, and proposed to offer me a chief engineer position in his ministry, with a salary that is much better than what I used to get in Iraq. I told him that I was determined to

continue with my studies, but also promised him to think about his offer and to give him an answer the next day. The next day I was in a true turmoil, not knowing what to do. Finally I decided I should go and thank him for the offer and tell him that I was determined to go.

I took the plane from Amman, which was a very simple city at that time, and headed to Frankfurt on a journey that lasted for twelve hours. I spent the night in Frankfurt and the next morning I flew to New York on another twelve-hour trip.

Alhadi: What year was that?

Fakhouri: I arrived in New York in 1951. I went to cash my money from the bank, but the transfer hadn't arrived yet. I didn't know what to do because I only had the twenty dollars in my pocket. When I explained my problem to a very nice person that I came to know, he suggested that I should go to the YMCA. He told me that the YMCA will allow me to live on their premises and they will charge me only when I get to leave. I went there, but I also had to manage for my food expenses given that only ten dollars remained on me. On the street, I saw a grocery store where they were selling different kinds of tempting bread. They also had sardines all over the shelf. I thought, "If I bought some of these, I will have my problem solved until the money arrives." I bought one big loaf of bread and ten or twelve cans of sardines and went to my room in the YMCA. As I started preparing my food, the entire place was filled by the sardine smell. The administration started to post notes reminding us that eating in the rooms is not permitted. I, however, had to keep myself alive and therefore had to continue eating my sardines. More

notes were posted that the person who will be caught cooking in the room will be kicked out. In one week's time, my money arrived and I paid the YMCA for their room and left.

Alhadi: How many years did you spend in New York?

Fakhouri: I stayed only for thirteen days.

Alhadi: Where did you go after that?

Fakhouri: I went to Raleigh in North Carolina and that is where I got admitted.

Alhadi: Did you finish your study in North Carolina? Did you go to the University of North Carolina?

Fakhouri: I finished my master's there, then I moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I obtained another master's degree, then to College Park in Maryland where I finished my Ph.D.

Alhadi: What happened after that?

Fakhouri: After getting my Ph.D., I went to Kuwait to work in 1959, and remained there until 1966. I worked as a chief engineer there. I resigned that post because I found that the education my children were getting there was not good. I decided to come back to America.

Alhadi: After coming back to America, where did you live?

Fakhouri: I first lived in Detroit. The day I arrived there, the city was on fire because of the slaves' revolution [i.e., black riots after the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr.]. I joined the same school that I used to work for before I got married in Detroit.

Alhadi: How many years did you spent in Detroit?

Fakhouri: I remained there until 1974, when a new college of engineering was opened in Kuwait. They invited me to come to teach there. I met with the university undersecretary who offered me the position, which I accepted and went there.

Alhadi: How many years did you spend in Kuwait?

Fakhouri: It was my second time in Kuwait, and I remained there from 1974 to 1981. I applied for a one-year sabbatical leave, and then I resigned and came back to America.

Alhadi: When did you come to Florida?

Fakhouri: The first time I came to Florida was in 1981.

Alhadi: Have you been permanently living in Florida since 1981?

Fakhouri: Yes, but I lived before that in California. I didn't like it there because of the earthquakes, overcrowdedness and pollution. I figured that place wasn't for me.

Alhadi: Where did you live in Florida since 1981?

Fakhouri: I came to Ocala in 1981, and remained there until 1985. Then I spent three years in Daytona Beach until 1988. I bought a condo there in an area called Ormond Beach. I was so anxious to live close to the ocean, but finally I got sick of it because of the sound of the waves day and night, and also the salt that covered the entire house. I decided to come back to Ocala. I came back in 1988, and since then I have been living in this house.

Alhadi: How many sons do you have Dr. Ahmed?

Alhadi: I have four sons.

Alhadi: Do they live here in Florida?

Fakhouri: One of them is in Raleigh, after obtaining his Ph.D. from MIT. Then my son  
Riyad, who has his clinic on Seventeenth Street. Another son is Dr. Jamal. And  
finally, Omer who works for a hospital.

Alhadi: You don't have daughters?

Fakhouri: No. I am one among nine brothers with no sister.

Alhadi: Does that mean since the day you took the train from Tulkarm, you never been  
back to Palestine?

Fakhouri: I went back in 1966. After I resigned, I went to Beirut, and also I wanted to  
have a teaching position in Egypt. I was offered a position at Al-Azhar University to  
teach engineering. The Six-days War broke out and everything was lost.

Alhadi: This tells me that you lived in Palestine, Egypt, Kuwait, Iraq, Beirut, and  
Amman of Jordan. Have you been to any other Arab country like Saudi Arabia?

Fakhouri: I visited the UAE.

Alhadi: Was it just for a visit or was it for work?

Fakhouri: It was for work. The UAE at that time, 1961, was very small. All these  
modern big cities such as Abu Dhabi and Dubai were not there. The Emirates  
were fighting against each other on water resources. We were there to help solve  
these problems. I spent one week there.

Alhadi: How about Saudi Arabia?

Fakhouri: I went there in 1981 for the Omra [i.e., religious trip] purpose.

Alhadi: How about the non-Arab countries that you have been to?

Fakhouri: I have been to many countries. I visited all the countries in Europe such as Germany, Netherlands, France, England, Italy, and Yugoslavia. I also visited Japan and China. These were business trips.

Alhadi: Do you speak any languages other than Arabic and English?

Fakhouri: I can read and understand French and a bit of German, because we were supposed to pass two foreign languages courses for the Ph.D. study. I picked French and German and I passed both of them. Unfortunately, I can't speak these two languages [now].

Alhadi: Do you still have relatives in Tulkarm in Palestine and do you contact them?

Fakhouri: No. I am not in touch with people in Tulkarm because most of my relatives are in Amman.

Alhadi: Do you talk to those who are in Amman?

Fakhouri: Rarely. I have a brother in Tripoli, Lebanon; another one in Germany; and another one in Michigan; I have four brothers in North Carolina.

Alhadi: Are you the oldest among them?

Fakhouri: Yes, I am the oldest.

Alhadi: Do they contact you?

Fakhouri: Some of them call me constantly, like my brother Lateef in North Carolina that I talk to every day.

Alhadi: Do they visit you here?

Fakhouri: They used to, when it was easy for them to drive. It is now hard for them.

Alhadi: Thank you very much, Dr. Ahmed, for this interview. We took more time than what we originally intended to. Thank you again.

Fakhouri: You're welcome. I hope it was good.

Alhadi: It was. And that is exactly what we were looking for.

[END OF INTERVIEW]