

**Fayez Hamdan**

Sunday December 2, 2012

Marks Street Community Center in Orlando, Florida

Esam Alhadi, Interviewer and Translator

for University of Florida

George A. Smathers Libraries

Edited by Jardee Transcription

Also present, Richard Saltzburg

Alhadi: Hello, Mr. Fayez Hamdan.

Hamdan: Hello.

Alhadi: My name is Esam Alhadi. I teach at the University of Florida in Gainesville. We are happy to be with you today.

Hamdan: Thank you.

Alhadi: We are here at the Marks Street Center in the city of Orlando. Today is Sunday, December 2, 2012. It is now 1:15 PM. Welcome one more time, Mr. Hamdan. And we are very happy to have this interview with you today. Let us begin by asking you to tell us a little bit about the early phase of your life before coming to America.

Hamdan: I am sixty years old. I left from my home country in 1970. I studied marine mechanical engineering in The Marine Institute, in Acre in Palestine, and worked for a Swedish marine company which is part of the Swedish commercial fleet. It had an office in Haifa. I worked with them for five years. I was a mechanic engineer officer.

Alhadi: Were you born in Acre?

Hamdan: Yes I was born in Acre. By the end of my fifth year of service with the Swedish company, I decided to quit after having the opportunity to travel around the world three times. I went back to my country and then came back to America in 1975 to settle here. I arrived in the city of Houston where I had some friends and old classmates who were living there. That is where I began my new life in America. I started working for fast

food restaurants, and it didn't take me too long to move on to have my own business. Because of my background in mechanics, I opened my own garage for repairing cars. I lived in Houston for thirteen or fourteen years. During this period, I came to know the woman who later became my wife. We moved to North Carolina, where I changed from garages—cars and mechanic work—to restaurants. I bought my first restaurant in Morehead City. It was an Italian food restaurant that we named Magic Pan. I started this business without having enough knowledge of restaurant work. We were determined to drive this business to succeed, although we started it at a very difficult time for us. Our children were still very young, and we were still in the early stage of our lives. However, things went very well and we bought the building that we were renting for the restaurant. We moved on to buy another restaurant and some residential units. The business kept on growing, and the children continued their education until they reached college. Five years ago, we thought it was the right time to sell the business after receiving a very good offer. Currently, I am retired.

Alhadi: I understand from what you have just said that you began in the marine sector, then moved to the field of mechanics, and ended your business career in the food sector. In which one of these fields did you feel that you were doing extremely well?

Hamdan: I was driven by a personal love to the field of restaurants. This is why I left the maintenance garage and car business. The restaurant field was new to me and I had no experience in it. However, I was ready to learn how to do it.

Alhadi: If I may, this sounds like a very strange shift from the very professional work of mechanics, which is related to your background, to a field that is totally different.

Hamdan: This is true. It is from one extreme to the other. I had a look at the area first and realized that it was an attractive tourist area located right on the coast. It is a small and beautiful city that usually has many tourists. There are no big industries in the area. Although there were many car maintenance centers and car dealers in the city, I was prepared to start something new. I picked the restaurant field, although I had no idea how to run them.

Alhadi: Who helped you with the restaurant work?

Hamdan: My wife helped me.

Alhadi: Is she American?

Hamdan: No, she is an Arab. We started the restaurant work together. It was very hard and we worked long hours between 4:00 AM to 11:00 PM. I was determined to succeed, but later I figured that it was too hard to keep doing it for too long.

Alhadi: You mentioned that the restaurant you started with offered Italian food. Why did you choose to work in the Italian food area?

Hamdan: The restaurant was offering Italian and Greek food even before we acquired it. The men who owned the restaurant before me had trouble keeping it running. They had it for one year. I got to know them and we negotiated the deal of transferring the business to me. We came to an agreement after training me on how to run the restaurant. I finally got it and began to develop my own skills in running the restaurant. I mastered the business and began to add new things until I became very successful in this field. I paid back the loan that I borrowed to start the business. I also bought the building where the restaurant was located. Things went from good to superior and we bought another a

seafood restaurant located on an island in the ocean. I did extremely well with that one as well, and my experience in restaurant work grew to a high level.

Alhadi: That means you had only one Italian food restaurant.

Hamdan: Yes, I had only one Italian food restaurant and another sea food restaurant. The sea food restaurant was very big. Because of its location on the island, it worked well only during the nine- month tourist season. It also required too much hard work for my wife and I who had to do it all. My brother came and joined us for a short period and then he decided to discontinue working with us. We decided to lease one of the two restaurants and to keep the real estate. As the sea food restaurant kept doing well, we invested the revenues that we made in buying new real estate, apartments, and shopping centers.

Thanks to God that we did very well. My children were able to get a good education.

Alhadi: What did they study?

Hamdan: My daughter went to medical school and specialized in audiology. She is now an ear doctor. She studied at Nova University in Fort Lauderdale and then moved to San Diego, then to Minnesota, and then came back to Orlando to be with the family. My middle son has a commercial collection agency. He is doing very well. My younger son has two master's degrees. The first one is in political science with a focus on conflict management and peace development. He studied in Charlotte and then moved to Philadelphia. After that he moved to Paris American University to do a second master's in international relations. He is not working in the field of politics because it is hard to get a job in that field. However, he is working. All my children are doing fine and things are going well with them.

Alhadi: Mr. Hamdan, I noticed that you sometimes speak in Egyptian Colloquial Arabic.

Hamdan: True. I know that you are from Sudan and that Sudanese and Egyptian spoken languages are not too far from each other. I always try to adapt to the language of the person I am talking to.

Alhadi: How did you get to know the colloquial Egyptian?

Hamdan: I went to Egypt two or three times, but I also have Egyptian friends and when I meet with them we converse in Egyptian Arabic.

Alhadi: Are the Egyptian Arabic and the colloquial Arabic spoken in Acre the same?

Hamdan: They are widely different. I always try to speak to any person in the language he uses. If I meet with a friend from Egypt, Syria, or Lebanon, I speak with them in their colloquial Arabic. However, the colloquial Arabic that I am more familiar with is the Palestinian accent that is used in the costal Palestinian areas. I feel it is close to the classical Arabic.

Alhadi: I am familiar with the Palestinian Arabic because I had the opportunity to live in Jordan. The colloquial Arabic used in the two countries is almost the same.

Hamdan: True.

Alhadi: When was the last time you visited Acre?

Hamdan: I just came back two days ago. I was there for one month and five days. I had the opportunity to visit Jerusalem, Haifa, and Galilee. I belong to a very big family.

Alhadi: That means your family and relatives are in the 1948 lands?

Hamdan: Yes. I also went to the West Bank to visit my relatives in Jenin. I like to visit with my relatives as much as possible there.

Alhadi: You told us earlier that your children are in different fields of work. Is any one of them close to the business field, or maybe thinking of doing business?

Hamdan: As I mentioned previously, my middle son is in the collection business. He has developed very good business skills and he is a very successful businessman.

Alhadi: Based on your knowledge of the Arab business community here in Orlando or in Florida in general, are there some Arab business firms that became large and well-known to everyone?

Hamdan: You can find different types of Arab businesses. Some have grocery stores, others have gift shops, and others own commercial real estate. Some of them may have achieved high levels of success and they are doing extremely well either in the real estate field or in investments in general. Some of them own shopping centers and others have restaurants, lands, or gas stations. Some are successful professionals such as doctors. Some of them went into the construction field and own one building or more. I have been here in Orlando for five years and I know many of the Arab immigrants of different nationalities such as Syrians, Lebanese, Jordanians, Egyptians, Palestinians, Tunisians or Moroccans. Most of those I know are very successful.

Alhadi: My next question may be a bit personal. You mentioned earlier that you are retired now, and you also mentioned that you are now sixty years old. With all the business experience you have, why did you decide to retire that early?

Hamdan: What happened was that we grew tired of restaurant work. We decided to quit and come to Florida. The intention was not to come here for retirement. We wanted to come here and start buying and selling things that don't need too much physical effort. We began with buying land, and with the economy plunging downward, we lost too much money and that forced us to stop. It is clear that the economic life in the town and in the country in general is getting bad. This is why I didn't go into any other business.

However, I am willing to go back and start business again when the economy recovers. I don't feel that I am ready to finally retire just yet. I look forward to getting back in business.

Alhadi: What you are saying is that this is not a final retirement decision.

Hamdan: No. I would like to go back and do something.

Alhadi: I agree it is still early to make a final retirement decision.

Hamdan: True. I still feel I have the drive and energy.

Alhadi: You dealt with the Arab community in Texas, North Carolina, and Orlando. What field do you feel that Arabs generally to do business in?

Hamdan: In America there is—. (interruption)

Alhadi: Sorry to interrupt, but I wanted to say that most of the Arabs in America, and particularly those who come from Syria and Lebanon, work in the grocery business.

Hamdan: Let me give you a general idea. When I arrived in Texas in the 1970s, I found that everyone loved to do a gas station or grocery store business. Those who came in the 1960s mostly worked in the grocery store business. They worked very hard and sent their children to school to get a good education. With the good level of education their children had, they went into professional fields of business such as medicine and engineering. They never thought of going back to the grocery store business. Arab immigration to America never stopped. When the newcomers know of business owners who are very successful in their gas station or grocery store business, they try to do the same. However, the people of my generation who came here and didn't think of advancing the level of education we came here with, were stuck—that is, we had no option other than getting into the gas station, grocery store, or car dealership business.

This was the same case in Texas, North Carolina, or Florida. Some of them might have owned companies. We merged ourselves with our American colleagues, learned from them and worked with them.

Alhadi: I am interested to know more about your first experience with marine work. It sounded like a very exciting experience. Can you tell us more about it?

Hamdan: Yes I can. I joined this field after finishing high school. I came from a big family and my father didn't have enough financial resources to support my education. I had to find a job, but I was always determined to keep moving forward and to do as much as I could do with what I had at hand. I joined the company and started working in the sea shipping business. I had a very good technical background from the vocational high school that I went to. I successfully completed many training sessions and workshops. I also passed a number of tests before being offered a position with the Swedish company. I boarded a ship for my first trip and I did very well on that trip. I soon began to like that work and worked very hard to keep myself progressing in that field. A short period later, the company sent me for training in order to become better qualified and to develop my professional and technical skills. They sent me to join The Marine Institute in Acre to take courses there. Acre is located on the sea. I kept working and I made very good money while I was still young. Although working in the sea was good enough and I had many travel opportunities, I always had questions in my mind about the future. I had the opportunity to keep working and get promoted from a third-ranking ship's officer to eventually become a captain and a chief engineer. The thing that I didn't like it about it—and I saw it happening to other people who have been doing this kind of work—is that they remained single for too long because of the long-distance trips and the long

periods they spent onboard travelling from one place to another. I figured out that the job I was doing was not good for a person who wants to eventually settle down and have a family. That is the reason why I quit that job.

Alhadi: How long had you been working at sea?

Hamdan: I worked there for five years.

Alhadi: How much of the world have you seen?

Hamdan: I have been all over the world. I visited America, Europe, Central America and South America, the Philippines, and China, Japan, and all of Africa.

Alhadi: What was the longest sailing period you had without any chance to see the land?

Hamdan: I once sailed from South Africa to Japan for twenty-five days without any stop.

Rough sea conditions make sailing too tough. In many cases we had to face hurricanes and typhoons. These are unforgettable experiences. Rough seas make the trip take a lot longer.

Alhadi: These sound like very exciting experiences.

Hamdan: That is true. I will never forget such experiences.

Alhadi: Do you have any other memories that are still stuck to your mind from your days on the sea?

Hamdan: Travelling by sea gives the opportunity to know about new traditions and habits and to get to see and know people who may be wealthy, poor, or from the middle class.

Alhadi: Did you learn new languages during these trips?

Hamdan: Yes. I speak four languages, including Hebrew, Arabic, English, and Spanish. I also came to know few words from this or that language.

Alhadi: This is impressive. We are very happy to listen to the details of this rich life experience.

I really hope you may consider going back into the business field. I believe it is still early to retire.

Hamdan: Yes. I also believe it is still early to retire. I hope things will get better. We will wait and see.

Alhadi: Do you see any opportunities out there that might convince you to go back to sea work?

Hamdan: I have the experience and certificates that are necessary for sea work. The age factor may be the reason that stops me from going back.

Alhadi: It is not necessary to engage in mechanical work on the ship. It could be any office work that is sea-related, such as cargo and shipping.

Hamdan: It is possible that I could do office sea cargo and shipping work. I have many friends who are doing work like this. The only reservation I have towards this proposal is that sea work is not exactly my area of specialty anymore. However, the idea is there and the experience is there and it is not hard to grasp the basic idea and details of this work and get involved in it. However, my nature is that I always love to try doing new things in my life.

Alhadi: I want to move on and ask you about the Arab community here in Orlando. How do you see it?

Hamdan: Generally speaking, it is not too bad. We have Syrians, Egyptians, Lebanese, Palestinians, and a small number of Iraqis. They are very good with each other. There are always opportunities for them to get together. We have the AAC which brings all people of Arab descent together. There is also a Syrian Club that was established by the Syrian immigrants who arrived here as early as the early 1900s. That was the time when

Syria was known as “Greater Syria” including Lebanon and Palestine. That club is still functioning. The AAC activities are open for everybody, and we always organize activities that bring the Arabs together. I don’t see a problem if any group such as the Syrians or Lebanese wanted to be on their own and have their separate church or mosque. There is nothing wrong with that.

Alhadi: Mr. Hamdan, this is a very big and rich life experience and we are happy that you agreed to share it with us and to have it documented on tape. I am sure that our students will enjoy it very much. Thanks for giving us this opportunity.

Hamdan: You are welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]