

## **Oral History: An Unmatched Source**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honored to be participating in this international conference to launch “the Palestinian Oral History Archive.” Such an archive was literally just a dream 40 years ago. How do I know? Because it was in 1978 that I tried but failed to convince three Palestinian research institutions to undertake a single oral history project as a start.

My first experience with Oral History started in 1972, when it accompanied my work on my Ph.D. thesis at the Faculty of Law and Political Science at the Lebanese University. I was happy indeed when my adviser, the late Dr. Anis Sayigh, approved my proposal entitled “Political Leaderships and Institutions in Palestine, 1917-1948”, but he warned that it would be difficult for me to find sufficient sources and references, especially on the 1920s.

No need to describe my long visits to libraries – including those of the Institute for Palestine Studies, here at AUB, and the PLO’s Research Center headed by Dr. Sayigh himself – but I do need to mention that, just as my adviser had predicted, I could not locate enough sources. I told him:

“I have found a way Dr. Sayigh, but I would need around one year to prove how successful it might be. It is based on interviewing Palestinians who played roles during the British Mandate; because from my experience as a journalist, I can

predict how much some people would be actually willing to talk”.

My adviser agreed, but before that year was over I had already obtained marvelous results. My interviews with 25 personalities – some a single time, others two or more times – yielded not only a treasure trove of personal experiences, including numerous interviewees who shared memories of those who had passed away, but also vital insights regarding some sources. Several of these interviewees were able and willing to review documents and other information I had gathered, expressing well-informed views on their authenticity, the implications and credibility of their content, and the reliability of particular sources and documents. These interviews turned out to be a kind of workshop that added enormous value to my work.

My most productive visits, however, were when my hosts had told me in advance that they had private papers or old publications, and that’s how I reached the unreachable. The most important periodicals were *al-Jami’a al-Arabiyyah* newspaper (1927 – 1935) in seven huge volumes; *al-Arab* weekly magazine (1932 – 1934) in three volumes; and *al-Sha’b* daily newspaper (1946 – 1948) in two volumes. The publishers of those titles were, respectively, Munif al-Husseini, Ajaj Nuwayhed, and Kan’an Abu Khadra. They honored me by lending me their periodicals for months to review them at home, but I was happiest when each of them welcomed the idea of submitting his publication to the

research center of his choice, where it would be converted into microfilms.

Other rare sources I accessed at the time included handwritten diaries and autobiographies. These sources were full of life. And just to give one example, it was so interesting to read Dr. Hussein Fakhri al-Khalidi's autobiography in his own handwriting, and especially the chapter about Jerusalem in May 1948. His manuscript was finally published in 2014. And the same goes for Akram Zu'aier's diaries, penned in his own handwriting about 1930s Palestine, and which were published in 1981.

In the middle of the 1970s, Lebanon's immediate fate was to cope with a two-year civil war. Who could ever forget the days when only a few cars were to be seen in the streets, and is there any need to mention how often the schools were closed? My husband and I decided that I should move with our children to Cairo, where they could enroll at the German School, and that he would come to us whenever possible. I myself made use of this year abroad by interviewing more people.

By the end of 1977 my thesis had been completed, but throughout my work supervised by Dr. Sayigh I do not recall that either of us ever mentioned these two words: "Oral History". But if I were to be asked: what's the real significance of all those dozens of interviews? I would mention two different aspects:

The first significant aspect is linked with the main object of oral history as a source of information, but in this study some interviewees proved to be the only source for the specific subject they were talking about, especially when they talked about the then-banned political parties, such as the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), and that's how the only path to the history of this secret party emerged, through its members, and those were: Youssef Sayigh, the general commissioner of the SSNP's branch in Palestine; Camil Jada'; Jubran Greig; Fuad Msallam; and Farid Ataya. A similar path led me to the secret history of "The Arab Nationalist bloc," namely through my interviews with: Wassef Kamal; Youssef Haykal; Burhan Dajani; and Kan'an Abu Khadra.

The second significant aspect of the Oral History of this particular study I can describe in a few words, basically that it resembled or rather constituted the spirit of the body.

My second experience was supposed to be the easiest on earth, but to my astonishment I had to face a closed door and a simple "no", which in fact was not uttered as a word, but was well understood when a historian and orator from the first Arab Nationalist generation, almost paralyzed in bed, listened carefully to my proposal to record his life-story. However, his response was mere silence and a sad look. This man was my father, Ajaj Nuwayhed, who suffered a stroke in June 1979 and could no longer walk easily, let alone write down his memories as he had planned. Many months passed before he suddenly broke into a smile and said: "Didn't you ask me once to dictate my biography to you? I'm ready."

We started on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 1980. In this first interview, as well as in all our later ones, he was generous in his conversations and replies and very patient in answering my questions, especially whenever I went back to him with further questions related to earlier interviews; thus the ship sailed on without any wind.

My father told me the following after he had read the first three chapters as part of a manuscript: “If I had to write my life-story, sitting at my desk alone through long nights, I would not have gone that far remembering all the events and all the details, but with all those questions showered on me, the old days came back with all their vitality”. Unfortunately, however, he could not read his book, which eventually was published in 1993 under the title he had chosen: “Sixty Years with the Arab Caravan”. He passed away on 25 June 1982, while the Israeli military was besieging Beirut and bombarding it with missiles from sea, air, and land.

My third experience in Oral History was with the Sabra and Shatila massacre. The amount of news coverage at the time of the incident was highly significant. But, like the event itself, it was soon over. The scream of pain at the time of the event is merely the first chapter, because the story is never finished after that first chapter alone. This was what prompted me to launch the Oral History Project, and I started on the 10<sup>th</sup> of November 1982.

In the initial interviews I limited myself to taking notes, but soon thereafter I started recording them with the permission of the interviewees, promising that full names

would not appear. During those dark days anyone heard or accused of talking about the massacre could face dire consequences, including prison. In fact, my sole aim for the whole Oral History Project at that stage was to document the event and preserve the documents in any way possible, for fear that they would be lost or even possibly proscribed.

On the 7th of February 1983 the Israeli Commission of Inquiry into the events at the refugee camps led to the issuing of the famous – or rather infamous – Kahan Report. This report contained some democratic elements, yet this does not excuse the absence of conclusions that might have been drawn from data available in the report itself, or the presence of misleading figures and other errors of information. We might, as one example, note that the report put the number of women killed in the massacre at just 15, and the children at only 20. I learned from the Kahan Report the extent to which facts can be distorted through incorrect numbers and figures.

In light of the Kahan Report, the objectives of my work became clear, for they were to show conclusively:

- that what took place in Sabra and Shatila between 16 and 18 September 1982 was a massacre, and not a battle;
- that the P.L.O. did not break its promises, since there were definitely not 2,500 Palestinian fighters left in the area; and
- that the Kahan Report's victim count was a grossly understatement.

I continued to work on the Oral History Project, but I had to start a new historical project based on accessible sources in Beirut, and on inaccessible ones through my friends abroad. And by the summer of 1984 the documentary phase came to an end, including: the Oral History interviews on tapes, the field study's original questionnaires; and the lists of names of the victims and the abducted based on various primary sources.

When I returned to my hidden files on Sabra and Shatila towards the end of the twentieth century, my mission was to add historical substance to the entire Palestinian cause, and so I decided to issue one single book that combined oral history and the history of the massacre, and thus the book *Sabra and Shatila: September 1982* was published (Arabic, 2003; English, 2004).

I thought that by publishing the book, I might personally gain some closure about this bitter experience, but in vain. Whenever I sit alone and read a few testimonies or listen to the voice of Um Ali, or Zainab, or others, I feel the same sadness and pain that I felt when I heard them for the first time.

I still remember my visit to Ronald Grele, Dean of the Department of Oral History at Columbia University, in 1985. He gave me good advice, and when we were talking about the significance of Oral History in the USA, he said that oral history "is not the song but the singing". I told him: "That's a

refined literary description, Professor, but everything is different in Sabra and Shatila, for there's no singing by any means, and all that you feel through their weak voices and sobs is the deep pain that engulfs them all.”

Before closing, I would like to mention that ever since the 1970's most of my books and essays have depended on Oral History as a primary source. Even when my interviewees were few in number, quoting them has constituted either the backbone of the study at hand, or its flavor, and sometimes both.

Finally, I wish the “the Palestinian Oral History Archive” lasting success, hoping that it will become and remain a constant source of historical scientific research.

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