

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Life in Syria

Personal Experience

O. H. 1065

ABDELKARIM H. NEEMEH

Interviewed

by

Patricia R. Homick

on

March 2, 1981

ABDELKARIM HASAN NEEMEH

Abdelkarim Neemeh was born December 15, 1956 in Manbej, Syria. His father, Hasan Neemeh, runs a variety shop specializing in eggs, grains, and chickens which are bought from neighboring villages and sold to city dwellers. His mother, Subhiyeh Jobokji, has been busy raising Abdelkarim's nine brothers and sisters.

Abdelkarim graduated from Al-Shahba High School in Aleppo, becoming one of the few literate members of his family. He then studied civil engineering at the University of Aleppo from 1977 to 1978, and left Syria to begin studies in the United States in April 1978. He learned English at universities in Vermont and Iowa, after which he finally came to Youngstown State University to finish his degree in civil engineering. Abdelkarim was recently elected to the Tau Beta Pi national honorary society for engineers. His interests include cooking, soccer, and politics.

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY

Life in Syria

INTERVIEWEE: ABDELKARIM H. NEEMEH

INTERVIEWER: Patricia R. Homick

SUBJECT: customs, attitudes, religion, education

DATE: March 2, 1981

H: This is an interview with Abdelkarim Neemeh for Youngstown State University Oral History Project by Patricia Homick, at 7017 Marinthana, on March 2, 1981, at 10:00p.m.

Okay, why don't we start out by describing the village in which you lived.

N: Well, it wasn't really exactly a village. It was a small city. It was called Manbej which is about fifty miles away from the major city in Syria, Aleppo. The population is about 50,000 people. That city is a typical Syrian city, because it is poorer compared to cities like Aleppo or Damascus. The people in there aren't as educated as people in cities. They have their own customs.

H: Are other villages or other small cities or villages similar to this city, even though this city is different than Aleppo and Damascus. Still is it similar to other smaller cities or villages?

N: It is similar in many things, but they have different accents. They sometimes have different customs. In a typical village you would get up around 6:00 in the morning. Of course, my dad gets up in the morning and wakes everybody when he gets up, so he would take everybody to work with him. People who have to go to school, they would leave for school.

There is no public transportation provided. So, we used to have to walk to school in either snow, or cold, or hot. We would have to walk 8:00 in the morning until

2:00 p.m. Then after that, we'd come home. When we weren't working, we would spend our time playing with our neighbor children. When we are eight, nine, ten years and older after we'd finish school we'd have to go to where my dad works to help him with his work.

H: What did your dad do?

N: He bought and sold chickens, eggs, and grains.

H: From where?

N: Okay, he would buy these things from smaller villages. We'd sell it to bigger cities like Aleppo and Damascus where we'd make profit from it. There's a point in here. We'd buy everything in there like old shoes, old aluminum pans, old brass, broken brass, everything. We didn't throw it away, because they would take it to the cities and they would make new things out of these things.

H: About how many eggs would you deal with per day, and how many pounds of grain?

N: This would differ from summers, to winters, to falls. But, you would say about five dozen to seven dozen eggs per day and about a ton of grain a day, and other things.

H: Your dad owned this business himself?

N: Yes, he does. Of course, all my brothers work with him, so the whole family which consists of twelve brothers and sisters, that's not including my brothers' wives, all work in the same place for the same business. The money is distributed among them.

H: So, you have a rather large business then?

N: Right. Well, now my brothers are starting to do other things like being a chauffeur of a taxi. My other brother is a teacher. But, all the money still goes back to the same; to the origin and contributes to rest.

H: So, everyone gets the same amount?

N: Right.

H: Since your father owned his own business, how does that relate to socialist programs in your country? Do many people own their own businesses?

N: Well, as you know Syria deals with Russia. They have socialist ideas, but still you could say all these things are very small businesses. You would never see large businesses with four persons or two or three members. Large businesses have to be owned by the government. So, they don't say anything about small businesses. Most, about 95%, of the small businesses belong to the people.

H: Okay, how about schooling in your village? Was everyone required to go to school?

N: As I remember at the time when I was attending elementary school it wasn't required that everybody should go to school. But since, as you know, families there are poor, families many times take their children out of school to help their parents to work.

For instance when I was in sixth grade, my oldest brother felt that he needed me in work, so he asked me to leave school. Well, at that time I really liked school, and I didn't leave school because I didn't want to be involved in business. I just liked school. So, he insisted that I should leave, and I didn't. It took at least a week; every day he would wake up in the morning, break all of my pens, and tear all of my books and notebooks. He would ask me to go to work, and I would say okay. He would hit me and once blood came out of my nose, because he hit me a lot. He wanted me to go to work. I said okay. I would leave and from there I would go get a pencil and go to school. I told my math teacher after a week of that. He sent a note to my brother. So, from that time on he loved me dear.

H: So, he felt ashamed that the professor sent a note?

N: Right, Right. Comparing elementary and secondary school in Syria and here: Schools here have more facilities and convenience for the student. In Syria, as I told you, we'd have to walk to school and walk home.

Teachers there aren't like the teachers here. Here, I think it's very bad if a teacher hits a student. Well, there it would be 8:00 in the morning and we would probably be late, because it was snowing and it was cold. So, we couldn't get there. This town's very far away. So, if we'd be late five minutes, some teacher would be standing at the door. Every student he'd see late, he had a stick in his hand and he would hit us on our hands

For two or three hours our hands were red, because of that. They would hit us on our faces. If a student didn't know an answer to a question the teacher would take the student out of the classroom. They would make fun and hit the student. So, I think that's what the difference is between schooling here and schooling there up to high school. Of course, in high school they don't hit students or anything like that. In high school, students there are more responsible than the high school students in the United States. They take it more seriously, and they are required to learn much more than they learn here. What I learned in high school math and physics I learned at Youngstown State University in Calculus 1,2,3 and 4. After that, I studied some Physics. All of it I had studied in my high school. It was really easy for me.

It is required to take religion classes. It's required to take social life about socialist countries and socialist ideas. We're required to take that.

H: So that's the Russian influence in your country?

N: You could say that, yes.

H: What else was required?

N: Well, the last year of high school, the senior year of high school there is extremely hard. A lot of people flunk because we are required to take certain subjects. We must take them. We can not drop out of any one. We have only the final exam at the end of the year. We must know all the books from the beginning to the end, every book. We have only one chance at the end. One exam that year and that's it. If you pass, you pass. If you don't pass, you have to go back and review the whole material, even though you had passed it before. You must take it over. So, I think that's much different than it is here. I don't think it's very effective, but if you are a good student I think it helps you much more than if you weren't.

H: You mentioned that you're required to take religion?

N: Yes.

H: What if you weren't a Moslem?

N: Well, they have that if you are Christian you are allowed to take a Christian religion. In my class I

remember there were about forty Moslems and about five Christians. So, when it would come the class of religion, the five Christians if they would like to sit and listen they're welcomed. If they don't want to, they have a special religion class. They can go there. At the end at the finals time, there are many tests, especially in Religion, for Christians, Moslems and Jews.

H: What would happen if someone was not religious? What if you weren't a Christian, Moslem or a Jew? Would they force him into one of those classes?

N: Yes. I think he would have to take one of them, because it's just like computers here. If you don't push the button, it doesn't work. Also, there if you don't fill the space of religion, they will not allow him to pass. Well, I've never seen a case of that. I'm sure there must be a case like that, but I don't know how they would deal with it. I'm almost sure he would be required to take one. To choose one and take it.

H: So, the main concern is that the student get a decent type of religious than moral training?

N: Right, right. That is very, very important to us, because religion to us is most of the time, much more important than a lot of things around us. Even sometimes more important than ourselves to us. More important than our country to us. More important than learning or science or all that to us.

H: What is the relations that lie between Romans Jews, Christians and Moslems? How do they get along?

N: I went to high school in Aleppo. That is a very large city. It has a lot of Christians, a lot of Jews and a lot of Moslems. As I noticed there that this section of Aleppo belongs to the Christians. They lived in the best section of that city. They work with jobs that pay a lot of money. The rate of return is a lot. They work as mechanics, which really now is the best kind of job there. They work also with the government with high positions with the government.

But, Jews mostly work with gold in Syria. They are almost the richest people there. Whenever you hear a Jew, he must be dealing with gold and these things.

Of course, there are Christian schools, Moslem schools and Jewish schools. If you are one of any, you can go

to yours. They do not teach only religion. They teach religion, science culture, and language. They taught Christians I don't know what kind of language, I didn't figure it out. They had a different language than the Arabic. And, the Jews have the Hebrew.

But, all of them say we are Arabs and we are Syrians. Like when we had the war in 1973 with Israel, I passed in front of the Jewish school in Aleppo. I saw a big sign outside saying we are against Israel, even though we are Jews, we are against Israel. We think they are Zionists. They aren't being fair.

H: So, if you would have Christians and Jews among the Moslems in the schools, you'd get along?

N: Yes, very well.

H: It doesn't matter what the religion is, as long as it's a religion that believes in God?

N: Right, right.

H: Okay, can you describe some of the customs in your village that you mentioned are a little unique?

N: Yes, there are a lot of unique customs there. A lot of them are really bad. When did I know that? I knew that when I came to the United States. I knew that these customs were really bad. Some of them are very, very nice.

Okay, some of the nice customs are taking care of the parents, of all our parents when they get old. Here when they get old they mostly take them to the old people's house. What do you call it?

H: Nursing home.

N: Nursing home, and just forget about them and their problems. As over there, we are responsible and we must take care of our parents. If you don't, then you will be ashamed. In front of all the people, they would say, "Oh, look at him. You know his parents are in bad condition, and he doesn't mind." They think of him as really a bad person.

Some other customs are family union. like the way the family is united. The way your neighbors talk to you or deal with you. The people there like to be close to you.

Well, now about 15% of our family live in the same house and take from the same money. We can always go to my uncle's house and eat without being asked to go there, because he is the brother of my father. So, no problem. We can go to our neighbor's any time we want to. We talk to each other and on occasions we visit all the neighbors or family or all our relatives. So, I think that's nice. Families there are much, much more united than they are here.

A very good thing also is the drug and alcohol problems. Well, there you could say the drug problem is zero, or 1 out of 2,000 or 3,000 persons. Because, first it's against the religion. Secondly, when people would know somebody smokes, marijuana or anything, no way would somebody let his daughter marry him. Nor, somebody would want to deal with that person or somebody would want to be close or be a friend of that person.

H: Really?

N: Yes. So, that's some of the good customs. Some of the bad customs are the way people react when they get mad.

H: Yes, I've noticed.

N: They have very high tempers there. When they get mad, they're really bad. They fight. Like I have been here about three years, and I haven't seen two people fighting or hitting each other. But, there you would see that almost every week; two people hitting each other or killing each other. Because, they have a very high temper. Also, treating children the way Americans do here. Like here you treat that child softly, and you say this is my child and I'm going to be a good mother or good father. So, I'm not going to scream in his face or I'm not going to hit him. I'm just going to come to him in a nice way and tell him. I think that's very nice.

In our culture, since our parents weren't treated this way, and they never saw a person treating his child this way, they think the good way is to hit that child, smack that child, and paddle him. So, this is also another bad custom.

There is also a lot of people in there having old ideas. That is hurting the country so much, and hurting the new generation. They have these weird ideas about customs. Well, it must be like that, otherwise, it's no good. It must be that custom, otherwise, it's no good. The older

ones when they think of something in their heads, like the women should cover their face. Why? Because she is more religious. When you tell them our religion doesn't require that, they just think you are an idiot. Why? Because that's what they know in their heads. That's what they want the people to follow. So, that is a very big problem among the new generation and the old generation in Syria.

H: Going back to what you said about the temper of the Arabs. Do you think the fact that they react before they stop to think has anything to do with the situation in the Middle East as it is now?

N: Well.

H: If all the Arabs are like that, all the Arabs I've met here are like that. You have thousands of Arabs acting like that. Don't you think that has something to do with that, the situations in the Middle East?

N: Well, the situation in the Middle East isn't being built by the people of the country. It's being built by the government of the country and the president of that country. So, when you are president or in a high position, of course you should be different. You can not react fast. You can not do things fast. You have to think, wait, and think, and ask a little bit. So, I don't think it has to do with or effects a lot, because the government, the Syrian government, goes back to Russia to get ideas, to get weapons, to get support. While Israel comes here to the United States to get the same thing, and then they go there and fight each other. But, there's one thing I should mention here, the president there knows that the people there react fast, so he tries to give speeches or give ideas that the people think, "Oh, you know we're fighting for our rights. We are fighting for a good thing, we're fighting for our land, our freedom." It could very well be that they're fighting for the want of the president or the want of somebody else in a high position.

H: So, leaders are able to take advantage of the fact that Arabs react very quickly and that way they can get them altogether roused up and get them behind their programs.

N: Right, exactly.

H: How about some of the vices in this country, such as

pornography, prostitution, people dealing with the devil, things like that. Do you have problems with them in Syria?

N: Well, I remember about five years ago and before we had a place for prostitution in Aleppo, because it was a major city. I don't know what their purpose was, but they had one. About five years ago they just kicked everybody from that place and they destroyed that place. They built a market in that place, which is a maronite church like Christianity. So, prostitution in there isn't a big problem at all, because you could hardly find prostitutes. If you did find, I don't think they would be from the city or from the country. They would be coming from somewhere else, like Egypt, Lebanon or Turkey.

H: They would come to major cities only?

N: Yes, to major cities.

H: They wouldn't go to a city like you lived in?

N: No, no not at all. They would be mostly just in Aleppo and Damascus. These are the only two cities you could find. Of course, it is very secret there. When you want to deal with that, you must do it secretly, because of the people. You don't want the people to know you are doing that, because then they would start having bad ideas about you. So, that's about prostitution and about . . .

H: Pornography?

N: What is pornography?

H: Where they take maybe bad pictures of women, use them in a bad way or other perverted subjects.

N: Oh yes. There is a law in Syria that if they could find in your hand anything like naked women pictures or any dirty pictures you could be in jail for six months. At the borders they would never let one of those magazines get into Syria, dirty magazines get in Syria or one of the dirty pictures get in Syria. So, there is not really a problem at all in there. Of course, some people bring them from other countries secretly. That is very, very few. If they were caught, they could be in very big trouble. About the other subject you asked me.

H: You mentioned to me one time if anyone was ever in pos-

session of a book about the devil they would be in big trouble?

N: Yes, before people used to believe in reading the future, people who would read the future or fortune tellers and all of these kinds. Of course, nowadays people are becoming more aware of it. The other people, fortune-tellers or these people are becoming very, very few. The government or one of the policemen would see a book in your hand dealing with the devil or how to read the future or how to do tricks with the devil and all of that you could also be in jail for six months. You could go around and tell people what their future would be, and take their money. But, they wouldn't do it in front of the government. They would knock on your door and say, you want me to tell you about your future? So, you would let them in, and they would come and do it for you.

None of the new generation believes in it, you could say almost none. About 90% of the old generation believe in that.

H: Did one of these fortune tellers ever come to your home?

N: Yes, and I asked her to find mine. Well, see when they want to do that with that person they are dealing with they ask him some questions before they tell him anything. Like they'd come to a young man who was sixteen or seventeen. What young man at that age isn't thinking of girls. So, they would tell him, "Oh, there's a girl who is crazy about you. She is like that and she is like that, and she wants you, but she is too shy to tell you." So, that guy gets excited and he gives her more money.

They'd come to women, old women or women married to her man in her middle ages, they'd say, "Well, watch out for your husband. There's another woman looking at your husband, and she is interested in him. So, watch out for him. In the future you will find something good." They just think of the person they are dealing with, they ask him some questions and then they give them some suggestions and they say that's your future.

H: It seems strange to me though that, since a lot of the people are so religious, they would allow even such a person into their house. A lot of the religions forbid to read a horoscope. How does that relate to your religion?

N: Okay, that's a good point you brought. As I mentioned before, in our society the old people are the problem there. They believe what they only know that they should believe, and they think that that is their religion. So, most of them they believe in fortune tellers and all of that. They don't think anything's wrong with it. Well, in our religion it forbids it and it is sinful. They think what they think is right is their religion to them, and everybody must follow that otherwise everybody's Atheist. Like when I wear pants, the first time I bought pants(bell bottoms) I was in the biggest trouble I could ever be in. Why? Because they said these pants look like girls' pants. Well, is that forbidden in our religion? Show me a place that says it's forbidden in our religion to wear pants like this type. Of course, they don't know anything about the religion. They only know the religion they have in their mind, and they think that it is the right thing. So, like my father, he almost tore the pants in his hands because they were wide in the bell. So, just what they believe and think is right is right, they think that is their religion. Everything else is not.

H: Okay, you mentioned to me that many of the members of your family can't read or write?

N: Right, yes.

H: Didn't any of your sisters attend school?

N: Well, this is another bad custom there that I hate. The old people think that girls shouldn't attend school. They should just be in the house. Housewives, that's their job. They think that schools teach the students how to be Atheist. Like they say they teach them science and most of their science conflicts with religion, with their belief of their religion. They think why should girls go to school, just to attend school to learn how to write and read. Then, write letters to boys. So, my sisters, I have two sisters, they're married now, they didn't attend school because my father didn't allow them to. All my brothers attended schools, but five or six of them dropped out of school. So far, I am the only one studying at the university. I have two brothers, younger brothers. The youngest brothers I have attending middle school.

H: Okay, can you describe to me what your house looked like?

N: Our houses there are different than the houses here. Here you have most of your houses built out of wood, because you have wood here that is cheaper compared to ours there. There we have most of the houses built by cement bricks. Our houses are like squares. All around the square are the bedrooms. In the middle, is open area to the sky.

H: Like a courtyard?

N: Right, yes. The whole house would be surrounded by the bedrooms, and the rooms, and the kitchen. In the middle, would be open area to the sky where you have a place for plants, place for a fountain. A place where we go and sit. And in the sky, you know, the air is blowing, and the moon and stars. Most of the people there prefer that. In the summer or spring at night, they go sit in the middle of the house where they can see the sky and moon. We talk and all of the family gets together. We have a good time.

H: Okay, you mentioned to me one time that you would sometimes sleep on the roof in the summer?

N: Yes, in the summer it is very famous there. We have, in villages and small cities, mostly one floor buildings. In the summer time, we take our mattresses up to the top of the ceiling.

H: The roof?

N: We sleep on top of the roof of the room. We cover ourselves so the smell of the trees comes to us in the clean air. The sky, the moon, you know if you want to get yourself alone in there. It is very, very nice. I have experienced both of them, sleeping in the room and sleeping there. It is much better than sleeping in the room. You wake up in the morning, and the birds make nice singing. If there's a stream beside you, you can hear the water running. The sun comes to you in the morning, also. So, it is very interesting. I really like it. It is very famous there.

H: How about the houses in major cities like Damascus and Aleppo? Are they similar, or are they more like western homes?

N: No, they are mostly western houses like floored buildings, ten or twenty floor buildings, small apartments, small rooms where you have a lot of people. You have

these problems. They have in the big cities housing problems where they can not provide housing for everybody. So, the rates are expensive. Bedrooms are small western type. For a village person, he wouldn't be interested at all in living in this house.

H: Are the cities polluted like they are here?

N: No, not at all. Here you have a lot of factories. You have a lot of cars. Of course, we do there too, but not as much as here. Our factories are far away from the city. Then, we have the bus transportation, public transportation in the city. Almost nobody really needs a car there. A bus for about three American cents could get you anywhere in the city. They are working twenty-four hours a day. Every five minutes there is a bus coming. So, there are thousands of buses in the city which run everywhere. Of course, they belong to the government. They take anybody anywhere. They really solve the transportation problem there. So, nobody has to have a car. Today, two or three cents gets you from the beginning of the city to the end of it. If you are a student, you pay even less.

H: What is the woman's role in Syrian culture?

N: Well, women didn't have power at all. When I say before, I mean about twenty years ago. Women didn't have power at all. Women were just meant, I'm talking my country, to be housewives. Why? Because again, of the old people problems, and what they think is right and what they think is not.

Of course, the new generation is coming. Everybody is going to school, everybody is being educated nowadays. Women have become more liberated. We have books written by people about liberation of women. Books written by religious people. Muslim religious people. Christian religious people about liberation of women, about how she should go out to work with men. So, now you go to Syria you see a lot of women are doctors, a lot of women lawyers, engineers, working in the restaurant, working in hotels, working in almost every place, factories. Of course, there still are a lot of women still in the house. But again, these women are either the old women like my mother and her generation, or the women who still have fathers from the old generation, who still have ideas that women should be in the house. Like my father and my sisters. My sisters didn't go to school, because of the ideas of my father. So now, I think you could say the women there are just as the women here.

But, there is one thing different of women from there to here. Their women are more respectable. Here, like in the university, she comes in saying all the bad words and swearing. And, doesn't care if there's a person beside her or nobody beside her or anything. Over there when you see a lady walking, you would never swear. You would never say a bad word. I've never heard my sister or a girl in Syria say a bad word up to now. They are much more respectable. They are more strict to deal with than women here. Like here, you can make a girlfriend in a day or two days. Within the first week, you go with her. While there, that is very, very hard. I was nineteen years old when I lived in Syria. I didn't have a girlfriend there, because it's just very difficult there to have a girlfriend. Why? Because, they don't allow that. They just think when it's time for you to get married, then you look for the girl you want. You get together. She likes you, and you like her, then you get engaged. In less than a year, you get married. So, the girl you go out with you must be thinking of getting married to her, not like here goofing off and playing around.

H: How do you meet a wife then?

N: That was a very big problem to the people before. Like my father, I know this will sound very strange to you. When my father married my mother, he never saw her before. He only saw her on the wedding night. He didn't know what she looked like. He didn't know what she thought, or what her ideas were. Just his sister went and she saw her. She came and described her to him and they made a deal.

H: A deal?

N: Well, not a deal. They agreed to get married. But, like getting to my brothers. None of them got married without at least being with his wife before marriage at least a year. That's at least. My brother, I know he was with his wife three years before they got married. He knew her and was going out with her. Well going out, I told you before that they couldn't go out with their girlfriends, but since my brother was engaged with his cousin, my uncle trusted him very much and he trusted his daughter. That's why he allowed them to go out like to the movies, to public parks, picnics and other places. But, like now for me, if I would go back to Syria and I would think of getting married I think it would be very, very difficult for me. Because I want to know a girl

with whom I am going to get married before I get married to her. That takes a lot of time. You have to find the right girl. Have her ideas, see if you like her ideas, if you like her. Then, mention that you want to get married with her. Then, I could go out with her more. Of course, if I wanted to break up later I would, but it's not nice there. I mean people would like that.

H: So, it's very rare that anyone would break up?

N: It's not very rare, but the percentage is much less than it is here. Of course, there are people who break up, but they are very few. Since you get to know her, it's not required but it's much better that you would get married to her. It's not good there for a girl to go with a person, or after two men. It gives her a very bad reputation. Then, people would think to go away from her. Not to marry her or anything, because they think that she is the reason. Relating to that, there would be a lot of or there have been a lot of girls who were mistreated because of that.

H: Really?

N: Yes.

H: But in that sense, you don't really know the girl that well do you, before you marry her, even though it is better than it used to be?

N: Yes. When her family trusts you and they trust their daughter, you really get to know her well. Because, they allow you to go out alone, talk with each other. Of course, you can not take her to your apartment. You can go to the movie, you can go to the public parks, picnics, all of that alone. See her ideas, and stay like that about three or four months, a year until you really get to know her very well. But if you are in a hurry and you want to get married next month, then that becomes a problem.

H: A lot of people are in a hurry?

N: No, not a lot of people. Some of them are. So, they're going to decide quickly and see whom they want.

H: But, are most people free to go out like that, go to parks and movies? What if the family didn't trust you?

N: Well, in many time, the mother of the girl sends her

little daughter or her little son with them, so he'd keep them in line.

H: Really?

N: Yes, but you know giving the child a \$1 and telling him to go get something to drink or something to eat, he could go for an hour while you discuss what you want or . . .

H: So, young couples don't get angry then if a little brother or sister is sent along?

N: No, they don't, because that is expected to be done.

H: What is your father's attitude towards women?

N: Oh my gosh. Why did you ask me this question? His attitude is very negative about women. He thinks women just belong to the house. He thinks women have no right to do anything without asking their husbands, or without getting the permission of their husbands.

H: You mentioned to me one time the saying he always told you about women being like snakes?

N: Yes, that is again a problem of the old generation in Syria. Up to now all of the things have related to the problem of the old generation in Syria. He is not a unique type. He is just like a lot of them. Like a lot of old people in Syria. They think of women as being lower than men. And, housewives doing only housework, the work of the kitchen and home and all of that. He doesn't think that women should go to school. He said he certainly would like it if I asked my wife to stay at home or if I would ask my wife to cover her face. I'm sure he thinks now, since I wouldn't want to do that, that I am an Atheist. Because, he thinks that our religion requires that and this is what Mohommad said. This is the right thing we should do. Follow the Koran. It doesn't say that in the Koran. A woman doesn't have to cover her face. She doesn't stay in the house. A woman should work and all of that, well he wouldn't believe you. First, he doesn't know how to read. Second, he is older than you, so when he thinks he is in the weak position discussing problems with you he'd just say, "Oh, shut up son. That is it, you don't know anything. You come from the golden egg and you want to teach us to fly. You don't know anything about these things."

- H: What was his saying though about the snake? I just thought that was funny.
- N: Well, he always comes to me and said to me, "My son, listen, women are just like snakes. Whenever they raise their heads, smash it with your feet."
- H: You mentioned to me one time that your father wasn't to pleased with the way you would always help your mother out?
- N: Well, he was pleased with the way I helped my mother, but he wouldn't be pleased at all if I would help my wife like that. He just thinks that men shouldn't do anything at home. That's the wife's job.
- Men take care of business and women take care of the house. So, if he would enter once and he would see my house and he would see me washing the dishes, he would think that's awful. He would say I don't want you to be my son. I wouldn't want to go out and say you're my son, because I would be to ashamed of you.
- H: Really?
- N: Yes, but see I am saying this is just the point of view of my family. I've talked to some of my friends, Arabs here, who came from Kuwait, and Lebanon. Well, they were really surprised and shocked at these things, because they never had these things. They see things totally different.
- H: So, this is a characteristic more of the smaller villages in Syria?
- N: Right, exactly. Like as I told you even my friends were shocked of the stories that I told about my father. My friend's parents don't do that. My sister goes to the university. Well, I tell them I know, but what can I do if that's his idea. I can't change it.
- H: Have your brothers followed in your father's footsteps? Do they have the same attitudes toward women?
- N: Mostly, they do. They also have some very bad ideas about women, but at least they are better than him in these ideas. But, still since they didn't go to school, they went to third or fourth grade and they quit school. Working day and night with my father, what ideas did they have? Like his ideas, right?

H: Does the mother play an important role in the house? I know the father has the ultimate command. How about the mother? Does she have a lot of control within the house?

N: Within the house she has the most control, even more than the father.

H: Oh really?

N: Yes, because they say well she is for the house, so she has the rules of that house. So, she can patrol the way she wants, make her own rules. Do whatever she wants. She is the head of the house.

H: Even the father will be?

N: If he likes it, and she orders. Otherwise, he wouldn't.

H: But, he would expect all of the sons no matter how old they are to obey?

N: Yes, and if they didn't then they would be in trouble with him also.

H: But, even if he didn't like her rules?

N: Right, right.

H: Do your sisters wear veils?

N: When they were in my house and my father's rule, they did. But, now since they got married and their husbands are not from the old generation, they don't really care about that a lot. Of course, about veils this is mostly in their villages. Like now, if you would go to Damascus you could hardly find a woman with a veil. Women go out just like American girls here. They seem exactly the same way. They seem like school girls, working girls. I think it's the same thing here. Even I was shocked. I heard one of my Syrian friends who came from Damascus, he said go to Damascus and see. We have now a new custom of girlfriend and boyfriend. Gosh I was shocked, because I could never believe that is happening there.

H: But, still women wouldn't dress in such revealing clothes as western women do?

N: No, especially like here some girls would go out with jeans that have a lot of stitches, a lot of places cut. Like half of her legs are showing, half of her body is

showing. It doesn't matter how she goes out. While we are there, she must wear decent clothes. She can not wear pants with holes in them or pants with holes and then the holes are covered with weird things like girls do here. They put writings on their rear ends. Of course there, they would never do that. That's again why they are respected there, because they look the type that they should be respected.

H: Do they wear bathing suits there to go swimming?

N: In the cities, like most of the cities, where they have places to swim, yes. Of course, my father believes if you would do that you are an Atheist, again. If you would go to Aleppo, Damascus or other big cities beside the Mediterranean Sea. I went many times, trips to the Mediterranean Sea. Just like here, bathing suits and girls with guys, rent apartments or chalets beside the sea shore. Just like here.

H: How do you compare women in Syria to women in other Muslim countries?

N: Well, here I could compare it to the worst and to the better. To the worst, compare it to the women in Saudi Arabia. Like women in Saudi Arabia, they must wear a veil. They can not do any work outside the house. They can not drive cars. So, that is being over protective or extremely stubborn in ideas.

So, if you would compare the women in my country and the women in Saudi Arabia, I think the women in my country have much more freedom. Especially like in the cities as I told you, it's just like in the United States. They have all of the rights. Women have more rights than men. The government thinks of women as weaker and tries to help her over the man.

Comparing women in Syria and women in Lebanon, or women in Egypt, like Cairo or Alexandria, women have a lot more freedom. The relationships between men and women are more free than it is in Syria. Women can go out in more western clothes than they could go out in Syria. So, you could say Syria is in the middle.

H: Why don't you have photos of your sisters with you? Because you do carry photos of your brothers?

N: When I came to the United States, I was in a hurry so I didn't have a photo of everyone in my family. I asked

my family to send me photos. My father thought that they shouldn't go through all that trouble to go to my sister's house to take pictures of them. So, just my little brother took pictures of my family. He sent me pictures of my sisters' marriages.

H: Okay, in what ways did westerners misinterpret the Islamic religion?

N: Well, they misinterpret it in many different ways. Really I don't blame them because we, Moslems, misinterpret it. Like as I said the old generation. Not just them, a lot of people misinterpret it. If you think what they misinterpret is like how our religion treats women, well, there is a big difference between how our religion tells us to treat women and how we treat women. There is a big difference in that. Westerners think only that our religion is what we are doing. Well, most of the people aren't doing what they are supposed to be doing. Like my father is an example. So, they think that the Islamic religion says that the women must wear a veil. Well, that isn't true. In our religion, you don't have to wear a veil. You only have to cover your hair. Just not to let your face to be seen, and proper clothes.

Here everyone thinks from Saudi Arabia when they cut the hand of the thief or kill a killer. My gosh, they think that is awful. Well, if you think of it in a different way. In Saudi Arabia about every three or four years, they have to kill one person, because he killed on purpose. that means in every three or four years there is one crime in the whole country.

Secondly, I think also in the bible it says the blood of these people who shed blood their blood should be shed.

H: Are you referring to an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth?

N: Right, right. Our religion says an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth also. So like for a thief, there are, of course, rules before they cut his hand. there are rules that should be followed. Like if he would steal the first time they would warn him. Put him in jail for a very short time and warn him not to do that again. If he would do it a second time, they would put him in jail longer time and warn him a second time. But, the third time, if he would do it a third time and he really isn't in much need of money, and the thing which he stole

wasn't just thrown outside or wasn't properly locked or anything like that; if all of these would happen, then they would cut his hand. Three times, he wasn't in any need of that thing he was stealing, then they would cut his hand. And as I told you in about three or four years, it would happen once. you can go for a walk in Saudi Arabia and have in your pocket \$2,000,000, nobody would say anything to you. Nobody would bother you. You would keep your shop open while they go pray in the mosque. They leave their shops open. Nobody dares take anything. Why, because everybody is afraid of the results.

Also, about killing on purpose or raping on purpose. If you would go and kill her, well since he killed her why shouldn't he be killed. That's dangerous to the society. So, an eye for an eye and he would be killed. If he would will a person to steal money, he would be killed. But if he would kill as an accident or he would kill not on purpose, he wouldn't be killed.

H: So, if someone who was in need and stole, he wouldn't be in trouble?

N: Well, his hand wouldn't be cut okay. Of course, he would have to go to the judge and you know police and all of that, but his hand wouldn't be cut. They would find out why he is in need, and try to satisfy those needs. Like in Mohammads time and after about 100 years after Mohammads time, we had in our history there was a special place where you contribute money for the poor people to take. When there was a lot of money, and there was nobody to take. Because, everybody was following the religion correctly. Everybody was in great satisfaction. The money wasn't even locked. It just was put in there. Everybody trusted the other. Everybody had enough. Everybody was religious. There was money and nobody was to take it. Of course again, the governments aren't exactly the best governments. They take to their pockets a lot. They do a lot of bad things. That is what really is getting us down and is getting our religion down and is getting our reputation down.

H: You've told me that Islamic law works better than western law, and in other words you don't see to many murders in your country, not to many people steal, there aren't that many rapes. Yet, you've also told me at other times that out in the backwood areas of the country that people are sometimes very harsh toward one another and do go after each other with knives and

things like that. yet, they get away with it don't they at time?

N: Sometimes they get away with it. When village people get their temper they don't care what happens to them. They just want to do what they think they should do. If somebody would swear at another person, and the other person didn't fight him the other people would think of him as a coward. So, that person by the society he is required to react and hurt or fight or kill, no matter what the results would be. Most of the times they get into trouble. That is really getting bad, very bad. You could get away in many things by bribing. So that people who would get away, they usually bribed a lot.

H: What would happen to a girl if she became pregnant and she wasn't married?

N: Well, that is very, very rare to happen there. If it happens, it has different results. These results differ from the villages to cities. Like in big cities as Damascus and Aleppo sometimes they get away with it. They move to a different place and the child wouldn't be born. they would have an abortion, and she would get away with it. That's very rare.

But, in villages, if this would happen, they would have to kill the girl. That is again a custom. The old people are the only people who support this thing, because they think it's their pride. If they don't kill that girl, then their pride among the other people would be down. They would be ashamed of themselves. So, in small villages if she would get pregnant, everybody would know. If they found out right away that she is pregnant and she is not married, they would kill that girl.

I know about a true story that happened with my oldest brother when he went to get married. It happened about fifteen to seventeen years ago. I remember I was a child, about fifteen years ago. My brother wanted to get married, so he saw this girl and they liked each other. My mother went to her mother and they talked about this. They arranged a meeting and my brother got engaged to her. After that, she got some kind of sickness. About three or four months after that she got some kind of sickness that she's walking and she would fall down unconscious for an hour. That would happen every two or three days once with her. We took her to many doctors. They didn't help. These doctors didn't

help. So, every two or three days she would fall down on the floor unconscious for almost an hour or two hours.

Once, her family wasn't there. She was there alone. It happened that she fell down unconscious and her father who was about fifty year old, forty-five to fifty years old, he was very, very religious. He appeared very religious. Well, he came and saw his daughter on the ground. He got into his mind and he made love to her or sex to her. So, when she woke up about two hours later, she found out. She saw her father in the house, so she knew. She knew it was her father, but she was a very nice girl. I knew her. Gosh she was really an extremely nice girl, sweet and everything. Well, when she woke up she knew that it was her father who did that. Because she was very shy, she didn't tell her mother. She didn't tell anybody. Well about two months later or three months later, she became pregnant. Her mother noticed, and her stomach was becoming big and big. So, her mother asked her well what is that? Where is it from? She said, "Ask my father." Finally, her brothers noticed, and everybody in the village noticed. When in the village everybody noticed that the girl was pregnant, and she is not married, well everybody thinks that the custom is she should be killed.

So, her father ran away, because he was afraid of his children. Because, they were going to kill him because of what he did.

H: They knew he did it?

N: Yes, they knew he did it.

H: How did they know?

N: When her mother was asking her, she would say, "Well, go ask my father." Everytime her mother would ask her she would say, "Go ask my father." So, her brothers were asking their mother. Her mother knew that her husband did that to her daughter. So, and his children knew that. So, what they did is they had to kill her. So, they brought poison. She knew that was happening to her. She saw the poison, and they put the poison to her in the food. So, she went around she had small brothers and sisters. She went around kissing everybody, her little brothers, she was kissing them goodbye. She knew that she was going to die. She went and she ate. About half an hour later she died. They just said that she died.

H: If they knew she was innocent, how could they do that to their own sister? How can they go pray after doing that?

N: Well, see this again goes back. You say how can they pray? They aren't religious to start with, because if they were they would never do such things like this. But again, the customs to these people are much more important than their religion. That's what they go by; customs.

H: Since your brother was engaged to her, why didn't he try to do something?

N: Because, they broke up about two or three months before that happened to her.

H: Didn't he still care enough to try to help her?

N: Well, he didn't think it was his business, because you are not a member of the family. You just don't get into the things of the family. But they tried. Her brothers went looking for their father to kill him, but they couldn't find him. It was a very sad story. We all cried about it. Many girls go innocent, because of stupid customs. That was an innocent girl who died because of customs. Again, these customs are from where? From the old people.

H: Do families go to the mosque together on Fridays as families go to church here on Sundays?

N: Well, not here every family goes. The same thing there.

H: I mean the families who do go, go with family? It's something that if a family is a strong believer in God everyone in the family has to get up on Sunday mornings, and they have to go to church or else they're going to be in trouble with mom and dad, and they all go together.

N: Yes, they do the same thing on Fridays there. Like, I have an uncle who is really religious and nice. They are religious people there. All his daughters are educated. He would never hurt his child or hit his child or hit his daughter or anything. He would always think of his wife as higher level than him. He always respected her. They go every Friday. That is why I think of him as the typical Moslem.

H: Typical or . . .

N: No not typical. I mean that right, right Moslem. I sent letters to my family and I put my last name by his last name. I changed my last name, because I just love the way he is; the way he deals with his children, with his family, with himself, with the people.

So, if the family is religious as you said, they go to the mosque on Fridays.

H: What if they're not?

N: What if they're not religious you mean?

H: What if, for instance, the family just goes to the mosque for appearance sake, not that they're really close to God? Do they have that same togetherness of the family?

N: No, no they don't. They don't insist on their wives and children to go with them. They just, as you said, go for the appearance, and that's it.

H: Christians, especially born again Christians, often discuss miracles of God. Did you as a member of the Moslem family ever see any miracles?

N: Before when I was twelve even fourteen years old, people would tell me this happened, that hapened to some other people. I would never believe it. I wanted to believe it, but it was hard for me to believe such things like that.

Once I was travelling from my city to Aleppo, and I saw Moslems gathering. They were asking the other people to believe truly in God, especially when the communist ideas came to Syria. There were communist beside them who didn't believe in God. So, I saw a person in front of my eyes. In his hands were big swords, and he said by the name of God if there is no God I shall be killed if I put this sword in my stomach. And he said by the name of God a lot and he put the sword in his stomach and others drove the sword on the street. He pushed all his weight on that sword, but when he pushed like that the other end of the sword came from his back. He took the sword again back from his stomach. He said by the name of Allah; not even a drop of blood came out. His friend was beside him also. He had a knife in his hand. A big knife in his hand. All the people were saying, "Oh, there is no God. You're just making that up We are hitting ourselves by the name of God. If he is really

there, he would allow us to hit ourselves and nothing would happen to us, just for you to believe that there is a God." He was hitting his stomach with a knife. Then he said, "You probably don't believe our sword." He took his shirt off and just his skin was there. In front of my eyes was his skin. He was hitting his stomach with that saying by the name of the lord. Not even a drop of blood came out.

Other miracles I know what happened with my great cousin. He died now. When the French were in Syria, some of them did not believe in that. They said, "Oh, you Moslems are just nothing. You made up this religion and all of that." So, some of Moslem religious people gathered and they asked the French people to show them the miracles of God. So, they made a big gathering. The mayor of the city, of course he was a French person also, all the top French people came gathering and the religious people, Moslem people, they sat there and they built a fire. They built chains and some kind of pens on the fire until it became red, extremely red. So, what they did was that, one of them was my great cousin, they took these spoons while they are red from the fire, put them on their heads. They were going in front of the whole French people at that place showing them that we aren't lying. We are people of God, and there is God. Nothing happened to them.

H: How about when you mentioned the knives. How do you know it wasn't some type of trick?

N: Okay, you would expect a trick. I mean if the person is really tricky, you could right away tell. When these people are all their lives in the mosque, reading the Koran and praying to Allah, and just trying to help the people get the right ideas and all of that. So, these people wouldn't know what a trick means. Then, the knives they didn't come from their pockets. The knives came from the people who didn't believe in God.

H: You saw that?

N: Yes, the people who didn't believe in God, they gave them their knives. Of course, the swords no because nobody had swords. But, because of our history the old people have swords there, so they had swords.

H: One time you told me a story about carrying the coffin?

N: Yes, of another cousin. He didn't know how to read or

how to write. He was to himself. He would never hurt anything in the world. He just prayed, went to his shop from the morning until night, and came home; praying and staying with his family and his wife. He died when he was old. But, many people suspected that he was from the tree religious people who could do miracles. He didn't do any miracles while he was alive. So, while he was dying he asked them (his daughter died before him), to take his body beside his daughter's tomb for half an hour. Just for half an hour and then take him back to his tomb. Well, when he died I was in the ceremony. My father was there. He was our cousin so we were all there.

H: When was this? About what year?

N: About, I was in the twelfth grade between eleventh and twelfth grade. About five years ago say. So, we all went in there. It was late at night. There we carry the tomb on our shoulders, taking it to the cemetery. So, we carried the tomb to the cemetery. Just off of the street was the cemetery. Well, we wanted to take him to his tomb which was very far away from his daughter's tomb. I was one of the carriers. My father also was one of the carriers. About fifty persons were carrying. The coffin stopped when we would take it to the direction of his tomb. The coffin would force all of us and go to the direction of his daughter's tomb. Well, it was kind of late and we were in the middle of the street. All of the cars are stopped, and nobody could move the coffin. We would try to take it to his tomb, it would resist all of us and turn to his daughter's tomb. When we walked to his daughter's tomb, it felt as if we were carrying nothing. Like it was flying there. He's not going to move, and we had to take him to his daughter's tomb. Well, when we turned to his daughter's tomb, it's just like there was no weight at all. We went there for about fifteen minutes and then took him to his tomb.

H: Okay, let's go back to your schooling once again. Only this time we'll talk about the university. Why did your family make fun of you when you enrolled in dentistry school?

N: After I finished my high school with a high grade point average, I went to dentistry school in Damascus. So, I went and registered without asking my family. When I came and they asked me what I registered, I said I registered in dentistry. They were all laughing and making

fun of me. Oh, that's awful, that's bad. Why, because none of us has gone to dentist. Why, because they just don't think much of it. They don't think it is necessary. They don't think of a dentist as being a doctor. They wanted me to study medicine. They sent me to Damascus to study medicine, but they didn't want me to study denistry in Syria. Because, none of them have gone to a dentist. None of them think that a dentist is a doctor. None of them think that this is important in their society. But when their teeth hurt, their mothers would tell them what they should do. Like, they smoke a cigarette, or they put a drop of alcohol on the tooth or on the sore. They were all making fun of me. I changed from denistry to civil engineer.

H: Were they happy then?

N: Well, yes they were happy, because either they wanted a doctor or an engineer. But, they mostly wanted me to be a doctor. That's why they let me come to the United States.

H: Why didn't you study medicine in Syria?

N: Because, Syria is a socialist country. The problem with the socilist countries is they want a number of Syrians to be attending denistry school; this number of students should be attending engineers, and this number of students should be attending medicine. They take usually the highest grade point average of students, and they put them in medical school. Well, at that time they wanted 180, four points after 200.

H: This isn't the grade point average? This is the test you took at the end of high school?

N: Yes, right at the end of high school.

H: So, no matter how high your grades were it depended on that test?

N: Right, right. So, I had four points less than what I was required to have for medical school. Probably if you have one point less, it doesn't matter. You must have the same or more to get in. So, I couldn't get in. Of course, if I had used bribery, I would have got in easily.

H: How many points were required?

N: 184 out of 220 I think, yes.

H: And you got 180?

N: Yes, I got 180. So, I studied civil engineering there.

H: You told me that Syrians have an interesting idea about lawyers?

N: Yes, well lawyers there can't find jobs. Why? Because people there try to solve their problems among themselves. There would be people who would find what the problem is and try to solve it. Especially our neighbors would get involved in our problems. We'd get involved in their problems, and try to solve problems between them and other people. They would try to solve problems between us and other people. If there's an old person in the family, he would take care mostly of that. If he would say, "Well, that's it," you know we would have to follow that rule. So, we really solved our problems between ourselves. We do not take it to the government or to the court. That's why lawyers don't have jobs there. Secondly, especially religious people really don't like this kind of job. Because as we say in Arabic, lawyers never go to heaven. Why? Because think of it here in the United States, if you are guilty you could go to a lawyer and pay say \$100,000 and he will work to prove you innocent. Well, that means he works for the money? He's cheating, and he is doing a very big sin. That's why we say lawyers never go to heaven. Because their business is to get people out of trouble by taking money. The more money they take the more innocent they get them to be.

H: Can you compare your experience at the Syrian University to those here at Youngstown State in regard to your studies, your professors, extra curricular activities, student conduct?

N: There are a lot of differences between the university there and here at Youngstown State University. There, like in here you can't take the courses you want to. You can't drop the courses you want to, of course, there are guidelines you have to take.

Over there you must take certain courses for civil engineering. They have curriculum for every year, and you must take this load; such as fifteen or twenty subjects for each year. You must take all these and you must pass in two of them, you don't pass that year. You are

required to take everything again. It's really a lot there. I used to go about forty-eight hours a week. They give us much material that is really hard. I remember my material for civil engineering. It's called engineering drawing, graphic engineering drawing. I would never have an hour empty from my days there. All packed with school and studies and all that type, and homework.

The same subject I took here was nothing compared to what I took in Syria. I didn't even open the book, and I got an A in the course. It was much, much more easier than what I took in Syria. So there, subjects are much harder, especially when they translate English books to Arabic. Like mechanics and dynamics and all of that. I didn't understand mechanics there very well at all, because they'd have English names written in Arabic. Well, I wouldn't know what Victor meant. They'd just see Victor and they'd say well this is Victor. But, when I studied it in English here, I understood it much more. So, that's also another difference. And there, they give us some materials that we don't need, such as courses about Socialism. Read about Socialism, about other materials which we did not need.

- H: If the programs there are so intense, why do so many Arabs come to the United States and other countries to study engineering?
- N: Because, in Syria there would be at least 300 students in a class. If you would ask one question, say every student would ask one question, the whole period would be gone and the teacher would not say a word; just answer questions. You don't get to ask questions. You just have to accept what the teacher says. Many students enroll but few are accepted. Well, in some cities in the United States, I know there are three universities. So, that is the problem, the lack of universities. There isn't enough universities.
- H: So, even though you don't think the programs are as intense here in the United States, how can you account for the fact that the United States does produce a lot of great minds? If they aren't receiving this intense education that you had over there?
- N: Well, when you receive intense education, then you forget a lot, because when you want to put in your mind a lot of things in one day then the second day you forget a lot of it. When studies are not as intense, you take

it easy and study the way you're supposed to, you experience with materials, that's the most important thing. Here, there are labs. Two students work together. While over there, we used to work every eight to twelve students together, because they didn't have enough equipment. A lot of students, and not enough equipment. So here, they don't give us as intense, but they give us more details. The material's more detailed. They give us the materials we want, and need in our lives as engineers. When they give us more, we have to study more materials. When studying more materials you forget other materials. While here, they go in more details. There are more equipments, more labs, to practice.

H: Are classes conducted the same way they are here?

N: Yes, they are, but the number of the students that's what makes the difference. You can not ask questions. You don't get to ask questions. Sometimes you don't get to hear the teacher, because you are so far away in distance from him. You can not see the board, you can not hear the teacher. A lot of problems there.

Here, you have fifteen or twenty students in the class. While there, classes are with five to six hundred students.

H: Are the professors similar to the professors here?

N: Well, they have the same knowledge or probably more. Most of them are doctors, PhD, from say Europe or the United States or some other different country. But, they aren't like the teachers here. Teachers here try to be the outgoing type with the students. After they finish their class, they talk to the students. They joke with them. They eat at the same place students eat. They wash their hands from the same place students wash. Here in the United States I think of my teachers as my friends. I can talk to them the same way I can talk to my friend.

While there, teachers are more strict. They want respect. They want to be different from students. Always you could tell if that person is a teacher or not from the way he works, from the way he acts, from where he eats, from where he goes. He doesn't make jokes with the students. I don't know, here I think it's much better. Because when you feel your teacher is your friend, you receive more benefits.

H: There are some unusual teachers though on American campuses. Didn't that surprise you? For instance, you encounter a particular professor at YSU who is known to be a witch. Wasn't that rather shocking to you that that type of person was a professor?

N: Yes, that was very shocking to me. I didn't think that there would be such people like that who are teachers or who teach in a university like that witch. Some teachers who act, I don't know if you would say so dumb or so surprising that they are teachers. I think you would probably find the same thing there but not in the universities. Rarely you would find that in a university there.

H: Are many students allowed to leave Syria to study in foreign countries?

N: Before I came to the United States, there weren't any allowed. But teachers in the universities were complaining that there were too many students in the universities, and they were going to leave teaching. So, the government had to find a way to solve this problem. They thought that they should let some students go out of the country to study. From that time up until now they would let the students who could get accepted in Medical or Engineering school to leave.

H: That is all?

N: So when that opportunity came out, I put my application in, and I came here.

H: Once you came here and found you couldn't get into medical school, for various reasons and you switched to civil engineering did that cause any problems?

N: It caused a lot of problems with me and my family. They didn't want me to study engineering. They wanted me to go back and study medicine. But I felt to know English, being in this culture and knowing about it, and knowing about the people here is much more important to me than learning civil engineering in the United States rather than in Syria. That's why I decided to stay here. It's just not that I wanted to learn in the United States. I stayed here because I wanted to learn about it. The culture of the United States, the people whom I always heard in Syria that were greedy. They just love money. Everything they think of is money. Everything they deal is about money. You have no friends. They don't make

friends. They don't make neighbors. They don't talk to each other. Everything is just money, money, money. But when I came here, I saw everything was the opposite. A lot of people who really don't care about money. They care about friendship. They care about love. They care about you. I simply could say I found some people here who care about me as an individual much more than my country would care about me as an individual. That's why I like it here.

H: How does this theory of impression of Americans compare to the impressions of the Russians?

N: There the impression of Americans are as being greedy and they only care about money, nothing else. But as true religious people, they think or have much better impressions of Americans than Russians. If you are very religious you would hate Russians because they don't believe in God. We say how could they say there's no God when it's obvious that there is. But Russians, they are sneaky. The difference between the U.S. government and the Russian government is the United States government supports the government of the other country. Russia, they work with the people from inside. So, I know from the village I was living in I knew many people who were getting monthly payment, monthly like say \$50 a month payments from Russia. Why, because they were carrying on the communist ideas.

H: Were they paid?

N: Yes.

H: Your friends were doing this?

N: Yes, my friends. Not my friends, but you know I know people. I wouldn't claim them to be my friends.

H: Classmates?

N: Yes. So, I was asked to take every month about \$50 just to become this, and carry on the communist ideas.

H: Who asked you?

N: These people, classmates and these people. Of course, I refused. But, there were many poor people who would take this money. So, that's why Russia works from the people. Inside the people they try to give ideas and give support to the people.

But, still the point of view of Americans is general, because we don't have enough knowledge about America or about Americans. That's why we think they only care about money. That's what we see on television. Like when I came here, my mother what she asked me to do was to promise her that when I go from my house to the school I should wear bad clothes and pretend that I am not interested in girls at all. Because, they said you know girls over there they grab you right away. And she also said, everybody told us that from the airport you will see girls just looking for guys there. They'll take you, and you'll live with them for free just you know to do things with them.

Well, when we came here, we stood in front of the JFK airport in New York City about an hour waiting for the bus, and there were five of us. We were surprised none of the girls came and got us. So, that's why my mother made me promise her that when I'd go to school I'd pretend like I'm, you know, a poor person who doesn't know anything about life, so girls wouldn't be interested in me. They think American girls are just for play and fun. Why, because again that is all they see on television and movies.

H: Just like here the way everyone thinks all Arabs have camels?

N: Right, exactly. Many times people ask me, do you have televisions? Do you have cars? All of these things. Well of course we do. They only think we have camels. Also, the way we think of girls here.

H: Since we're speaking of camels, how many times did you actually see a camel?

N: Well, I don't really remember seeing a camel, not even once. I ate the meat of camel.

H: Is that common?

N: Yes, it is very common. If I did see a camel it was probably in the village when my father would take me to other villages to visit or do something there. I think I saw one once in my life. But, at least once in my life.

H: Besides some of the people excepting money to spread communism within their village, in what ways is the Russian influence felt in your country, and in particular, in your city?

N: Well, since we take aids from Russia, because Israel is taking aids from the United States, also again the chess rules playing the king of the two kings of chess. One is Russia and one the United States, and everybody gets the others to kill each other. So, we're takin aids from Russia. Russia doesn't give aids only, she gives aids with ideas, communist ideas. So now our government is trying to be or is a socialist government. That has created a lot of problems. Such as, the rich people have left Syria to Lebanon, because they didn't want their money to be taken away from them. In this case, Syria lost a lot of money.

I didn't see any equality. they just talk of it. They never make it right. Especially parties which relate to Russia, to communists, like socialist parties there; the government parties and socialist parties. Well, almost everybody I know hates that party in Syria. I hated it. I hated it very much, but I had to register in it. Why, because if you are from the governing party the socialist part, you get the better jobs, better opportunities, the better everything. But, if you are not, then there is a red mark beside your name.

H: How do you go about registering in the party?

N: There are agencies in your schools, in your universities, everywhere. In the city, there are places to go register. The problem is the stupidest people go in there, and they pretend they are the best followers, the best followers to that party. They get the high, good positions. And when they get the high positions, they don't know anything about it. They try to put in their own rules. They forget about the rules of that party, and they try to put their own rules. It just becomes unbearable. There is no respect for individuals. There is respect for groups, but not for individuals. That is why I like it in the United States. I found I was much more respected than I was in Syria.

H: How are elections held in Syria?

N: This is a big problem. Of course, there are elections. There is voting and all of that, but as we say it's all ink on paper. It doesn't affect anything. The figure everytime there is an election, the figure of the people who say yes for the president is 99. It is this small point that differs; 99.56, 99.42, 99.72. Always the 99 is a fixed number. The small point is variable. They just differ with that. So, no matter if it is 50% they

N: say yes and 50% they say no, it is going to be 99 something. If no one votes yes and all votes are no, 99 something is yes. That is if the president has been elected before. Like our president now, when it was the election about three or four years ago, they got a number about 99%. While I am sure not 40% voted yes. The rest voted no. He has the power of the government. So, the popular government always is supporting the president. So, they can change what they want. In the villages, people don't think a lot of voting. The government party goes to a village and promises them that it will do some good. Like, give them some money, or give them something they need for free. They would go vote. These people you know they don't know how to write or read. It doesn't matter to them. They don't know what it means to vote yes or no.

H: Women vote also?

N: Yes.

H: How do you vote? Do you have voting machines?

N: No, it's boxes and papers. You write yes or no. Also, going back to the voting for president. The problem with our president when he came to power, he had to come by force. He had to take over by force. He put the former president in jail, so now our former president is in jail. Our president now, I'm sure he wouldn't leave power just like that, unless somebody would take over by force; over him by force. We jumped from the bad to the good.

Well, they said that to our former president when he came to power. But when he left the power, now they're saying it to this president. When this president is out of the power, they are going to say it to the next president. Every president puts the one before him in jail or sends him out of Syria because he is afraid that he would get the people around him and take over again.

H: I have one more question about the election, when you mark your vote was it in private?

N: Yes, it is. But still, it's not going to make a difference, because 99 is switched then.

H: Don't any of the people ever get suspicious?

N: Well, everybody knows.

H: They don't care?

N: Some of them don't care, but most of them are helpless. They can not do anything. Like if I would go there and say, "Well, this is not fair," I would be in jail right away. Nobody would know where I'd be.

H: Your country's listed in an official book as a democracy. Apparently the people don't understand the western meaning of democracy?

N: Right, exactly.

H: So, you can call it whatever you want?

N: Right.

H: They wouldn't say, "Well, according to the principles of democracy it shouldn't be going on?" Because they know nothing else?

N: Right. Like I knew when I came to the U.S. I learned much more than I knew. I didn't think of democracy the way it is here. That's why I wrote a letter to my friend after I came to the United States and I learned about the things here. I wrote him a letter saying that our country must get rid of socialism, because it's just hurting the people, hurting the country. It's not doing anything good. When we want to go, we were complaining about capitalism.

When I came here, I saw people were really democratic, really respect their freedom. I think that's what we need. And I didn't sign my name on the letter, because I was afraid if the government would find out I could be in very big trouble. My friend told me in the other letter, the answer. He said, "I heard your letter, and was afraid to read it because I didn't want people to see it. Because, both of us would be in trouble."

H: Is there respect for elected officials, government officials, policemen?

N: No, not really. Well, they respect them in front of them but otherwise they don't.

I know he didn't get into that place because he deserves it. Just because he bribed or he did something with the other bigger officials that got him into that place.

H: Several of your brothers have served in the army?

N: Yes.

H: What kind of experiences did they have?

N: Well, I haven't served in the army, but they come and tell me about the army. When you finish high school and you go sign a paper with the army saying that you will serve for life. Then you get to have star, a general. Because you will devote yourself to be there for life and you have finished high school. So, they teach you. You become a star, so this person is safe. He is on the village. He just barely passed high school, and he had all of his father's ideas, all his religious people ideas. He wants to show his power, so he treats the soldiers very badly. He would speak with them so harsh, all the bad words using, all the bad words, torturing them. People there don't like the army at all.

Once I was passing my village street, and I saw about ten women crying, crying really hard. Well, I came and I saw a little child and asked him, "Why are they crying like this?" He said, "One of the women, her son is going into the army. His sisters are crying because he is going into the army."

Well, is he going to die? Are they taking him to the electric chair? No, he's just going into the army. Well, why? Because, everybody thinks of the army as a place of torture, a place of unfairness, a place of unhappiness, a place of or dying, a place of hating, a place of doing without getting repaid. They don't receive enough money to eat. The army of course provides food, but they don't give enough money to spend I mean. They say it's because our government is a poor government. It's not like we have to serve two and a half years. Everybody has to serve two and a half years. Well, you never get out in two and a half years. They just tell you two and a half years, but they may keep you three or four years, five years until they think that you're not needed any more, or you could be replaced. Like up to now, nobody has heard of a case where someone finished in two and a half years; at least three and a half years. I had a brother who served in the army in 1967 when we had the war with Israel and we lost. He said there was a lot of cheating. Officials were bribed by the Israeli government, and they found out. A lot of Syrian officials in the army were bribed by the Israeli government.

H: In what way?

N: They were given money to give wrong directions or to the Israelies, like spies or something like that. So, they found out a lot there, and he helped to cross to Bureya Lake which was between Syria and Israel. You had to cross swimming to go back.

My other brother who was in the war of 1973, the war which we won. He also said that there were some officials who were paid by Israel to do things. They did awful things. They found out, they killed them. They shot them on the spot. This brother who was hurt in 1973 was a driver of a tank, so his tank also not bombed it just broke down by a small bomb. He had a broken leg, but it was alright after a little bit.

Now I have a brother who is in the army. He has been in there more than two and a half years. I don't know if he has finished yet or not, I'm sure he is.

H: Were you ever involved in any political activity?

N: When I was in sixth and seventh grade, I was one of the Nasser followers. Nasser, who was the president of Egypt. I always think of him as the best Arabic president we have ever had. So, I was one of his followers. Our governments party at that time was against that group of Nasia. So, we had to be secret. Like I was sworn secretly that I wouldn't let any information go out. I went to two or three meetings secretly. If they found out, we could be in big trouble. In the school, I used to talk about Nasia and so they would get the impression I was one of them. My brother was a teacher in that school, and he found out that there was a red mark on my name as a follower of Nasser, so he tried to with the other teachers to erase it, and he did.

H: The meetings that you went to were they attended by a lot of people?

N: No, not a lot of people. They were attended by about ten to fifteen about my age. We were about fifteen and twenty years old that is all.

H: A lot of us in the west have the impression that since Syria was under the influence of France that Syrians, at least some of them, speak French or studied it, but when I'm talking to you as Syrian it seems like you hate anything to do with the French language, the French people?

N: Yes. Well, we were under the control of French, and they weren't exactly the nicest people to us. Like my father always tells me about the way the French people treated them. Everything was almost forbidden. Like if you would carry a lighter, you could be in jail. Why? Because they think this lighter could harm or you could do something against the French Army with this lighter. They put an embargo on the grain. Every drop of grain must go to the French Army. Well, where are the people going to eat from? They just didn't care. They just wanted their grain.

My father told me stories about the French. Once he was trying to bring grain from a village to my mother, who was at our house, to make bread, and he had to bring it at night, because we are scared of the French. If they would catch you taking grain from one place to another even inside the same village, you would be jailed. My father was transferring a sack of grain on a donkey at night. He heard the French people behind him, and their horses. He heard the hooves of horses and French people. So with his fingers he lifted the sack a little bit and made a hole in the sack and he made the grain drop on the ground until the sack was empty. So, the French soldiers came to him. He showed them that it was empty, so he wouldn't be in trouble. He had to let all of that be waisted.

The French would bother the women. They would try to rape women, put rules the way they want, take everything in the country the country produces, like cotton, grain, gas. Everything that the country produced there they would take it to the army or to France. Also the French General, if he would see someone running in front of him while he was riding his motorcycle he would shoot them right away. He shot a lot of people just for nothing. They weren't doing anything, they get scared of him since they would hear his motorcycle and they would run away. They don't want to be in that place.

They didn't improve anything in the country at all. They didn't let anybody go to school. Why, because they wanted the people to stay without knowing how to read and write. The Syrian people simply didn't have anything to fight the French with. My father tells me that they would hit the French soldier with tomatoes and potatoes.

H: This was in your village that you did this?

N: Yes.

H: Your family did this?

N: Yes. So, that is why really why I don't like the French very much. Because they destroyed us. They left us about 200 years behind. They took all of the good things from us, and they didn't give us anything.

H: Why don't we finish by discussing some of the events in your younger days when you were somewhat of a character? You've told me that your encounter with the Israeli soldier, about running away from home in this spiritive time. How about telling me something about that?

N: Well, it started right after running away from home. I was in sixth grade, and I loved at that time playing soccer. So, after school one day there was a big game, so I stayed the whole game. I was required to go work with my dad when I finished school at 2:00; I didn't. I just stayed in school and I played the game. So, I came at night and I knew I was in big trouble. Before my dad came I just put three pants on and extra clothes, much extra clothes, and I took twenty-five Syrian pounds from my mother's pocket, and I left that night. I slept out in the street in my village until the morning. I was freezing to death. From there I went to Aleppo. I stood on the highway to go to another place where I knew they were taking a lot of workers. So, a big truck came and picked me up. He asked me where I was going. I told him I was looking for a job. He said, he was looking for a person to help him with the truck. So, I said, "I'll work with you." So, he said, "Fine." I went with him. He was just paying for my food. He didn't give me anything. He was only paying for my food.

I was with him about ten to twelve days. Finally he came to rest. He sat in the city, it's almost about the farthest city to Aleppo from in Syria. So, he said, "We'll get rest here, and we can sleep here." Well, I said, "Since we want to sleep here, let me go downtown to buy clothes." So he said, "Okay, go ahead I'll wait for you here."

I went downtown and bought clothes and when I came back I didn't find him. He had gone. I tried looking for him. I couldn't find him. But, I already had spent my money on the clothes. So, I didn't have a penny, and I didn't find him. I went to the hotel, and I told the owner of the hotel, I said, "This is what happened to me

and I don't have a penny." He said, "That is okay. You can sleep." So, I slept there until the morning, and I went to the truck places which were going to Aleppo. I tried to ask some of them to take me to Aleppo. One of them was nice and he said, "Okay, you can come with me."

Well, it was a very long way. It took us until almost 9:00 at night to come to a place. The village was about thirty-five or twenty-five miles away from Aleppo. I thought if I would go to Aleppo I wouldn't find any place to sleep. So, I asked him to let me out and drop me in the village close to Aleppo. So, he dropped me in the village. In that village I slept in a coffin for dead people. I was in the sixth grade and I was scared. I went to the first door. I didn't know which door it was. I just saw a woman. A woman came to me and I told her, "I am strange to this area, and I want to stay overnight." She said, "Well, since I'm the only woman here and if I had a husband it would be okay, but since I don't have a husband people might think different. I'm sorry." So, I went and bothered another door. A man came out. I told him my story. He said, "Well, come on in." So, they let me in and they brought me food. I ate, I changed my clothes, I washed, and in the morning I hitchhiked. A truck came by and he picked me up. But, he had to turn about ten miles before Aleppo. Before arriving in Aleppo, he had to turn. So, he had to drop me there.

Well, I went there and I was waiting to hitchhike to Aleppo. A big truck stopped and a guy came out of the truck. He had a camera, and like a radar telescope, a telescope in his hand. He was looking at something. Well, I looked at the thing that he was looking at. It was this secret airport, a military secret airport. So, he was looking at that airport, and he took pictures of it, of all the airplanes there and everything. He hid everything and came looking for me. He said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I was going to Aleppo." And I said I was going to join the PLO. I thought that is where I could make my living, and I wanted to at that time. Well he was telling me, "Oh, that's awful. Don't you ever join the PLO. They are not nice. They don't give you anything adequate. They don't give you money, they don't give you food. They are bad, they treat you bad." He was talking like that and suddenly we were surrounded by police and guns pointed to us.

So, they came and they said, "Why did you take pictures of that airplane and airport?" He said, "I didn't."

They said, "Well, we just saw you." He said, "No, I didn't. I don't have anything." So, they checked him out. They found a little camera in his pocket. They asked him for identification. He said he didn't have any. He had a very heavy spoken Arabic. So, they asked him okay come with us. So, he went with him, and they asked me to come with them. Well, I said, "I wasn't with him." They said, "Well, you must have identification." At that time I was in sixth grade. I didn't know what identification meant. I didn't have any. Well, I said, "I don't have any, and let me go please." So, finally that person told them, "He's not with me." So, they let me go.

Two or three days after they put it in the paper that he was an Israeli spy. I found that then I went back to my family.

H: Were you in trouble when you got back home?

N: Well, I was in trouble, but they just pretended that they didn't need me. Everybody was saying, "Oh, why did you come? We didn't need you." So, I felt very, very lonesome at that time. I wanted to go back, but I said no that's enough.

H: Is there anything else that we haven't discussed that you would like to talk about?

N: No, not really. I think we have covered a lot. There is just one wish that there would be understanding and more dealing between the Arabs and the Americans so none of the either thinks of the other as an awful party. As you know, what Americans think of Arabs, as camels and everything. There's just a little bit. When we think of Americans we think of money and that their girls do everything. I wish they would be more understanding and more knowledgeable of the two parties.

END OF INTERVIEW