

**Khūrī ‘ Abd al-Nūr, Fīfī. Interviewed 6 July 2004 in Hamra, Beirut.
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Timecode: 00:08:00 – 00:17:21

Bushra Moghrabi: How old were you when you started school?

Fifi Khuri: Five or six years old. The neighbors' daughter used to hold my hand and take me to school with her, and then bring me back.

BM: Do you remember your first day of school?

FK: No, I don't remember [smiles]. Later, at the age of twelve, my parents sent me to a boarding school in Jerusalem. That was the trend at the time, girls from good families would go to Jerusalem to study and live with the nuns of Sahioun. I was twelve years old.

BM: What was the name of your elementary school?

FK: The nuns of Saint-Joseph's Annunciation. They were all nuns.

BM: It was a private school, of course.

FK: Yes.

BM: Were you paying tuition?

FK: Yes, we were. There were very few public schools in Jaffa, too few. I didn't know anybody from our entourage, or our friends, who attended public school. There probably were some who did, but I did not know...

BM: So would people not go [to public schools] because they were scarce, or because they themselves were from a specific social class that wanted a private school education?

FK: Do you mean people who went to Jerusalem?

BM: No, the ones from Jaffa itself.

FK: From Jaffa? No, they would go to public schools. Opportunities for education were widely available. People wanted to get an education. There were public schools, but I don't remember exactly where they were. There was a school called Hassan 'Arafeh, a private school he himself opened. It was a very good school. And the Missionaries, the Protestants, the Catholics and the Greek Orthodox all had their own schools.

BM: Was your school a missionary school?

FK: A French missionary school.

BM: Do you remember what you used to study in elementary school?

FK: Our education was very good, and we received very strong foundations in English, French and Arabic. I used to love mathematics and I felt it was my strongest subject.

BM: Were you studying mathematics in French?

FK: Mostly in French, yes. And our Arabic was not bad. But after that school... What do you call what comes after elementary school? Secondary school. When I went to Jerusalem, my Arabic was the worst. I was studying it for an hour only each week.

BM: Did you use to have female or male teachers in elementary school?

FK: No, they were all female teachers. There was a priest who used to teach us Arabic. And they did not have sections for each grade. I remember how so-and-so was in my class... Why was that, if she was a lot older than me? They were not precise about students' ages. They would mix us together and teach us.

BM: And those who were in the same class were at the same level?

FK: That happened in Arabic class, not in other subjects. Only with Arabic. I guess we must have all had the same level... I don't know, I can't remember much.

BM: Do you remember the names of some of your teachers?

FK: Yes, there was Sister Elie. I have pictures from... From that period. Nuns. One of them was from Aleppo, another one from France, and again another one from France. And our principal was French as well. There were very few Arabs. Most of them were French.

BM: Would they teach you anything other than educational subjects? For example, manual activities or sports?

FK: Manual activities, a bit of sewing which we would try to escape. There weren't any specific physical education classes. We would just play during our free time. We would play a bit. There was not much enthusiasm for sports.

BM: After elementary school...

FK: Usually, secondary education continued in the same school. But at the time, my parents decided to send me to Jerusalem, to the nuns of Sahioun, as they called them. They used to be in the old town. All my girl friends from my generation, and those slightly older and younger, as well as my aunts, studied in that school. It was famous. The quality of its education was excellent, but Arabic class... [shakes head] One hour a week. I stayed in that school for two years, and I took the secondary school test – what they call Brevet. And my father moved me out of it right after. He said: "Are we foreigners? No, we are Arabs, we should learn Arabic." He enrolled me in an English school, in Jerusalem as well.

BM: What was its name?

FK: Jerusalem Girls College.

BM: What was it affiliated to?

FK: English Protestants as well. The education there was good as well. Because I had received a good foundation in French, with the nuns, things went smoothly in English. Arabic was a bit complicated, because I had missed out on a lot. I remember an incident with the teacher, Mr 'Assaf Wehbeh from Jerusalem. He used to teach us Arabic. We each had to read a line from "Diwān al-Mutanabbi", and explain it. I was not understanding anything, and I would tell my teacher: "Why should I care about al-Mutanabbi's thoughts?". As you know, in Arabic, each line can be interpreted in a thousand different

ways. I told him "Let me read everybody's lines, and let them explain them". He said "No, it's not possible". But it was alright afterwards [smiles].

BM: Did you use to learn history?

FK: Yes, of course. But Palestinian history? No [ironic].

BM: Which histories would you learn about?

FK: We learned French history with the nuns, and English history with the British. We learned France's history from beginning to end, and its geography from beginning to end as well. And it was the same with the British.

BM: Didn't you learn Arab history?

FK: Very little... Very little. We were colonized...

BM: Did you take part in any activities during patriotic events, for example?

FK: Not at all... There weren't any. I don't remember anything of the sort at all. During a vacation, I went to study in Birzeit. It was not a university yet. My parents were travelling to Romania, and they placed us there, for about two months, with my sister and brothers and my cousins. There, you could feel the patriotic vibe, the enthusiasm, and all of that.

BM: Whose school was that, in Birzeit?

FK: It belonged to Priest Hanna Nasser at the time, and his daughter, Sit Nabiha Nasser was running the school. She was the principal, and her two other sisters were teachers. There were also teachers from the al-Tarazi family. It was a very good school.

BM: So it was a national school.

FK: Yes it was.

BM: Were there national schools in Jaffa?

FK: No, there was the Orthodox school in Jaffa. They would not call it the national school. It was the school I knew, as well as the Hassan' Arafah school. Those are the only schools I know.

BM: Were there girls from other religions with you?

FK: Yes, of course. In Jaffa, we were a mix of Christian and Muslim girls. There weren't any Jewish girls with us in Jaffa. But in Jerusalem, there were Jewish girls. We were friends.

BM: So there were Jewish girls at the nuns of Sahioun?

FK: Yes, there were Jewish girls there, as well as at the Girls College. And they would speak Arabic well, like you and I do, and our parents used to know each other and everything.

BM: Where were the Jewish girls from?

FK: From Palestine. It's not like...

BM: So not from Jaffa.

FK: They were living in Tel Aviv. But their father, for example... I knew somebody [a Jew] who had a very nice store in Jaffa, and we would go buy clothes and shoes from him. What a wonderful man he was! And then when the revolution happened, he closed up shop. The mayor of Tel Aviv was a very good friend of my father's, and when the bombings started, he [the mayor] called him and said "Wadi', trust me, tell your people to raise the white flag, so that our people stop bombing."

00:43:00 - 00:48:40

BM: You were telling me about a club, did it have a religious affiliation?

FK: Yes, it was the Catholic Church's club, but anybody could go to it. It was not strictly religious. Although at the time, there was a bit of religious extremism around the question of marriage. For example, a Catholic girl was not allowed to marry a Roman Catholic man. And if she did, they would ban her from the Catholic church. A similar incident happened to one of my

friends. It was the talk of the town. They excommunicated her from the church, as well as her mother, because the mother was going to let her daughter marry an Orthodox Christian.

BM: Were they also denied their civil rights?

FK: No, not their civil rights, only their ecclesiastical rights. So, if she [the daughter] died, they would deny her a Catholic burial. Ecclesiastical rights, only.

BM: What activities did the club offer?

FK: There weren't many activities. People would play ping pong, go on trips, that's it. The Orthodox club had more activities, because it was open to young men only. Football, tennis, things like that. Those were the clubs I knew. When we wanted to get some fresh air, or go on a family outing, we often went to Tel Aviv. We would go to the cinema, or to a coffee shop, or...

BM: Did you have issues going to Jewish areas?

FK: No, not at all. Had we sensed any problems, it would have surely been better for us. But we didn't... Whenever we wanted a nice custom-made dress, we would go to the Jews. They would come from Europe... Talented seamstresses, hat makers. There were shops owned by Jewish immigrants, who were allowed to bring over their furniture and things with them, but not any money. So they began selling furniture, and people would purchase beautiful expensive pieces from them. I had my wedding garments sewn by a Jewish seamstress. You had to book your appointment in the summer to see her in the winter, and in the winter to see her in the summer.

BM: Do you remember the name of this seamstress?

FK: Yes, Lola Ber [looks annoyed]. To hell with her... [laughs]. Take handbag stores for example... Everybody knew that "Harnak" in Tel Aviv was the most expensive handbag store. As usual and from now until forever, that is what us Arabs, rush towards... The brand. And there were many coffee shops and restaurants and cinemas...

BM: Would you go to the Jewish restaurants?

FK: Yes we would, of course. Most unfortunately. But there was Moussa Nasser, whom I mentioned to you previously, he was a governor [kaymakam] in Jerusalem and al-Nasra, and a very nationalistic man. He was Hanna Nasser's father, of Birzeit University. He would come over, and we would offer him chocolates that had the name "Bafga" written on them, which was the Jewish chocolate brand. He would refuse to take it. He would say: "This single piece of chocolate will cost you a lot." I will never forget what he said. There was a third club in Jaffa, how could I forget it? The club... Al Nadi al-Riyadi [the sports club], is what they used to call it. It was a family club, it did not pertain to any specific religion. It was on my in-laws' land. There was tennis, ping pong, card games, and every two weeks they had dance parties, with a small orchestra, and people would dance. It was a very nice club.

BM: Would young women and men go to these parties?

FK: Young women, young men, yes.

BM: Did the Jews go to these parties?

FK: No, at that time, most Jews were living in Tel Aviv, they would not come. They wouldn't come to our areas unless it was for work. After they moved away from Jaffa, none of them would come anymore. There used to be nice Jewish-owned shops in Jaffa.

BM: What about the British, would they come to Jaffa?

FK: No. The British would not mix [with us], except for a few [Palestinian] families. For example so-and-so who was a highly-ranked [Palestinian] government officer would mix with the British. But God forbid if the British would mix with the Palestinian people. The British as colonialists, were different than the British in Britain, who were extremely kind. The colonialists were arrogant, to say the least.

BM: You told me the Jews had moved out of Jaffa. Were there any Jews in Jaffa who then moved out? [Note: point of confusion about why she would state the fact and then ask it as a question a second time. We are wondering if she meant if any of them had left and come back for a bit before leaving again. Maybe not.... Did any of them ever move back again?]

FK: Yes, of course, there were some before the revolution. There was a big store called "Rabinovitch" where we would buy the most beautiful outfits, the most beautiful shoes, everything there was beautiful. And we would speak to the owners in Arabic, and they were friends of the family and all. When the first revolution happened, I think it was in 1936 or 1938, I don't know, they closed up shop and left. They knew they could no longer make a living in Jaffa. Can I drink coffee now, or is it not allowed? [smiles]

01:00:08 - 01:03:10

BM: Let us go back to the period before you left Jaffa. Before you became surrounded, before you decided to leave. Which incidents seemed to be occurring in preparation?

FK: On our side, as Arabs, we were lost, we did not know what would happen. We knew that the British would leave on May 15, they had informed us of it. And we knew that King Abdullah would announce every now and then that Jaffa would not be [abandoned]... Because Jaffa had its own situation, Jerusalem had its own situation, Haifa had its own situation, each city had its own situation. He [King Abdullah] would say "The city of Jaffa is my port, I will not abandon it". So we were somewhat reassured that even if bombings happened, we would be protected by Jordan. And I remember, it was a Sunday, it was Palm Sunday and many people had already been gone. Some would flee and would be afraid to say they were leaving, they did it undercover. Some people sold a few of their properties to the Jews and ran away. And I remember the time someone passed me on the street and I was seven months pregnant, and he said "Is your husband crazy, keeping you here?". I answered "I am not afraid, and I am not leaving without him." During that week, there was a lot of confusion in Jaffa. Some people wanted to leave by boat, other people this and that... When the last airplane left, the "Gharghour" offices - they were ship dealers - brought a boat to Jaffa. The families who had stayed, some of whom were my relatives, my mother and father, departed on that boat. As they were taking the small boat to get on the bigger ship, some people's belongings capsized and fell into the sea, other people fell in the water... It was an ordeal. They finally got on the boat and arrived to Beirut.

BM: During that period, were there any Jaysh al-Inqāth, or any Arab army arriving to the city?

FK: Not at all. The last day before we left, on April 29, an officer named Michel al-Issa, who was originally with the Jordanian army, arrived with a group of young men. They passed through Jaffa claiming "Do not be afraid, we opened up the road for you". See to what extent it got... These guys came and opened the road, and those who had cars ran away, and even those who did not want to flee fled.

BM: What did he mean when he said he opened the road?

FK: We were under the impression that he had come to rescue us. We were not politically-minded then. These days, we know to analyze every word they [politicians] say. At the time we did not use to analyze. We did not use our heads [note: she might also mean they had nobody leading them. Both meanings appear in the interview so perhaps it's an implied mix]. And so you had people leaving... As we were leaving on the Jaffa-Jerusalem road, we saw a Jewish settlement. We got scared, my husband told me to lower the children's head so that the Jews would not shoot them. Later, we realized they had not been shooting anybody who was leaving. On the contrary, they wanted the people to leave.

BM: During that time, where were the British?

FK: The British were still in Jaffa... I mean in Palestine, in general. They had two weeks left.

01:04:44 - 01:07:24

BM: During the period when the situation was no longer normal...

FK: Really not normal, there was confusion.

BM: Yes, how much did it affect your life socially and economically, and what was the timeframe?

FK: During the last four, five months, the economy collapsed. The orange season was ruined. Socially, there was a lot of fear, and everybody kept talking about the situation, about why it was happening, and how... And this guy insulted that guy, these ones blamed these other ones... There was

confusion in the city. People were afraid and had no idea what would happen. Nobody planned the next step. Nobody.

BM: Weren't there elders who tried to meet to decide what would happen to Jaffa?

FK: [Shakes head] Let me give you our own example. My brother-in-law and my sister-in-law's husband were members of the municipality of Jaffa. Dr Haykal was the mayor. There was no money left, and the British had imposed an embargo. They all had a meeting on the very last day, at the Cliff Hotel in Jaffa and were wondering what to do, and that they should raise... As I told you earlier, my dad had been advised [by the mayor of Tel Aviv] to raise the white flag, and he had relayed this message. "Let's raise the white flag". But we had no real leader. There was a Sheikh among the municipal members, whose name I do not recall, who put his gun on the table and said "There is no way we are raising the flag". You have to know that each person called the other a traitor. So who is the real traitor, it remains a mystery. Bottom line, they sold us and they bought us, and we had no idea.

BM: Did anybody announce to the people in any official way: "Let us leave, let us depart from Jaffa"?

FK: Nobody told the people, no. People... Fear. People were puzzled over how they would leave.

BM: What were you afraid of?

FK: Of the bombing! [astonished at the question]. We were afraid it would intensify. If... Take the recent bombings in Lebanon... Had we known that, when these things happen, people have the option to remain in their country - and not die - we would not have left. And now, our children are putting a huge blame on us, they tell us: "Why did you leave?". There was no more meat left, the shops and bakeries would close, this store would open briefly... This is how it was, I remember how on our last day, we saw a passer-by carrying a piece of meat. I asked him where he had gotten it from, and he told us. We went to buy the meat and made stuffed zucchini and stuffed grape leaves, and when the bombing intensified and we decided to leave, I gave them to the woman who used to work for us and told her "Take them and God be with you". We left with very little belongings, a suitcase this small [gestures a small size], we were four people and I was awaiting a child. We

were supposedly coming back home two weeks later, that was King Abdullah's promise. That after May 15, he would be taking responsibility.

01:10:42 - 01:11:07

BM: What did you take with you when you left? What did you bring along, during that time?

FK: Nothing, I only took two weeks' worth of clothes! A suitcase no bigger than that [gestures a small size], the one you pack for a weekend trip. I did not take a coat, nor a single sweater, or anything. For example, I had a fur coat, it stayed in the closet. The children's clothes stayed. There was even a dress... I had opened a bottle of oil and it had stained the dress... I remember taking the dress off, laying it out on the bed and sprinkling it with powder, and it stayed as is.

01:15:38 - 01:17:24

FK: September came, and we had no more money left. We moved to a cheaper hotel that only gave us one meal a day. It was the Hotel Belvedere. I had a diamond ring, my engagement ring. One day, my husband said: "Would you be sad if I went and sold it?" I said: "No, go sell it, what's it for anyway." He went down to the jewelry market and the first shop was too crowded. He went into a second shop and bumped into people he knew, and felt ashamed, so he left. As he walked down the street, someone tapped him on the shoulder. He was one of his customers in Jaffa, from the wood business, whom my husband would help by letting him pay in instalments. He told my husband: "Where have you been, I heard you left and you were not able to cash out..." His name was Badr Dajjāni God bless his soul, wherever he may be. He pulled out... [pauses, tear-eyed] four-hundred dinars from his pocket [voice shakes]. He told my husband: "I am going back to Amman, and when I come back I'll bring you more money" [almost crying]. My husband came back happy and said "Here, take your ring back, I don't need it". A while later, he opened a wood business here, construction wood, with a Palestinian partner. He invested the money and my husband and his brother worked. Later, someone came in from Amman, who was related to this person who gave him [the four-hundred dinars]. He told my husband "I need to ask you... Badr passed away and there is an entry in his journal that says: four-hundred

dinars, Antoine Abdel-Nour. Does he owe you or do you owe him this amount?" My husband said "I owe it to him." But the banks had not been paying us yet, they were paying us in instalments, from the money in our own bank accounts. I will never forget this incident.

01:19:35 - 01:20:50

BM: If you could turn back time and go back to 1948, how would you have handled it? Would you have acted the same way for example, would you have left, or what would you have done?

FK: I can't really answer you... With my current life experience, I would not have left. Or maybe I would have anyway, because those who remained there until now are not dignified. They are still living... How do you say... Like second class. The work opportunities are not what they used to be. Had my husband stayed there, what would he have worked in? Do you think he would have stayed a wood trader? They would have run him down.

BM: Do you get nostalgic about your home in Jaffa?

FK: Of course, I get nostalgic about the quality of life we had. Our minds were at peace, my husband dreamt of having five children, three boys and two girls, and that we would buy them a house in London and offer them an education in Britain, you know, those were the dreams... But also, thank God. I always thank God, because we did not have to endure misery like... Some people went through a lot of misery here... From those who left. When I look at those who are living in the camps, I feel we are in heaven in comparison to them. God help them.