



Mais

Hamrah, together on a journey— The Hamrah Oral History Project is a series of interviews with immigrants, refugees, and asylees in Arizona, people who had to leave home due to oppression, war or violence, pursuing their future elsewhere. These are personal accounts of life between places and cultures, exploring how we arrived here and why we left home. Listen to stories of joy, dream and emotional pain that comes with the relocation and separation. Recorded at KXCI Community Radio's Historic Armory Park Studios in Tucson, Arizona.

Can you introduce yourself?

I was born in Syria, August 20th, 2000. I was born in northern Syria. The area where I was born had very good weather. The weather was wonderful and it was all green and it has a lot of old Roman ruins. A long history.

Can you tell me about your childhood?

I had a beautiful childhood, a very nice childhood between my family, my friends, and all other relatives, and I think I had an exceptional treatment in the family because I was the only girl between a lot of boys. So I was spoiled, kind of.

What was it like growing up in your home?

From the start I've had a very good and strong relationship with my mother. Yes, of course there's always conflicts in the family, like any normal family, but in general my relationship with the family and as a family we are very well connected and love each other and have a good relationship and that's about it.

Do you have a favorite memory from your childhood that you want to share?

She says that she left Syria when she was 11 years old, so she doesn't really have as much memories of childhood in Syria as she does in Jordan. She says, but she remembers the most and is very thankful for as an experience is that when she was in Irbid, in Jordan, she had joined a group where they performed on stage and they went on trips to many different areas in

Jordan, getting to know the region and other events and activities. So she was very active with that group and that to her is a great memory.

When did your family leave Syria and do you know what happened that led to that decision?

They left Syria in 2013, but the event that led to their decision to leave was on a Friday. And Friday had become in recent time since the uprising, the demonstrations, had become the day of demonstrations and the day of demonstrations meant also that the day of sadness and pain and death because the demonstrators were attacked and every Friday several were killed after the demonstration. And we decided to get away from that situation that day. We prepared ourselves to move to my grandparents' home who live a little bit farther and is not as disturbing, the situation there is not as disturbing as the region where we were living. We prepared ourselves, we had things packed and we were ready to go to leave. My grandfather was waiting for us, had come to pick us up. He was waiting for us from the car. The area where we lived, we had on either side of a family, my aunt, my father's sister lived next door to us and I was very close to my cousin. My cousin came out and called me. She wanted to talk to me. I told her not right now. I'm busy getting ready to leave.

Between the entrance to our house and the entrance to the street, going out to the street, there's a large distance. As I was walking, I was almost in the middle of that area, I heard an explosion. I was certain I imagined and I was certain that my whole family had been destroyed, had been blown up in that explosion. I froze in my place. I was not able to look or turn my head to see what had happened, but after a few minutes, a few seconds, I realized that the explosion did not take place in my home. It took place at my aunt's home and the walls that were above where my cousin was standing who was waiting for me to come and talk to her, had collapsed and fallen on her. My mother was of course very worried and very scared for me. She took me inside. I was completely unable to talk. It took me more than a week to be able to say anything or to react to anything. We went away to an area nearby that was safer. We stayed there for a while and then of course taking a decision, specifically my mother had decided that there was no way she could live in a place where these things are happening, occurrences, so they went back home, packed their things and decided to go to Jordan and that's when they went to Jordan.

What happened to the family members who didn't leave to Jordan?

My aunt, whose daughter was killed, decided after a while also to follow us to Jordan. My mother's family also decided to move and join us in Jordan. My father's family, though, remained in Syria. She knows that they're alive, but the threat of death, the threat of attack, the threat of abuse, all of this is ongoing, so they have to live with it, but they're surviving.

How long did you stay in Jordan?

Almost six years.

Can you talk about your journey to the US from Jordan?

Okay. The initial contact was in 2016, but then my mother was pregnant and was unable to travel, so it got delayed and then there was the elections in the US and then after that Corona, so everything was postponed and delayed. 2020, they reached out to us and they said that you have to be, you can leave and go to the United States within four days, so get ready. And that's what happened. Our trip was from Jordan, traveled through Qatar and through from Qatar to Los Angeles and slept in Los Angeles and then came to Tucson the following day.

What was it like when you first arrived in the US?

Coming to the US, they had envisioned arriving to skyscrapers, magical world all around them, everything. They arrived to Tucson when the doors open, a burst of heat attacked them and her mother said, I don't want it. Take me back.

How long have you lived in Tucson?

Three years.

What has been the most difficult part of adopting to life in the US?

Of course, first and foremost is a language barrier. We were subjected different situations that we were not able to deal with because of the language barrier.

What has been the easiest part of living in Tucson?

I believe it is the way that we were treated by people. People were very kind, very sweet, very giving, and that helped us a lot.

What do you like about the city of Tucson?

Again, first and foremost I think I like the fact that we talk with other Syrians elsewhere in the US and we're told all about a lot of racial incidents. That's something that we have not had to deal with here and I like that very much. I enjoy the weather in Tucson except for the couple of months of heat and I like the activities that take place in Tucson. I love the scenery. We live close to the mountain and I love to see the scenery in Tucson as well.

How has your life changed since you came to Tucson?

I believe that the routine of life, the daily, I guess discipline of life, things that we do on a daily basis is a little bit more contained or present and that helps a great deal. The difference between the societal or cultural effects on women definitely is something that's very important. Had I stayed in Syria, I would have to follow, possibly, the role of getting married and taking care of my family and all this. As a woman that demands social culture. While here, I learned to be self-sufficient. I learned to look out for myself for my own life and take that direction without any social influence or fears.

Do you ever dream of going back to Syria or Jordan?

Every day. I feel that if I go into any specific direction in my life, I would like for it to be connected to or be in Syria. Whether it be a business or my educational specialty, whatever, I would like to practice it back there, but I will always hope and feel that my homeland is my backbone and I'm very grateful and thankful to what has been given to me here. And I would also like whatever I do to benefit where I am right now, but my basic interest, my basic principles take me back home.

Do you have any dream or any image of when you go back, when you said you imagine it every day, what is it like? Do you have an image in your mind?

First and foremost, I want to go and hug my grandmother. My brother's illness led my mother to be in the hospital with him for more time than at home and so I ended up living with my grandmother. So the first thing I want to do is to go and give her a hug and show her I love her.

Do you ever wish that you never came to the U.S.?

I felt not wanting to be here when I first arrived here. Specifically because four days before leaving we had received the results of the high school or Tawjihi tests and I had passed and I was dreaming and hoping that after that I will go to college and build and build my life, but we had to come here and the change of course, lack of language, all of this changed everything, my dreams and my wishes and my hopes and showed me how difficult it is to achieve what I had already achieved there to try to achieve it here.

What do you miss about Syria or Jordan?

I miss the family unity, the family gathering that we used to live through on a daily basis. Not only the family gathering but the neighborhood gathering and the evenings people get together and enjoy each other's company. Especially in the summer where families would gather and children were playing in the streets and everything. I miss, definitely miss all that. And of course I miss not only my relatives and my family, those that stayed behind, but I also miss my friends, the people that I left behind altogether.

Can you talk a little bit more about the role that language has played in your experience living in the US?

A few days after we arrived here, my brother was ill, had a seizure and we had to take him to the hospital and I felt how bad things are when you don't know the language. It's not just a daily communication, but it's needed in so many different and difficult situations. I think that the most important thing when you're a refugee or moving into a new place is definitely the language because the first thing I had to learn due to my brother's illness, the first thing I had to learn how to do and to use the use of the English language was how to connect with ambulances, how to connect to 911. That was the first thing I had to learn. And everything that I learned after had to follow that initial experience. So no matter, again, where you're coming from or what place you go, the language is essential to any place that you go that you newly arrived to.

Have you found anything that you really like here in Tucson or in the US like new food, new friends, any new opportunities, something that you didn't have before?

I had already mentioned that the mountain view from my home is one of my favorite things. This is definitely something that I like. I've made a lot of friends, friends of different nationalities and friends from my own community. As far as food, I was introduced to sushi here and I love it.

Have you found emotional support in your new city?

Oh yes, definitely. Specifically from Hamrah, I've learned a lot of new things. I've done a lot of activities and all of this I feel is a large support for me.

How has your experience living in Syria affected your identity and your sense of belonging?

I am sorry, not apologizing, but I am sorry that my introduction here in the US to my country or introducing my country to the US here is not how I would've liked to introduce it. I need to introduce it right now with wars and killing and suffering and that is not what my country is about and that is not what I hope will be the case for the future. I hope that soon enough I can begin to explain what it was like and what it's going to be in the future and regardless, I will always be connected. I will always, my roots will always be there.

I want to follow up on that with this question. What hopes do you have for the future, for yourself and also for your country? Both of them.

I hope that basically there will be an end of war and the end of the internal fighting. That there will be a return to the cohesiveness of the society as had been when I was, what she remembered in childhood, that people will wake up without fear, without fear of death, without fear of bombing, without fear of abuse or whatever, and that people will be able to feel relieved both socially and psychologically and live well.

Have you or your family faced any discrimination or prejudice in the US?

No, none.

What advice do you have for yourself when you had just arrived in Tucson and also what advice do you have to other young people like yourself who are just arriving to the U.S. right now?

The first thing would be in getting information or directions or instructions from the right sources. I had heard, to any question or any form of information I wanted, I was given a variety and numerous different and difficult explanations and or instructions, be it from the community or other people and all this and that in the end influenced my ability to get this scholarship work I needed for school. So I ended up losing the scholarship offer because different people told me different things and I followed the wrong people. Essentially, what I'm saying is that seek either government or secure sources when you're trying to get information. Don't take it from anyone, anywhere or people who have been here, who arrived here before you who think they might know better than, so just go to the source. Again, one of the reasons that, again, I reiterate the need to go to the sources, to governmental sources or to the organization that help bring you into the refugee committees and organizations. And try to stay away from listening to what other people are saying because each is speaking of their own experience and that differs. And very important that all of this of course affected my studies, affected my ability to stay within my studies will continue. And one of the most important thing is that here a person works towards self-sufficiency, works towards independence and this is what needs to happen and independence or self-sufficiency has to have the right source also to lead you on its path. On the path. Thank you so much.