

“PALESTINE IN THE BRONX”

FOR LESSON

Migration
StoriesNARRATOR **Fatima Shama**

SHAMA My parents are — my dad is Palestinian. Born in the West Bank of Palestine, in 1934. And — in a town called Deir Dibwan. And migrated to Brazil in 1948 as a teenager. He was the youngest of — he was the youngest male of five males — four males and five sisters. But the youngest male. And his brothers were recruited into the Jordanian army to fight in the Arab-Israeli War. And his father said, “You have to go. And send us word when you arrive.” And like many he made his way to the ports of Beirut and boarded a boat, really having never left, as I — as he retold those stories — never left his town. And I think he’d probably gone to the big cities, you know, of Ramallah and Jerusalem, you know, maybe once or twice in his youth. And got on a boat and landed in Brazil, actually, as a teenager. And then while being in Brazil did a bunch of odd and end jobs. But basically, like, grew up formidably.

And in his twenti— by the time he was in his twenties he was in Rio. And actually in a town adjacent to the town my mother is from. So my mother’s Brazilian, from Rio de Janeiro. And worked — was a nursing student and — or hoping to become a nurse, but worked in a bakery to help support her family. And my dad would come in and see her. And she knew he owned — he and someone el— some — another Arab — owned a furniture store. So at this point he had enough in his journey from a teenager to being in his early twenties that he and someone else, probably several people, had sort of chipped in and bought a business. And they were selling furniture and, like, bedding and curtains and... And so my mother wanted to buy a — or the story goes — she wanted to buy a — a buffet for her mom, like, to put her plates and cups and things. And my dad said, “I’ll give you a great discount if you have coffee with me.” And I think she says at first she

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thought it was terrible, and then of course she thought she needed a discount, and so had coffee with this “turco,” which is what the Arabs were called in Latin America, certainly in Brazil. Because of the Ottoman Empire, they were called Turks. But — so she had coffee with the turco. And they then became friendly and I think a couple of years later — I don’t know how long their courtship lasted — but they married, and the opportunity to come to America was exciting and great, and they came to the Bronx.

We had a lot of family, my dad’s family. So we lived in this very interesting neighborhood with a bunch of Palestinian families from neighboring villages and our own village right around us, like, within a three- or four-block radius there were probably about eight to ten families. Some of which were like us, like, the mother was not Arab and the dad was Palestinian. Some — maybe two — the mothers were actually Brazilian and the dad was Palestinian. But — so I grew up hearing — my dad spoke Portuguese fluently. So we spoke Portuguese predominantly in our home. But because we had a lot of our Palestinian family around, I grew up really hearing Arabic and sort of being raised in that cultural reality.

My — the schools in our neighborhood — or the public schools in our neighborhood — were not very good, and my mother, who’s Catholic, and my dad, Muslim; my mother observant, my father not so much — my — we went to Catholic school. We were all baptized as children, all of my siblings and me, and had godparents in the traditional Catholic tradition. And we — we went to the local Catholic school. As did all of my Arab cousins, right? Like, our — all of my cousins went to the same school. We all went to Blessed Sacrament [School] in the Bronx. And — I — I don’t know. I mean, I then went off to —

I would say that I was raised in a very culturally – very culturally rich Palestinian community, in that my father left in the late '40s. His sisters, I guess, left, and some of his cousins and brother left a little after. But whatever time period they left the region was the time period we were being raised, right? So if it was 1960s when they left, the traditions of the 1960s were the ones we were following, right? So we went to a lot of weddings and, you know, lots of engagements, and we had lots of big community dinners, and it was all about our village and our tribe. And, you know, it was – I remember it fondly, but now that I think of – I mean, I think it's pretty interesting how comfortably connected we all were to this thing that we didn't even know. Like, you know, I just knew of it as “back home,” and I – you know, or in Arabic you say “Li-Blad,” right? Like, the – “the country.

BIO Fatima Shama was born in 1973 in the Parkchester neighborhood of the Bronx. She earned a bachelor's degree from the State University of New York at Binghamton and a master's from Baruch College's School of Public Affairs Executive Program in Manhattan. After college, Shama worked with the Arab-American Family Support Center and the Greater Brooklyn Health Coalition to improve New Yorkers' access to health care and education. She served in New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration from 2006 to 2014, first as senior education policy advisor and then as commissioner of immigrant affairs. During her tenure, Shama worked to build stronger ties between Muslim communities and the city government. After leaving the administration, she became executive director of the Fresh Air Fund, a nonprofit organization focused on providing low-income children in New York City with access to nature.

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