

## Myassar Ismail: Palestinian Housewife

*(Born in 1935, in Haifa [Palestine]; currently living in Sa'dnayel [Beqa']; recorded in her home, in the presence of husband and a daughter. Language: Palestinian colloquial. of the older generation.)*

**M**yassar: Do you want me to tell you the story chronologically? I'll tell you from the date of my birth until today. I'm sixty three years old today. I'm Palestinian of course. I was born in Haifa. I'm the eldest. For five years I was the only child. I was followed by a girl, she lives in Kuwait today. She was followed by a brother who lives in Saudi Arabia. My father was a train driver. Although he belonged to the traditional period, he was understanding of modern days. He was aware. My mother lacked my father's awareness. My father tried to give us the best living standard possible. Later we went back to our village, Sha'ab, and lived there for a year. When Jews and Palestinians started fighting each other, my father joined the resistance and we moved to another village called al-Ba'ineh. Then we moved from al-Ba'ineh and went to Jwayyeh, and stayed there for a year and seven months. People were almost without clothes. Life became difficult. Eventually we came to Beirut. When I was fifteen years old and eight months, I married. When I first got engaged, my husband was an employee in the post office. His parents owned land, and he didn't have any brothers. He joined the Sha'ab local defense force. When the leader, Husni was killed, he was free. So he came to his relatives in Anjar. We were in Beirut. He wanted to get married, so we got married. I went to Anjar. In Anjar, life was extremely miserable, it was all mud, cold, no heating, desolate. People could only eat one meal a day. He was also in debt. We left Anjar for Beirut. In Beirut, also life was hard.

Ghena: You knew that he was in debt?

Myassar: No, not at all, I wasn't aware yet of such things. Anyway, I'd been engaged to him from when I was in Palestine, from the age of eleven. People weren't as enlightened then as they are today. We stayed in Beirut for two years and I had my first baby, a girl, Ilham. The hajj [husband] had an opportunity to be employed here as a school teacher. So we moved back to the to Beqa', to Anjar, there was only Ilham. We lived for seven months in Anjar and then we rented a home near Sa'dnayel. And here we are today living near Sa'dnayel.

I gave birth to five girls and four boys. My husband is a school teacher. I am a home person. I look at life from a clear perspective. I don't like ambiguity and games. I deal with whatever is serious, thank God! We both put much effort into bringing up our children. One son is an engineer, another is a doctor, a third is a dentist, the fourth an administrator in



UNRWA, and the fifth is a school principal in Beirut. As for the daughters, two of them are employees, a third has a master's degree in chemistry from Canada, the fourth is married and lives nearby. Thank God, we're living happily and content. The most important thing is to have a plan for oneself. One should know where one is heading, and be content. My nature is to accept anything that is reasonable, I'm not demanding. I'm not of the kind of woman who likes to rest. I don't avoid work so as to stay young and in good shape. As much as I can give, I give. Do you hear? And here I am. This is our life. Some of our children are here and some of them are abroad. I am here at home, the hajj and me.

Ghena: No, this isn't enough!

Myassar: What do you want me to tell you?

Ghena: Major landmarks?

Myassar: Wallahi, nothing comes to my mind right now.

Daughter: How were my grandparents?

Myassar: Concerning your grandparents, I was favored by my father. Whatever I wanted I had. Whatever I said was true. (pause) And my brothers were good.

Ghena: Nothing more! You don't remember anything about your childhood?

Myassar: First of all, your grandfather was strict - you're not allowed to join in a wedding, you're not allowed to go out. We didn't enjoy our childhood. We didn't live as children. We didn't feel free.

Ghena: Why did you say he was modern?

Myassar: He was modern in the sense that he accepted certain things and rejected other things. For example, he would have allowed me to go to school, but my mother influenced him. It was she who was responsible. It wasn't my father who refused me the privilege of education, it was my mother. That's what happened to me. Thank God! Here we are, living and content with what God has chosen for us. What can I say concerning my childhood?

Ghena: Aren't there major events that you recall?

Myassar: I don't think that anything that happened has a place in my memory now. Nothing! I was engaged to the hajj when I was eleven years old. My father engaged me the first time when I was seven years old, to his nephew. Then a dispute arose between the parents, and my father stopped wanting his nephew. Then I was engaged to the hajj with whom I'm living today. I've been engaged to him since I was nine. Good? We stayed engaged for six years, and we got married, and we came to Anjar, and as I told you life was —

Ghena: How was your childhood? How was your relationship

with your mother, brothers and sisters, neighbors?

Myassar: We didn't mingle much with people. We couldn't go to a wedding or to anything else. He didn't give us the chance to mix with people. He didn't allow us to talk to anyone. That's how he was. That's how they all were in the older Palestinian generation. The girl wore sleeveless dresses, she played with a skipping rope, and went to school, until she reached puberty. Once she reached puberty, they covered her and that was it, she wasn't allowed to go out. Girls were oppressed, they didn't have the freedom you have today. Whether you rebelled or not, nobody would have listened to you then. And the one who encouraged this pattern of life to persist was my mother. My mother wanted it more than my father. If he wanted to say yes, she said no. They didn't allow us to go out, not with anyone. That's my story.

Ghena: No, you haven't said anything yet.

Myassar: There is nothing. Wallahi I can't remember. Close the recorder!

*[Recording was resumed next day, in the morning]*

Myassar: My mother was one of those ignorant women (almost cries) —

Ghena: It's interesting how differently my father perceives your mother. He sees her as an ideal woman.

Myassar: Of course, she was ideal with *them*. Yes, believe what your father says, she was ideal with the boys. But with the girls, no. My father was better with me than with the youngest sister, Fatmeh. He preferred me to the other girls. My childhood was better than that of many people, but there was a lot of suffering as well. Children weren't given their rights. They were neglected, Parents didn't show sympathy, they overburdened them with work. They didn't think that they are still children, they wanted to relax at their children's expense. I want to forget all this. Do you hear? I want to forget, and I almost forgot. If I have to tell you from the very beginning — this is my program. I told you the second child came five years after me. For those five years I lived as a special child. Do you hear? Then my sister came, followed by my brother. My mother, as I told you, wasn't aware. She was a backward woman, she seemed to come from three hundred years ago. Do you hear? I told you she was selfish. They sent my brothers, who were much younger than me, to school. But my sister and me, no. I went and begged my mother. I told her, "Mother, you want me to help you, bake, wash dishes, bring you water - I'll do it all." She said no to school. I asked her, "How shall I live?" She told me, "As I lived you will live." See what kind of answers she gave! I took my brother, who was seven years younger than me, to school. I stood just outside the classroom while the teacher explained the lesson. Do you hear? I listened to the teacher as he was explaining the

*"I believe that to be  
happy inside my home  
is much better than  
seeing the whole world"*

lesson. Whatever the teacher explained, I grasped. When my brother came home, when he recited, counted, and read, I repeated after him. So I almost learnt how to read, and I studied the Quran through my younger brother. Do you hear? As I told you I was seven years old when my father got me engaged to his nephew. Then when I was nine years old he got me engaged to the man I'm living with, the haji.

Ghena: How did you feel when all this was happening?

Myassar: How do you feel today when you rebel and protest? I wanted to rebel, but that there was something bigger than me, beyond my capacity. Do you hear? Beyond my capacity. I couldn't face them with what I was feeling. I was engaged to him for five years. His hand didn't touch mine. Do you hear? This was in Haifa.

Ghena: Were you upset when you got engaged?

Myassar: No, I didn't know what it meant. Everyone around me got engaged, I got engaged like the other girls. No, what upset me was being deprived of education, my mother's attitude, my father's attitude, daily life.

Ghena: You didn't play with other children?

Myassar: No, that wasn't allowed. Other children played hopscotch, they skipped rope. But if I wanted to go out and play, my mother would tell me that I had to carry my brother. See! You weren't free. If you wanted to go down, you had to carry your brother and play with him. When did I have the chance to play? When my brother was sick, and I had to bring a number for him to be checked by the doctor. If my brother was crying and my mother wanted to finish some work at home, I carried my brother and went out. If we wanted to bake, I took the bread to the oven. If they needed me to fetch water - these were the only times, when I could go out. But to go out without carrying something, this wasn't allowed. Do you hear?

Ghena: But I know many Palestinian women your age who went to school in Jerusalem.

Myassar: Yes, of course. I know all the schools' names by heart. There was Marmash School, and the Nuns' School close to our home. Girls from all classes went to school. When other girls went to school, I started crying, I tried to persuade my mother because I knew my father was not the problem. However my father wanted to please my mother, because her health wasn't good, and she needed to depend on someone. Had I confronted my father, he might have taken me to school. However, I was a child so I talked to my mother. I didn't know better. I talked to her because she was my mother and I thought she would listen to me. But she didn't. Do you hear? They didn't allow me to go out to play unless I carried my brother or sister. Just at the Feasts, we went to the swings, I and my sisters and brothers. Then there was fighting between Arabs and Jews. In our home

[Haifa], the lower floor overlooked the Arab quarter, the upper floor was next to the Jews. Our neighbors on that side were Jews. Perhaps they were a bit more free, but their lives were basically the same as ours, they had the same style of living as us. Their house had three rooms and was shared by three families. One kitchen for all. Then the war started. We had olives. Your grandfather took his holiday, and we went to our village, Sha'ab. My mother was either pregnant or breastfeeding then. When we went to our village, there were small clashes between the Arabs and the Jews, but not serious. The Jews didn't only attack the Arabs, they attacked the English, they dynamited buildings. When we left Haifa, I was only eleven years old, but I knew everything that was taking place. Before that there was World War II when Germany fell. Our Jewish neighbors celebrated, they started dancing and singing. We witnessed all that before we left for



Picture Credit: Leena Saraste. For Palestine, Zed Books, 1985.

our village. My mother was late giving birth to Fatmeh. My father's holiday ended and he went back to Haifa. While my mother was preparing herself, and collecting the crops - we were getting ready to go to my father - suddenly he came. He told my mother, "Wait. Yesterday they killed a Jewish health worker. The situation is tense." By that time, the Jews had taken parts of Haifa.

They made a truce and we stayed in our village. In these villages there were no girls' schools. You, because you were raised in a city, you wanted to get educated. I also wanted to get educated, in Haifa I saw girls going to school in front of me. However, in the village things were different. In the village, if you were only six years old, you had to fetch water, and harvest olives, you had to work just like older women.

Now while we were in Sha'b, the real fighting started between Arabs and Jews. The Salvation Army entered Palestine. Akka fell. Near us there were two villages, al-Birweh and al-Damoun. They also fell. Men in our village started to arm themselves. Weapons were expensive, a good gun cost £P100, the lowest was £P65 and people did not have as much cash as today. They shared. A man in our village, Abu Isaaf - who was with al-Hajj Ameen al-Husseini - brought some weapons and came to our village. Then the men in our village set up a defense force containing 120 men.

Before the day that we left for our village, I never knew sickness. I wanted to be sick, because my mother took my brothers and sisters to the sea when they were sick. Because I was healthy I had to stay at home to clean, wash dishes, scrub

the floor and fetch the water. She never took me with her. Do you hear? My family had a small garden in the village where they planted mint, and peppers, and other vegetables. I used to go to water them. This is good for your story! Once I went and I was watering the hot pepper and mint plants - "In the name of God the most merciful and compassionate." There was what we called the 'Jewish grave', it was as if carved out of rocks, and it had the exact shape of a grave, and water fell on it from the stream. It was a really beautiful scene. Water fell and lilies appeared on its surface, they had a nice smell, they were white, yellow and red. As I was watering I suddenly saw a cat jump in front of me - an ordinary cat - but it jumped two or three meters high. Its body became very long and stretched. This attracted my attention. I saw it jumping. There was a high cactus hedge. A few seconds later, another similar cat jumped the same way the first one had. It also stretched its body, and went up, and sat next to the first cat on top of the cactus. Both of them. I looked at them - "In the name of God the most merciful and compassionate" - I noticed that their eyes were not those of ordinary cats, they were split vertically. I felt terrified. Their looks were frightening. I had always heard that in our village there were strange things. I didn't talk or scream or do anything. I left and went home.

Now in the summer we slept on the roof. Nobody slept inside the house. A special place was made for the parents to sleep in, and the rest of the family sleep together on the roof. There was a lot of dew. They used to leave the mattresses out until ten o'clock so that they would dry, and then they took them in. So I went back home and slept, and I remained sleeping. My mother didn't usually leave me to sleep. At ten o'clock I

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couldn't stand up. They started calling me from downstairs. I tried to get up but felt dizzy. I went down stairs, and I slept continuously for two months. I didn't eat. I became like a ghost. I didn't dare talk about what I had seen, because people said that if you tell, it comes to you in the night and hurts you. At that age, one doesn't know better. So I stayed sleeping.

My aunt came to see me. She and my mother were sitting near my feet and talking. I could hear them. She was asking my mother what was wrong with me? My mother said, "Wallahi, I don't know. She went out to the garden, and came back and slept. And she's still sleeping. I don't know what happened to her." My aunt said, "What if she saw what my daughter Fatmeh saw? Since then, for six months she hasn't had her period." Fatmeh was older than me. So I understood that what I saw had been seen before. There had been a doctor in our village before the fighting started, but now he moved to another village. Akka fell, and there was no doctor. My father sent for the haji - who is my husband now - he gave him a pony and sent him to bring a doctor. That day also I didn't speak. The doctor said that I was suffering from typhoid. There was a battle near our village. Everyone in our village went out, men, women and children. They carried guns, sticks, rakes, and forks. Everyone fought. Women carried water and food, and followed the men and ululated so that the men wouldn't turn back. I stayed at home. I began to hallucinate and not to see properly. I stayed like that for some time.

Then, gradually, I started to stand up and eat. One evening I was on the roof, and my mother told me to take to my brothers and sisters downstairs, also to carry pillows, blankets, covers and mattresses. We had to sit outside under the olive trees. The Jews were about to attack Miar which was next to our village. It was supposed to be for one night only. People were fasting. I was still weak, unable to walk or carry anything. However I was forced to, everybody was carrying something. We carried everything, and went and sat under the trees for seven or eight days. We watched how beduin bake bread, and we baked like them. We bought milk from beduin on the road. We sat up among the olive trees for forty days, everyday thinking that we would go back the next day. But we didn't. People started to go to Lebanon, those who had cash. If they could afford to spend time in Lebanon they went. My uncle's wife panicked every time she heard shooting, so she went to Lebanon. We tried to leave with our uncle's family, but the Salvation Army turned us back. We rented a house in al-Ba'ineh, it's a village where half were Muslims and half were Christians. We never had sectarianism in Palestine. We were all neighbors and never looked at each other in a sectarian manner.

So we went and stayed in al-Ba'ineh. My mother, aunt, future mother-in-law and sister carried water from the well, with the Jews in the mountains above us. They couldn't work during the day because the Jews could see us, so they worked in the

evening. We rented the house in al-Ba'ineh for six months. I remember the rent was LL17 a day. In those days the LL 17 was worth something. They bought wood and prepared for winter. We planned to spend the winter there. One night, our neighbors came, they said, "Abu Ghazi, come out and see Haifa from Mar Elias. You can see the battles going on". I slept, and my mother was chatting with other woman. I woke up to hear my mother screaming, my sisters and brothers shouting, and the sound of

*"No soap to clean with, no kerosene to make light, no thread to sew with, I never lived like that before"*

battle outside. There were about a hundred men in front of our door. I asked my mother, "What's going on?" She told me the country had surrendered. I felt lost and I imagined the Jews invading our village and ready to do all the terrible things we had heard about.

I saw my father dressed in his work overalls with his cap on his head. My mother, brothers and sisters were crying. He told her, "You must leave just as you are. Don't carry anything, nothing, between here and Lebanon is a long way." My mother was worried that we might get dirty on the journey, so she took one dress for every child. She put everything in a bag. When he came, he asked her "What's this? I told you to go without anything". She said, "What if they get dirty?" He told her "Then stay here with the clothes." She stayed, and I was crying. My uncle had brought a man's slippers. I put them on and walked. Before we reached mid-way, the slippers were gone. I continued walking barefooted to Rmeish, Bint Jbeil, Jwayya. We arrived at dawn. The Israeli airplanes started flying over us. I shall never forget this scene all my life. Never. There was a pool of water. We wanted to drink. A drink of water was sold by the Lebanese for one and a half piasters. A drink of water cost one and a half piasters! We found buses waiting for us, and drivers were calling, "Halab, Homs, Sham, Baghdad, Ba'albeck, Beirut, Saida, Sur, Tripoli." People got on the buses for free.

We went to Jwayya, which was no more than sixty or seventy kilometers from Palestine. We thought we were close. Many people had left without money. Some people went back to their villages in secret. Many died on the road, killed by the Israelis. It started snowing and Palestinians weren't used to the snow.

*[Unfortunately we have had to cut much detail about the exodus and life in Palestine because of space constraints.]*

Ghena: What about your adult life?

Myassar: When I got married? Okay. Before I turned sixteen I got married. As I told you he was an employee in the post office. In Palestine, everyone had land and was living well. We came here. He was a member of our village's local defense force. When the leader Husni was killed, they were set free. Where did he go? He had relatives in Anjar. Anjar is mud, cold, misery, no proper roads, and ham wa gham (burden and sorrow). They used to steal charcoal from al-Kfeir so that they could make a

fire to cook. I found that the dowry he had paid - £P 400 - he had paid part in Palestine - he had borrowed from his relatives. When we entered the house after the wedding party, just after he closed the door, someone knocked on it. It was his cousin. "What's wrong?" Someone had come to him that day asking for LL15.

Ghena: This happened on the wedding eve?

Myassar: Yes, on the wedding eve, before he slept with me.

Husband: No, we had already slept together.

Myassar: No, no, no, we hadn't. He closed the door. The people left and he locked the door. We hadn't done anything yet. Nothing. So what did I do? I had my nkout. How much did people give in those days? Five pounds. He had reckoned that I would have money with me. He wanted to corner me.

You know I hadn't lived in a village before. The clothes I had prepared were different from their clothes. They were all villagers, miserable. What can I tell you? I had long robes, suits, velvet dresses, scarves, and I looked different. Everybody asked, "Where has this woman come from? Is she a Christian? After staying there for two months, I got haemorrhoids, they were caused by cold and hunger. Then your grandfather came. From Saudi Arabia. ARAMCO needed workers, whoever had a skill went and worked. As I told you, your grandfather was a train driver, he came to Anjar and saw how we were living. He told the haji, "Why do you stay in this place? Go to Beirut, you'll surely find work." Abu Muhammad [husband] was educated compared to others. He had reached seventh grade. We went to Beirut and we rented a house for LL11 LL10 for the house and LL1 for the light. We stayed in Burj al-Barajneh near my parents. My father was away in Saudi Arabia. I told you that my mother was unfeeling. I used to buy vegetables in the afternoon because then they were cheaper. He worked in a stone quarry. He couldn't work in building. My mother lived next to me, and my father-in-law's home was in front of mine. I never entered either of their homes when they were having lunch. I didn't want them to know that anything was wrong with me. I suffered from anaemia. I only ate supper. When Abu Muhammad came home in the evening I put out the food and ate with him. My mother lived next to me, but she never knew, and never asked. Never. She had flour in barrels, she got it from UNRWA because she had so many children. For me, my husband and his father, our flour was not sufficient. If I went and took two loaves of bread from her home, she'd ask for them.

Eventually, God helped us. My father kept telling Abu Muhammad about people who went to Beirut, until one day he went to sit for an exam in the Beqa'. He came back to Beirut thinking that he had done well in the exam. But people who had money paid bribes. They gave LL400. In those days LL400 was a lot. We didn't have money to bribe anyone. We wanted

to clear our debts and eat. He thought he had done well, and stopped going to work. He stayed home waiting for the results. One day I told him, "Go and ask". He went and asked. They told him, "You failed". He started shouting, "I want to see my papers!" The gate-man was kind and showed them to him. He came and told us his story. I was crying and beating myself. I had recently given birth to Ilham. My milk was dry. I said, "God will help us". I washed her clothes and diapers in cold water. There weren't Pampers like today. There was no more milk in my breasts. I cried.

Eventually, my uncle on my mother's side went to see the inspector of UNRWA schools, Diab Fahoum, and told him our story. He said, "I know that he is better educated than all those who were accepted, but he doesn't have money to bribe anyone". Fahoum went and checked the grades. He found out that they were lying. The day after, wallahi, I was washing clothes and crying. My hands were shivering from the cold. It was February. That day Abu Muhammad said, "It's over". When they didn't call for him, he put on his work clothes, got on the bicycle, and back to the stone quarry. I sat crying and washing. And suddenly Diab Fahoum's maid passed by. She knew me. She asked me, "Where's Khaled?" [husband] I told her, "Khaled has gone back to misery." She said, "Tell him go to see Mr Fahoum. He's going to get a job." I ran to your grandfather's house and told them to call for Khaled. He came at once and was given the job.

In those days, I used to pray to God for him to have a salary of LL40 a month, so I could pay the rent of LL11, save LL10 and live on LL10. He got employed. Those black days and misery I didn't go through in your grandfather's house. Because in Palestine, they had land, and when we came to Lebanon my father received his end-of-service benefits. My mother had gold. Those days I lived with your uncle [husband] were new to me. No soap to clean with, no kerosene to make light, no thread to sew with, I never lived like that before. But I put up with it all, I put up with it and deprived myself until he got a job. Even if I

had nothing, my mother wanted me to give her. She cannot give you, you have to give her. This is her style. So when Khaled got a steady job, and we came to Anjar, I didn't forget the lesson I'd learnt. I kept in mind that one day he might lose his job, so I should always be prepared. I wanted always to have cash. Do you hear? This was the path I chose. And how much was his salary? LL40. Others who bribed got a

salary of LL110, though he had a higher grade on the exam than all of them. I always decided what would be spent and what would be saved.

I care a lot about looking nice, having a tidy home, and that my children should be well dressed. I wanted to have a plan for every child's future. Do you hear? Yes, for every child, whether girl or boy, I had to have a clear future plan. I sewed clothes for

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us all. I sewed things for the house. They were never deprived of anything. Whenever someone got sick, I made sure he went to the right specialist. I calculated everything, I did not believe in extravagance or laziness. I believed that to be happy inside my home is much better than seeing the whole world. If my house and children are in good shape, then thank God, I have reached what I aimed at. We have built our own home. We are the first Palestinians to buy land and build our home in Saadnayel. In 1966 we bought land in Sa'dnayel. If I ever spent from the sum allocated for savings, the next month I considered myself in debt until I'd paid it back. So we bought a cement factory and a motorbicycle, but the haji — how can I tell you? His knowledge is restricted to education, he has no idea of commerce and money. The workmen aren't honest and he is not aggressive. When you discover that those working for you aren't honest, you should be tough with them. Anyway it didn't work out.

Ghena: You stayed in Beirut until when?

Myassar: Until 1953. When he was employed by UNRWA we came to the Beqa', We stayed for seven months in Anjar. Then we came to Sa'dnayel. Your grandfather's relative told me, "Sa'dnayel is better for you, it's a village, there are roads and electricity." We came and settled in Sa'dnayel in 1953. We forgot the hunger and misery. Though his salary wasn't big, and it didn't increase for a long time, but believe me, his salary was more than enough for us.

Husband: I worked and she —

Myassar: I managed everything. Thank God.

Husband: She unwound the wool sweater, and re-knitted it for the younger children.

Myassar: In the Beqa' we have to wear wool for seven months. The first year, I bought wool and made sweaters for my children. For the girls I made dresses. The second year I unwound the sweaters, brought some new wool, and made new sweaters out of the old ones. Never, do you hear? never has failure had a place in my life. Even in the days of hunger failure never showed in either of us. If you entered my home - I had a quilt - I hung clothes on the rope, and hung a quilt to cover the clothes. In the second room I had a bed and I put boxes under the bed. And on the bed I put a white blanket. So if you entered my home you couldn't see signs of failure [poverty]. I went down to the market, I saw what children's clothes were in fashion. Then I bought the material needed for sewing. No one taught me how to sew, I taught myself. So I sewed for myself and my children the same things I saw in the shops. The same goes for my home. When we built in 1968, I said I don't want a large home because I have children whom I want to educate. I wanted to have money in my hands, so that when one of my children needed education I would be able to manage it without having to ask anyone. So we built a three-room house. Do you hear? And he planted a garden in front of the house, a garden with vegetables and fruits. The children went through UNRWA elementary education, but after that you had to put them in private schools which you had to pay for. I didn't have one or two children only, I had nine, five boys and four girls.

Ghena: You didn't discriminate between girls and boys?

Myassar: No, no, not at all, never. Whether a girl or a boy, the clever child had my full support. Do you understand me? I didn't want to repeat what I had gone through with my children. My mother was the suspicious kind. If a girl stood on the balcony, she'd ask her, "What are you doing? What are you looking at on the road?" I trust the child. I don't discriminate. The clever child has our support. And thank God, we didn't need anyone. I tell you, people borrowed from us. We never asked anything of anyone. I educated one of my children in America, another in Romania, a third in Russia, the fourth in Spain. Yasser spent seven years in Spain. He could have graduated as a doctor. I don't know what happened to him there.

Ghena: When one of your children didn't show competence, such as Yasser, how did you react? Were you understanding or tough?

Husband and daughter: She's tough, tough.

Myassar: I can be tough but with moderation. Listen to me, your son is your mirror. Neither me nor their father were able to make them reach where they have reached the easy way. There was no time for fooling around. From beginning to the end I took life seriously. But there are things that you have to forgive. Yasser, for example. Everyone told me to leave him there, they said, "He spent the money and time without doing anything useful, let him face his fate abroad." I could have listened to them and said, "Yes they're right, let him face his fate, why should I care about him?" But I didn't. I told them to go and bring him back home. Do you understand? He's been back now for nine years. Often I remember and feel upset. He had the opportunity to learn and become a doctor, respected. What happened to him? He could have gone astray for one, two, three or four years, but you don't continue all the way through. He lived in this home and saw what we went through to bring them up.

Ghena: Had you lived in Palestine, would your life have taken a different course?

Myassar: No. I am ambitious. Since I came into this world. Since I was a child that was my nature. This isn't something I acquired, it's in my blood. Now listen, I'm telling you about myself. Even if I had more money I would have maintained the same life program. Nothing would have tempted me. Life doesn't tempt me. See, in the days of hunger, I wished - it was a wish - that I knew how to sew or to do anything that would be financially rewarding. I wished. Now I say sometimes that he [husband] was lazy with me, or I may have been lazy with myself. There passed a time when I could learn. That was after I got married. My mind was open and I had the potential.

Recorded and translated by Ghena Ismail

## End Notes

1. Nkout: This is the gift given to the bride by her own family, usually money.