Oral History of Palestinian Migration Family Memory and Adaptation in the United States

Posted on October 2, 2019

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Introduction

This oral-history essay records the memories of a Palestinian man who migrated to the United States with his family at the age of sixteen. The interview was conducted by his daughter and focuses on childhood poverty, interrupted schooling, work, war, migration, faith, family responsibility, and adaptation. The original account contains valuable personal details but sometimes judges the speaker's wording, compares him vaguely with unrelated immigrant narratives, and treats his memories as simple facts rather than situated recollections. A stronger oral history preserves the interviewee's voice while explaining how memory, family relationships, displacement, and present circumstances shape the story. The aim is interpretation without replacing the narrator's experience with a generic migration history (Thompson & Bornat, 2017; Portelli, 1991).

Oral History as a Method

Oral history is more than recording answers to questions. It is a collaborative production between narrator and interviewer in which memory is organized through language, relationship, and purpose. The interviewee decides what to emphasize, what to omit, and how to connect past events with present identity. The daughter's questions also influence the account because family members share knowledge, emotions, and expectations that an outside researcher would not possess. Oral-history scholars therefore examine both content and form: pauses, repeated themes, emotional shifts, chronology, and the meanings attached to events. The interview should not be evaluated only by whether every detail can be independently verified. Its value includes how the narrator understands his life (Portelli, 1991; Thompson & Bornat, 2017; Shopes, n.d.).

Childhood and Early Responsibility

The narrator describes his Palestinian childhood as materially poor compared with the childhood of his children in the United States. He attended school through approximately the seventh grade and then worked with his father. Rather than presenting early labor only as deprivation, he remembers helping

his father among his best experiences. This combination reveals how hardship and affection can coexist. Leaving school limited formal opportunity, yet work created competence, responsibility, and closeness within the family. His statement that he does not regret the past should not be read as proof that conditions were harmless. People often interpret difficult experiences through pride, survival, religious belief, and gratitude for relationships that developed within them.

War and the Decision to Leave

The family's movement to the United States occurred against a background the narrator describes as war and uncertainty. The interview does not provide enough dates or locations to identify every political event, so the analysis should avoid assigning a specific historical episode without evidence. What is clear is that insecurity shaped the meaning of migration. Leaving was experienced as relief from danger but also as separation from place, memory, and a previous way of life. Migration decisions are rarely caused by one factor. Safety, work, family networks, legal opportunity, and hopes for children may operate together. The interview's brevity means these causes should be treated as themes for further questioning rather than as a complete explanation (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.; Said, 2000).

Migration at Sixteen

Migrating at sixteen placed the narrator between childhood and adulthood. He was young enough to enter American institutions and adapt linguistically or culturally, but old enough to carry memories, work expectations, and family obligations formed in Palestine. Adolescents in migrant families often become bridges between generations because they learn new systems while remaining accountable to parents and siblings. The narrator says that he worked hard to support himself and his family, suggesting that migration did not create immediate comfort. Economic survival came before personal exploration. His later emphasis on providing for his children shows continuity between the early role of family worker and the adult identity he built in the United States.

Family as the Center of the Narrative

Family is the interview's organizing theme. The narrator's happiest memories involve his father, his present priorities involve his children, and his current life remains connected with siblings and spouse. This structure shows that migration is remembered less as an individual achievement than as a family project. At first, the goal was to earn enough to survive; later, it became creating stability and opportunity for the next generation. His statement that the best moments are spent with family gives emotional meaning to the sacrifices described earlier. It also helps explain why he does not want to return permanently to Palestine. Home has become attached to living relationships rather than to geography alone (Said, 2000).

The Memory of His Father

The narrator's father appears as a model of work, love, and loss. Helping him during childhood is remembered positively, while his illness and death form one of the narrator's most painful memories. The interviewee describes trying to save him and confronting the limit of what effort could accomplish. This story complicates the larger narrative of persistence. Much of the interview celebrates hard work, but the father's death represents an event that could not be repaired through labor. The daughter's question may also create an intergenerational moment: she learns about a grandfather she did not know fully, while her father translates grief into family memory. Oral history becomes a form of inheritance (Portelli, 1991).

Faith and Meaning

When asked about the most important person in his life, the narrator answers God. The original commentary questions whether God can be called a person, but that correction is unnecessary and risks dismissing the narrator's religious framework. In many religious traditions, believers speak of a personal relationship with God and use ordinary relational language to describe divine importance. The answer reveals how faith organizes memory, morality, endurance, and family life. It may help explain acceptance of hardship and his refusal to frame the past only through regret. A respectful analysis does not need to share the belief. It recognizes religion as a serious source of meaning and asks how it shapes the narrator's interpretation of migration and loss.

Adaptation without Simple Assimilation

The narrator has adapted to the United States through work, family formation, and a decision to remain, but adaptation should not be confused with complete cultural erasure. The interview does not provide enough detail about language, community organizations, food, religious practice, or relationships with other Palestinians, leaving important questions open. His present commitment to children and siblings may preserve values formed before migration even as daily life changes. Migrants often participate in several social worlds rather than moving from one fixed identity to another. The interview's strongest evidence of adaptation is practical: he reorganized goals from immediate survival toward long-term provision and created a life in which his family can experience opportunities unavailable in his childhood (Said, 2000).

Generational Comparison

The narrator compares his childhood with that of children in the United States, emphasizing facilities, comfort, and educational opportunity. Such comparisons can express pride in what parents have provided, but they may also simplify both generations. Children raised in the United States may face

different pressures involving identity, discrimination, expectations, or distance from family history. The daughter's role as interviewer demonstrates one way to reduce that distance. By asking about school, work, war, grandparents, and belief, she converts family stories into a record that can be revisited. The interview allows the second generation to understand present stability as historically produced rather than natural or automatic.

Memory, Accuracy, and Narrative Truth

Memory is selective and reconstructive. Dates may shift, events may be compressed, and repeated family stories may influence what feels certain. This does not make the interview unreliable in a simple sense. Oral history distinguishes factual accuracy from narrative truth: the sequence of an event may require corroboration, while the meaning attached to it remains evidence about identity and experience. Researchers can compare the account with documents, photographs, immigration records, maps, or interviews with relatives when appropriate and consented to. They should also preserve uncertainty instead of correcting the narrator through speculation. The goal is not to force memory into a perfect timeline but to understand how a life is remembered and communicated (Portelli, 1991; Thompson & Bornat, 2017).

Ethics of a Family Interview

A daughter interviewing her father must consider consent, privacy, and future circulation. Family familiarity can encourage openness, but it can also make the narrator feel obliged to answer sensitive questions. The interviewer should explain how the recording or transcript will be used, allow sections to remain private, and confirm names or identifying details before publication. Translation and editing should preserve meaning without making the speaker appear less capable because of accent or grammar. The narrator should ideally review the transcript and clarify ambiguous passages. Ethical oral history treats the interviewee as a partner with continuing interests in the story, not merely as a source from whom information is extracted (Oral History Association, 2018).

Questions for a Follow-Up Interview

The existing ten-minute interview provides a valuable outline but leaves several areas undeveloped. A follow-up could ask where and when he was born, what work he did with his father, why schooling ended, how migration was arranged, and what his first months in the United States were like. It could explore language learning, employment, discrimination, Palestinian community networks, citizenship, religious practice, and how political events affected contact with relatives. Questions should remain open rather than forcing a heroic or tragic storyline. Photographs, objects, foods, songs, and places may serve as memory prompts. More detail would deepen the history while preserving the narrator's control over what he wishes to share (Oral History Association, 2018; Shopes, n.d.).

Conclusion

The interview records a life shaped by Palestinian childhood, early work, war, migration at sixteen, family responsibility, faith, and the death of a beloved father. Its central achievement is not a complete political history but an intergenerational account of how displacement becomes family memory. The narrator interprets hardship through pride and gratitude, yet the story also contains loss, interrupted education, and the pressure to survive economically. His daughter's participation makes the interview part of the adaptation it describes: a new generation asks how its present was created. A careful oral-history analysis respects the speaker's language, marks uncertainty, avoids judgment, and treats memory as both evidence and meaning (Portelli, 1991; Thompson & Bornat, 2017).

References

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