

TELLING OUR STORIES, FINDING OUR ROOTS ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW SUMMARY FORM

Date of interview	18th March 2020
Location of interview	Exeter Community Centre
Name of interviewee	M --
Name of interviewer	Nicole Redfern
Length of interview	01:31:14
File format, storage format	-

Tags:

Syria ; Lebanon ; Identity; First Generation Story ; Language ; Language Learning ; Food ; Tradition ; Okehampton

Interviewee's wishes regarding use of interview

M-- does not wish an audio version of his interview to be made available.

Interviewer's notes / any issues on recording

Interview in two parts

Linked objects/photographs.

Key themes and topics covered in the interview

Theme / topic	Timecode on recording
Journey to the UK	
Coming to Okehampton and Experience With West Devon Safe Haven	
Language	
Okehampton	
Working Life in the UK and in Lebanon	
Leaving Syria	
Faith, Family and Community	
Religious and Cultural Traditions	
Racist Incidents	
Identity	
Hopes for the Future	

Interview highlights

"I can understand a little bit of English, and we manage to communicate that way, but I find it difficult because people speak very fast."

"I don't care about the religion of my friends, my house is open for everyone."

"We only celebrate the kids' birthdays, we no longer celebrate Eid or New Year's Eve, because I believe such events are connected to our beloved ones, and since our beloved ones are far away there is no need to celebrate."

Interview summary

M--- opens his interview by talking about his move from Hama, a city in Syria, to Lebanon in 2013, after the start of war in Syria. He and his family remained in Lebanon for four to five years before moving to the UK as part of the Family Reunification scheme. Of this time, M--- notes, "I didn't think about travelling as I never wanted to leave Syria. I wasn't really scared but I thought about that I will be moving to the UK without knowing anyone there, and without knowing the language."

He recalls knowing little about the UK before arriving, but being primarily concerned for his children when they arrived, as they "didn't like it because they didn't know anyone in the UK and everything was new and weird for them". He describes adapting to the UK and particularly beginning to like it when his brother arrived eight months after M---.

M--- then describes his family's involvement with a local charity organisation, which arose after "The first house we arrived at was in a bad situation". The charity supported them in their adaptation to life in the UK and helped them find a more suitable place to live. When he first arrived in Okehampton, M--- recalls that he found it to be "very calm with a few people living in it". Next, M--- describes the house he and his family currently live in, their love of sitting in their garden, and their experience of the previous summer when his daughter was born prematurely.

M--- discusses some of the difficulties of moving to the UK without a full grasp of the language. He notes "I can understand a little bit of English, and we manage to communicate that way, but I find it difficult because people speak very fast."

He talks briefly about his siblings; he has one brother in Bristol, one in Lebanon who is awaiting an interview with the UN and hoping to move to the UK soon, and one in Denmark.

M--- then returns to thinking about his arrival in Okehampton. He notes that "Even now, I don't have many friends here", which he attributes to the language barrier, and he goes on to speak briefly about the few families he knows of locally who also speak Arabic. M--- asserts that he enjoys living in Okehampton and would rather stay there than move to somewhere with a stronger Arabic-speaking community, but he notes the transport links (particularly the bus schedules) as a barrier to his ease of life. He also talks briefly about people's reception of his family when they arrived in Okehampton: "I didn't have any problem when walking and shopping in town. However, my child was not accepted between kids in the school."

M--- moves on to talk about Okehampton in general, noting in particular the natural surroundings and the lack of opportunity. He talks about the shops available, particularly the supermarkets (which he finds to be expensive), and the lack of a local source of Halal meat for his family.

M--- then discusses his job in a local restaurant and the differences between this and his work in construction and agriculture in Lebanon, but notes that "My bad experience in Lebanon is that I didn't enjoy my work because I faced racism and discrimination."

In his free time, M--- describes spending a lot of time on his phone. He does this to stay in contact with his parents and friends in Syria. He describes the troubles some Syrian residents face and goes on to describe his experience in Syria shortly before he left for Lebanon: "I had a very bad experience in Syria when I wanted to leave from one town to another. I had to pay the soldiers to allow me to pass. The situation is getting worse in Syria and I still have many things to tell about Syria but I prefer to forget. I was shot in my hand, and the scar is still clear."

Interview summary

M--- then returns to talking about Okehampton and the Muslim community there, although he does not have much engagement with it himself: "I don't care about the religion of my friends, my house is open for everyone." He mentions keeping in contact with his personal community of family and friends via social media channels and occasional visits with those who live in the UK.

M--- next talks about tradition, mentioning that "We only celebrate the kids' birthdays, we no longer celebrate Eid or New Year's Eve, because I believe such events are connected to our beloved ones, and since our beloved ones are far away there is no need to celebrate." M--- does, however, still enjoy eating Syrian meals, though he finds the seafood available in the UK to be very different to that in Syria.

At the end of the first part of the interview, M--- mentions briefly an incident of racism (an unprovoked shout) directed at him outside of his house, but notes that "I didn't care because I didn't know what the word meant at that moment and never saw that person again."

In the second part of his interview, M--- begins by talking about identity. He discusses his middle son's self-identification as Lebanese (as he was born in Lebanon), his older son's identification as Syrian, about his baby daughter's likely future identification as a British person, and his own Syrian identity. Although M--- and his family have viewed their move to the UK as permanent, M--- considers returning to Syria himself in the future but states that "I am not counting to go back now since there is no work for me there and the living situation is bad."

To close the interview, M--- reflects on his hopes for the future and on his welcome to Okehampton, and expresses his thanks to members of the organisation who have helped him and his family since they arrived in Devon. Finally, he gives some advice to his past self prior to arriving in the UK: "learn English so I could accommodate people and become more familiar with the culture and engage more into the community here. If I don't know English I can't manage to live here."