

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interview with: Imad A. Haj-Ismael

Interviewed by: Saima Toppa

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Interview Transcript:

Key:

ST	Saima Toppa
AH	Imad A. Haj-Ismael
...	Speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

ST: Yes. It's recording now. So...Imad A. Haj-Ismael. That's how you say your name?

AH: Yes, this is how you say my name.

ST: Well, I'm going to be interviewing you today on your immigration history. And the purpose of the project is to track um labor and employment in and out of Houston for immigrants.

AH: Okay.

ST: Um so would you please start off by telling me about yourself and your background?

AH: Sure, my name is Imad Haj-Ismael. I was born in Palestine which is um in Asia, or actually, in Israel and Jordan there. I finished my high school there and I came to the United States to study. I went to Texas A&M. I got a bachelor degree in Civil Engineering. Then, I went to graduate school, where I got a graduate degree in Transportation Planning and Engineering. After I completed my graduate study, I came to Houston. I got a job with Metro Public Transport Company and I have been working with Metro for 21 years now. I am in charge of uh scheduling the service for the buses and trains. I am married and I have five kids, two of them are in college and the others are in high school and elementary school. This is just short and brief.

ST: Yes, thank you so much. [**AH:** You're welcome.] Um so you mentioned how you came to the United States after high school. So was your specific purpose of immigration for education?

AH: Education: the sole purpose for my uh trip or my immigration was for education. I actually had some friends and uh some relatives who were going to Texas A&M at that time and they got me the I-20 or the

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acceptance to school and I came in here and they were very helpful. It is family connection.

ST: Um was it a difficult process to get this I-20 or to um apply?

AH: To me, it was not because I had some family who were at the school—they knew the procedures. They were telling me what I need to do. Uh for example, I took a course in English before I came here—which helped a lot when I came in here, uh they took care of my paperwork and here. When I came here, they picked me up from the airport, they helped me to find an apartment, they helped me to sign for classes, and they showed me around, get the driving license, so it was not uh difficult for me.

ST: Um so what year did you immigrate?

AH: I would say '78-79.

ST: And what age were you at that time?

AH: Uh, 18 years.

ST: 18 years.

AH: Just finished high school.

ST: So let's backtrack a bit. What was uh your childhood like in Palestine?

AH: Well, I came from a fairly big family. Most of the families there are big. Uh I had uh four brothers and two sisters. We lived in the country, so my family very much farmers. And uh I came from a town that at that time was about three thousand people, it's about 40-50 miles from Jerusalem. It's a beautiful village with mountains and trees.

ST: What was the name of the town?

AH: Hawara.

ST: Can you please spell that?

AH: H-A-W-A-R-A.

ST: Is it under Israeli occupation right now?

AH: Yes, yes, it's the West Bank.

ST: So what would you classify your socioeconomic status growing up. Was there enough money, was there enough food...middle class?

AH: I would say we- it's middle class. Uh we lived fairly comfortably. My family worked hard though. My mom, my father, and we also had our grandparents living with us. My grandmother, my grandfather. And back home, most of the people if not all of them—they actually lived with their kids when they grow older, either the same house or next door house. Uh at that time, senior citizen housing was not something familiar so basically my grandparents lived with us until they passed away.

ST: Okay. What were your parents' professions?

AH: Uh, farmers.

ST: Farmers. What did they farm?

AH: Uh, wheat and barley and uh we also had olive trees where we got olive oils from them. We also raised some cattle and some sheeps.

ST: With this uh kind of background, what type of academic or professional expectations did your family have in mind for you?

AH: Uh they always wanted me to be an engineer...I'm the oldest in the family, so they were hoping that I go to school, get my degree, and uh get a good job, and help my brothers and sisters, and help the family to have a uh better life.

ST: Mm-hm. Um...so um you immigrated by yourself?

AH: Yes.

ST: Alone?

AH: Yes.

ST: Were your parents enthusiastic behind that—supportive?

AH: Uh they were supportive. But my mom, in particular, she was very sad to see me leaving. I remember she cried a lot and uh—because that was my first trip out to the country and it was a big trip and it was a first trip going out of the continent. So she was worried about me.

ST: So was this an in- and independent choice or was it influenced by someone else? Like how did you hear of this opportunity [to come to America]?

AH: Well, like I said, we had some relatives who were going to school in here. they were doing good and they had a good reputation, good kids who went to school—they did well, some of them did well, and so I was influenced by that and also everybody knows there are more opportunities in the United States than almost anywhere else in, in the world.

ST: So um, you wouldn't have immigrated to another country if there was a chance? Is there something special to the United States?

AH: Well, uh I believe the fact that we had some relatives in here that made my family and made me much more comfortable than, for example, immigrating to Australia or Japan or Germany. Where also, the fact that I studied English in high school. That was also another factor. 'Cause going to another country like Germany or Japan or France would require you know studying a new language. So there were several factors.

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ST: Mm-hmm. Um...did you envision your immigration to be temporary or did you want to make a life here?

AH: No, absolutely, absolutely. The plan was I come in here, I get my degree, and I go back, get a job somewhere in Saudi Arabia or the Gulf Region—some of these oil-rich countries. Get a good job, help the family, get married, and help my brothers and sisters and so on. But like with so many people, once you get to the United States, it's so difficult to get out of it. So I uh I got my degree, my bachelors, my family encouraged me to go to graduate school. and I got the graduate school and after that I got job offers and at that time, the situation in the middle east was not good because of the war between Iran and Iraq and there were not many job opportunities there and so I got the job offer [in America] and I took it. And like I said, the rest was history. Yeah.

ST: Um do you still hold on to that dream of going back one day [inaudible]?

AH: Yes, yes, maybe after I retire. And uh I still have some family need to go to college and I actually travel every other year or so. I travel, go back. My parents passed away but I still have brothers and sisters and cousins and uncles and aunts and. They still live there so we are, still in touch with them. I don't know. This is always a question in, in which I always think about. Do I need to be in here or do I need to go there? It's uh very difficult. But like so many people are doing, they keep traveling back and forth. So I imagine myself; I probably go there live for a few months, come in here. Also depends on what my kids will decide to do. Uh will they go back and work. So it's, it's a very difficult question and time only can tell.

ST: Mm-hm. Um...what did you hope to achieve by immigrating here?

AH: Uh good education. [**ST:** Good education.] That's about it. That was the main goal. Getting a good education.

ST: Mm-hm. How's the education system in Palestine comparatively?

AH: Uh well, it's Palestine and a lot of the Middle East countries they don't really have the resources which the United States have. Definitely it's not at the same level. But I can't tell you at that time when I was there, the teachers and the students they worked very hard. And uh when I came in here, uh I did not find it so difficult to go through the freshman year. Because we had a good high school program there. Of course, things were different than now. But in terms of the colleges and universities, of course, there is—you can say there is no comparison to the schools in the United States in here.

ST: So you mentioned you had the support of family and friends, relatives who had migrated to the United States earlier? Um can you describe at what time period they immigrated and for what reasons?

AH: Some of them they migrated for education and I would say almost all of them they got their degrees and they went back home. Others they came in here for business and mainly they were in New York. Some uncles and some aunts and some relatives, uh they came strictly for business and look for jobs and better living opportunities. And some of them they did well. Others they did not do well. Some of them went back; some of them are still here.

ST: And what time period did uh they initially start to immigrate?

AH: I would say probably three to five years before I came in here.

ST: So, around 1975?

AH: Yes, around that time.

ST: So, even though they had immigrated, they weren't established in the United States yet?

AH: Not necessarily, yeah.

ST: What was your port of entry in the United States? Where did you enter?

AH: Houston. Yeah, well, actually, it was in New York. Then, from New York to Houston. The first was in the port was in New York.

ST: ...What do you mean by uh New York first?

AH: The airport. Which is—most of the international flights at that time [**ST:** Oh okay.] came to JFK and from there you took the domestic flight to different cities.

ST: Okay. And then, so, you initially lived in Houston for a period of time?

AH: All the time. Well, then no, no, no. I came to Houston, then I went to College Station. [**ST:** College Station, for?] I just landed in Houston, then went to College Station so during my college years I just lived in College Station. Then, after I finished my graduate study, I came to Houston, which was for after I got the job.

ST: Can you describe your college experience. Roughly like what would you—if you had to summarize in terms of your transition to the United States? How was it?

AH: I—it was interesting. I like it. I like college life. I lived on campus.

ST: Oh, you did? All four years?

AH: I did. All four years. Yeah. Three and a half, actually. I lived on campus. I had some interesting times. I loved going to Texas A&M. College Station is um a small city, with the standards of Houston or other big cities. It was safe, I had a lot of friends, uh immigrant students basically. So, I would say it was a great experience. I really liked it there and that's why uh my sons is going there and I...

ST: I know, Nadia told me.

AH: Yes, yes, so I encouraged him to go there. He had to the choice to go to the UT or the Texas A&M. Which I know UT is a very good school, but I like College Station. I like the A&M campus so it was, it was a good experience.

ST: So did you receive uh any culture shock?

AH: Yes, to some extent, yes. Uh the U.S. here is a more open society. Uh there are a lot of intermingling of uh gender and uh a lot of things I'm not used to—for example, drinking and driving, dating. So it was, it was a...also the social life...It's something that doesn't exist here...where it's different from Asian countries where the people in the same town, the same neighborhood, they know each other. They visit each other you know they socialize. You see a lot of people walking uh on the streets.

ST: Internationally?

AH: Internationally, yeah. But something in College Station or Houston, you don't see. People walking in the streets at all. Everybody's driving. Uh the other thing that the people here in the U.S., United States knew very little about the people coming from overseas, from Asia or other countries. Very little. So they were asking questions that would surprise you like: Do you have Coke? Do you have cars? Do you have this? And, and uh so then you know very little about the culture and the people uh overseas, so that was really shocking to me. The people overseas know a lot more about the U.S. since it's a very influential country and I would hope they would know about other cultures, about other people and it was really surprising to me. Of course the food also was kind of different.

ST: The what?

AH: The food.

ST: Oh, yeah, definitely...um so, um after A&M, after three and a half years at A&M, then you went on to obtain a graduate degree, correct?

AH: Yeah, I took probably a semester off. I traveled back home to the Middle East and then I came back.

ST: And you did your graduate degree at A&M?

AH: Undergraduate degree from A&M yes, and the graduate degree from A&M as well.

ST: Okay. And so immediately after the graduate degree, you went on to be employed in Houston?

AH: Yes.

ST: Okay. And what year did you start your employment in Houston?

AH: I would say in '89.

ST: At the METRO?

AH: Yes..

ST: What's, what's the official name of the METRO?

AH: Metropolitan Transit Authority.

ST: Okay...And what was your position title?

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AH: At that time, I was Transit Systems Analyst...my graduate study mainly was in transportations and logistics so I felt fortunate that I find a job in the field where I study.

ST: Yeah. Did you find it difficult to apply to jobs? Like were you—did you have a lot of anxiety?

AH: I actually ... it was kind of difficult for a lot of immigrants and students, or international students. And mainly because most of them don't have the immigration papers like resident green card or citizenship, even though at that time it was not as difficult as now. Right now, it's almost impossible for a student who does not have a Green Card or uh citizenship to work. Uh so, it's still, at that time, it was quite difficult. I was lucky in a way. Some of my uh some of my student friends they had uh internship at, at METRO. And METRO was looking for someone to work in the area of modeling and so they told the people there. And that there were a couple of people who were interested so they called me and said, we want you to come forward for an interview. So I went for an interview and they offered me the job. And I actually got two jobs offers, one from California. Los Angeles and one from Houston and at that time, I was not done completely with my graduate studies so Houston is close to A&M so I was working for a few months about 6 or about 6 months so months before I actually graduated. So, I was commuting back and forth on the weekend. [**ST:** Wow.] So it was a good arrangement and uh I started working for METRO and I liked them—the projects and the opportunities and it's been a rewarding experience.

ST: So you worked on weekends?

AH: I actually commute. No, I work on weekdays. I commuted to College Station on the weekends.

ST: Wow, wow...um so what was your legal status while you were...?

AH: I was a student. I had F-1 visa.

ST: F-1 visa.

AH: And yeah. And I managed to get I-10, H-1 visa, or a training visa which was at that time for uh three years, okay. And after that H-1 visa. Or actually, before it expired, METRO helped me get my uh work permits and immigration papers and I got my green card.

ST: At what point? What year?

AH: Uh, I would say about two years after I started work. So, probably '91. Around that time. It's been a long time, but I would say around '91 when I got my work permit and uh soon after that, I got my Green Card.

ST: Do you think um since it was so hard for a student without a Green Card um to be employed, did you face those challenges as well?

AH: Uh, I did, I did. But I—it was not as bad as for other students. For example, which I knew some students sent maybe 50 or more resumes and work applications and did not even get an interview. Okay. But always like I said, always connections and networking helps a lot. But the fact that some of my friends they were working in here and they helped to uh connect with er, with the people at METRO and I knew I just wanted an

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opportunity to tell the people what I can do for them and talk to them about my skills and my interests in transportation. And uh so I guess they were interested or impressed whatever they said (?), and they offered me the job. I still consider myself blessed and, and lucky that I managed to get the job.

ST: Hmm, especially, since you stayed with it for so long.

AH: Yes, exactly, since I know a lot of students who graduated and actually never worked. So they had to get into different fields and different-

ST: With the same degree you have?

AH: With the same degree or with a different degree, yes. Different. Most of them, uh international students, they usually get into technical field, like engineering, computer science, technology, and so on. So, I know for sure they graduated with engineering degrees and they could not get jobs. So they had to get different jobs in different fields.

ST: And do you think it's because—do you attribute it to a lack of connections and networking?

AH: I would say several factors. First of all, not understanding how the system works. Okay. Uh definitely connections and networking helps a lot. The best jobs actually come from connections, not through somebody sending a resume. The other thing, like we said, uh having the proper immigration papers or work papers was also an obstacle. Uh I would say also at times the playing field is not level. Okay. Uh is there a bias in the process? Possibly, there is some bias in the process. And so there are several factors. I mean, it could be a language barrier; it could be a cultural barrier. So there are quite a lot of obstacles.

ST: What year did you get married?

AH: Ahh, '90.

ST: 1990?

AH: Yes.

ST: Okay. And can you describe to me how that transpired?

AH: Well, my, my wife is from my hometown. So I knew her before. But uh as you probably know, in so many cultures, there is no dating, or even though people here they look at it or call it arranged marriage—it's not necessarily arranged marriage, where they bring someone from one place and someone from a different place and say, 'Okay, you guys are going to get married.' Or no, it doesn't work this way. People normally know each other, I mean especially if you come from a small town like where I come from. People know each other for a long time. Families know each other and so on. So if uh if somebody is interested in someone and this is how families get involved and start talking to each other. You know. Like we're interested in your daughter, we're interested in your son and so on. Then people get to know each other. And if you want to say arrange the marriage, and then they'll work out the arrangements. But it is not something that is conceived in a vacuum, where the people never knew the people before. We know each other before. But like I said, it's different than here in the United States. There is no dating, and even though people could sit and talk with each other and you know talk about their interests and so on but it does not happen in the way it happens here in this culture. Yeah.

ST: Right, so in 1990, you were married in Palestine or in America?

AH: No, she came in here.

ST: Oh, she came here in 1990.

AH: She came in here.

ST: Um and at that point...um so you were married in 1990?

AH: Yes, I got married in 1990 and she came in here and we got married in the United States.

ST: Okay.

AH: No. So, the actual marriage happened here in the United States

ST: In what city?

AH: In Houston.

ST: In Houston.

ST: So, um how was her immigration story?

AH: She came as a student.

ST: Okay. She also came as a student.

AH: Yes, and when I applied for my immigration papers, she was on my application.

ST: ...So you got your green card in '91, it says though.

AH: Yes, so I got married—we started working with immigration paper. Then about a year later, I would say 12 to 18 months, after that, we got our Green Card.

ST: Okay, so it was a joint application?

AH: Exactly.

ST: ...um so what's your wife's profession?

AH: She actually a part-time student and full-time uh mother and housewife.

ST: Mmm. Where did she go to school?

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AH: Here. Uh she went North Houston Community College. Or now it's the Lone Star.

ST: Okay. And how was your wife's transition to the United States? Would you say it's different than yours?

AH: It was kind of difficult initially. Because she did not know many people here. And I did not know hardly any families because I was a single, just moved from here. I was very busy, working during the weekdays, commuting to College Station on weekends. I did not know many people. And uh also, she was not driving so she had to learn how to drive, learn her way around. And so uh I would say the first 12 months was kind of difficult and lonesome. It was also you know culture shock for her and then after that, after she started driving and we knew a few other families and things started getting better and easier.

ST: Mm-hmm. So um while...when you were in the United States, like say in the first 5 or 10 years, did you maintain a lot of contact with family back in Palestine?

AH: Oh yes, yes, yes.

ST: Through what?

AH: Telephone. At that time, telephone, no computers. And so with telephones and letters.

ST: Letters... And now it's mainly through Internet?

AH: Computer, internet and telephones and yeah. Video. The means of communication is... Technology you don't feel like you're far away from any place. So, when I travel overseas, I bring a computer and I work from overseas so it's—technology made it a lot easier to communicate, stay in touch.

ST: So do you think keep up with news and popular culture back home?

AH: Yes, yes. To some extent. Not as much as used to be. That's because I'm quite busy. And, we're busy with the kids. You know, when you are obviously single and you don't have as many responsibilities so you probably tend to read the news more or watch the news more, so. But right now, almost leave home 7 o'clock and get back at 7 o'clock. Uh so by the time you eat dinner, spend a little bit of time with family, it's almost 9, 10 o'clock time to go to sleep. On the weekends, usually, you have a lot of work to do, a lot of activities. But I try to keep up in touch to some extent, and keep up with what's going on.

ST: So tell me about your transition from single life to married life and how different it was.

AH: Well, it's definitely, it's different. Uh you have someone else you need to share your life with me. You no longer can make decisions on your own; so you have somebody else to share the decisions with them. I think it provides stability. And it's probably knowing our culture, one of your goals in your life, is to get married, to have family, to have kids, and you know, it's sort of instinct, instinct, in our culture, so it was one of the, the goals that I need to achieve so it provided me with some peace of mind and stability I find.

ST: Um so what were your expectations for your wife? If you don't mind me asking?

AH: Well, I, I really thought the transition was gonna be difficult for her. But I guess I was wrong. She managed to adjust. She learned the language quickly. And uh I would say now she is in control of everything.

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Now she has in control of the financing and running the affairs of the house and keeping up with the kids. And, and so on she really learned quickly the system and um and she loves it in here.

ST: Mm-hm. Does she want to go to Palestine?

AH: Uh I would say not as much as I want. Yeah, she's quite comfortable in here. The other thing is her family and even my family they come and they visit us quite often, so another thing is you don't feel the distance, that you are far away from her mom she comes in here. Her brothers, my mom used to come in here. And possibly someone in her family, her family will come this summer. So she always you know close to her family. So I would say, you know maybe one day she think—she probably likes to go and visit, I don't know if she likes to go and stay there.

ST: Would you imagine your life to be radically different if you were to—if you had stayed in Palestine longer? Perhaps started your education there?

AH: Maybe.

ST: And like maybe migrate at a later point in life?

AH: I would say it probably would have been different. I would say. Probably would not have achieved the education or the kind of education which I did in the U.S. in here. Uh it is really difficult to tell, because I can tell you some people who did not immigrate and stay there and they have done very well.

ST: Right.

AH: Uh I have some friends, some relatives who came to the United States, they stayed here for a while. Then they just either did not fit, they did not like it, or—and they went back. And they did very well. So it's-

ST: Back to Palestine?

AH: Yes, so it depends on circumstances, you know.

ST: Um...what hardships or struggles do you remember facing upon arrival in the U.S.?

AH: Language.

ST: Language.

AH: Language was difficult to understand, for people or for the people to understand me. I can't tell you when I started college, and I had a history course, which was kind of difficult, and it requires language. So what I did uh myself and a few of my friends, we used to take a recorder and put it there on the table and record the lectures and we go after, we go home and sit down and listen to it, repeatedly and write down the notes, so we could read the notes. And I tell you, we did really well. We made really high grades. But it was difficult for us just to sit and take notes because we could not understand everything the professor said. So initially the language was uh the big obstacle, big barrier.

ST: How long did you study English in Palestine, before you immigrated?

AH: Well, uh we started there learning English in the 5th grade to the high school. So we started learning grammar and composition but the speaking skills and, and the accent and getting your ear used to hearing English from the native speakers—that was a difficult thing. Also, the pronunciation. I’ve been here a long time, but I still don’t pronounce like a native speaker because I came here when I was 18 years old. So it’s so difficult for a person to uh speak like native speaker, when you learn the language in your adult life.

ST: So what hardships have you faced recently? Do you still face difficulties as an immigrant—do you think?

AH: I—uh, not really. Nothing really significant. Uh again, I would say... you know some of the difficulties you could face, you are still very much uh kind of an immigrant even though after you get citizenship. You know it’s uh you still, somehow different. Or some people look at you different. I would say very few people. You know, uh but overall, it’s you know it is okay.

ST: Mm-hm. So, going back to your childhood and of your parents’ history, what was their educational level?

AH: Uh I would say elementary.

ST: Elementary, wow.

AH: Yeah. ‘Cause at their time, the schools were very primitive. The education was primitive. And basically people learned how to read and write.

ST: In Arabic?

AH: Yes.

ST: So did that create an opportunity to have really high academic aspirations and expectations for you?

AH: Oh definitely. And I was the pride for my parents. Yes, they want to get our kids the education that we never had.

ST: You can drink some water. [laughs] Um did you ever feel alienated upon your arrival to the United States? Lonely?

AH: Well, you can’t help but that sometimes you feel lonely. Again, because of the culture shock. And uh it’s uh even though, like I said I was lucky in a way because I had some relatives and friends and uh again I lived on campus and I had so many friends but there are times when you feel lonely, I mean especially around the holidays for example. You know, whether it’s the holidays in the United States or the holidays for the people overseas, you always wanted to be with your family and your relatives and so on so there were times when you feel lonely.

ST: Um so um did you find that there was an Arab or a Palestinian or a Muslim community to back you up at these times?

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AH: Yes, yes, but the community at that time was not as big or as influential like nowadays. Now in Houston, you probably have 100,000 Muslims in Houston. Uh you have dozens and dozens of mosques and organizations to back you up and [inaudible] for support. But at that time, there were not too many but there were enough people. We had the Muslim Students Association, the Arab Students Association, which uh they help the students—the new arrivals, to settle.

ST: Were you part of either these groups?

AH: Yes I was part of the Arab Students Association.

ST: Um so are you currently involved in any community groups or associations?

AH: Uh, not really.

ST: No?

AH: No, not a whole lot. Probably very limited. Uh, I, I, I sometimes take part in the Boys Scout. We have Boy Scouts—two of them in the mosques for the Muslim community in the spring. We get involved. I uh—but because of my very busy schedule, we don't really get involved with the associations.

ST: Does your wife, on the other hand, get involved in community associations?

AH: Very little.

ST: Very little.

AH: Very little, yes. She gets involved with Girls Scouts and some of the activities. But not as much as we should, but again with a big family...

ST: That's true.

AH: The obligation—it's kind of difficult.

ST: Um would you say you interact with a lot of Arabs and Muslims frequently though? And how do you find out—how do you get these contacts in Houston?

AH: We do interact. We have some friends—family friends uh in Spring. And mainly for the kids to get together and for you know the families to get together and it is not as often as you know probably needs to be. Probably every 3 to 4 weeks, you go to the park with some friends and, and that's about it. Again the busy schedule and the fast life uh in the United States does not really allow you to do a lot of social activities, [**ST:** Yeah, yeah.] hardly any, especially in my part. My wife probably gets a little more time sometimes breaks after the kids go to school—uh maybe she gets together with some of the friends. But in my case, sometimes I don't see anybody or meet anyone for a month or so. Yeah.

ST: Wow. My family is like that too. We have a large family and I have five siblings. And my parents they're so busy. My mom doesn't have time to—for social activities. Nor does my dad because he's working.

AH: Life, life is really about the fast paced—living, right now. Uh commuting to work takes about three hours for me every day. Three hours.

ST: Three hours?

AH: Yes, about an hour and a half in the morning and an hour and a half in the afternoon. Uh the traffic. And it's just it takes a lot of time.

ST: Right.

AH: And of course the work stress and sometimes bothering me to work on the weekends or.

ST: Right. Um so how often do you work? Like uh hours a week? How many days a week?

AH: Five days a week, Monday to Friday. It's an office job so 8 to 5.

ST: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. And was your work schedule always like this?

AH: Yes, very much so.

ST: Mm-hm. Do you enjoy your job?

AH: I do enjoy my job. At times it is uh stressful uh but uh I enjoy it.

ST: Mm-hm. Um is this the career path if you—like when you were little, you envisioned yourself in? Is this?

AH: Well, I...I think I, I'm satisfied with what I accomplished and what I did. Uh I think my hard work has been rewarding. Uh would I be something different, like I wanted to be a physician or a lawyer so?

ST: Wait, did you?

AH: No, not necessarily. I wanted to study engineering. I wanted to be an engineer. And uh I think I'm content and satisfied with my career.

ST: Mm-hm. Um so what were your hours when you were a student? Um you said you were uh working Monday to Friday? Was it the same schedule: 8 to 5?

AH: When, when?

ST: When you were in college?

AH: Well, no, no.

ST: And commuting on the weekends? [**AH:** When I wasn't-]

AH: Oh, yes, yes. Yes, but this was a short period of time, about six months or so.

ST: Okay.

AH: Yeah, 'cause I had a full-time job, 8 to 5, and 5 days a week, and the weekend. That was about 6 months.

ST: Right. Um if you don't mind me asking, can you tell me the pay scale of your job?

AH: Uh I, I make about close to \$106,000.

ST: Oh wow. And uh when you started working what was your salary?

AH: \$31,000.

ST: Wow.

AH: I tell you what. I worked very hard and uh I got rewarded for it. Monetary-wise, I got rewarded for it.

ST: And for your first uh job—the starting salary—this was in what year?

AH: Uh, '89.

ST: 1989.

AH: Mmm.

ST: And it's pretty comparable in the number of hours and so forth?

AH: Yeah

ST: So it was just further education or what? What created this?

AH: Well, hard work and promotion

ST: Hard work and promotion.

AH: Yeah.

ST: ...um so uh how's the nature of your interactions with people from other ethnicities? Do they—um are they ever hostile to you? Are they welcoming? How do you find ...?

AH: I would say most of them are welcoming, okay, regardless. We still say the foreign workers—they feel closer to each other. Like an Indian or a Chinese or a Pakistani or a Tunisian or Iranian uh worker probably feels closer to each other. Uh but my American co-workers are receptive and actually all the people that work for me—I have six people working for me—five of them are Americans and one Vietnamese so it's uh—I think they all are accommodating, they all are good, and overall the American people are really nice people. They're accommodating. And uh I really don't have much complaint; sometimes you know you face some difficult people. You know, overall, though, it is not the norm. The exceptions.

ST: Did you receive any sort of discrimination post 9/11? Did you notice any difficulties or challenges in a post-9/11 climate?

AH: Nobody directly and openly told me anything. Okay. If somebody looked at me different, I don't know. And I doubt...again...a lot of people in United States don't know uuh who is this...and who is that.

ST: Right, ambiguous.

AH: And who lives where exactly. So for some people you know all the people in, in, in the Middle East are Iranians or when I tell some people I am from Palestine, they say Pakistan, so there is not much of understanding.

ST: Much knowledge.

AH: Knowledge of the culture and the origins and the language and the whole nine yard. But uh nobody really bothered me. Nobody made any remarks. Uh I, I would not say. My wife probably—some people made the remarks. My wife, she covered her hair and there are times when people give you a finger or they push the horn or do the horn or something.

ST: Oh my God.

AH: But uh I would say that was occasional incident. But I would not say anyone really bothered us or tried to you know to harm us in any way.

ST: Um...can you tell me about the Palestinian or Arab American community in Houston um and whether you actively seek out those relationships? Or how do you feel—do you feel like a special kinship?

AH: Oh, yeah definitely, definitely. You feel closer to the people who came from where you come from uh sometimes talk about what's going on. And uh you definitely feel closer and some kinship to the people you know who came from where you came from.

ST: But do they—meeting with these people ever invoke nostalgic—nostalgia of home [**AH:** Yes.] and with Palestine?

AH: Yes, it does. It does, yes. You start remembering you know uh the different things like from the food to the culture you know, to even some friends and some you know neighborhoods. You know, it does, yes.

ST: Okay. So um can you describe the job position you have now versus what you had when you initially started your first employment job?

AH: Yes, when I initially started, I worked in area...it's called Modeling...it's basically trying to uh plan and uh plan transportation facilities and transportation networks. Like it planned for putting public transit, railroads, I mean rail transit, and so on. So it was more of uh planning and modeling and the long-range stuff. It's like trying to plan for the future. Right now, my work is focused on what's going on right now. I, I schedule. I'm responsible for scheduling the service—the bus and train service—also for supporting the technology aboard the buses. A lot of people would be surprised that we have more computers on buses than what we have in our board room of fourteen or thirteen, of you know thirty or forty years ago. So it's, it's much more complicated than it used to be. So I'm responsible for scheduling the services. Like when you look at the bus schedule, in public cars, the bus comes at this time, at this point, and so on. My goal will be responsible for preparing this which directly affects the operating budget of the agency. The more service, the more buses you put there, the more drivers you put there, it's uh it means costing money and scheduling too, allocation of equipment of the buses, allocation of manpower, and support of technology on the buses.

ST: Of buses?

AH: The buses, yeah. Like if you—when you ride the bus, you will hear the bus stop announcements.

ST: Yeah.

AH: Okay, we program that, we put there. Or you see inside the next bus, the internal sign, the next stops. Also, every time you get on the bus, you get counted. You get on the bus, every time you get off the bus, you get counted. Also, we have Global Positioning System or GPS on the buses so we keep track of the buses any minute on, on, on the road.

ST: Okay so it seems like it's a more technologically oriented job than your initial...?

AH: Absolutely, absolutely and all this technology happened in the last, I would say, five, eight years so it's everyone's job almost transformed by technology [**ST:** Yeah.] and all this is not possible without the computer and technology and software we have right now.

ST: So did you find yourself having to reeducate yourself on the processes?

AH: Yes, yes, yes absolutely. I try to keep up with technology and with research. Keep my skills sharp and definitely you have to.

ST: Um so, let's go back to the question of racial status. Like how would you define yourself in a questionnaire in terms of defining your ethnicity? Your race? However it may be?

AH: Uh on paper, legally, I'm supposed to be a white.

ST: Right.

AH: Okay. But does the system treat me as a Caucasian person who was born here and so on? Sometimes, yes. Sometimes, no. I, I mean, I'm still an immigrant. And uh even though I'm a citizen, I've been a citizen for a

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long time, I, I would say this country helped me a whole lot in giving me education, in giving me jobs, and skills and I also pay back in terms of working hard, uh being loyal to my job and to this country. Okay. Uh so, even though again, I'm classified as a white person, but there are times when you feel you are not exactly treated [ST: Right.] like a white person who was born or maybe European origins or roots...and I don't say this is necessarily as some kind of bias or, or racism. I would not say it is. And like I said again, I think the people in the U.S. are more accommodating than so many other countries. You can go to some countries like Japan or maybe China where you will never be able to obtain a residency or citizenship at all and you will never be treated like the other people.

ST: [laughs] Um I'm almost finished. I'm just trying a...

AH: Take your time.

ST: Like what if I miss an essential piece? Is there anything more you would like to tell me; anything you think would be crucial?

AH: Not necessary. All I can say that, in general, most of the immigrants come to this country to look for opportunities [ST: Yeah.] and they work very hard and you can tell it whether they are students or they involved in enterprise, businesses, you can see it around you even at Rice. You have a large number of international students, or, or students of Asian or immigrant origin, maybe they are the second generation but they still carry some of the uh culture or some of the way of thinking like in terms of working hard and, and trying to achieve and trying to, you know, get a good education and good jobs. So, overall, I think immigration enriched the U.S. and I think it helped the country uh to become what is a superpower economically and, and otherwise. Definitely, for sure.

ST: So would you say there is inherently something to an immigrant that makes them work harder? [AH: Yes, yes.] That there is an immigrant work ethic?

AH: Well, because most of them came from countries that they don't have these opportunities. Don't have the resources. They—you could not get a good education that you can get in here and so when they come in here and see these opportunities they feel compelled to work hard. Uh the other thing is most of them come from cultures which uh they value education, uh uh where failure is a stigma, and it is uh—people look at it as shameful, degrading thing if you fail. So like students or people who come in here for other reasons, they feel compelled, obligated to work hard and besides that in so many cultures where if somebody, especially like the older child you know if he gets an education, get money, they help their parents and their brothers and sisters. So they don't really do this for themselves only. They do it for the whole family. And a lot of them they know, uh 'If I succeed, the whole family will do very well. If I fail, the family will you know... will not do well.' Or their life will be much more difficult. That's why you see a lot of immigrants they really work hard for these reasons.

ST: So would you suggest that of your family and friends remaining in Palestine that they immigrate to the U.S.? Do you think that would positively impact..?

AH: Well, no, [laughs] the people cannot just leave their homeland, their countries, and come. Uh for some people, maybe it's the right thing to do—people who want to get a good education. Right now things are different around the world, there are a lot of rising powers and opportunities for you know making wealth and getting a good education. A lot of people, they immigrate to Australia, to maybe to China, even they stay home,

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they still do well because technology and computers and other means made it a lot easier for people to, to learn and uh to start or to become more innovative and, and do better. But for some people, maybe it's provide them with better opportunities and, and, and greater uh opportunities to come and do well in here but it is not for anyone or everyone. It is not.

ST: A certain type of ambitious person? You would say?

AH: I would say ambitious and responsible.

ST: Uh-huh. So would you—do you think that when immigrants come to the U.S., of those immigrants, are they the 'cream of the crop?'

AH: Not necessary. A lot of times the 'cream of crop' they stay back home because they have better uh opportunities for good education, scholarships, and, and otherwise. And besides that, people and families who are doing well they don't think about immigrating and leaving their homeland.

ST: Yeah...do you think a lot of immigrants want to go back home eventually? Like to contribute to their culture as well?

AH: Not necessary. People should you know be where they feel like they belong—where they can do well and contribute. You know you don't want to live in a country just for the sake of living or being a burden on the system. You want to be part of the community, part of the society. [**ST:** Right, right.] Contribute to the society, be someone. If you raise a family, you want to make sure you raise good kids, who be a good citizen you know, so if you are here, you feel that you are doing well, contributing the society, and then if you want to stay, that's fine. But if you think probably there is a need for you to be somewhere else, then I think you should try to go somewhere else, not necessarily back to where you come from. I know some people who lived here and they immigrated to Europe or to Australia or somewhere. Or some people now they go and work in China because there are a lot more opportunities [**ST:** Yeah.] and it worked well for some people.

ST: You mentioned before how immigrants have enriched the U.S.? And um there's a lot of talk now of in third-world countries, second-world countries, of a 'brain drain,' where the most educated are leaving the country to uh explore and discover opportunities in America and Europe and so forth. Would you say this is a true phenomenon? Have you seen those?

AH: To some extent, there is some truth into it. But if you don't want to lose your bright- bestest and the brightest, you need to give these people the opportunity there. Because if you have a bright person, it will be uh a waste of brainpower if they—you—put him on a desk and give him some kind of bureaucratic jobs. You know, if you don't give him the opportunity then let them go where they can contribute and use their skills...I give you an example. You know years ago, and you still see a lot of people, came from China and settled the United States and they contributed to the United States in so many ways. Right now you see people going and working in China, even you know Caucasian, not necessarily Asian, where they go back and work in China and India. So there's a reverse immigration or brain drain, [**ST:** Yeah, there is.] so people look for opportunities too...And the word now is a global village.

ST: Well, um do you have any documents, photographs, letters, or diary from your early days in the United States um that you would allow me to like use? Do you think there's anything relevant that would be somewhat interesting?

AH: Uh I may have some pictures.

ST: Uh huh.

AH: That may be. [**ST:** Uh huh.] If I find some, I will send them with Nadia.

ST: Yeah.

AH: I will try to find something.

ST: OK

AH: I will try.

ST: OK, thank you so much.

AH: You're welcome. Good luck.

ST: I'll stop this now. And stop is...

AH: If you have other questions...