

ANDREW ALLEN'S ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH FATIN AL RAWI ON 24 OCTOBER 2016

AA Fatin, let's start with where you were born.

FAR I was born in Iraq in Baghdad.

AA What made you choose to come to Australia?

FAR Actually I never thought to come to Australia or to live in a country outside my country. After I married my husband and I went to the UK for my husband to finish his PhD there. This was in 1990. The war started between Iraq and Kuwait and the Government cut the money for us to continue our studies so we came back to Iraq. My husband was always willing to finish his studies. He tried again and again. For a few years he tried to finish his studies in the UK but he went to Jordan because at that time Iraq was under sanction and there were no flights to and from Iraq. So he went by car to Jordan and then to fly to the UK but we couldn't go because we were Iraqis. We couldn't get a visa. He still had a connection with his supervisor in the University in the UK but because he was an Iraqi he couldn't get the visa to go there.

Anyway, then he went to Malaysia. At that time I stayed with my family in Iraq. He went to Malaysia because he found a chance to finish his studies and to work there. After two years I joined him in Malaysia and finished our studies there. He finished his PhD and I finished my Masters in Engineering. We stayed there for a few years working there. Administration in Iraq was still not good with the sanctions there. It was very hard even for the young kids for things like medication, so we couldn't go back. It was better to stay outside until things came better.

At that time my husband was always searching here and there for jobs as he was doing contract, so every time he wouldn't know if they would renew the contract or not, so he was looking for a permanent job. Also we were thinking because the situation in Iraq is not good to maybe find a place that is a second option for us and maybe the situation in Iraq would get better.

My husband applied everywhere in the world. He got a job actually in New Zealand and we were supposed to go to New Zealand. We got a visa and went there for a few weeks and we came back to Malaysia to arrange our things and to go back there. I was not happy, it was different from Malaysia. I stayed in Malaysia for six years and I was used to the place. Any time you go out at night it is live there are people around you and for me as a Muslim I can't find the food anywhere. We didn't have much choice but we had one month to decide.

During this month somebody called him from Australia and he said you applied for this job. My husband didn't remember when he applied for this job it was maybe one year ago. It was with UTS – University of Technology Sydney - and in one month everything was settled and we came to Sydney.

AA Do you find Australia much different to New Zealand?

FAR In my mind I like it more in New Zealand. My husband has a friend here in Australia who was a friend from Iraq but we didn't meet until we came here and he was talking about Australia and how nice it is here and the weather is nice. We asked him to get us from the airport. We know he is in Melbourne and we thought that Melbourne is beside Sydney. We had no idea and he said no it is too far. So I have a very small connection. I was not very happy but happier than going to New Zealand.

AA So it was that connection that made you happier, knowing that someone was in this country. When your husband was in Malaysia did he come back home to Iraq to visit?

FAR No, we couldn't go back to our country because of the situation we were scared for our kids and it wasn't safe. When we got here we got Australian passports after two years. So for me it is nine years and for my husband eleven years to go back to our country to see our families.

AA So you didn't see your husband for two years when he was in Malaysia, is that right?

FAR I didn't see him just letters. It was very very hard for both of us. He didn't have enough money to get us and emotionally it was very hard to raise two children alone. In our culture it is not common for the husband to live in one place and the wife in another place. It was not easy at all. But still in that time both of us encouraged each other. I kept telling him not to come but to continue to finish his studies and he would give me the patience with the two kids. We had one boy and one girl.

AA When did you arrive in Australia?

FAR We arrived in October 2001. It was two months after September 11. We were very scared, we thought maybe at the airport someone would tell us to go back. At that time especially not everyone liked Muslims especially as I wear a scarf.

AA So you had no problems when you arrived.

FAR No, when we arrived there was someone from the University and we stayed the first week in the City. During that time I had two incidents which made me very scared of Australia. The first day we arrived my husband went to the University.

He put us in the motel and went to the University. He gave me some money to buy lunch.

10 mins

So my first day I went to buy lunch with my kids. I had three kids at this time, my daughter was one and a half in a pram and my son and daughter were eleven and nine years old. I took them and I went to the fish and chips shop and we bought some food. I asked the man there was it safe in Sydney. He said it is very bad, very dangerous. Where are you from? I told him. He said you need to take your kids and go home. I asked him why and he said so many people are taking drugs and if you don't give them money they will steal your kids. So I took my kids with both of them holding the pram and me holding them tightly and went back to the motel and stayed there until my husband came. He told me not to worry, maybe he had an incident or something. He said he would ask more people. I limited my going out just to buy something and going back. Even the lady who cleaned the place said to please take the children out so she could clean the place.

After living one week there my husband was searching and asking where Iraqis were living and he was told in Auburn. So in that week my husband went there and he rented a house there. While the taxi was waiting to put in the luggage the taxi driver missed his wallet. He put it in the front on the dashboard and suddenly it is missing. They tried to find it and couldn't. My daughter was beside me and she told me she saw the man who took it and ran away from the site. I already told him it is very dangerous, don't leave me. It gave me a horrible experience and I was so scared.

AA How long after that did it take for you to realise that this is a relatively safe country?

FAR Wherever I go I will ask people if I am near the bus stop or the shop and I would ask old people. I remember one old lady, this is stuck in my mind during the first few months, who said it is safe but don't go out at night. She said if something happens it is usually at night. Don't take your kids out at night.

AA You missed home for a while.

FAR A lot, I miss Malaysia also as it was my second home country as I have very close friends there like my neighbours. My son and daughter also missed their friends. Even after a few months myself, I like to meet people and like to be with people. One day at the shopping centre I met a lady and she was an Iraqi, so we began talking and became friends. My daughter told me I was lucky because I had a friend. I remember when it was the end of school term they didn't have much time in school and they didn't have a friend in that time.

15 mins

AA You've made friends in this time.

FAR Yes, while I was in Auburn I made a friend and we became very close. She showed me where to buy my stuff, what is good and where to go.

AA We have talked about what your first impressions of the country were. What were your preconceived ideas of Australia before you came out?

FAR Our friend is Christian but he told my husband there are so many Muslims here. So I was very happy, I would find Muslims here. So that made me feel comfortable to come here. There are Muslims so there will be a Mosque and Halal food.

AA What about the wildlife? Did you hear anything about our animals, or our dangerous creatures?

FAR No, because in Malaysia there are so many dangerous creatures especially a lot of snakes. So I didn't think about it. In Iraq we love the green area so for us in Australia the greenery was like heaven. In Iraq, Baghdad has some green area but where I originally come from, the west of Iraq it's near the border of Syria, so the way from Baghdad to this place is mostly desert. It is just brown. So whenever we see trees it is a blessing, it is so nice.

AA It is very hot in Iraq too isn't it?

FAR In Baghdad the weather is almost like Sydney, we have winter and we have summer. In the north of Iraq we have snow and in the south it is very hot. Baghdad is similar to Sydney only harsher. Summer is dry and sometimes it is 50 in June. In winter we have the rain and cold.

AA When did you move to Campbelltown?

FAR After a few months in Auburn my husband and I were thinking to buy a house. I did that myself because my husband was busy with his job. I was looking for cheap, a Mosque, Islamic School and a train station for my husband to go to work because he works at Sydney University. I tried in the west in the Mt Druitt area and to the south. I looked in Mt Druitt and before I looked at a house I looked at the school. I went to the school and they said they were full and couldn't take my kids. Then we came to the Campbelltown area and I found Minto. I went to the school and the Mosque was also there. There was Minto Station and we got our house for a reasonable price. We settled in Minto from 2002 until 2008.

20 mins

AA So you have been in Campbelltown that long, that is a fair while.

FAR Then we moved to Glen Alpine now.

AA What do you think of Campbelltown compared to Auburn?

FAR In Auburn I liked to see the shops. Like the first week when I went I was very happy to hear the Arabic accents in the street and to find all the food because in Malaysia we didn't have the Arabic food there. It was like I was in Iraq and I was very happy. I didn't think to settle there not because of the people or the prices of the houses was very expensive compared to other areas. Auburn has the Mosque, the Islamic school but houses are very expensive. When we moved to Minto for 6 or 7 months we did all our shopping in Auburn. Every weekend we would go to Auburn to do our shopping and then come back. We didn't know where to shop specially for the Halal meat. There is in Campbelltown but at that time we didn't know.

AA Do you still go to Auburn now, to do your shopping?

FAR Not much no, Campbelltown has become more culturally acceptable and we have a few shops here.

AA Are your children happy here?

FAR Yes, my daughter has just finished at Western Sydney University and my son is still studying here.

AA Do you have contact with your family back in Iraq?

FAR Yes, we went back in 2003 to visit them. We went there after the invasion of America into Iraq. To us it was very sad to see the country in this situation. We went there a few months after America came to Iraq. We went by car because there were no planes at that time. All the way the road had been bombed and buildings were still under fire because they had been attacked and demolished. It was a very very sad time for us to go and see our family. Everyone was still scared and the water was not very good. We stayed there for one month but my husband the kids became sick because of the water. It was very sad for us because after nine years, we wanted to see our family, but to see our country in this situation it is hard. It broke our hearts. Then the situation in Iraq became worse and worse. Every day it gets worse than the day before, it's not just the month it is the day and the hour. My family left there after 2005. My brothers have had different incidents happen to them, one being kidnapped, one being shot and one being robbed in his shop. They have young families so they left and went to Syria.

25 mins

I managed to visit them twice in Syria, in 2009 and 2011. At the end of 2011 the war started in Syria. They stayed there until the end of 2012 and they went back to Iraq to Baghdad. They found it too dangerous and only stayed there for a few days and went to the north of Iraq. At that time I tried to sponsor them but

my application was rejected a few times. But I managed in 2014 to bring them here. There were my parents, my two brothers and my sister with their families.

AA Where do they live?

FAR They are in Campbelltown. It is not acceptable to go any further than Liverpool. It has been a blessing because it was so hard for me. In 2003 to 2005 it really was so hard for us both. For me I couldn't sleep at night, I would think of them and their safety. It was a very stressful time.

AA Do you still worry about what is going in in your country?

FAR Of course, because I still have relatives, friends and neighbours. It is not just the roads and buildings that they destroy, they destroy the humans. People change and the new generation are not educated. We were living in the best situation. Even though we had a long time war between us and Iran, we had the best education and health system and it was all free. Everyone was happy, everything was free and everyone loved one another, people lived together, there was no difference between us. Anyone against Saddam Hussein had a problem.

AA So you weren't allowed to say you didn't support what he was doing?

FAR Of course, but if you count what he did for the country he did a lot. I remember when I was in primary school we had the books, the stationery everything is free. Even at University everything is free. If you do your post graduate you have a salary from the government to help you. All the health system is free, the best hospitals, the best doctors all free.

30 mins

AA I suppose you have mixed thoughts about him because he did a lot of good things for the country.

FAR For me I didn't like him, my father didn't like him. Whenever my father would see him in TV, he would turn off the TV because he knows about the political things. But for me when I see myself how I grew up in the school, my neighbours the buildings he built like the best school buildings in the 1980s which were very modern even electric escalators. I met some friends who say we don't have it in our country. I told them we have it like in the public roads when you cross between one road and another, there aren't just stairs they are electric ones.

After they took him I asked my father what did he think the situation is. Is it better with him or without him? He said it is like old shoes they are more comfortable to wear than new shoes. But I think now everyone regrets the time when Saddam Hussein was there. At least we were all together. Now Muslim

here and Christian there and even Muslims between themselves, everyone is pulling apart.

AA So are you happy here now?

FAR Yes, especially here when I see my parents and my brothers. I work in Queen Street so especially the first months when I met my brothers in the street, I was saying is it real that you are here. It was a blessing. When I used to buy things for my kids I had to buy two pieces, one for my place and one to send to my nephews and nieces. To see them now in the school and my brothers and my sister and brother in law are working.

AA Can I ask you did you ever cop any racism? Did you have any problems there?

FAR In general, nothing really. I have had a few small incidents happen in the 15 years I have been here, but it is not that much. With my family coming here, everything is going very smoothly. They say they are very nice people they just want to help. With my sister in law in the first or second month that she came here she was in Campbelltown Mall and she lost her wallet. She had her Centrelink information and Medicare card. The second day a lady came and knocked on her door and gave it to her with the money and everything in it. She told her she came the night before but she couldn't find the right house. The same thing happened to my brother on the train. He lost his wallet and I told him just to go home and cancel everything because losing it on the train he would not find it. After a few days he had a call from Campbelltown Police Station and said that someone had found it in Parramatta. So it was a really good experience for them.

AA What I meant to ask you before is about the language. How did you find the language situation when you came here?

FAR Before I left the country I had some English. I didn't use it for a few years but when I went to Malaysia in the beginning I found it very hard. I couldn't remember what to say and I was like somebody who couldn't speak. But after a few days slowly slowly it came back to me. When I came to Australia from Malaysia I had been speaking English there but it was a different English. Especially when two are talking together it is very hard to catch what they are talking about. We say "Good Morning" I say "G'day".

AA The New Zealand accent is very different to Australian.

I really enjoyed talking to you it has been very interesting and fascinating.