



Telling Our Stories, Finding Our Roots

Interview with M, a Syrian national living in Okehampton

Interviewer: Nicole Redfern

Interpreter / translator: Reeda Alji

N: Okay today is the 18th of March of 2020, and we are at the [REDACTED] and this is an interview with M-- and the interviewer is Nicole Redfern and our translator is Reeda Alji. Great.. So M- to begin could you tell me a little bit about your name, whether there is a story attached to it, what it means, who gave it to you?

M: My name is M--- but I don't know what my name means.

N: Okay, thank you.

N: Can you just tell me a bit about yourself and anything you would like to tell us about your story?

M: Like what?

R: Like your story in Syria, from where are you, about your family?

M: I am from a village that is near Hama City. We lived in Syria until the war occurred, we moved to Lebanon in 2013. I stayed in Lebanon for 5 years, I had only one child in Syria and when I moved to Lebanon I had the second son there. We stayed in Lebanon for 4 years, we were not happy there because our situation was really miserable. After that, we moved to the UK.

N: So I believe you came to the UK through the family reunification scheme, is that right?

M: Yes, I came through the UN.

N: So, can you remember where you were when you found out the news that you would be coming to the UK?

M: My reaction was normal because 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. I also thought about that I will be leaving all



my relatives in Lebanon. However, when the news of traveling came I accepted it without hesitation.

N: And, M, did you have a choice in which country you would come to? Did you choose the UK or was that chosen for you?

M: The UK was chosen for me.

N: And at this time, I think you were in Germany and your family were in Lebanon, is that right?

M: Actually, I stayed at Germany's Airport for about 7 hours, and then travelled to the UK alongside my family.

N: So everybody came from Lebanon to Germany and then to the UK? Ok, great. And before you came to the UK, what did you know about the country, what were your expectations?

M: Nothing, I only heard little about the UK such as its unstable weather.

N: [Laughter] Great. Okay, and when you arrived in the UK, what can you remember? Can you tell us about that?

M: At first, my concern was for my kids, they didn't like it because they didn't know anyone in the UK and everything was new and weird for them. After a while, the kids started to go to school and know some people where they started to adapt to the UK. 8 months later, my brother came to the UK and we were really happy to have a familiar face around, we started to love the UK.

N: And when you arrived did you come to Okehampton straight away, or did you go somewhere else first?

M: I came to Okehampton first.

N: And, again, did you choose Okehampton or was this chosen for you?

M: No I didn't choose Okehampton, it was chosen for me.

M: The first house we arrived at was in a bad situation, so we moved to another one. There was a charity, a group of 20 people who assisted refugees; they have been helping us till now. The ones we were directly in contact with from the charity were called [NAME REDACTED] and [NAME REDACTED]. [NAME REDACTED] later became our close friend, she assists us in becoming familiar with everything and she helps my kids in learning English. Unfortunately, she is now at the hospital due to health problems.

M: When we first arrived, we struggled with [NAME REDACTED]'s organization because the one who was responsible for us didn't take good care of us, and then she was replaced with [NAME REDACTED] and with him we felt that we had got the support we needed. [NAME REDACTED] is very helpful and always available, whether during his job or out of it.

N: And, so, I want to go back to remembering when you first arrived in Okehampton, the town. So what did you notice, what do you remember, what did you think or feel when you arrived there?



M: I noticed the town to be very calm with a few people living in it. I wasn't expecting this at all, but after a while we got used to the town calmness and weather. Then we moved to a new house, which was really beautiful. We managed to move to this house thanks to [NAME REDACTED] and the charity who help us financially to pay the rent.

N: And was [NAME REDACTED] the first person you met in Okehampton?

M: I met [NAME REDACTED] when I arrived, she was the one responsible for helping us, she stayed with us for a short period of time then she was replaced so we didn't get to know her well at that time, [NAME REDACTED] then returned to be with us and we became good friends as she takes good care of the family.

N: Great. So, thinking about the house that you are living in now, can you describe it to me?

M: 3 floors with a small garden, it is warm. The house is beautiful, the living room is our favourite, we also like setting in the garden in summer. But last summer we missed setting in the garden because we were in the hospital as we had a newborn baby, we called her [NAME REDACTED]. We had to stay a long time in hospitals because the baby was born in the 27th week and weighed about 1 kilogram. We went to the hospital in Bristol and spent about 15 days there. I am very thankful for [NAME REDACTED] because she helped my wife when she had labor. Before we moved to the hospital in Bristol we spent 7 days at [REDACTED].

N: To the children's hospital? There's a special children's hospital there, I think.

M: No, in Bristol it was a general hospital.

M: After the time in Bristol, we returned to the hospital here. The children were not settled down, they stayed with their uncle for a time and then with [NAME REDACTED] and sometimes they came to the hospital. I stopped working because I needed to stay with my family. After 4 months we left the hospital and returned to Okehampton and the summer was over.

N: [Laughs] Thank you. So thinking about the other house, the first house, what was different about that? Why was not a nice place to live?

M: Everything, it was a very old house with a flat floor. The house smelled bad due to humidity, and leaked water to rooms. The house was really cold and didn't have a good heating system. We didn't have a garden or balcony in that house to take fresh air.

N: And your house now, is it in the centre of Okehampton or the edges?

M: It is close to the city centre, about 5 minutes away from the city centre.

N: So you can walk?

M: Yes.

N: Great.

N: Ok brilliant. So thinking about when you first arrived, did you or your wife or any of your children speak any English?

Telling our stories Finding our roots

M: None of us spoke English.

N: So how was that, having to learn to live in a country where you didn't speak the language?

M: It is really difficult, we find many struggles due to the lack of language.

N: So how did you manage to make yourselves understood and to understand other people?

M: The people here understand that I cannot speak English which is very helpful and many things are clear. However, 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 like it here, and I am expecting my brother from Lebanon to move to the UK where we will be having another family member here. Actually my brother's interview with the UN was scheduled for today but it was postponed due to the Covid-19.

N: Because you have one brother in Bristol already, and then this brother in Lebanon who will come soon? And in Denmark? Yeah, I remember.

M: One in Denmark. My wife's sister also lives in Bristol because she is married to my brother.

N: I remember. Okay, so when you first arrived in Okehampton what was it like adjusting to a new place?

M: There was no accommodation at the beginning. Even now, I don't have many friends here, we only have [NAME REDACTED] who visits once in a while. I also have one friend called [NAME REDACTED] from the volunteerism I worked for, near Okehampton. I worked there for 1 year as a volunteer, we cleaned forests, and even we worked in school gardens and helped in farms.

N: Why do you think that is? Is it the language, for example?

M: Yes the language.

N: Is there anyone in Okehampton who also speaks Arabic?

M: I know one family that has been here for 6 months. There are also two other families, one from Egypt and the other from Syria, but in both families the wives are from the UK. I was also surprised that there are English people who speak Arabic as yesterday I was walking in the town. I heard English people speaking Arabic, but I have not known any in person.

N: And for M, how has he found the experience of not being able to make friends in Okehampton? Is it something which feels lonely or it feels okay?

M: It is hard on me, the language is certainly the reason for not being able to make friends and feeling lonely. The language is necessary to fully accommodate.

N: And if you could choose, would you rather live somewhere where there were more people who speak Arabic and it was easier to make friends or are you happy in Okehampton?

Telling our stories Finding our roots

M: I had the chance to move to Bristol where there are many people who speak Arabic, but I didn't want to, I loved Okehampton and the children started to adapt here. I don't want to live among Arabs because I want to learn the language and maintain the children's constancy. Another difficulty I am finding in the UK is that I don't have a driving license even though a car can be bought cheaply. In comparison with Syria, in the UK I can buy a car with a little amount of money but it is harder to nail the driving license whereas in Syria it is easy to obtain the driving license but it is expensive to buy a car.

N: So how do you manage to travel without a car? Do you use the bus, the train...?

M: Bus.

N: And how do you find the transport links in Okehampton? Are there enough buses or do you find it difficult to travel?

M: The buses are in good shape, but the main problem with buses is that I am bound to travel at the times the buses are scheduled not based on my schedule. The bus comes in certain times so I have to stick to the time even though it doesn't suit me.

N: Great. So coming back to when you arrived can you remember how different people in the town responded? So how did people respond to you and your family arriving in Okehampton?

M: The people in Okehampton town didn't visit me, but it was fine because we didn't need each other, and I didn't have any problem when walking and shopping in town. However, my child was not accepted between kids in the school, at the beginning the children used to hit my child, but now everything is fine.

N: Why... do you know why the children behaved that way?

M: No, the police handled the situation.

N: Did the school do anything?

M: The school helped my child and intervened to stop the other children from hitting my child.

N: And was that to your son in primary or in secondary school?

M: In primary and in college school.

N: The older one? Ok, yeah. And, how - now, is it okay for him now?

M: Yes. Now my children can speak English but they still need help. The study here is difficult.

N: Do they like school? And you as well?

M: All children hate going to school.

N: Do they have any, do they do any hobbies? Any sport, or anything?

M: My older son likes sports and he plays rugby, but the younger one doesn't like sports and lately his weight has increased.

Telling our stories Finding our roots

N: Great. Okay. So let's talk a little about Okehampton and the town. So how would you describe it to someone who has never been there before?

M: Okehampton is a nice and very calm town, its weather is cold and it rains a lot. There are not many work opportunities in it and it is far from Exeter. Its nature is very beautiful and it has many gardens but still it is not the best town.

N: Okay. Okay. So what is your favourite thing about Okehampton and what is your least favourite thing about Okehampton?

M: I hate that there is no railway train station in Okehampton, and the people always demanded to have one. I like in Okehampton that it is calm and safe.

N: Great. So, thinking about Okehampton's shops and the things you can do in Okehampton, is there anything that isn't there that you wish there was there?

M: I wish Okehampton had Tesco. If I have had the chance to choose which town to settle in, I would have chosen another city because most of the shopping centres here are expensive.

N: So do you and your family travel somewhere else to do your shopping?

M: Sometimes I shop in Exeter, and sometimes I ask a friend of mine to buy me stuff from Bristol as he comes here once every 2 weeks. In addition, there is no Halal meat in Okehampton, usually many stores have delicious food but we can't eat it as it is not Halal.

N: So if you buy Halal meat, do you buy it in Exeter?

M: Yes from Exeter, although I myself don't like meat in general, but I buy it for my family.

N: Great. Okay, and, so do you spend most of your time in Okehampton or outside of Okehampton?

M: I spend my time in Okehampton except if there is something urgent that requires me to go outside [of the town]. I don't feel like going anywhere outside, and I don't have a car to do so.

N: Do you think you will get a car soon? Or a driving license?

M: I want to learn how to drive first, but I find it very difficult because I don't know the rules and directions here. In Lebanon and Syria there were no instructions or rules for driving. But inside Okehampton I don't really need a car, I can walk to any place here.

N: And, M, I think you said you were working in the UK at the moment? What do you do?

M: I work in a restaurant, I wash dishes there.

N: Do you like your job?

M: Yes I do because I fill my time with it and get to go out instead of sitting at home.

N: And I think when we spoke before you said in Lebanon you worked in construction and in agriculture, is that right?



M: I don't like to remember that time because it was a bad experience there. If I worked here in the UK the same work I had in Lebanon I would earn much more money. My bad experience in Lebanon is that I didn't enjoy my work because I faced racism and discrimination.

N: That was going to be my question — would you like — So my question was going to be, would you like to do similar work here in the UK, or are you happy doing the work that you are now doing?

M: No, but I really don't mind or care what kind of job I have because I want to feel I am doing something.

N: And do you work in the daytime or in the evening?

M: In the evening. [SECTION REDACTED]

N: So, in your free time, what do you like to do?

M: I spend a lot of the time on the phone, I constantly contact my parents in Syria as I am worried about them. For my friends in Syria, many of them have died and lost contact with others. My village is now under attack and I don't really have much left for me to remember in Syria. My parents are now living in a tent and usually are forced to keep traveling. Politicians don't care about the common people in Syria. I don't want to return to Syria, there is nothing left for me there, and even though my house was bombed in Syria they still count bills for me like electricity and water supply. I knew that from my brother before he left Syria, he told me that there are bills on me to pay. 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.

N: Those are some big memories to carry.

M: Syria was not a good place to live in since I was a child, and now the situation is getting worse. I have been working since I was 8 years old so yes I have been through a lot. In Lebanon, I used to work from 7 am to 7 pm, after that I take only a break to see my family and return to work at 9 pm until the next day. I even didn't earn much for this hard work.

N: Okay, so I'd like to move on to talk a little bit about you, and your family, and your culture. So I know Syria is a really culturally complex country with lots of different types of people, and faiths, and cultures. Can you tell me a little bit about yours?

M: I don't know much about the differences in Syria, I didn't feel like I was different there. I define myself as a Syrian Muslim.

N: Great, thank you. So, think — so let's — In terms of Okehampton, are there many people with the same faith or the same - we know not Syrians, but are there many Muslim people in Okehampton? And, if not, do you connect with other communities elsewhere?

Telling our stories Finding our roots

M: I believe there are a lot of Muslims in Okehampton, but I don't engage with any of them. [NAME REDACTED] is the only Syrian friend that visits me, but I don't have a strong relationship with him. I don't care about the religion of my friends, my house is open for everyone.

N: So, I know M, you were telling us that you've found it difficult to make friends. Do you feel part of a community, and that might be a community locally, or it might be a community that you connect through a telephone or around a Mosque, or anything like that?

M: The people I am in contact with are from Lebanon, Syria, Exeter, and Bristol because my brother lives there. My connection is not limited to one certain place.

N: And do you keep in touch by phone? By WhatsApp? By Facebook?

M: Yes social media applications.

N: And your brother in Bristol, how often do you see him and your wife's sister, how often do you see them?

M: It depends, sometimes we see each other every month and sometimes every two months. We don't go often to Bristol, they usually come to visit us and bring along their children. We don't go to Bristol because I don't really have much free time and because of my baby, the doctor suggested not to take the baby out for the sake of her health.

N: In terms of these people's faith, are they practicing Muslims? Do they go to the Mosque? Do they practice at home? Do they not practice?

M: I don't go to the Mosque so I don't know if others go. Also I am not in a strong relationship with them so I never asked them such questions about their faith.

N: And I wonder if you would like to be part of a wider community or if you're happy where you are?

M: I don't really care, I am okay now.

N: Ok, so thinking about language, do you speak any other languages other than Arabic?

M: No.

N: And English, a little. [Laughter] Great. Lovely. So, thinking about festivals or celebrations, are there any things that your family celebrate throughout the year? So that might be Eid, or it might be birthdays, or it might be New Year, etcetera?

M: 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. I remember the last time we celebrated Eid was 10 years ago.

Telling our stories Finding our roots

N: And are there any other kinds of traditions or things that you have brought from home with you, so that might be a recipe, or a thing that you do every week, or anything from Syria that you practice here?

M: We didn't bring anything from Syria except that we cook Syrian food. Other than that we didn't have the chance to bring any other thing with us.

N: Cool so of the - you said the Syrian food that you eat, what's your favourite meal, favourite thing to eat?

M: I like every Syrian food and I like the sea food the most. But I don't like the fish here because it is frozen, not fresh like in Syria. Even the fish I find in the market is not like the ones in Syria.

N: Lovely. So, thinking about your children and particularly your youngest daughter, who has been born in the UK, as she grows up and as your children grow up, is there anything that you would want to pass on from your history and your culture to them?

M: I don't care since nothing is left from Syria. After all, it is up to them, they decide what they want. My children don't know Syria, they didn't live there, for example one of my children was born in Lebanon and now he thinks he is Lebanese.

N: Is there any - so thinking of Okehampton, are there any local traditions or local things that people do that you started doing since you moved there? So for example that might be around Halloween or Bonfire Night or something like that?

M: I noticed these things but I don't know how to celebrate such events because I don't know many people there, so personally I don't practice these things. For my children because they are more familiar with these events, they started to practice such things, for example in Christmas they expect me to bring them gifts.

N: So, thinking a little bit about the experience of coming to place where - which is a new country, where you are different to the people who live there, sometimes people can be suspicious or unwelcoming to people. You mentioned about your son who had experienced the other children that had hit him in school. Have you or your wife experienced anything similar, any discrimination, any racism since being in the UK?

M: I and my wife didn't expect much racism here. But not long ago, I remember someone insulted us with a word in public, I didn't know what the word means until I returned home and looked it up, and it was a bad word. If I knew what the word meant at that time I would have hit him.

N: Was that someone just on the street that you passed, or...?

M: It was in front of my house, I didn't do anything for him to insult me.

N: How did you feel about that M?

M: I didn't care because I didn't know what the word meant at that moment and never saw that person again.



N: Great. Okay, I think we've covered most of these things. So -

M: Can we take a 5 minutes break?

N: Yeah. So, we'll take a short break.

N: Ok, so this is M's Interview Part Two.

N: So I was interested in what you said about your - I think your middle son saying he was born in Lebanon, so he thinks of himself as Lebanese, not as Syrian. How do you think of yourself? As Syrian, as Lebanese, now as a British person?

M: I like the fact that I am Syrian, even though I lived in Lebanon and the UK I still define myself as Syrian.

N: And how about your other son, how does he think of himself?

M: My elder son [NAME REDACTED] was born in Syria so he knows a little bit about Syria and defines himself as Syrian.

N: And, thinking forward, how do you think your daughter will answer that question, in maybe 10 years' time or 20 years' time?

M: I think when she grows up she will think that she is British but she will also know that she is originally from Syria, but she basically doesn't know Syria.

N: So, I think you said you will have been in Okehampton 3 years in June, is that right? So when you arrived how long were you expecting to stay? Was it a permanent move or a temporary move?

M: I didn't expect to leave the UK. I think we will stay here permanently.

N: And would you like to stay in Okehampton, or would you like to live somewhere else?

M: I don't really know, I don't know what will happen in the future so it depends. Maybe when the children grow up and if the situation in Syria becomes better, I might leave the children here and return to Syria. Still I am not sure at all.

N: If it was safe in Syria would you like to go back?

M: Even if the situation stabilises there, I am not counting to go back now since there is no work for me there and the living situation is bad.

N: Thinking both about your children but also just about yourself in the future, do you have any hopes or fears?

Telling our stories
Finding our roots

M: I am not worried about my children here because the situation here is safe and stable. As long as my family is doing okay it is fine for me.

N: So thinking back to when we asked some questions about what you thought about the UK before you came here, has your view of the UK changed over time? What - how do you think now about the UK?

M: I didn't know the UK well before. I can say my view of the weather didn't change! The weather is bad here, but I like the UK in general.

N: So I am interested to know whether you think your family coming to Okehampton has changed the town in any way or has had an impact on the people living there.

M: We haven't had the chance to change anything in Okehampton because we don't really have relationships with the people here, thus we haven't made any impact.

N: Sometimes people can make an impact just by being there.

M: I don't think your point applies to my situation because Okehampton is a big town and has a lot of international diversity in its community. I don't think we specifically made any impact and people there don't care about diversity because it already exists. Usually if strangers come to a small village everyone will notice them, unlike big towns.

N: So it feels like a place where diversity is already welcomed and already part of the town, is that right?

R: Can you say that once more?

N: Yeah, so in M's opinion, does it feel like Okehampton is already a place that's diverse and where diversity is already welcomed? And it doesn't make a difference where you're from, or...?

M: I don't know if they really accept outsiders like international people, but since I rarely experience any type of racism I think the town is welcoming.

N: Great.

N: So just very quickly, I'd like to ask about your wife's experience and how she has found living in Okehampton.

M: My wife is only taking care of the children, she rarely leaves the home.

N: Does she like the town as well?

M: Yes she does. It doesn't really matter if we like it or not because it is not our choice, we have to accommodate after all.

N: Great. So, I wonder, with coming to the end of the questions I have now, is there anything else you would like to share or tell us about?



M: I am very thankful to [NAME REDACTED] and [NAME REDACTED] because without them our situation would have been much worse. [NAME REDACTED] and [NAME REDACTED] are really taking care of us, we are really grateful for that. They assist us in almost everything, they even take appointments for us to go to the dentist. I am thankful for the charity too.

R: Is it a charity? Organisation?

N: West Devon Safe Haven? I think a charity. Charity organisation?

M: It is a charity, it is not located in Okehampton, it is far from there.

N: Yeah, it's the whole area.

N: I think my last question is: if you could talk to yourself on the day that you arrived in the UK, and in Okehampton, is there any advice you would give to yourself or anything you would like to say?

M: I would advise myself to 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. I talked about this with [NAME REDACTED] once, and I agree with [NAME REDACTED] when he said that without learning English it will be very difficult to adapt here. I don't care if I learn English or not but I am only worried about my children, I want them to learn English in order to make a better life here. It is also really important for me and my wife that the children learn English so we can rely and depend on them with anything here.

N: Great. Is there anything else, M, that you would like to say?

M: Do you still have any questions you would like to ask?

N: Do I have any questions? No, I think I have said everything that I want to say. [laughs]

M: I still have time if you want to add any more questions. It is good to have this interview so I can speak everything out.

N: So we— I think, well, I will finish the recording now because this is, your story is finished. So thank you, M, this has been really helpful and lovely to listen to your story.

M: Thank you.