

Louie and Fadi

By Bob Mark

From 1984 to 1990 the primary school in Neve Shalom / Wahat al-Salam served only the Jewish and Arab children from our village. In September 1990 a school minivan from Abu Ghosh brought the first group of children from outside of NS/WAS who were to study in the school. And Louie Jaber takes pride in being the first pupil to jump out of the van and the first from outside of the village to set foot on the school grounds. At least that's how he remembers it. Details such as these continue to be parts of long nostalgic discussions among the NS/WAS School graduates in Abu Ghosh. Louie ("Lou-ie" rhymes with blue-sky) was starting second grade when he arrived. His younger brother Fadi entered the NS/WAS School the following year and they remained until 1997. In June 2007 I spoke with Louie and Fadi on the porch of their parents' home. They also brought along a childhood friend of theirs from the neighborhood, Anas Abd al-Rahman. Anas did not go to the NS/WAS School but he grew up hearing stories about it, apparently with some envy. During the discussion Louie and Fadi repeatedly referred to their time in the NS/WAS School as the most wonderful years of their lives and they just seemed to enjoy having any opportunity to talk about it.

Today Louie is 24 years old. He studied psychology and human services at Haifa University and then returned to Abu Ghosh. He now works for the Ministry of Industry and Trade as an occupational analyst. Mentally or physically challenged people are sent to Louie by Israel's National Insurance Institute in order to examine the extent to which they are employable.

Fadi, now 22 years old, studied Government Strategy and Diplomacy for two years in the Inter-Disciplinary Center in Herzelia. He is continuing his studies at the Hebrew University where he will soon complete a B.A. Fadi also finds time to work for an international finance company in Israel. He is responsible for maintaining the company's vast connections with 23 countries in the Arab world.

I asked Louie and Fadi if they can distinguish differences between those in Abu Ghosh who went to the local schools in town and those who graduated from the NS/WAS School.



Louie seemed to have already put some thought into the question.

"Imagine," Louie immediately replied, "watching a black and white television, and suddenly a figure appears on the screen in color... (feigning surprise) 'Hey! What was that?' That's how I see the NS/WAS School graduates in Abu Ghosh. We carry a world of experience different from anything that the kids receive in the local schools. You can see the difference in our attitudes and the way we express our opinions. You see the difference in the very fact that we express our opinions."

Fadi: "We, the NS/WAS graduates, speak to each other from the heart. When I look for someone to talk to, I turn to the kids who went to school with us in NS/WAS because I find a common language with them. The experience of being asked to express our opinions in class is something foreign to the kids who went to school here [in Abu Ghosh]. I don't know if you can appreciate that difference. I remember when Rabin was killed and when all kinds of things happened in the news and we'd be asked to draw pictures expressing our feelings. The kids here never experienced things like that."



Fadi and Louie completed each other's sentences.

Louie: "Things happen in the news. We analyze them. A child in the village throws a stone. Don't just slap him on the head. We ask what's going on. What made the kid do that?"

Bob: "Louie, that sounds like the psychology student in you. Do you really think that that has anything to do with primary school education in NS/WAS?"

Fadi (answering for his brother): "For sure. What I took from the NS/WAS School is not to be embarrassed to give my opinion. I remember the visitors who came to the school from all over the world. From Japan, from all over. We were constantly exposed to different ideas and different ways of life. Today we're politically active. I bring others from Abu Ghosh to Peace Now activities. Abdalla (another NS/WAS graduate) is active in Hadash (a left wing political party). He reads books. He's open. He'd tell others in town about what he reads and they'd say 'yah, yah' and act like they're

listening. And then behind his back they'd laugh at him. He went to work in Eilat. Not because he couldn't find work here. But because he felt out of place. He felt choked."

Bob (turning to Anas): "So Louie says that these guys are in color and the rest of you are in black & white. Are you prepared to accept the way they describe the town?"

Louie and Fadi respond right way: "No, no — Anas is something else."

Anas: "I went to primary school in East Jerusalem and high school in Abu Ghosh. Something else always seemed to be going on in Louie and Fadi's school. They'd do social activities. Sometimes their parents would take them back to school in the evenings for different events. In our school there was nothing like that. Who goes back to school after the end of the day? They spoke about peace, politics, Jews and Arabs... They'd sing songs in English. They had end-of-the-year parties. Things like that just weren't a part of our school life. We didn't have music."

Bob: "And what kind of things do the others in town say about those who went to the NS/WAS School?"

Anas: "Some say that they're too Israeli, or too delicate. They'd say they're elitist."

Bob: "Do they say too Israeli or too Jewish?"

Anas and Fadi: "Both!"

Fadi continued: "But that's not true. We're certainly not elite in an economic sense. Regarding national identity, it's true that our Arabic has suffered from our education..."

Louie: "Don't forget that after NS/WAS we went to a Jewish high school and that would explain our Arabic problems more than anything."

Fadi: "... but regarding identity, those in Abu Ghosh who went to the NS/WAS School have a far greater sense of their Palestinian identity, and pride in it, than anyone who went to the local schools."

Louie: "I remember when we first came to the NS/WAS School and the kids were drawing Palestinian flags next to Israeli flags. We were really repelled by the Palestinian flag. At first we didn't want to have anything to do with it."

Bob: "After NS/WAS you went to Sieff, a Jewish high school in Jerusalem. What was that like? How were you received?"

Fadi: "We were accepted and got along fine with the other kids. It wasn't always easy, but they heard what I had to say. I made them deal with some ideas that they didn't hear from anyone else. But we were respected and they listened."

Louie: "It wasn't that simple. The Jewish high school was not a supportive framework. Especially when you come from the NS/WAS Primary School where the Jewish teachers and pupils show you that you can be who you are, take pride in Palestinian identity etc. The Jewish high school didn't take into account that we're part of a different group. They would look at our difficulties as if they were our individual problems. There were a few of us from Abu Ghosh and we had to deal with some of the Jewish kids cursing at us. Sometimes I'd complain to the teacher but she didn't know what to do about it. She'd invite the kids for a talk about behavior. But there was no attempt to confront the problem as a Jewish – Arab issue."

Bob: "So your experience was different from what Fadi describes."

Louie: "We went into the high school together, but I went into ninth grade and Fadi started in seventh (the NS/WAS School had just closed its seventh grade class). It was easier for Fadi, starting in the younger group. He also heard remarks against Arabs, but maybe not as much. Also Fadi is, you know, more ... academic. He hung out with guys who were into computers."

They connected on things like that. The rest of us spent time with a 'cooler' crowd. I tried to be like them. Sometimes I tried to hide that I was Arab. I could speak Hebrew convincingly enough."

Bob: "Despite all the talk about gaining pride in your Palestinian identity, you found yourself hiding that you were Arab."

Louie: "I'm talking about certain moments. You're in high school. You want to fit in. There were moments when I just felt isolated and you don't want to be dealing with your identity 24 hours a day."



Bob: "Was going to the Jewish high school worth the pain? Didn't you often think it was a mistake not to just go to high school in Abu Ghosh?"

Louie: "No. The level of education in Abu Ghosh was just terrible. I wouldn't have gotten where I am today had I gone to the high school in Abu Ghosh."

Bob: "You were willing to pay the social price in return for the academic level."

Louie: "Yah. But I'm stressing the problems here. There were also good times. I made plenty of Jewish friends in the high school who I'd visit after school hours."

Though they sounded easy-going about it, Louie and Fadi seemed to be between a rock and a hard place. In the picture that they described, there was no easy path to academic and professional achievement. They struggled with racism in Jewish Israeli society and with a degree of alienation in their own society. At a later a point in the discussion, they spoke about the added predicament of being from Abu Ghosh. Abu Ghosh has a history of cooperation with Israel, which is one explanation of why it was not destroyed in 1948 along with the many other Arab villages that lined the road to Jerusalem.

Fadi: "Abu Ghosh has got a problematic name among other Arabs in Israel."

Anas: "We're seen as collaborators."

Fadi: "It's because we're not an active part of the conflict."

Bob: "Should you play an active part in the conflict?"

Fadi: "We have to be an active part. Not a violent part. But active. But like I said about Abdallah, he was active and spoke about change and then went down to Eilat because he couldn't find a place for himself in town. You can't change the town by taking a marginal number of kids out of it and teaching them in Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam. Maybe if you'd

build the NS/WAS School in Abu Ghosh, you might be able to influence attitudes.”

Bob: “Well, the school seems to have left some influence on you. Do you see any connection between what you're doing today and the fact that you went to the NS/WAS School?”

Louie: “Ab-so-lutely! A direct connection. Many of my friends my age who went to school in Abu Ghosh didn't finish high school and many of them are unemployed. Sometimes it can be real uncomfortable when I hang out with them when they're dealing with their problems and I have a car and go to work every day. Everyone... (Louie stops and thinks) Aziza, Roshan, Zinat, Abdalla, Lena, Muhammad... everyone from here who went to school with me in NS/WAS finished high school and went on or are going on to study in a university or college. Look, we're not the only people from Abu Ghosh who went on to get a college education. Anas is studying in the university. In recent years the high school in Abu Ghosh has improved and there are lots of people from here who go to college. But what we took from the NS/WAS school has influenced our whole personality. It's more than just a mastery of the Hebrew language.”

Fadi: “I got the job I have not only because of my Arabic and Hebrew, but because of my ability to communicate and feel at home in Jewish society.”

Our discussion scratched the surface of a dozen research questions. In the early 1970's, Del Hymes coined the phrase “communicative competence” referring to the need to acquire not only the vocabulary and grammar of a language, but to acquire an understanding of the social use of language in everyday interaction or perhaps to acquire a grasp of the rules of communication. This is what Louie and Fadi appear to have been talking about when comparing their Hebrew to that of their peers, tying their language skills to their professional success and their ability to manage in Jewish society.

In research on other Jewish – Arab bilingual schools, Zvi Bekerman found that academic and professional advancement was a major motivation behind the Arab families' decision to send their children to Jewish – Arab schools. Louie and Fadi may have justified the choice. They paint a grim picture of the alternatives available to them in the local Arab schools and Anas, who went to the local schools, confirmed their criticism.

Louie, Fadi and Anas also addressed problems of violence in Abu Ghosh, starting with stories of kids in the neighborhood and on to stories of family feuds with on-going threats of revenge killing. Two recent murders in town reawakened the fears. The NS/WAS graduates are far from being the only concerned citizens in Abu Ghosh who are critical towards issues such as these, who are interested in change within Arab society and who are capable of examining local pressures within the context of a broader look at Israel's social structure. However the graduates may be acquiring a name as being among the more vocal social critics in town. As Fadi said, the NS/WAS School may not change attitudes in the whole community (and it would be awfully presumptuous to imagine otherwise). But if it is true that our graduates have more of a tendency to speak their minds - and I have begun to hear similar claims from both Jewish and Arab graduates alike - then I will feel comfortable that the NS/WAS School is doing its job.