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Ahmed Abdirahman Muhumud
Narrator

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Interviewer

July 15, 2014
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Ahmed Abdirahman Muhumud **-AM**
Ahmed Ismail Yusuf **-AY**

AY: Okay. We are in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It is July 15, 2014. I am Ahmed Ismail Yusuf interviewing for the Minnesota Historical Society Somali Oral History Project. Here with me is Ahmed Abdirahman Muhumud, who agreed to be interviewed. Ahmed, welcome to my home, as a matter of fact, I should say. And welcome to the interview.

AM: Thank you very much. I am very happy to take part in this wonderful project.

AY: Do you know when your father was born and where?

AM: Yes. Obviously, we don't keep track of the exact date of births, but my father was born around 1950. He was born to a nomadic family in and around Galkayo [Gaalkacyo], in central Somalia, Mudug region.

AY: What about your mom?

AM: My mom was born around 1955—also, actually, to a nomadic family. My mom and dad are very close family members. They both hailed from the same area.

AY: When did they relocate to cities, and how did life evolve?

AM: My grandfather, Muhumud Ismail, was this character that was very well known in that part of the country. He traveled quite a bit and went to places like Aden and Djibouti for trade. So my father and his family had some early exposure in city life, but they also kept their nomadic roots. I mean, back then, I think everything in Somalia was very much rural. In addition, unfortunately, at an early age, my dad was infected with glaucoma, so he couldn't see well, especially during the night. He was the oldest in his family, and some of his family members lived in Mogadishu. As a result, my dad moved to Mogadishu at a young age to live with his relatives. He was raised by, among others, the late Prime Minister Abdirizak Haji Hussein, who was his uncle, and later on lived on his own. My mom and her family, too, moved into a small town near Galkayo, where they had a shop with my late maternal grandmother, Khadijo Abdille. And then in the early seventies, in '71 I believe, my father went back to Galkayo, and that's where he met my mom, who was living in Mogadishu at the time but came to visit her family and was only planning to

stay for couple weeks. Instead, they married—I have the date—on October 28, 1972 and the rest is history.

AY: Unbelievable. [chuckles]

AM: I know it surprises people. It certainly surprised me, but actually my dad wrote everything down. He was a learned man, relatively learned man. Unfortunately, I mean, I left home when I was young, so I didn't know a lot of those stories during my childhood. But I was fortunate to have met him in Nairobi in 1993, and that's when he told me some of those stories and the dates and stuff like that.

AY: I should actually make it clear why we are saying it's amazing. It is just, even that late of years, even though we were going to school, no one, no one wrote the dates that were important to them or to him or her. Let me just exactly go back a bit. So when, then, were you born?

AM: I was born in 1975.

AY: In Galkayo?

AM: Yes. I was the second oldest in our family.

AY: How many?

AM: Ten.

AY: Her alone.

AM: Yes, her alone. My father never married any other woman. My grandfather never married any other woman except my grandma. We have a problem in that sense. [both chuckle]

AY: In Somali terms.

AM: Yeah, in Somali terms. Sometimes I think they should have married more so there are a few more of us, I think, sometimes. But it was only my mom, who I love dearly and is still alive.

AY: And where is she now?

AM: She is in Somalia. She lives in Burtinle, which is in Nugal [Nugaal] region, Puntland. That is where I grew up. That's where I went to intermediate school and stuff.

AY: So from intermediate, then, where did you go?

AM: So for high school I went to Mogadishu. I attended initially Raage Ugaas high school.

AY: Located?

AM: Located in Mogadishu, near, actually, the Sayyid Mohammed Abdullah Hassan [Sayid Maxamed Cabdalle Xasan] monument and the State House [Villa Somalia], around that area, where there are many schools. But then I didn't like the quality of education, because I was a very bright and serious student and I thought it wasn't challenging enough. I didn't like it. I thought it was very easy. The kids didn't take school or education very seriously. It didn't have the rigor I was looking for. I wanted a little bit more of a challenging school, so I actually transferred.

AY: What years are we talking about?

AM: We are talking about in '88, '89.

AY: So the whole strata of Somali education was deteriorating.

AM: Absolutely. Yes, it was deteriorating, the whole thing. But it was even much worse in that particular time at some of the traditional public schools. And I wanted something more rigorous, and so I transferred to Afgooye Agriculture School. It is close to Afgooye. It's an agricultural school. It's a much more technical school. And it was taught in English in all the classes. So we were taking very advanced courses, like agronomy, and agriculture, plant biology, and animal husbandry, meteorology, math, et cetera. Everything was in English. It was much more rigorous. But you're right. That school itself used to be very advanced a few years back and used to have foreign teachers. It was a very modern-built school. It had a gym. And it was a boarding school, too. And so while it lost some of its luster, it was still much better than many other traditional high schools.

AY: No kidding. And who was teaching?

AM: At that time the teachers were Somalis. But in the earlier years, like in the late seventies and stuff, when the school was opened, I heard that there used to be foreign teachers and stuff like that. It was a very nice school. I mean, it had a basketball gym, large kitchen, nice dorms, et cetera. The other nice feature was it was really close to the agriculture university, so we used to go there. It was also close to Lafoole, so we used to go to Lafoole to use the library and to get help from the college students.

AY: University level.

AM: Yep, University of Lafoole. So it was an environment much more conducive to learning, I thought, which again matched with my interest in really rigorous learning and stuff like that. And it was a boarding school, so you could actually stay there. In my freshman year I didn't. My family thought that boarding school was a little too tough for me, so I commuted that first year.

AY: Yeah, from Mogadishu to Afgooye?

AM: Yes. But in later years I was able to go in and live on campus, until the civil war broke out on December 31. We were actually taking our finals, I remember. And some of the students actually went to the main road—the road that connects Afgooye and Mogadishu—to catch the

bus. And they were hearing that there was chaos and we can no longer go to our homes for that weekend. It was New Years Eve, and we were going to go to the city. New Years of 1991.

AY: So, prior to that, what was your childhood like?

AM: I think I had a very happy childhood. I had a very wonderful childhood life. Our family was always intact and close knit. I went to school and was a very popular student. We were well fed and well dressed. I had a happy and normal childhood, and so overall life was good, I would say.

AY: So still I'm actually stuck, also, with the vision issue. I mean, was your dad still suffering from the vision loss?

AM: Oh, yeah, that was permanent. My dad's nickname is *indhooole* [blind]. Everyone knows him as Abdirahman "Indhoole." And *indhooole* just means blind.

AY: So he was completely blind.

AM: He was not completely blind. He could see during the day, and then at the night he usually used a flashlight, unless he's in a big city where there is enough light and stuff like that. But he couldn't see well in dark.

AY: So it was dimmed.

AM: Yeah. He had night blindness, basically. He could see during the day, and he loved to write and read and those things. So he was fine during the daytime and when he was in lighted areas. But that was his famous nickname that everyone called him.

The only regret I had was that I wasn't able to spend as much time with my dad in early years as I would have liked because he was usually gone. He wanted to be in big cities for some reason, because, I think, that was his lifestyle and I think he felt he could support us more that way. He was gone to East Africa in Kenya and Uganda between 1975 and 1979. And by the time he came back, unfortunately, you know, it was a very difficult time for our area. There was a lot of focus by the military government at the time, and he had to flee to Ethiopia to join the opposition rebel group.

AY: Yes, that's when Mohamed Siad Barre [Maxamed Siyaad Barre] was just targeting the Majeerteen.

AM: Yep. As soon as my dad came back he was targeted, and he had to flee with the help of a friend—at night no less, as a visually impaired man—to save his life. Government soldiers used to come to our home and constantly harass my mom asking for any information about my father's whereabouts and later they destroyed many towns and villages, burning homes, destroying water reservoirs and confiscating properties including livestock. My mom was left alone to care for now four young kids at the time. And she had to make a difficult choice, because here she was alone with young kids, including an infant, and her husband now joined the

rebels. She felt like she needed to join him there. And no one knew how long this was going to take or when it will end.

AY: In Ethiopia.

AM: Yeah, because we were relatively right by the border there, so it was kind of close. So we joined him even though we didn't see him much as he was often gone into headquarters and other places. My father was not a combatant, not only due to his physical limitations but also because he didn't have any military background. He was a civilian all his life, so he worked in the logistics and administration side for the rebels. However, he had a uniform and a gun. And actually a funny thing happened. The first time I ever fired a gun, I found a gun in our home. I was about eight or nine, and I ended up firing the gun while playing with it. It accidentally went off.

AY: Oh my goodness. Was anybody around?

AM: No one was around, but it happened right after I had difficulty at the school and I had a fight with a couple kids. And so everybody thought that it was deliberate and I was targeting some people. So I remember I had to run, and I was punished very badly by the schoolteachers and at home as well. I was called to the police station, people thinking that it was deliberate and that I sort of fired the gun or wanted to go after some of the kids I had issues with at the school. So that was a scary lesson but a good lesson for me as I never played with a gun again.

AY: Were you really scared by the time that...

AM: Oh, I was scared, yeah. I mean, it was an AK-47. I mean, it was a big gun.

AY: So where did the bullets go? Did you fire up?

AM: Yeah. Oh, it was in front of our house. So I got up and I was sort of holding—you know kids, they always have this fantasy about guns and stuff like that, and macho men and all those things. So I was holding it, and actually aimed it, and trying to look good. And so I pulled the trigger, and two bullets went off.

AY: Came off. It didn't fire much.

AM: Yeah, but it didn't. It just fired into the air. Fortunately, it didn't hit anyone. And I was so scared. Luckily, I managed to release the trigger before more pullets were fired.

AY: So when the villages were burned, how much of that horrifying memory stays with you or did you see death?

AM: No, I don't remember that time. I don't remember some of those things. Later on, I saw where our house used to be and stuff like that. And then some of the stories I heard, but...

AY: But at the time you were probably shielded.

AM: I was four or five. I was shielded, and I couldn't actually remember what had happened.

AY: So, though, we're actually talking about the happy years. Before you come to the eve of the Somali major war or Somali civil war, prior to that you still think that actually you lived a happy life?

AM: Oh yes.

AY: Even though you were a member of a targeted group.

AM: Yeah, absolutely. One can find lots of happy memories even when surrounded by tragedies. So yes, I had an extremely happy childhood life, those things notwithstanding. Having said, when people say the civil war started in '91 and stuff like that, I'm like, "No, that's crazy." It started much earlier for us. And I think, honestly, that's true. It started in like the eighties for over north, too. So the timeline is different for everyone, and it was a very significant event at that time for us. But, yes, overall I wasn't expected to contribute to those violent years or whatever as I was just a kid. I think it did interfere with our growing years in some ways however. For example, like I was saying earlier, it was right after my dad returned from East Africa, and I think one of the plans he had was that we would move. But I also know that he brought a lot of gifts, a lot of clothing and other things that we were never able to use.

AY: You were excited about that.

AM: We were excited, but we never used that. And I know it, because much of our stuff was left with relatives and neighbors, because again, we were not sure what we should do and how long this was going to take. And when we moved back to Somalia later, we found some of our stuff, such as clothing—really nice clothing and stuff—but they couldn't fit.

AY: They were still there.

AM: They were still there, but it wasn't our sizes anymore.

AY: You grew apart.

AM: We grew apart, yeah. So there was some interruption, I think, in our lives. And then life and living with the rebels—in my opinion they were freedom fighters and real soldiers—it was sort of interesting. Again, I didn't know much around what was going on, though.

AY: When you were living in the camp—almost, not exactly a camp, but the rebels, you were with the rebels—what was that like to you? Was it just a game, or you knew that this was serious?

AM: I kind of knew it was serious, but we didn't live in the camps. The front lines were always way far off. So we're living in small towns. We moved into cities, and we actually had our business. My mom opened her business and shop and coffee and stuff.

AY: And what city was that?

AM: The earliest one I remember—and I think we lived in different places—was a small town called Gal-xamur. And they're all part of what is now, interestingly, considered Ethiopia, the Somali region. So the actual front line where the skirmishes and the fighting were going was always fifty, sixty kilometers ahead of us. But I saw the military and the uniforms and the soldiers and different things always coming from the front lines and stuff like that. Many of them will come to our store and shop. The Ethiopians were our biggest customers, I remember. We used to bring nice fashion clothing from places like Burao [Burco]. And we used to sell Seiko 5 watches. We had the nicest watches. My mom will go and bring Seikos and jeans and dress shoes, and they liked those things. Again, we didn't know such thing as Christmas, but these guys will buy stuff from us on these special occasions and now I know some of those were around Christmas and New Years.

AY: So who would come to Burao, though? Who was crossing the border?

AM: My mom. I mean, females would always travel easily. Or you would have someone shop for different businesses in one of these trips. My aunt who lived in Hargeisa [Hargeysa] would also sometimes buy things for my mom and send them to us. So we always got our supplies. Because, even today, I mean, it's difficult to import a lot of things to Ethiopia for some reason and there is always sort of this black market thing that's going on.

AY: Contraband.

AM: Yeah, contraband. The animals were imported to Burao. Burao was a big market back then for trade and stuff because of its close proximity to the Berbera port. And I think there's a shortcut where that area—Hawd and Ciid and Burao are not too far off or something. So we used to get a lot of stuff from Somalia. Burao mainly, but other places, and sell that to the soldiers and Ethiopians and stuff like that.

AY: So, moving forward—fast forward, in a way—just come back to Mogadishu and when all of a sudden you realized that actually life was not exactly—it was not peachy at all. War was just about to explode, and you said that some of the students came from Lafoole just find out that.

AM: Yeah, we were cut off. So we found out the first day. I mean, we knew that insecurity was increasing, stuff like that, but suddenly, yes, we couldn't go.

AY: Couldn't go home.

AM: We couldn't go home, and we couldn't go to our families and stuff like that. Because we all go home on weekends. So we lived on this campus, and now we wanted to go for our weekends. And we were just finishing our exams and we are excited about our break. But instead of people going to the city, they were leaving, and now there is actual war and violence. And it started kind of slow so we weren't sure if this one was real or if it was still minor. Then all of a sudden the buses could not go deep into—we lived in Howlwadaag, so the buses couldn't go to

Howlwadaag, Wardhiigley, et cetera. They couldn't go to some of the central or north districts in Mogadishu. So you take a bus from, like, our school—you know, the buses that work between Afgooye and Mogadishu—and they will drop you off over by Hospital Banadir and over by the US Embassy there. You know, that area, over by the University of Gaheyr. And you couldn't go any further. So I stayed at school that first night, and in the morning I went to the market in Afgooye and later visited my dad's uncle who lived in Afgooye to find out the extent of what was going on. That is when I realized how serious the situation was.

Soon thereafter, my family started to leave Mogadishu and come to the relative safety of Afgooye. So my dad's uncle—I said my grandfather's home became a big post for all of our extended family members and relatives. And the whole thing was overwhelming, and there were like over a hundred people. Two to three hundred people of our extended family members and stuff, and even neighbors and friends. I mean, no one knew exactly what was going on. So we stayed there for a few days.

AY: In Afgooye.

AM: In Afgooye for a few days and were actually some of the first people that ended up leaving Afgooye. Because then we realized that this was getting serious and the war was actually picking up pace, instead of just slowing down or dying down. So we left for Kismayo [Kismaayo].

AY: Wow. Sorry to interrupt you—but because at the moment, the majority of the people were actually in the mood or in the belief that exactly somehow or other it was going to die down one day, and they were going to go back.

AM: Oh yes. I don't know anyone who thought this will be anything but temporary. In fact young people, I included, were excited, because we were thinking, "Oh, here we go! It's going to be an exciting trip to Kismayo and a few more days off from school," you're kind of thinking. And it was only going to be temporary. I mean, we didn't pack up clothes, beds, anything. I mean, being away from home even six, seven days in a crowded environment was too long, but when you are a young kid you're always, you love travel, and you want to see adventure. And so, "Oh, we're going to go see Kismayo! Oh, okay. That will be interesting."

AY: So part of you just exactly knows that there is a war, but there is a part of you that is absolutely excited just because...

AM: You think that this war is just a temporary, right? It's not going to be serious, you know, and in the meantime some adventure.

AY: That's the mindset.

AM: Oh yes, that's so. The older people, maybe they understand, but for us—and it wasn't just me. I mean, I remember my cousins and all of us were together, and it's like, "Hey, have you ever been to Kismayo? They have beautiful beaches, and we're going to see Marka [Merca] along the way." Actually, Marka is actually off the road, so we were not going to see Marka, but I didn't know that. So, yeah, all of those things were in my mind. It's like you don't know, but

you just want to see this big trip down to Kismayo. We don't even have a faintest idea how far Kismayo is. But anyways, we went, and it was very interesting. It was actually beautiful. I remember, actually, still the government was functioning in those places. Even more, the government control was stronger in those areas, interestingly, than it was in Mogadishu in the later years. So there are government-manned checkpoints along the way in like Jilib and Bulomarar [Buulo Mareer] and all of those places. And, you know, the farms between Jilib and Kismayo, just beautiful. It was an afternoon.

AY: The landscape.

AM: The landscape there by the rivers, by the riverbanks.

AY: The green grass.

AM: Everything tall, green grasses...

AY: Lush.

AM: Green grass, lush fields, mangos all over the place, and bananas. It was just a wonderful scene. And we get to Kismayo, and, yes, actually, government is in control. Kids are going to school. That was the most surprising thing.

AY: To you.

AM: Yeah! Because they were still—it's like, "Are they crazy? Don't they realize that there is war going on? Don't we live in the same country?" It was around January seventh, eighth. So because we were some of the first people, we ended up living in houses, actual houses, because Kismayo was not still fully filled. But it was immediately, like in the next three or four days, that the city was overwhelmed, because an entire city's population was now living on top of them.

AY: The entire capital city.

AM: Yeah, yeah, just move over to Kismayo and everything was taken over. And then that's when the schools shut down, because people moved in—the refugees, the displaced people are moving into the schools, hospitals, government building, everywhere.

AY: Into the schools.

AM: And the church. I remember there was a big church in Kismayo, a Catholic church, near the hospital. And people couldn't have any more shelter, so they opened it, and the people lived there.

AY: All of the Somalis who used to run away from churches—time of need.

AM: Yeah, a time of need, I think. I remember people saying, “Oh, now it’s okay to live in the church because someone made a call of the prayer from there or something. So now it’s okay.” I don’t know.

AY: [chuckles]

AM: And I think the church was empty and not used at the time. I don’t think there was anybody who was living there or anything like that.

AY: But also, regardless, they knew this was a house of worship, so they were not exactly, I mean, they were not desecrating it?

AM: No, they were not desecrating. They did not destroy it. They just wanted a place to stay.

AY: They kept it intact.

AM: Yep. I remember people occupied there, people occupied *caymiska* [insurance]. I don’t know whatever places. I mean, every single space, you know, factories, everything was taken. I remember even people living in the hospital. There were some lootings in Kismayo, too, and so that’s when we realized it was getting serious.

AY: Again.

AM: That this thing was actually going, it was interesting, it was going to go on a little bit longer.

AY: How long did it last, when you just exactly reached Kismayo to the point that you realized, “Well, Kismayo itself is catching fire.”

AM: Well, there was no insecurity in Kismayo at the time. It was just that it was overwhelmed by the people. And many left. People kept moving. People were catching on the boats to Mombasa. Some catch boats to like Bosaso and stuff like that. Some people were going by road along the border to Kenya. But most people were staying in Kismayo. Siad Barre is still in power at that time. I’m talking about still in January. So we stayed there a little bit. Interestingly, I tried to go back to Mogadishu.

AY: Why?

AM: I mean, we just left thinking this was temporary, and we didn’t have all of our belongings and stuff like that.

AY: So you still have the gnawing, you still have the pull that somehow or other you are going to go back and take care of your affairs at least, whatever they were.

AM: Yeah, at least get organized, pick up some more belongings and stuff like that. Also find out what was going on. And so I end up going back to my grandfather's house in Afgooye, and now there were less people but there were mostly new strangers that moved in after we left.

AY: So it's in Mogadishu.

AM: No, no, in Afgooye. And the war was so fierce now you couldn't actually even go. It was the closest that I come to actually dying or get at least injured during the entire civil war. That was the closest I got. Because, interestingly, some of the people who were staying in Afgooye in my grandfather's house had this pickup truck we call *xaajiyad* [pickup truck] that worked between Mogadishu and Afgooye. So one day I rode that truck there, that pickup truck, and I said, "Okay, I just want to go see how far we can go." And they dropped me off right at what's called X Control. So I'm there, they say, "No, it's too risky for you to go beyond this point. We will come back to you while you wait here and we will see how far we can go, maybe up to Kilometer Four or something like that to get a better fare." This is around January twentieth at that time. So they dropped me off there. There was a big tree there, right at that intersection. I remember. I don't know if it's still there or not.

AY: Definitely, I don't think it is still.

AM: There's a lady there selling tea.

AY: Under the tree.

AM: Under the tree. So there's the road that goes to Wadajir, and then there's the road that goes to Wershedaha and stuff like that. It's right at that intersection. And now it's a lot of activity. There are street vendors selling fruits and other necessities. People are going back and forth. Very much anything north of that area is probably a kind of war zone. So it's the closest you can get to the city and still think you are safe. Suddenly, a firefight broke out. I still to this day have no clue what the hell that was about. But in my mind, I'm thinking it probably was militias of the same kind that were fighting over looting. They started using heavy machine guns mounted on these big pickup trucks and were just firing indiscriminately. Many people who were drinking tea or just standing around me got hit. I saw the lady who was selling me the tea—I don't know if she died or not, but I know she got hit. She was screaming and crawling near me with a pool of blood. So I just lay on the ground until the shooting stopped. I looked around and there were dead people and wounded people all over me.

AY: Oh my goodness.

AM: So it was crazy. I have no idea, to this day. I was just numb and just got lucky, I guess.

AY: So they randomly just...

AM: Yeah, suddenly something or another...

AY: Snapped.

AM: I don't know. Something just happened. War started around us, and I don't think that it was the militias that were fighting against the government, the USC [United Somali Congress] forces or anything like that. I think it was within either the government or some people that knew each other that were fighting over looting or something. So the lady got hit and I know I didn't pay for the tea. That was what was in my mind, "I didn't pay for this tea!" I'm thinking, "Would I die while I still owe for this tea?" I was scared like I have never been scared either before or after.

AY: So she handed you the tea and...

AM: Yeah, we're sitting there, yeah, and boom, all of a sudden.

AY: So was she the last person you served possibly—the last person she served?

AM: I mean, there were a lot of people there. I could have been the last person. There were a lot of us buying tea, and people were buying bananas and watermelons. I mean, it was a big gathering place, and people wait for the transportation, stuff like that. As soon as the firing stopped, I run. I run back to Afgooye. The good thing was I was very familiar with that area because it was the way to our school. And I got a ride right by the Corrections [Guulwadayaasha] Headquarters, very close. After maybe one kilometer, two kilometers.

AY: And how far were you away from Afgooye?

AM: Oh, I mean, that's right in Mogadishu, and Afgooye is still about twenty-plus kilometers for sure. But after only two or three kilometers I was able to catch a ride. A big lorry that was full of people fleeing stopped for me.

AY: And you are, at this time, you are alone.

AM: At this time I am alone. I lost the people that I came with.

AY: You did not even hesitate to see how many people were dead?

AM: Oh no. I am in shock. All I remember is the lady and a pool of blood. And I think she got hit in her legs, so I am hoping that she didn't die. But there were some definite casualties. I couldn't recognize the vehicles or the people who were fighting with each other or shooting with each other. But I remember I lay down initially and once some of them left or something and the shooting stopped, that's when I got up and just run.

AY: Do you remember anybody else running away?

AM: Everybody was running. People running in all directions... It was total chaos.

AY: In every each way.

AM: In every direction, yes. That was the closest. Fortunately, I never had to come close to that kind of risk. It was really a close call. So I came back to Afgooye in that same day, and the people who I went with in the morning, the driver and stuff like that, they were worried about me, thinking that I got lost. And they heard that there was a big, you know, chaos, and people died and stuff where they left me. So they worried, but I finally showed up and everything was good. That was when we gave up and said, “Nope, this is a done deal.” And I think the next day I came back to Kismayo, and like two or three days later, it’s January twenty-sixth. And Siad Barre is now in Kismayo, and he’s done, and he’s fled from Mogadishu.

AY: Did you see him in Kismayo?

AM: No. It was in the news which I listened. And I remember there was a big celebration.

AY: Even in Kismayo.

AM: Yes, but it wasn’t for Siad Barre’s downfall. No, it wasn’t for that. Siad Barre’s allies in Kismayo spread this rumor, this propaganda that he stepped down and transferred power to General Mohamed Said Hersi Morgan and General Gaani. It was crazy and it didn’t make sense. But apparently when Siad Barre decided to leave Mogadishu—he was removed from power on January twenty-sixth—he wanted to go to his home state, home town of Garbahaareey in Gedo. But for some reason or other he could not go there, because he’s afraid of Ahmed Omar Jeer’s SPM [Somali Patriotic Movement] militias that actually have roadblocks between Afgooye and Baydhabo [Baidoa] area or something like that. So he can’t go there and instead has to go the only route that was apparently open to him, which is Kismayo. But they didn’t exactly put it this way. Instead they spread this propaganda that they felt will work with the people in Kismayo—and, again, the regime’s remnants were very much in power in Kismayo. I mean, their people were controlling it. So Morgan is the big shot in Kismayo at that time, right? And all of the remnants of the Siad Barre regime, at least the ones that were sort of the Darod [Daarood] clan family, are in Kismayo, and they don’t want to easily relinquish power. And I don’t even know why they wanted to associate with Siad Barre, because that was a government for all. And I, personally...

AY: Because, you know, psychologically, people needed...

AM: Yeah. So they were using the psychological manipulation and also the propaganda machine. So the rumor that was spread in town was Siad Barre has decided to give up power but instead to give it to his son-in-law, Mohammed Said Hersi Morgan and [Mohammed Hashi] Gaani—is what, for some reason, I remember the rumor was. So, “He is restoring power and staying with us, and the dude realizes that he is too old now, but we’re still in power, and our sons are kind of...” So that’s what the celebration was.

AY: Oh, no kidding.

AM: And everybody was shooting into the air and people were throwing money in the air, and so that’s what the celebration is. It’s not for Siad Barre losing power.

AY: Oh, it's the other way.

AM: It's that Siad Barre is technically giving away power to more people who will be in charge and this and that. But then people listened to the radio and realized that, no, that was a piece of crap, and no, he actually did flee. And [Mohamed Farrah] Aidid will talk on the radio like the next day. And the people that supposedly were in charge, like Morgan, ended up in Kismayo like the next day. I heard at the time, I remember people saying, "Oh, he came like a day late so he could pick up his dad from Marka," or something like that. So it was all not true.

AY: Obviously.

AM: Obviously, but people didn't know. So that's what it was.

AY: At that particular time, you are a child, and even though I think generation of that—I am a bit older than you are, of course. But at the same time, I think that generation that actually grew up or came to age in actually the late seventies or eighties or even early nineties, I think still were somewhat safe about the bravado of tribalism. Where are you, you think, in that particular era? Because your particular clan was actually attacked in 1979, do you already live with the segmentation issue?

AM: I would say no. I mean, I was really, I knew what was going on in the tribes and the clans and stuff like that.

AY: Right.

AM: But I was not happy about the whole celebration. I mean, I'm the product of the rebel movement, the way I saw it. I'm actually mad that these people are celebrating anything. The fact that Siad Barre happened to be Darod didn't mean anything to me.

AY: All the bravado of Darods...

AM: Right. I mean, the reality is you are sort of forced that, because now you are actually a target because of that. But part of me is saying, "Oh, that doesn't make any sense." Actually the person that I identified with at that time, in the whole Kismayo power struggle, was a guy who disappeared only a few months later. His name is escaping me... Gardheere. That is who I identified with. And interestingly Gardheere didn't want anything to do with Siad Barre's remnants, also known as Haraadi. In Mogadishu he set up an SSDF [Somali Salvation Democratic Front] camp and basically was saying that we support the USC [United Somali Congress] struggle. But he, too, was targeted because of clan affiliation. And so he's now in Kismayo, but he's not affiliated with these Siad Barre generals. Mr. Gardheere was a big commander in the SSDF, and he is like, "No, this struggle is between the people in the old regime and the people who struggled all these years and his victims." But then, for some strange ways, we're all lumped together, and so you have to pay the price, but you don't have to join and fight for a cause you don't believe.

AY: So the idea itself, the bravado or the problems—I mean, the indoctrination did not exactly affect you.

AM: No. It didn't affect me. I think I was too mature to be taken into a ride by it. I knew it was very false.

AY: You were very young, or possibly you have a mind of your own.

AM: Yeah.

AY: And then, from then on, what happened?

AM: And then everything, obviously, went downhill from there, obviously. We were still hoping that Somalia will be able, this will end, but Kismayo was attacked by USC militias. So Siad Barre, after a day or two, actually did leave Kismayo, and he went to Gedo region. But there were a lot of armed militias and stuff like that. They were not very well armed or disciplined, but there were lots of militias. There was a lot of manpower, because all of the displaced people—I mean, Kismayo's population must have shot up to three or four times. I remember—because we were some of the earliest people that come to Kismayo—and the population was really very small. You could eat at the nicest restaurant, it was cheap. The cost of living was low. Everything in Kismayo was really nice at that time. But now everything changed after two or three months. But then, Kismayo, like I say, was attacked.

AY: So how long after Siad Barre's departure from Mogadishu was Kismayo also attacked?

AM: The distance between Mogadishu and Kismayo is long, but I think the war reached the outskirts of Kismayo in, like, a couple of weeks, I think it was. It was very close. But then it was pushed back by just these volunteer militias. They pushed back the USC militias, and actually pushed them back all the way to the outskirts of Mogadishu. And I remember this time around, people were putting up posters saying, "Ruug caddaagii soo rogaal celi [the legendary fighter/s is back]." There are two fronts—one pushing from Kismayo, and Siad Barre was pushing from the Gedo side and capturing Baydhabo and all of those things. So even Afgooye, I think, they recaptured it.

We were still in Kismayo, and so now there are people that want to restore the old regime back. And there are people who necessarily don't want that, and so again, it's a big confusion. But this is around, I think, March and April, around that time. And there are also some, not a lot, but some movements, some people, including the late Prime Minister Abdirizak Haji Hussein who is in town in Kismayo, and General Mohamed Abshir, and others. And they want to broker some sort of a peace deal. They want to stop these militias from Kismayo and Gedo not to go to Mogadishu, and also have their counterparts, like Ali Mahdi and others, I suppose, who are in Mogadishu, to talk to their militias on the other side, and broker some peace. But there are elements in both sides who want this to fail. Both General Aidid's allies and Siad Barre's allies are against the peace efforts. Even though I am a civilian and young, my allegiance is fully in the camp they call *Guddiga suluxa* [reconciliation committee], you know, the peace group, and it was the remnants of the manifesto group and other leaders like Prime Minister Abdirizak.

So it's all of those things and power struggles. But we're also happy that now more territory in Kismayo is relatively safe now, and the war has moved way past us. The fighting is going on in Marka and that area, really in the outskirts of Mogadishu. So what happened is there are big protests. There are clearly two camps, two groups in Kismayo, and the group that were for restoring the old regime were definitely I think much louder than the sort of peace group. So they want to restore the old regime and so forth, and so there are protests all the time, condemning this older generation of leaders, all the leaders who really fought for...

AY: The peace activists—

AM: Peace activists, former leaders from the civilian government, et cetera. So there's that going on, and finally the militias failed, and they were...

AY: Chased back.

AM: They were chased back. And I remember it is Eid morning and instead of going to the prayer, we actually fled that Eid morning.

AY: From Kismayo.

AM: From Kismayo. So it was the end of—I don't know if it was Ramadan or not—but it was Eid. I know some people were going to the prayer, and we didn't that morning. We had to flee one more time. We had, again, one of our own big trucks. All of those families that came together in that first...

AY: You mostly are still all together.

AM: Yeah, we are all still in together. We had our different houses and stuff like that, but we came as a group. And Abdirizak fled with us, so he was with us as well, because this was his very close family members. So we fled. And again, being kids, we're excited about another move and thinking that it was going to be fun again and we have to yet explore new towns and cities. And the first thing that dawned on us was when we realized the main tarmac road ended in the outskirts of Kismayo. We are not traveling on a paved road anymore. Once we got to like the airport, the road ends.

AY: What airport?

AM: The Kismayo airport, right at the outskirt of the city. The road, that tarmac road, ends there. And it's like, "Oh my God, we are actually going into a completely different trip than we anticipated." So we ended up in Liboi after two or three days. It was a horrible, horrible trip. There isn't much of a road. There is a small dirt smuggling road that is very well known. It is called Habaarwaalid [cursed by parents] Road. So that's where we are traveling. We are going very slow, painfully slow. And if one vehicle decides to stop or breaks down, you are all forced to just wait as no one can pass.

AY: Very narrow.

AM: It's only one lane dirt road. You cannot pass. So it took us forever to get to Liboi, Somalia—Dhoobley. I think it's like April '91, and we stayed there. Again, militias regroup, and they went back to Kismayo. But at that time we had enough of it, and we just crossed the border into the Kenyan side of the border—Liboi, Kenya—and then later into Kenya proper, into Mombasa and Nairobi.

AY: How long did you stay in Nairobi, then?

AM: I actually stayed mainly in Mombasa, except for short travels and stuff.

AY: Same group?

AM: Yeah, the same group. Some of them were fortunate enough to get through the sponsorship process and came to the US as early as like '92. I didn't, because there was something called brother sponsorship, which was open at the time. And then brother sponsorship was stopped immediately, like late '92, '93, so our reunification process basically kind of died before we started the process. And it wasn't until late '95, early '96 that they restarted the process of accepting the old applications that were basically shelved. So we were finally able to come in '96.

AY: So in '96, which city did you come to?

AM: I came to New York City. I came to Queens, New York.

AY: Because Abdirizak was there.

AM: Yes. He is the one that...

AY: Sponsored you.

AM: Yes.

AY: How many of you are there, now, at that moment?

AM: We were a big group. There were like ten or twelve of us. Yeah, we were sort of a big group. But we didn't stay in New York long. Because New York is an expensive place and that's a difficult place if you're really new to the country to start and to get situated right away. And then the other thing was the groups that were in Nairobi and in Mombasa with us, the other groups, some of them were in Minneapolis at that time. So people had started coming to Minneapolis and it was easier to connect with the younger generation, like my friends and stuff like that, who are in Minneapolis than the older generation in New York. I called the guys in Minneapolis to find what it was like here and they said, "Oh, Minneapolis is nice, and there are plenty of jobs, and you can go to school here," and stuff like that. And so I immediately moved to Minneapolis.

AY: Right after New York? How long did it take you to move to Minneapolis?

AM: It was only a matter of a few weeks. I stayed in New York only until I got my Social Security and some other paperwork.

AY: Yes, even the process of going through all the immigration...

AM: No, we went through that here. No, we didn't do much there. And people just split. Some went to Atlanta, some went to Nashville. I and a few others came to Minneapolis.

AY: Where in Minneapolis did you come?

AM: South Minneapolis, Elliot Park neighborhood. We were all singles back then. I mean, there were hardly any families, back then.

AY: There were very few women around. [chuckles]

AM: Yeah, yeah. So we were staying at apartments over on Fourteenth and Portland.

AY: You were in that group.

AM: Yeah, 1420 Portland was the first place I stayed. I basically stayed with cousins, slept on the couch of those guys.

AY: And how many were there?

AM: I don't know. Like twenty people.

AY: Twenty.

AM: Yeah. There were a lot of people coming in and out. You really don't know who's going to be there. People were just coming every day. People were moving from different places. People who are a little bit more established, they were moving out, and the newer guys were staying in these overcrowded apartments.

AY: What was your first job?

AM: My first job! It was very interesting. I went to this temp agency, it's called Work Connections. It was over at Diamond Lake Road and Nicollet. I went there with some friends to apply for jobs on a few occasions. I went there to help them because I was very lucky in that I spoke some English. I think, looking back, it's funny how poor my English was. [chuckles] But compared to a lot of people, I could fill out forms. I could speak relatively good English.

AY: You could communicate.

AM: I could communicate somewhat. So I went there and I'm helping all of the other guys who stayed with me and people who came with me and stuff. So one day I applied myself, and I was sent to this manufacturing plant that used to make candy. I have no idea where it was in town. I mean, really, everything is still sort of blurry at that time. But it was a candy manufacturing place. And I'm this light, skinny kid, and they put me to this hard labor thing.

AY: What are you doing, what is it?

AM: It's a candy processing place. And they didn't put me on the assembly line for some reason. They put me on this place. Apparently the candy is made with flour and all of these things. You mix them and they put it on these big trays. And there are like twenty or thirty of them that are in a big cart-wheel, and they want you to push it and take it to like the next stage or something like that. So I tried to close the gate of that cart-wheel, and I couldn't even do that. So I'm struggling, and actually I threw up. I threw up. It was hot, it was hard work, and it was dust all over. I was full of flour. I never had to work anything like that. And the guy, the supervisor is just watching me struggle.

AY: And how long have you been working in that?

AM: It was the first day.

AY: How many hours?

AM: A few hours there now, so by that time I exhausted my energy. They assigned me on the most difficult job in the plant, I guess because that is the least desirable job and that is what rookies are assigned to do. But I couldn't do it. I failed the test, and the supervisor saw me struggling and he must have felt sorry for me. So he said, "You know, I don't know who sent you here, but the rest of today, just clean up." So I mopped the floor and stuff like that. I cleaned up until my shift ended around midnight. We don't even have cars, so they have a van that basically takes people initially from the office, and then later at the end of your shift it takes you wherever you want to be dropped off. So technically that was my first job, albeit a one day job! I don't even know if they paid me or not.

AY: No, I don't think they did, because I think it happened to me several times, and I never got paid.

AM: Yeah. One of my roommates was working there for a few weeks. He was a little bit older than me, but he wasn't much stronger and I used to make fun of him when he comes home full of dust, complaining every night. But that night I became the laughing stock of the whole apartment. I was the weakest and everything else. I couldn't even finish one shift, much less last there for a few weeks. Anyway, I decided to never go back to that job, and I thought my exit strategy was to start school right away. So I went to school. I started...

AY: Immediately.

AM: Yeah, I don't know if the school was open, but immediately I went to school, and I went to Edison High School. I remember I went to the Minneapolis Public School's registration, which used to be on Broadway and Central. So that's where I went, and I took some tests, and I was registered to school. Most of the Somali kids were going to Roosevelt High School at the time, but I gathered that they were getting into fights, and I thought it might not be a good school for some reason. I don't know. I didn't want to go there.

AY: You choose not to go?

AM: I chose not....

AY: You chose not to go.

AM: Yes. Again, it went back to when the same thing happened to me like when I was in Somalia, when I changed. So I decided to go to Edison High School and was only one of, like, a few Somalis in that school. It was in Northeast, and at time I live even further south in the Phillips neighborhood, so I took a long bus. Sometimes I will take the city bus and it gets there late. It was so frustrating. And further disappointing to me was the school environment, which I didn't find appealing either. You know, kids not really taking school and education very seriously. They were all about what kind of shoes you are wearing, and who you hung out with, and want to spend more time at the gym than at the classroom. So I felt out of place, and I said, "I don't want to do this."

And so I'm not working at that time, right? Because my job was that tough job, and I said school is better for me. But then I also know that, you know, all of my immediate family, my mother and siblings, are still in Somalia. I didn't come with them. I came with, again, my relatives and stuff like that. And so I had to support them, even though they are actually saying—my dad, who loved education and had a big influence on me, and my mom, both said, "As long as you are studying you don't have to support us, because we have business and we are fine. There's an expectation that you will support us, but as long as you are going to school, we'll sacrifice it. You don't have to send us a monthly stipend." But there are my friends from Nairobi who I used to live with all this time, and cousins, and other relatives. I mean, I had a schoolteacher call me. You know, so, it never really is only about your immediate family that you have to support. So you have that pressure. You also need to have your own place and you need a car. And so I have the financial distress, and then the school, in which I was disappointed.

And that's when I said, "Enough of this. You know what? I think I can do my GED [General Education Development] and test out and just go to college." So I said, "Why waste your time here?" I stopped going to high school. Incidentally, many Somalis were starting to move into the Minneapolis public housing high rises at the time, and there were security jobs that were opening. There was a company called Avalon Security, which provided security at these high rises and which I think was one of the first major security companies that hired Somalis. I applied a job there and was one of the first people that they hired. Security was easier, much better than that hard labor. Avalon Security was my real first job, and I did that for quite some time.

AY: You don't have to push a truck. [chuckles]

AM: And then you can also study. You can study. So I did that, and then later on I worked at Seagate Technology, which is an assembly job making computer chips, really nice paying job. And when I started there, then I made my security job part time so I can work more hours at the higher paying assembly job. But then the jobs started to go, a lot of those assembly manufacturing jobs started to disappear. So I was laid off, I think it was January 1998, from that job at Seagate. But I got a nice stipend, like three months' severance pay or something like that, and at that time I had my own apartment. I'm settled, and I have a car, and I have my GED, which I prepared at Franklin Library.

AY: That's all—a few weeks.

AM: It took me like a few weeks. Yeah, the math and all of those were easy. Social studies was a little bit difficult for me. I completed my GED while I was working at the Seagate job and at Avalon security. Between them I got it done. And so once I was laid off, then the next stage of my life started, and that's when I started college. January 8, 1998.

AY: So did you sit down and just exactly say, "What am I doing?" I mean, you are thinking about your future.

AM: Oh yeah, yeah. I'm always thinking about my future, and I'm talking to my dad and stuff like that. Yeah.

AY: And he's asking you, interrogating you, just exactly saying, "What's the next step?"

AM: What's the next step, what are you planning to study? And, of course, you know parents, Somali parents, all want you to go to medical school. They don't know how it works here and stuff like that. But, yes, my family was about education and they were very supportive because they knew I was a good student from early on, so it's like, "Okay, go to school." I think I was paid like \$3,000, which was big money back then. I sent some of that to my family, so they're happy. I sent some to my aunt. So all of the immediate fires I put off, I think, and then I can focus on my school.

AY: Were you not thinking about tomorrow, that you're going to run out of money—save something for yourself?

AM: No.

AY: Just like... [chuckles]

AM: No, I mean, I opened a checking account at the time, and so I have a little bit of money there. But I'm worried more about other people than really me, because I know they need it much more than I do.

AY: So even the saving—and all those people, the rest of the world talk about it—it's not in our cultural DNA?

AM: No. You can't save when you know that people are starving, struggling, or calling you, yeah.

AY: You have to share.

AM: Yes. And so I went to Minneapolis Community and Technical College [MCTC]. And since I had a GED from here, it was easy for me to enroll. And since I was laid off from work, I had a little bit more time.

AY: You are taking also, you are receiving the unemployment?

AM: That was interesting. So in my mind, I'm thinking, "Oh, great, I'm also going to be getting unemployment after my severance package runs out." [chuckles] So I wait for three months and then I applied unemployment benefits. I don't know how the system works. I don't understand that to qualify for unemployment, you actually must be available to work. Instead, I am thinking they will probably be happier that I am going to college and hence earning more in the future and paying more taxes. So I applied and they said, "What do you do?" I said, "Oh, I'm a fulltime student and I can't work now." Denied! They denied my application because I was a fulltime student! I'm still upset about that to this day. So my unemployment was denied, and it's like, "Oh my God! I would have saved a little more if I knew that money wasn't coming." I was counting on a big unemployment check. That was actually part of the reason why I didn't save. So once I realized my unemployment was not going through, I just stayed in my school. I didn't want to quit it, but I changed my classes and stuff like that so I can work again.

AY: So you would have qualified if you said, "I wasn't going to school."

AM: Yes. I would. But technically, apparently, and now I know, for unemployment you must be available to work.

AY: Yes, yes, yes.

AM: So I said I wasn't, because I was thinking that was going to be good. They would love that I am studying, and hopefully will give me that. But no. They say, "No, if you're not available to work, you're not going to qualify." So it was denied and it wasn't a big deal. I just continued to work because there were plenty of jobs around. Security was sort of what I did the most because it was convenient and I could do my homework and stuff with it. And later on I worked at Wells Fargo Home Mortgage.

AY: And then from community college and Wells Fargo, where life took you?

AM: Well, I had a clear plan when I went to the community college. I wanted to eventually transfer to a university to get my bachelor's degree, so I spoke with the advisor and asked what I needed to do to transfer to a four-year school. I learned I could focus on what was known as the

“Minnesota transfer curriculum,” which were forty credits that I needed in order to transfer to a four-year school. I knew I didn’t want to get a liberal arts degree, because my plan, again, was to get a full bachelor’s degree. So that’s what I focused on in community college, because I didn’t want to waste my time taking the wrong things.

AY: You calculated all of your...

AM: I calculated, which was really helpful. So after the two years I was able to finish it, but then at that time, obviously, I am older. I started dating my wife in 1997, so we’ve been seeing each other for like three years, and we both felt the summer of 2000 after finishing community college and before starting university will be a good time for our wedding.

AY: Was she in Minneapolis?

AM: Yes, she was in Minneapolis. We met in Minneapolis, but she moved around a little bit to Iowa, Seattle, Mankato and was now back in Minneapolis again. We were both working at the time and saved enough money to start a family and for our wedding and stuff. We are planning our wedding in August. Everything was falling in place, until in July suddenly my dad passed away.

AY: Sorry.

AM: In July 2000.

AY: In Somalia.

AM: In Somalia, yes. He suddenly died. So it was just a big, huge devastation. I’m not there, I can’t see him. It was just too far. I sent some money to the family, but I talked to my mom and my older brother. He is only one year older than me, but he sort of now runs the family. And they say, “Go ahead with your wedding plans. Don’t stop.” I wanted to stop at that time everything and not proceed with that, because now there is a huge void left by my dad. I want to put all of my plans to stop and just maybe work full time and stop school and stop marrying and all those things. But my family was very understanding. They said, “No, this is fine. You should go ahead with your plans. Your dad would want you to marry and see his grandkids. And so are we. Go ahead.” And so we stayed with our plan and married and started...

AY: In 2000.

AM: In 2000.

AY: But you, even though you got married, you were emotionally rattled.

AM: Oh yes. I mean, if it was my decision, I would not have gone ahead. At least not at that particular time. At least I would have waited a little bit longer. I mean, it was just about a month after his death, after my dad’s death. But we had a lot of support from all the families and stuff

like that on both sides, both here and there, and so it turned out to be a very good thing, at the end.

AY: It was a good decision?

AM: Yeah.

AY: Okay. So did you go back, did you finally go to college? Did you, I mean, go to college?

AM: Yes. So I married that August and, yeah, that September, 2000, I started at Metropolitan State University. That's where I transferred to. And I think I had a choice of which school, but one of the big reasons was, "Well, now I'm married, and I have all of these families to support," and I know that I wanted to maintain a fulltime job or at least some job. I mean, I've always had to work two jobs if not more. So I knew that I needed to work but also take some classes, and that is why I decided Metro State. It was very convenient because a lot of the classes go on weekends and evenings and stuff like that.

AY: Yeah, it's catered, they cater to that kind of—

AM: So Metropolitan State University was really a perfect fit for me, and I had a good time. So that's where I went to get my BA [Bachelor of Arts].

AY: With what?

AM: I graduated in May 2004 with a BA in computer information systems.

AY: Now you were just exactly where you want to be, almost. I mean, at least you reached the compulsory goal—I mean, the goal that you set yourself. You have your degree, you are married...

AM: Yep.

AY: What's the next goal?

AM: Well, the next goal, then, was to go see my family. I didn't want to go see my mom without a college degree because I felt like I would be a failure. I know she will not be happy without having graduated, so I graduated first before I went back to see her. [both chuckle]

AY: Even though she didn't go to school herself?

AM: She had some schooling, but yes, she valued education very highly even though she didn't have much herself.

AY: Did she?

AM: Yeah. I was always happy to see my mom being able to read and write and stuff like that. So she had some schooling. I don't know if it was formal and I don't know if it was a lot of schooling, but she instilled the love of education into all of us, and my dad even more. So, yes, I felt like she would feel like I didn't live up to their expectations if I came back without having graduated from university. So in May I graduated, and I have the proof, and so I went to visit for the first time in 2004. In June, I think it was, June or July.

AY: So you went all the way to Galkayo.

AM: Yep. They actually live in Burtinle, which is close to Galkayo. So, yeah, I went there. I went to Nairobi initially to my old stomping grounds, and then I catch a flight from Nairobi. It landed in Ballidoogle, in the middle of a war zone.

AY: In the middle of war zone, yes.

AM: But I don't know better than that. The flight was called East African Airways, so it was Nairobi to Berbera. So that's where I went. I went to Berbera in what's currently Somaliland, basically, and then catch a taxi from Berbera all the way to Garowe.

AY: All the way a taxi from Berbera?

AM: Well, the one from there took us to Burao, and the one from Burao took us to Las Anod [Laascaanood]...

AY: So it's still called a taxi, but it is...

AM: Yeah, it was this small sedan called Mark II or Mark-et as they say in Somalia. But it functions like a taxi. And there were some other people who we met in the flight who were going to the same—they were going to Bosaso and stuff like that, so we catch the same car. On the same day, we went to Burao, and they say, "We're going to sleep here."

AY: What month was that? I am just trying to figure out which season was it.

AM: It was hot. It was the hottest.

AY: So it must have been June or July.

AM: It was July. It was July 2004.

AY: So Berbera was hell.

AM: When I get off the airplane, I went back. I mean, it literally felt like a fire in my face. I never seen...

AY: Yes! It licks you. Berbera, yes. And it's one of the hottest places on earth.

AM: Is it? Yes, it must be. I mean, that day it definitely was. I have never, and I lived in Somalia and stayed in Kismayo for like four months early in '91. Kismayo can get hot because the equator is right by there. But it was something else. Honestly, I thought there must be fire or something, and I went back inside the airplane because I couldn't handle the heat. And then they say, "No, this is normal. You have to get out." And there's no shelter or anything like that. But otherwise it was wonderful experience, the people. And I had my US passport in tow.

AY: Oh, you are already a citizen.

AM: Yeah, I got citizenship right after five years. No waiting—like 2000.

AY: You didn't even wait. You applied immediately.

AM: Yeah. I applied immediately.

AY: What was the feeling like when you went back? You have not been away, still, that long—it is about ten years—comparing to my case.

AM: No, actually, I mean, I haven't seen my mom since like '89. I am extremely excited. I am so emotional. I am happy. We took the taxi from Berbera, and we get into Burao in the late afternoon. We ate and the driver told us to sleep that night, and I said, "No." I overrode all the others. I said, "No. I want to go see my mom as quickly as possible. I don't want to stay."

AY: [chuckles] And they are not making fun of you, or they saw that you were serious?

AM: Right, yep. So I told the driver, "I will pay you extra. Please."

AY: Proceed.

AM: I didn't want to stop at least before Garowe. So we departed right away. Puntland controlled Las Anod at that time. But right around Adhicaddeeye or right close before we got basically to Las Anod, close to Las Anod, between Las Anod and Burao, the Somaliland army, in the middle of the night, stopped us and said, "You can no longer move beyond this point." I think it was early in the evening.

AY: Why?

AM: Oh, because of security. They say, "For your own protection." The militias on the other side, they were badmouthing the other group, basically. But they were saying, "It's not safe for you to travel at night beyond this point." So we ended up sleeping on the side of the road that night for a few hours until the daylight break. Like early in the morning, like four in the morning.

AY: So you can't protest this time, this time you can't order anyone. [chuckles]

AM: No. And the driver said, "See? We could have easily slept in Burao at a nice hotel instead of the side of the road." But, still, no. Knowing that we were stopped by higher authorities was

better than at least me making that decision on my own. So we left there early in the morning, we get to Las Anod, and then they put us in a different car. One of the funniest things happened along the way—so there's all of this fragmentation going on throughout Somalia, different militias controlling different areas, et cetera. But you know, that trip made me realize how superficial all of these are indeed. The whole trip between Berbera, Burao, and Las Anod was all a really very easy trip. No one bothers you, asks you where you are going.

AY: Asks you what tribe you are, no one cares.

AM: Yeah.

AY: And you didn't have the fear.

AM: No, there's no fear. I don't have any fear at all. I know that I am a Somali with Somali people. And even the drivers, they know this. So what was interesting was right before we sort of crossed this imaginary border, the driver, this car that we rented from Burao in Somaliland proper, stopped and says that he wants to change his plate. He called it *jaqaf* [license plate]. He said, "I'm going to take the *jaqaf*, the plate, from Somaliland." Basically saying it's a piece of crap, piece of metal. It doesn't mean anything. Except it means something, apparently, for these people at the checkpoints. And he says he wants to put it, now that we are entering Las Anod, we are putting the Puntland *jaqaf*. He has both. So it's all interesting. [both chuckle] So he is like, "I don't care."

AY: As a matter of fact, he is even making fun of them.

AM: Yeah, yeah. So he took the one plate, Somaliland, and put on another one, and we entered Las Anod. We ate there, and we had a breakfast. We went to this restaurant here. It's called Hamdi Restaurant. I don't know if it's owned by the folks who own the Minneapolis Hamdi, but I am familiar with this restaurant. "Hamdi, I know Hamdi."

AY: Is that in Las Anod?

AM: In Las Anod.

AY: I think it is the same.

AM: I don't know, it could be, but I never actually asked them. But Las Anod was booming, it was an interesting place at that time. And they put us on a different car. I am not aware of this, but apparently it's almost like free of charge. Our taxi driver from Berbera is negotiating with this new driver who is supposed to take us to Garowe. I paid this guy all the way to Garowe, because I know that's where my brother is going to meet me. But for some reason he apparently wants to just negotiate cheaper fare with some guy, so he put us on to this guy. I didn't know it at the time, but he's *qaadwale* [khat dealer]. Technically, our taxi driver has decided to put his passengers on a khat trader's vehicle. He's a *miraa* [khat, *qaad*] trader, khat trader. He drives the vehicle that brings the *miraa* or khat from Garowe to Las Anod every day. And he drives crazy.

AY: Faster.

AM: Faster—oh, they drive like crazy. I sat on the front seat next to the driver, and I said, “What’s your name?” And he said his name is Shilke. Shilke is one of these big, huge anti-aircraft vehicles that Somali militias used to fight each other.

AY: Shilke.

AM: Shilke, his name is Shilke. At this time I am starting to get concerned. First he was a khat trader, and now his name is Shilke. He then asked me who I was and we turn out to be distant, distant relatives somehow, and he knew the place that I wanted to go, which made me relax a little bit.

AY: But also, you are actually downplaying it, but anywhere in Somalia, if you just exactly tell your family name, everyone will...

AM: Will relate to you somehow.

AY: Yes.

AM: So Shilke, really nice guy, he is listening to a new song by Hasan Aden Samatar, who I left in Minneapolis, that I haven’t even heard. It’s crazy. I’m like, “How did you get it?” Apparently it was a pirated song before it was officially released. He said, “The album actually is not even out yet, but we have it.” The khat traders are just these interesting characters. And then he handed me his gun—he wants me to hold his gun. The gun is usually in the front passenger seat, and he is traveling alone so he felt I have to hold it. I am thinking, “I don’t know what to do with this.” So I’m putting it upside down so at least it doesn’t fire off accidentally like I did in the years earlier. [both chuckle] So I put it upside down, and he is driving one hundred twenty, hundred forty on a pothole-filled road! I mean, in a minute we were in Garowe where my brothers were waiting for me. It was an extremely exhilarating experience. Seeing my mom for the first time in two decades was happy and a joyous moment.

AY: Wow. So coming back to Minneapolis now, then, you got that monkey off of your back—you saw Mom, you are relaxed, you are married, you graduated. Still, what is the next territory to venture into?

AM: Yeah, well, I mean, life’s always, it’s an adventurous thing, it’s an interesting place. It never ends. You always have new dynamics that enter into the picture. Now you’re older, you’re mature, you have a family that you have to support. We have our own kids now that we have to raise. But, I mean, I was happy that at least that first few years went relatively okay. And maybe I didn’t waste too much time, kind of thing, is what I’m thinking. So I am happy about the situation when I came back in 2004. I was working for Hennepin County at that time.

AY: So when you graduated, you already got a job.

AM: Actually I started working for Hennepin County in January 2001 when I was still in school.

AY: As, still, an IT [information technology]...

AM: No, I started out as a financial worker while I was still in school. That was a fulltime job, and later on I would go to Dakota County to do the same job. As you know there was this dot-com bubble in the early 2000s resulting a major outsourcing of most entry-level IT jobs upon graduation. So not only was it difficult to find a decent paying IT job when I graduated, my fulltime permanent job offered better wage and benefits. So I am working at the county earning a decent salary. We lived in Minneapolis at the time and I'm active in the community. I served on our association's board and couple other organizations. I am also busy at home with two kids at that time. We were expecting our third child, a daughter, in couple weeks. She was actually born on July 29, just a few days after I came back, and I had to make my trip short because I wanted to be back for her birth. So with all of these things going on, I am thinking I need to take a little bit of a break before graduate school because I am literally exhausted with just finishing school, multiple jobs, and a young and growing family.

AY: Great. So how many kids now?

AM: Now we have five kids.

AY: And when was the oldest born?

AM: Oldest was born November 2001.

AY: She or he?

AM: She. We have five daughters.

AY: You have to name them all.

AM: Five daughters, yeah.

AY: You have to name them all.

AM: Okay, yeah. So my oldest is Asmaa.

AY: Second?

AM: And then Ashwaq and Amira and Asra. And our youngest is Salma, who is four years old, yeah. And you will notice my wife, who is very particular about names, named all of the older ones because she wanted them to be A. Her name is Ayan and mine is Ahmed. We both start with As.

AY: Wow!

AM: And she wanted all the kids to start with A as well. So I felt like there's a bad omen with all these names starting with A, and having only girls, and... [both chuckle]

AY: You dare not say that!

AM: No, actually, we love our kids, our girls. No, I am not particular about genders, but I said, "I'm going to have to name the youngest one." So I think I won over that battle, after four tries.

AY: You lost, actually, ninety-seven percent of the time. [chuckles] So, where do you live now?

AM: We live in Apple Valley. We bought a house in Apple Valley in 2006 while working for Dakota County to be closer to my job, but also because I opened a business with a few friends in Burnsville—the first Somali-owned grocery store south of the river—in 2006 as more Somali families started to move to the suburbs. And honestly, because housing was so expensive in Minneapolis at the time, this was the only thing we could afford at the time.

AY: Did you go back to graduate school?

AM: Yes. Eventually I went back to do my graduate degree at Hamline University in the fall of 2005. And because I had now five, six years working in the public sector and actually, you know, the public sector being really what I am passionate about, I wanted something to go along with it. I had very good and fond memories at graduate school and at Hamline University.

AY: Great. And what was your discipline?

AM: Public administration.

AY: Oh, public administration. So then you are still in Hennepin County?

AM: No. I left Hennepin County after four years in January 2005 and went to Dakota County. I then worked for the state Department of Human Services as a project manager, mainly in the IT field for a few years. So I kind of got back to the IT, but this time it was more in terms of managing projects and having a team mainly in the IT area. Most recently I was with the City of Minneapolis serving as the deputy director of the Neighborhood and Community Relations Department. So all in all, I have nearly a dozen years of public sector experience in local and state government and felt I needed a break and need to spend a little time self-employed.

AY: Okay. And what are you doing now? How many businesses are you running or how many businesses do you own? How much money do you have? All that. We want to know all that. [chuckles]

AM: Really? You want to know all that? Some of that I can't disclose. No, I was really blessed. That grocery store business didn't work out quite as I expected. After that grocery store business failed, I started a health care business in 2008. It started slow and I felt I could manage it on the side with my wife, but it has grown and I needed to spend a little more time running it.

AY: What kind of business is it?

AM: It's a home health care business.

AY: And you cater to, though, possibly—not Somalis, is it?

AM: We have mixed clients, even though, yes, most of our clients are not Somalis. But there are some Somalis.

AY: When did you start?

AM: I started in 2008, but we really started small and slow. It was sort of on the side business kind of thing. But it was getting increasingly busier and busier, so that's why I had to focus fulltime on that business and left my job, professional work with the city. So I am now a fulltime business owner. So that business and—

AY: Of which you do not wish to disclose the money.

AM: Yeah. It's a growing business. It's doing okay. I mean, it's doing enough that I was able to...

AY: To leave your job.

AM: To leave my job, which was paying me good. The most recent project which I am actually quite proud of, I established an eye clinic with a couple other partners at the heart of the South Minneapolis community, Lake and Chicago, called Midtown Eye Care. We started this business not only because we felt like it's a niche market and a need but it's an extremely underserved community as well. Not just the Somali and other immigrant communities, but African Americans and all of the residents in that part of town, the Midtown area, Powderhorn area, Phillips communities didn't have enough high quality eye care that catered to low and middle income residents. There's not a lot of eye care in that area, and the ones that are, are very busy.

AY: Yeah, that's the one that I was just telling you that actually it's a stroke of genius because it is not a field that actually we somehow or the other extended our hands into. Somalis are not into it.

AM: No.

AY: Even though we can assume that once you start, even if you started on the moon, as long as you are Somali—and that, actually, that's going to take you to the moon.

AM: Yes.

AY: Every Somali is just going to say, "Why not me, too?"

AM: Yes, absolutely. And we are okay to be trailblazers, and hopefully it's a harbinger of a lot of good things for the community. We will not be upset if others follow suit. But it's a really difficult field with lots of requirements, and a lot of compliance issues, and you have to have the right team and the right business ideas, and the right location to succeed. It's a professional field. It's not a field that anybody can really get into, because you need to have your medical doctors, your eye doctors, et cetera to get into.

AY: And how is it going so far?

AM: Actually, this is like the second week. So it's a new business, and every time something is new it takes some time.

AY: So now that we are getting to the conclusion of our interview, just tell me—we have been here twenty-something years, so twenty-one years at most. We are a very visible community. If you just try to assess us, how are we doing? Somalis?

AM: The Somali-American community, I think, has been very resilient and successful in this state and in this city. I think a lot of that has to do with the culture of the community that we were fortunate enough to host us and to join. Because when I was with the city, for example, some of the things that I used to do is meet up with these other delegates from other cities and countries. And there was a big interest from a lot of Scandinavian countries, places like Norway and Sweden and Denmark and stuff like that, that would send delegates here. They want to see this Minneapolis community that everybody has heard is so successful. And they ask us, "Is the DNA of the Somalis in Minneapolis different than the DNA of the other ones? Because the ones that we have are not doing quite as well as you guys apparently are doing here." And so what I tell them is, "No, I think the people are the same." We have family in Norway and they are just like us here. So I think whatever success that we enjoy here, I think the quality of the education and the people that have welcomed us here and hosted us here and the systems have a big part to do.

So I would say the community is definitely not without challenges and struggles, which I think is normal every time that there is this huge population of refugees and people from all, you know, all sort of life. You know, there are people here with a lot of skills that are really well educated, and there are people here who've come really from zero. So I think the community is doing okay. I never expected that Somalis would live in a place—particularly a place as cold as Minnesota—for twenty-plus years. So that itself, I think, tells you something unique about these people and this particular place. And I think now you will see the community engaged in every facet of business. I think that eye care might be one of the last ones. But we own pharmacies, and clinics, and urgent care clinics, and other specialties. We are into transportation. And also we have different businesses in the Somali malls that I am not particularly a huge fan of, but they support some families and I think there's some need for them as well. So there are those. There are a lot of kids that are going to school, especially girls, that are staying in school and doing relatively well. I think the job opportunities are somewhat scarcer than they used to be, and I hope that people really get educated and get some skills, because the reality is in today's economy and today's workforce, you need skills. You can no longer get by with just your

physical abilities and stuff like that. So it's not like in '96 when we came, and they just ship us in a van from one assembly to another and you could technically do the job on the fly.

AY: I think that's gone forever.

AM: I think that's gone. So hopefully for people to have a real future and a prosperous life, they need to get education. The other really important thing is to really feel home and get connected here.

AY: How are we doing with that?

AM: I think that we are doing increasingly better. The community is not as isolated. I hope that people really get connected and have people get to know us, because I don't feel like people really know us. I think we have a compelling story to tell if people knew us. And I think we have a huge potential and we could benefit a lot if we opened ourselves a little more. For example, our businesses, which predominantly cater to only Somalis, could benefit a lot if they cater to everybody. I mean, there are five million people in Minnesota, and I want to have them to be my customers. I don't want to have only Somali customers. And I hope that by people getting to know us and learning about us, that they will feel comfortable enough to come to us and to our businesses and use our services.

AY: Great. The last question is—which it is actually a generic question, to some extent, that I ask everyone, almost—okay, twenty years pass, what do you think we would look like in twenty years?

AM: Another twenty years?

AY: Another twenty years later.

AM: I think another twenty years we will probably look... I don't know. I mean, I think people at that time will more or less give up the notion that this is somewhat sort of a temporary home, because I don't know if the situation in Somalia will really stabilize. And I don't know even if it does—no one ever leaves America. That's the history of this country. No one ever goes back. Everyone comes here thinking that this is temporary, and no one goes back, at least not for good. So I have returned a few times. I have seen a lot of people who go back, but they always crave to come back here. You know, this is our country, this is an amazing place, and as much as we love our motherland and hope that it gets better than it is now, I doubt that too many people will permanently ever go back. So I think what you will see in twenty years from now is a community that would look like any community that has been here forty years. There will still be some issues. There will still be some struggles, but I think more and more people will... One, I think the idea of this being home will become stronger. It has already been over twenty years, two decades, almost now, it has. And I think it will continue to be that way as more years pass. And then I think you will see growing professionals in every field. You will also see, I think, less of the really visible culture, distinct community that we have today. So maybe we will look a little bit more like the rest of Minnesota.

AY: We will adapt.

AM: I think we will adapt a little more, yes, I think. Hopefully we won't lose our identity, because I think that's such an important piece of who we are and culture. But also, you know, this is our culture, and I think people should feel like they are part of this community as well. This is who we are.

AY: On that positive note, Ahmed, we are going to end here. Thank you very much, because I think your telephone right now is full of messages. As a matter of fact, I think you are going to be arrested soon. [chuckles] But thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity.

AM: Oh, absolutely. Thank you very much, and I wish you luck with the rest of the project. Hopefully it will be a meaningful contribution.

AY: Hopefully.