

VICTOR ATIYEH

June 30, 1993

Tape 43, Side 1

C.H.: This is an interview with Governor Victor Atiyeh at his office in downtown Portland, Oregon. The interviewer for the Oregon Historical Society is Clark Hansen. The date is June 30th, 1993, and this is Tape 43, Side 1.

V.A.: Well. When we arrived at the village, and here was this very narrow street filled with people, really. There were people up, oh, let's say a story high, by a wall, there was a lot of people all around. You know, using the words "swept up the street," and incidentally, it was uphill all the way, it was a good description.

But some beautiful young ladies, girls, they presented us with flowers, I remember that. They had a Boy Scout band playing music. I wish, I wish that I could have a sound of that music; I don't have on the video.

As we were going up the street, there were people in front of us, people at the side of us, people in back of us. You know, moving up the street. I don't know if you've ever heard - I can't even duplicate it - but that very high la la la ...

C.H.: Shrill?

V.A.: Shrill, yeah. Whatever that song's called. And that was going on, and rosewater was coming down, and there was a sign of both President Assad and myself, "Welcome Home." And we got up to my dad's - well, my cousin lives there now - home.

C.H.: Did you know any of this was going to happen?

V.A.: Well, you knew there was going to be some kind of a - but you know, you don't have any - you can't even conceive of something like this. Obviously, it never happens in Oregon.

And there's no way that, you know, that in advance know what this is going to be like. And so this band is playing, this Boy Scout band, and you know, it's not like the Oregon Symphony or any marching band we have. You know, it was done in an unprofessional way, but it was just marvelous. Exciting.

And I go there, and old cousins - I say cousins, second and third or fourth cousins, I don't know, you know. A little old lady came up. She had remembered when we were there when I was six years old. This old lady. They have a greeting there, as you know, both men and women, and they kiss on each cheek.

C.H.: Three times, isn't it?

V.A.: Two times is a good one. Three times is even better, but that doesn't happen too often.

C.H.: I guess I see that when presidents are coming or something like that, or Arab leaders, or whatever.

V.A.: There's a picture in the house. I have to kind of describe it, because it's unlike anything we have here. It's an open courtyard and kind of an overhang and the rooms are separate. You don't go from a living room to the dining room or anything like that. There was a sitting room, if you will, and then you'd have to go out into this courtyard with the overhang, and then you'd go to a bedroom and another bedroom, there's bedrooms upstairs. But you go out.

[break in tape]

Oh, what an evening. What an afternoon and evening. The next morning, we got up early and I wanted to walk through the village quietly. I think I talked about that. But Dolores and I got up from the bedroom and walked down under this overhang. I'm sure I was sleeping in my cousin's bedroom, and he slept I'm not sure where. But I had to walk by this living room, and all the security was in there. These Syrians, they were in there sleeping. That's

I HAVE TO GUESS THAT THIS WAS A DESCRIPTION OF THAT EVENING  
GYPSES, PUMING OLDS & FUTES, GYPSIE WOMENS  
DANCING, FOOD, DRINKING - A WHOLE LIND -  
(TO WHO IS LOST)

where they slept. Because I had to go through past that room to where the washbasin - this was all on the outside - and wash up and shave.

Well, they woke up. Oh, da da da da. Next thing you know, the village is awake, and I never did get my quiet visit that I wanted to get.

We went then - incidentally, I did remember; I remembered that courtyard, and so that became real. That's the way I remember that. There's a couple other things I can't quite figure out. By that I mean my memory versus actually where that was. But the courtyard I remember.

There was something else I remembered. I didn't know where it was, but I recalled it, and that day we went to - it's called the *Craque des Chevaliers* - the Castle of the Soldiers, I guess, whatever. But it's called the *Craque des Chevaliers*. That's that Roman - excuse me, that Crusader castle.

And we went in there, and you walk up inside a - let me call it a street, and then there were some arches with light coming in. And all of a sudden - that's what I remember. That's what it is that I remember. You know, walking up this - that, I recalled that. Don't remember much else, but that I remember from as a six-year-old. And we visited the whole castle, up and down and around. It is a marvelous, marvelous thing.

As you and I talk, I should bring my photographs and show you some of it, because it's really something. That was an event unlike anything else.

I will speak about this now. When I returned - incidentally, this was beamed back here, a tape was sent back, it was played on television here. So many people commented on that visit, and they had a sense that they were going home to where their roots - Sweden, or France, or Italy, or you know, like they had gone home.

You know, they saw this on television and that's how it related to them. So that's the kind of feeling that it brought forth on the people here in Oregon.

C.H.: Were there very many Atiyehs in the area?

V.A.: No, I had my cousin and his wife and children. He has quite a few children over here now living in Allentown, Pennsylvania. I went back last year to Allentown. First time I'd been there. I knew there were a lot of Atiyehs there.

And there I met a lot of my cousins, including my cousin there, his children, in Allentown. It was interesting. They have this - we call it <sup>ARABIAN</sup> [indiscernible]. It's that glass thing that they smoke from, and they have a pipe and they smoke from that.

Well, when I went in there, in this sitting room that I talked about, there was three of them up there on the high shelf, and I said to my cousin, "I'd sure like to have one of those." He said, "Take it, this is yours." You know, this is the Atiyeh family home. He happens to be living there. This is the Atiyeh family home. "If you want one, take it," you know. So I have it, it's in my office, that I got from Syria.

It's interesting how they talk about this. I had a cousin, his name was Atiyeh. Khalil Atiyeh. He was in World War I. He died, and he was ninety some-odd years old. I don't think he'd been back to Syria. But we were walking up the street and they said, "This is Khalil's house." Now, there was no house there. There was some, you know, it was down and there was some foundation, but that's his house. And you know, this was the Atiyeh - where my cousin was - this is our family house. Somebody's living there, it happened to be my cousin, but that's how they look at it. You know, it's the family house.

C.H.: Were they Islamic or were they Christian?

V.A.: They're Christians. Actually, there's two churches in this small village. My dad and uncle sent money for one of the churches. Presbyterian, I think. Delores remembers that, I keep forgetting it. But this is called the Christian area of Syria, and I have to maybe presume because of the Crusaders or whatever. It's an old, old village, but the area is called the Christian area of Syria. There's a Orthodox monastery not too far from where our home is.

C.H.: Like Greek Orthodox? Or Coptic?

V.A.: Probably that. Coptic. Yes. But I went there, visited, not that time, subsequently, the old church. No, no, no, excuse me. The new church. There's a large [indiscernible] and I went into where this all the facilities. But the new church is 600 years old. That's the new one. The old one is below it. St. George Monastery. So I guess it goes back even further than that. But anyway, this is called the Christian area of Syria.

Which, incidentally, is kind of a shame, that's part of the problem over there in that part of the world. I noted it for the first time with this fighting in Beirut. You keep wondering who's fighting whom and why are they fighting, but there was the Suni Muslims had an area they lived, and the Shi'ites had an area they lived in, and the Druze had an area they lived in, and the Christians had an area. So you almost have states within states. That's kind of a shameful way to divide up a country, but I mean, as states within a country.

And incidentally, if you go a little further to the west and up a little bit north along the Mediterranean, the [Alowites] and that's where Assad comes from, not too far from where our village is. But anyway, the churches are old, the graveyards are right there in the courtyard and they're old. It's old. It's a very, very old village. My cousin makes money off of olives.

C.H.: Did you feel changed from the experience?

V.A.: Oh, I guess a little bit closer. It becomes real, everything that I imagined or tried to put in my memory, now it's real, I can see it, I know what the buildings look like, I know what the village looks like. It's all real and no longer imagined. Now you've got the real feel of it.

As you drive - and incidentally, the geography is not very large. We start talking about Lebanon and Palestine, which is Israel, and we're not talking about a lot of geography, and as you leave Damascus heading north, there's a mountain - as you're heading north, there's a mountain to your left. On the other side of that mountain is Lebanon. Just right over the hill.

I took a picture, I went up near a hill by the village, and I took a photograph. You can actually see the Mediterranean. It isn't quite that close, but you can see it in my picture, and to the left in this same picture is Lebanon. It's right there. Actually, a lot of smuggling goes on between Lebanon and Syria right through there, because that happens to be at the end of where the mountain is.

The geography is very small. I suppose that Lebanon might be from Astoria to - oh, I don't know, maybe Coos Bay, and maybe up to halfway up the Coast Range. I mean, we're not talking about a large piece of land. And the same thing's true of Israel, or Palestine.

Syria's a much larger geographic area. At one time, it encompassed - Syria was Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan - that was all Syria. We get into what the British and French did to those folks - but anyway, Syria is a much larger piece of geography. On the east of Syria, there's a lot of desert, dry - I'm not sure, it's not sandy desert but dry and vacant land. But in the area where Damascus and Homs and my village, and all those trees and mountains and - not

that high like we know them, but mountains - green, you know, very fertile, very nice looking. It's a fascinating part of the world.

C.H.: So you ended up spending part of one day and then another day?

V.A.: No. Well, no, actually it would be let's say late afternoon, that night into the relatively late afternoon the next day, maybe 24 hours. Then we went into Homs and stopped at the governor's house.

When I returned, <sup>SUBSEQUENTLY</sup> ~~incidentally~~, the governor then was now in Damascus. This is my second visit. And I'm not sure what it's called, but I have a sense that this would be comparable to our CIA. He was the head of that. I just bring back a memory of things that I should have talked about. I tried to get in touch with him on my second visit, and we finally - I was with this delegation of the invited parliamentarians, a lot of them from South America.

I really was the only one, an elected official - we had some other Arab-Americans there - but elected official - and two or three from Canada, I don't recall. Maybe not that much. So anyway, we had the conference and that's when I went to see Palmyra, they flew us out and we went up where the dam is on the Euphrates in Syria, and enjoyed some entertainment and had a meal, and we traveled around as part of this conference of parliamentarians.

That's when I got to see some things that I hadn't seen in my first visit, or my last visit. I was able to kind of get out and look around a little bit. We were flying in Russian airplanes. They're not very commodious, but we got there and got back. The thing I recall of that particular visit, I was planning a Mideast trip, a Middle East, a Far East trip, and there was a definite date in Taiwan, and I was invited to come to Taiwan and this was the

celebration of the 40th anniversary of retrocession. So that was a definitive date.

But when I make a trip like that, I like to go to Korea and Japan, and whatever my schedule was here, I just couldn't put it together. I was trying to - I didn't want to come back and go again. But I just - no way. I finally made a decision, okay, this isn't a good way to do it, but I'll go to Taiwan, I'll come back, and then we'll go another trip shortly to Korea and Japan.

I made that decision, the next day I get a call from the Embassy of Syria. The Ambassador <sup>RAFIC JOUEJATI</sup> ~~Dujjati~~ said that "President Assad's inviting you to come to Syria to this conference."

And I said, "Gee whiz, I'm going to Taiwan."

"Well good," he said, "come from Taiwan." Which I agreed to do, but I would never do again. It's a long trip from Taiwan to Damascus, Syria, and we flew -.

We were south of Tai Pei, so I took the car, woke up that morning - I don't sleep in an airplane - drove to Chiang Kai-Shek airport, we were heading north to this airport. Got on the plane, flew to Hong Kong, had - I don't know - an hour or two in Hong Kong. Got on the plane, flew to <sup>BAHRAIN</sup> ~~Bahrain~~, which is in Saudi Arabia, and there I had about maybe four hours or something like that, and they put us up in one of the - probably the plushiest hotel room I've ever been in. But I didn't dare go to sleep. Now there's a bed, but I don't dare go to sleep, I don't have that much time. I mean, I'm going to die, you know, and then they would wake me up. Took a bath, shaved, you know, and stuff like that, then got on the plane for Damascus.

So I get into Damascus now, I have not slept, about twelve o'clock Damascus time. Get into the hotel, and my American compatriots that were there said, "They want you to say a few words this evening," or this afternoon. You know, if they'd told me



that, <sup>BEFORE</sup> I had hours to write this thing. And so there was all this confusion, I'm writing, you know, my - they want each of the representatives there to say a few words.

What I wrote down, I still have it, it's about a page and a half of my writing, so, you know, it couldn't be more than three or four minutes. But I'm writing it, and you have to think about it and how you're going to compose it and scratch it out, but I had do to that so that it could be translated. In the meantime, they're rushing me to get my picture taken for my ID for this conference.

And we then finally go to the conference hall where this event's taking place. It is not large. It would be, oh, about, you know, these different theatres that we go to, about the size of one of these theatres, you know, where they have four or five theatres, you know, they're not huge. About that size. With a stage.

And we're sitting up on this stage and President Assad's there. And we're all supposed to say a few words. Quote, "a few words." And I have not yet slept. I'm still awake from Taiwan. And it's warm up there. You know, when you're up a little higher and the place is filled with people, and it's warm up there. Well, President Assad says his thing. And then they start with - I don't recall, Argentina? They do this alphabetical, and the U.S. is way down the line.

C.H.: Oh, no! Oh, no.

V.A.: So I have the earphones on for translation, but I'm really close to them. And so the South Americans, these guys were all making United Nations speeches. A few words to them has to be at least ten minutes, you know. Maybe fifteen. They went on and on. They're all posturing, South American style. And I'm trying to stay awake, and I'm trying to listen what the interpreter says,

but these guys are so close and so loud that I'm having trouble hearing.

I remember that as being the most torturous thing that I've ever gone through. You know, you've got the president of Syria there, all these dignitaries there, and I'm sitting up there on the stage and I gotta stay awake, I can't go to sleep.

Well, the pain was over after I don't know how long, too long. Went back to the hotel and finally went to bed. Got up the next morning, went to about two or three o'clock in the afternoon, and I said, "I just can't do this anymore." Went back to bed in the afternoon, slept all afternoon, all night, and the next day I'm okay.

Well, back to my friend from Homs. Finally, after we came from Palmyra back to the hotel, it was early evening. I get this phone call. It's my friend from Homs. He's now in Damascus.

He says, "Well, I'll come on down."

I said, "No, I'll come out to where you are."

"Okay," he said, "I'll send my car." And he said that it's a cream Cadillac or something like that. Okay, wonderful, eight o'clock I'll meet the folks in the lobby.

So I'm downstairs. Pretty soon this young fellow comes in - shirt, no tie, you know, shirt and pants. "Governor Atiyeh?"

"Yes."

"Well, the car's outside."

So I go outside. This Cadillac isn't exactly that color. There's two of these young Arab fellows sitting on the front seat, and I'm sitting in the back seat of this Cadillac. We start driving through Damascus, and it's dark. I don't know Damascus at all. I thought to myself, as we start driving, "You know, if a guy was inclined to get nervous, this would be a pretty good time to get nervous."

C.H.: You were by yourself?

V.A.: By myself. So we finally get to this gate. Now, this is iron, this is all iron. Not a wrought-iron thing, it's all iron, and there's a couple of guys - again, not in uniform, but they've got guns, you know, and so I don't understand Arabic, they're talking to one another. And the gate opens up, we go in, and there's another gate, go through that.

We finally pull up in front of this building. In the lobby of this building there's a very large statue of President Assad. "Oh," I say, "okay, everything's fine, I have no problem."

But I do recall that I really wasn't nervous. I tell it humorously because I thought, you know, if somebody was inclined to get nervous, this would be a good time to get nervous. And I had my conversation with my good friend, and enjoyed it, and came on back.

Now, gosh, I've lost track of where we are. We're still back to 1984. Well, we came back, flew to - left Syria, flew to Cyprus, got to Cyprus in the afternoon, and we had to stay overnight and into most of the next day before we caught a plane to go to Israel. And so we went. Delores was with me, Lon Holbrook was with me, Denny Miles was with me. Denny Miles was my director of communications.

I can recall we went out onto a grassy area in the morning. We couldn't go anywhere. The Mediterranean was right there, right there, at Cyprus. And just kind of laying around and resting and out in the part of the hotel they had these chairs and lounges and things like that. And then Lon and I went in to get a coke or something for ourselves and Denny and Delores.

Now the scene shifts a little, because while we were gone, Delores said - now it's Delores and Denny, they're laying there,

sunning, and all of a sudden Dolores said, "Denny, that girl is topless." And Denny tells this story, "Oh, that got my attention."

We came back, and sure enough, there was really a very beautiful girl some distance away, but she was without a top. Which is apparently over there is sort of, that's a normal routine kind of thing. A man and his wife, and I know that was the case, out in front of us, they come out and she takes her top off. I always remember that because some friend of his - they were dressed in shorts or swimsuits or whatever, and she took her top off - came and said hello to him. I couldn't hear the conversation. This fellow had his shirt and pants on, you know, normal business kind of clothes for that country, and he introduces this guy to his wife, you know, and she had - you know, I'm seeing things that I just wouldn't normally see. Three ladies come right next to us, and two of them, you know, take their tops off, but I remember that.

But anyway, we went back to the airport, and there the security is really tight, very tight. And not only do we go through those little arches you go through, and your luggage, you open the luggage, you open your carry-on, then you go and they - male and female - and they actually frisk you. I mean, this is to get on the plane to go to Israel.

And I recall the situation was we checked our baggage, we go out to get on the airplane, and all the luggage is on the ground and you have to identify this, you know, "This is mine, this is mine, this is mine." The point is that the person getting on, if there's one left, it means that somebody's checking luggage and they're not going on the plane.

And Dolores said - you know, she had a clothes bag. They had now strapped the luggage with nylon straps, once we checked it in they put nylon straps on it. And here is her clothes bag, looks

like a sleeping bag. It's all rolled up with these nylon straps -  
"That's my dresses in there!"

I said, "Honey, there's not a thing you can do about it until we get to Israel and cut those things off." And we landed, we flew to Israel and landed in the evening and went to the hotel. Now I'm not sure where you are on the tape.

[End of Tape 43, Side 1]