

Israel Transcript

[Opening Music]

Susan Neville: Hello, and welcome to Naptown. I'm your host, Susan Neville, and our guest for this initial series of interviews is writer Dan Wakefield. Mr. Wakefield is the author of nine non-fiction books, two memoirs, five novels, including the best-selling *Going All the Way*.

Bill Moyers called Dan's memoir, *Returning, A Spiritual Journey*, "One of the most important memoirs of the spirit I've ever read." In his book *Island in the City: The World of Spanish Harlem*, James Baldwin wrote, "Dan Wakefield is a remarkable combination of humility and tough mindedness, it makes these streets and these struggling people come alive."

Over the next few episodes, we'll be talking to Mr. Wakefield about his life, including his deep friendships with writers such as Baldwin, Anne Sexton, Joan Didion, and Kurt Vonnegut, and his interviews as a staff writer for *The Nation*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *New York Times*, and other newspapers and magazines, with such luminaries as Bobby Kennedy, C. Wright Mills, Dorothy Day, Adam Clayton Powell, Joan Baez, and Golda Meir, some of whom became good friends.

Again, I'm your host, Susan Neville, welcome Mr. Wakefield back to Naptown.

[Transitional Music]

Dan Wakefield: This is from my book *Returning, A Spiritual Journey*:

If there ever was an innocent abroad, it was me in Jerusalem at age 23, with my knapsack and typewriter, romantic ideas of journalistic derring do, \$200 in American Express traveler's checks, and a Hebrew vocabulary of roughly a dozen words I had learned on the boat. God or no God, I was surely there on faith, both mine and *Nation* publisher George Kirstein

Before I left, he had told me while pacing behind his desk, and puffing his Briar, it sounds like you will get into trouble, but I guess that's what you want.

That wasn't quite how I saw it, but I knew what he meant. I wanted to put myself at risk: test my courage and integrity.

Expose myself to the kind of life or death experience I could learn from, in the Hemingway school of hard Knox journalism. I wanted to know what it felt like to face death, for I thought the experience would make me a better writer and I jumped at the first opportunity to get myself shot at.

I had actually read something where Hemingway said, "In order to be a good writer you had to have been shot at." And I remember thinking about the world, at that time... This is 1955. And the best opportunity to get shot out was the Middle East. And I'd published my first article in *The Nation*, which was the coverage to the Emmett Till murder trial.

And then after that, my Columbia friend, Sam Astercan, had taken me to a place in the Bowery called the Catholic Worker, which was Dorothy Day's hospitality house and I did an article about that called "Miracle in the Bowery." And, so, after those two things had been published, I thought, well... Now, I've got to really think of something where I can get shot at so that I can become a writer.

And at that time, the writer Arthur Kessler was really very big in this country. He was a Hungarian. He had been a communist and had left the party. Had written about leaving it and he wrote a book, a bestseller, called *Darkness At Noon*, which was about a communist who was put in jail under the Stalin regime and facing death because if he had changed his mind...

But Kessler had also written an autobiography called *Arrow in the Blue*. And I remember finding it in one of those great used bookstores that used to line Amsterdam Avenue around Columbia. And it was just great going into those stores and discovering things. I remember discovering a copy of John Reed's *Insurgent Mexico*.

And I discovered this *Arrow in the Blue* by Arthur Kessler and it told how he was a young journalist in the 1920s. And he went to, what was then, Palestine and he was able to live very cheaply because he went from one Kibbutz to another. So, these were the communal farms that had begun the first settlement of Israel.

And the rule was, he said, if you went to Kibbutz, they had to take you in for three days. So, it was some rule and they give you food and shelter for three days and then after that, you had to work whatever job they had and could assign you.

So, that sounded great to me because, first of all, I could get fed and housed and also I can get a... An article out of it. Also, Jerusalem was my headquarters. I went there with my knapsack and typewriter, and one change of clothes. And I found a wonderful pension on Zion square called the Hotel Himmelfarb. And the man and wife who owned it, didn't speak a word of English but they had a daughter, Ruthie who they called Ruti. And Ruti spoke English, so she was very helpful.

And whenever I went off on some journey, I could leave my knapsack there and stuff and typewriter also if I wanted and then come back and get it, and spend a couple of nights in the Himmelfarb. So that was all good.

And then I also... I checked in at the government press office. And there I met a great guy who was really a key to a lot of what I did in Israel, who told me where to go and good things to do... His name, when I met him, was Jackie Wolfsburg. Later, he got into the government... He got to be an official in the government, and you had to change your name to Hebrew. So he became Yacolt Oviatt and that was... I had forgotten this.

When I wanted, a couple of years ago... I wanted to get my interview with Golda Meir... I wanted a copy of it that was published in *The Nation*, and they couldn't find it. And I said, "Well, it really happened." No, it was in 1956. Yeah, I went there, Israel, in January '56. And I said it was probably in March that I interviewed Golda Meir.

Well, they finally realized the reason they couldn't find it: that was not her name at the time. Her name was uh... Golda Meyerson. And she was from Milwaukee, by way of Kyiv, and again, she had to change her name to Hebrew name, which she became foreign minister.

So anyway, my concept was, I would read the *Jerusalem Post*, which was in English, and try to see where stories might be. The first thing I read about was that the fisherman on the Sea of Galilee... Which was Lake Kinneret in Israel, Lake Tiberias for Arabs, and the Sea of Galilee for the Bible... And the Israeli

fishing boats were being shot at by Syrian gun emplacements on the Northeast shore.

So, I thought, well, if I could get in a fishing boat, I might be able to get shot. So I went to Tiberias, got up at dawn the next day and went down to where the men were assembling for the boat. And this one guy spoke English, because he'd been in the British Army in World War II... And I said, "Could I try to get on a boat?"

And he said, well, one of his men had not shown up, so if I would pull an oar, I could get on. And I said, "Great." But, the oars were not like what we think of as oars. They weren't shaped. They were just long pieces of wood. And there wasn't an oar lock. There was just some wood, holding it in place and twine rope.

Susan Neville: How would that even pull the water?

Dan Wakefield: Well, it was pretty broad. So we went out... It was really a beautiful experience. We could see the lights on the Syrian guns, and we stopped. We pulled the boat up, and then, you decided on a place. And then, as it got dark, the men would pound pieces of wood on the bottom of the boat and they put the nets out and that would supposedly attract the fish.

So, no shots were fired, but it was a great day. And then, the best part was, in the morning, we rode back to shore, Tiberias, and Nazim was the man who was the captain of the boat. And he said to me, well, I can't pay you, but I can get you breakfast, we'll take a couple fish... And we went up into the town. And there was these guys with the little charcoal grills. They put the fish on the grill and we had breakfast. And it was only 25 years later, when I started going to church at King's Chapel, that I read again, the story in John 21 where that's what happened.

Susan Neville: Oh, my gosh. So you actually got the fish out of the Sea of Galilee.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah. And that's what happened in John 21. The guys are out fishing and they see this figure on the shore and they think it's Jesus. They go up, and they pull a fish up at the net. And they go up and he's made a fire on charcoal and says "Come and dine." And he caught... Put the fish on there.

Susan Neville: So was the fish good?

Dan Wakefield: It was very good. It was very... Also, I really didn't eat a lot during this six month adventure, because I didn't have enough money. And again, thanks to Hemingway, I'd read that you could always skip lunch and go to a museum, or take a walk, or something.

And I remember once being invited to some people's house for dinner, and so I didn't eat anything. I didn't eat breakfast or lunch. I just couldn't wait to get to this place. And the dinner was liver and onions and I had never eaten liver, and I thought the idea of eating liver was horrible. But I came to love liver And that was a big transformation.

Susan Neville: That's the meal I hate most from my childhood, actually.

Dan Wakefield: Well, if you haven't eaten anything all day, it tastes real good.

Susan Neville: So when you were out on the boat—

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: —and you saw the lights from the Syrian guns, you didn't get shot at?

Dan Wakefield: No, I did not. I was hoping, but nothing happened. In fact, an Israeli police boat came up to check on us and to ask if we had any activity or anything from the Syrian side and there wasn't anything to report. But it had happened just three or four days before that, which the *Jerusalem Post* had reported.

Susan Neville: So when you were out there, were you expecting the shot at any time? Did that color the way that you ever reported on that experience?

Dan Wakefield: When we were out there, it was so peaceful that I didn't really feel like it was going to happen, and the lights didn't move. First, when it was kind of light enough to see you could see the Syrian guns, the soldiers... But as it got dark, all you saw were these points of light in the darkness so and there was no—

Susan Neville: Sounds more like a Chekhov story than a Hemingway experience.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah and it was totally dark. And, so, yes, it was very Chekhovian. But one of the great contacts I made there, I can't remember who was who recommended that I see a couple... A man and his wife. A man named Heim Blonc and he had left Harvard... And... To fight for Israel in the War of Independence in 1948. And he had been blinded in the war.

After being blinded, he had become the leading Arabic scholar in Israel. Really remarkable, brilliant guy... And his wife, who was absolutely beautiful, Judy... And she had been head of the Smith College Communist Party. And they sort of knew everything and everybody. And the wonderful thing about Israel at this time, it was like... It was sort of like New York in the 50s, where everybody knew everybody.

So when I was there, talking to Heim and Judy, I said, "Listen, one thing I really want to do here if I could... Is there any way I could see the Bedouins? Because I'd read also, just before going... I'd read T.E. Lawrence, the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, which is one of the great romantic desert epics of all time. And Heim said sure.

He said, there's a guy I know in Be'er Sheva, said all you do he said just go to Be'er Sheva, go to the cafe Arava and ask for Moyes. So I said, well, okay, and I sort of... That's when I first knew Heim and I thought maybe he's just putting me on, you know, a wild goose chase but I hitchhiked to Be'er Sheva. I got a ride on an oil truck and I stayed in the pension

The next morning, I go to the Cafe Arava and I say, "Anybody here know a guy named Moyes?"

He said, "Yeah, he's over in the corner table."

So I went over and I introduced myself. I said, "Heim Blonc told me you could help me get to the Bedouins."

And he says, "Yeah, sure." He said, "I trade with the Bedouins and we could go out this afternoon. And they'll probably see you as a celebrity because you're an American, and probably kill the lamb and we'll have a good dinner."

So, we went out there and that was indeed the case. And we sat in this large camp with the men... I never saw a woman the whole time I was there, but you

heard behind the tent or outside the tent, you heard this tinkling sound. Just that... It was the women going back and forth. Their bracelets and jewelry that they wore, made this beautiful tinkling sound.

Susan Neville: So, you were out in the desert. Is this nighttime?

Dan Wakefield: No. It was... Yeah, it was the afternoon. It was the afternoon. It was bright, and it was very light colored sand. And we're inside the tent, which is cool and dark. Not too dark to see everybody but, I mean, it was not bright like outside.

And so the lamb was killed. The food was being... And they brought in this huge, was almost like a tub, which had rice and lamb. And just like... It was the same thing that was served to T. E. Lawrence. And as he had pointed out, every part of the lamb is in it.

And the custom is when it comes around to you, and you put your hand in, and you balled up some rice and took some part of the lamb and just put it in your mouth and eat it. You're not supposed to look and pick out a piece, you just put it in your hand and... So, of course, my terror was I would get the eye because I knew—

Susan Neville: —the eyes are in there.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah. I lucked out of that, but it was great knowing I'm having the same meal that Lawrence had.

Susan Neville: That Lawrence did.

Dan Wakefield: And then afterwards, you get these series... I think it was five different types of coffee, each served separately. And, again, exactly as it was written about in the Seven Pillars of Wisdom.

Susan Neville: So did the women come in and do the serving?

Dan Wakefield: Oh no.

Susan Neville: Or there were men doing the serving? The women were just preparing the food outside, but you never... You're not allowed to ever see women.

Dan Wakefield: You never saw a woman.

Susan Neville: Wow.

Dan Wakefield: Somehow, a man evidently went out and got this large pot, and then passed it around. I guess there were about 10 or 12 of us sitting in this circle and they all were dressed as Bedouins, just like in the... What was the great movie of Lawrence?

Susan Neville: Lawrence... I think it was *Lawrence of Arabia*, wasn't it?

Dan Wakefield: Yeah, I guess so. I love that movie. So, I carried out my plan to go to different Kibbutz and try to get a story and do whatever work they had. And I quickly learned the Kibbutzim, which is the plural, were divided into one sponsored by different political parties. And, the Kibbutzim, most of them are really sponsored by Mapai, which was sort of the central... The middle of the road liberal party and the other group sponsored by Mapam, which was the left wing.

And I quickly learned that on Mapam Kibbutz, you worked much harder than you did on a Mapai Kibbutz. And I was at Mapam Kibbutz called—

Susan Neville: That's the left wing, right?

Dan Wakefield: —Yeah, I was at a Mapam Kibbutz called Nerim and... And there I was a hay pitcher. And I've got to tell you, I have never worked that hard in my life. That was the hardest physical work I've ever done, but it was great. I mean, I could do it.

And before the Kibbutz I had been on before that, was a Mapai Kibbutz where I just picked vegetables. So that was not very challenging. But my favorite of all was a Kibbutz in the Negev desert called, "Stable Care."

And it had been founded by David Ben Gurion, the founder of Israel. And he wanted to get the farthest out place. And this was in the middle of nowhere in the desert. It was way south of Be'er Sheva. And so I went there. And I said, "I'd like to work."

And he said, "Well, we have a sheep camp, which is farther out than we are. And one of the men has gone to Tel Aviv for his annual vacation. So we need somebody there."

So they took me to the sheep camp, which indeed, farther out than the regular Kibbutz, and all it was... It was a converted... It was a railway car, an old railway car. They put bunks in and a little stove.

So, there were usually three men and one woman. And the woman stayed in the car and made the meals and cleaned the house. And one man took out one of the herds of sheep, and then two took out the big herd. So, I would be one of the two guys on the big herd. And they gave me a rifle and taught me how to shoot the rifle.

They said that was because sometimes hostile Bedouins came by and wanted to take the sheep or take something. And, so, they all had a rifle.

Susan Neville: Were you supposed to shoot the Bedouins if they came by to get—

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: —the sheep? Or shoot around them or—

Dan Wakefield: It wasn't just said. I mean, I guess you had to make up your mind on the spot if you're... They're going to shoot at you, I presume you shot back. But, it started out before dawn. So, it was absolutely dark when you started. And we went, I don't know what distance, maybe a couple miles, because you had to get the sheep ahead of you, going.

And I thought being a shepherd would be this idyllic thing where you sat on the hillside and somebody played a lute, but it was one of—

Susan Neville: —Like one of those songs—

Dan Wakefield: It was one of the hardest jobs because the sheep were always running away. They were all the lost sheep, or they wanted to be. So you had to be constantly going... You hardly had time to eat. You know, you had sandwiches, you had a fire, had to cook something on it. I don't remember what. But, you had to constantly be getting up and running after the sheep. They were going up.

And you came back... The timing you brought the herd back, so that it was time... So you arrived at the car, the railroad car where you lived... You arrived there, just as the sun went down.

And then, the way you bathed was... Well, first, you got back and you had dinner that the woman cooked and then you went out and there was a pipeline at the Negev, a water pipeline. And there was a place for you where you went, that you could unscrew the pipeline, and this huge jet of water would shoot up into the air and you stepped into this cold water thing. And that was your bath.

But I remember, for one thing in the desert, even in the desert in California, you see more stars than you've ever seen. But in Israel, I mean, there wasn't... There was nothing but stars. And I remember standing in that icy water and looking up and the thought that come to me was, "You've gone a long way from Indiana."

Susan Neville: Wow.

Dan Wakefield: It really was... That was what was in my head and I felt really great.

Susan Neville: I can't imagine that. I mean, that's one of the things I think we've all lost this century is... I remember, even when I was a kid in Indiana, being able to go out and see stars at night. Now it's very rare.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: So tell me about the people who lived with you in the railroad car.

Dan Wakefield: Well, I was only there for a weekend. There wasn't a lot of conversation and you were so tired... It was, you know, you getting up before dawn. You're with these sheep, chasing them around all day, bringing them back, trying to see that none are lost and strayed. And you eat and you have your bath in the pipeline, and then you go to bed... You know, you're totally wiped out.

Susan Neville: So where were they primarily from? Do you remember that? Like people in the Kibbutz?

Dan Wakefield: I had less conversation with them. I stayed in the Kibbutz on the Dead Sea, I can't remember the name now, but there was a couple from New York, and I remember asking them about why they had come to Israel. They were about just a few years older than I was.

And he said, "You want to know the truth? The reason I came to Israel? So I wouldn't have to go through Christmas in New York!"

Susan Neville: Hmm, interesting. Interesting.

Dan Wakefield: That I got completely, you know?

Susan Neville: I mean, how do you even walk up to, say the Kibbutz? I mean, do you walk in? Is there a central office, you check in and say, "Hey, I want to live here."?

Dan Wakefield: You know, you would see whoever was the first person you saw. You'd say, "I'd like to stay, or work and I go, and they direct you. And there'd be somebody who told you where you could sleep, and when the meals were, and what you did.

Susan Neville: People were generally... And did you present yourself as a journalist?

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: You did?

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: And did you write separate articles about hay throwing, being a shepherd, or was it background?

Dan Wakefield: Yeah, it was background. It was to know the place and try to be alive. I knew what was going on then. And of course, it was also just being in cities. And, you know, I went to Tel Aviv. I went to Haifa.

In fact, I remember in Haifa, I met the journalist, I. F. Stone. Issy Stone who had *I.F. Stone's Weekly*. And, I remember... And he'd been to Israel before and he took me around. Sort of showed me Haifa.

He and I walked along the waterfront in Haifa and he turned to me at one point, he said, "Can I loan you \$100?" This was after I'd been there about four or five hours.

Susan Neville: And you didn't say, "May I borrow \$100?"

Dan Wakefield: And I said, yeah, I would, that would be good. And, you know, so, I got back... And, in fact, when I got back to New York, and I wrote to him and sent him the hundred bucks, and he invited me to Washington and offered me a job. But, at the, same time, I really preferred to be in New York and to be working for *The Nation*.

Working with him, it was much more digging out facts rather than, quote, "writing" as I understood. But anyway, it was a great thing.

Susan Neville: Can you talk about some of the postwar mood of Israel? I mean, you were there not that long at the end of World War II.

Dan Wakefield: Their Independence War was 1948. It was after World War II. And, you know, I didn't get to talk to many Arabs, but they were clearly the subjugated class. In fact, I remember there was a journalist from the Netherlands. And he and I were taken on a trip by the Israeli press over to a Druze village, and the Druzes' were famous as being the one group of Arabs who liked the Israelis, I don't know what they're... At any rate...

But, I remember... And so the press officer was telling us how wonderful Druzes' were and how they got along and they did this and that together. And we pass some of them and they waved and then the journalist of the Netherlands waved and said, "So long, you Quislings."

Susan Neville: Quislings.

[laughter]

Dan Wakefield: But I've got to tell you, my biggest adventure was I, of course, I wanted to go to Jordan. And the particular reason I wanted to go to Jordan... Here I am, struggling. I can't remember what *The Nation* paid me... It wasn't their usual \$75, maybe it was \$120 for an article, but I thought, "If only I could sell an article to a big magazine."

And I had an idea of selling an article to the *Saturday Evening Post*. And I thought I had the perfect story. Because there was a village called, “Beit Safa,” that when the armistice lines were drawn in the '48 war, half the village was in Israel and half in Jordan.

Susan Neville: Wow.

Dan Wakefield: So families were even split up. So I went to the village on the Israeli side, and I met some of the people, and some of them spoke English. They told me about the village on the other side and I thought, “Oh my God, this is it.” You know, the village that's in two countries. But I had to get to Jordan.

And, you... Journalists were not allowed to go from Israel to Jordan. But what I learned was, Easter, of course, was a religious holiday, and if you were certified as a religious pilgrim, you could go into Jordan from Israel, but you first had to get certified as a religious pilgrim.

So I say, “Well, how do you do that?”

“Well, what religion are you?”

“Well, I'm a Protestant.”

Of course, at this time I was a Hemingway atheist and he said, “Well, but what denomination?”

So my mind raced and I thought, “Well, my Uncle Jim, in Kentucky is a Baptist,” so I said, “I'm a Baptist.”

And he said, “Well, what Baptist church did you belong to?”

Susan Neville: Oh, no.

Dan Wakefield: I said, the 42nd Street Baptist in New York, which doesn't exist. But, anyway, so I had to go to the Baptist minister... And I remember him. He was a nice, very sincere guy, probably in his 40s. And I had to do all these pretenses and then he wrote me a letter saying I was a religious pilgrim.

So I cross over in the Old City. And the Old City was really old. I mean, it was... I don't know how to describe it. The sidewalks were part of the walls. The walls came down and became sidewalks and you're walking down these streets and you're like, in a tube.

And, anyway, I got a room and that's been shared and I had my notebook. And, somehow, I'd found out who was the former mayor of Jerusalem before the war. And his name was Aref al Aref, A-R-E-F al A-R-E-F... And God, how did I do that? I have no idea.

But I found how to get to him. I went to him and I interviewed him. I had my notebook, and all this stuff, and writing all this stuff down. And then he had somebody take me to a refugee camp, which, you know, if Israelis knew this, they would have been very unhappy. And Jordan didn't want any stray reporters.

And, so, anyway, but my main point was to get to that Beit Safa on the Jordan side, so I take my notebook and I'm... No, I didn't take my notebook. I just went strolling down, I think I put some paper and a pencil in my pocket, but I'm strolling down this little road and on my way to Beit Safa

Suddenly, there's a man on each side of me, an Arab Legion guy. They said, "Oh," and it started out very friendly, "What are you doing here?"

"Well, I wanted to go to Beit Safa, and see some people I had met."

"Oh, really? Where are you from?"

I said, "Well, I just come over from Israel."

And then they stop talking in English, and then talking in Arabic, and they're taking me to Bethlehem. They did tell me that they're taking me to see the military governor in Bethlehem. And they're not happy. And I get into this... I think it was an office in a church. It was a long, very dark, dank thing. And there's this guy who's a military governor and he's sitting behind a big desk. I remember, he had on a big black coat, mustache. And he looked very hostile. And so they sat me down.

And he says, and I showed him my passport. And he said, "From where do you come here?"

I said, "From Israel," and he bangs the desk and says. "No." He says, "Where do you come here from?"

So I thought, *Well, that wasn't the right answer.* "From America."

"No."

"From New York."

"No."

So after about four of these wrong answers, he says "You have come from occupied territory."

Susan Neville: Oh, wow.

Dan Wakefield: So he said, "I am sending you..." He said, "What are you here for?"

"Oh, I just wanted to see these people.

He said, "I'm sending you to Arab Legion headquarters." He got a car and these two Arab legion guys sat on each side of me. And we were driven back to the Old City of Jerusalem. And I was to report to Arab Legion headquarters at nine the next morning.

So, I get to my room and I'm pretty shaken by this time. But then, to my horror, I realize if I have to go to Arab Legion headquarters... Oh, and they said, "Bring everything you have with you." Well, there's my notebook with my notes interviewing Aref al Aref, my notes from going to the refugee camp. Jesus, they'll think I'm a spy.

Susan Neville: Right.

Dan Wakefield: And, in fact, that was the military government in Bethlehem. You know, "So what are you really here for?" You, you know. So, I thought *I've got to get rid*

of the notes. So I took the notes out of my notebook, and they were pretty thick, I remember the paper... But, I was going to burn them.

So I held them over the toilet and lit this match. I started burning them and I burnt my hand and drop the papers into the toilet. So, I fished them out, and they're all soggy. I'm like, *And this looks even worse*.

Susan Neville: Yeah, so you're really going to get shot.

Dan Wakefield: So, I'm trying to think of what to do. So I wad them up and I go outside. And I try to, you know, there aren't any garbage cans, and, as I say the streets are all... There's no place to throw it. And there's Arab Legion guys at every corner, walking back and forth. So I go back to my room and I think, *Okay, what am I going to do?*

I can't stick at my place... So, anyway, I knew that it would later be funny, but at the time was very serious. I figured out the only thing I could do was eat the notes. And so I take little pieces of paper, wad it up and swallow it. I sat there the whole night eating these notes.

Susan Neville: Oh, that's so awful.

Dan Wakefield: So then I get up the next morning and go to the Arab Legion headquarters and there's two guys there questioning me.

"Okay, what are you really here for? What? You think you're making peace with the Arabs and the Jews?"

"No, no, no, I just wanted to see these people."

So they said, "Well, you may not be able to go back through the Mandelbaum Gate" That was where I'd come from Israel. "And you may have to fly to Cyprus." And I didn't have money to fly to Cyprus, anyway... And then the indication was, "Or you may have to be in jail."

And so they told me to go outside while they determined my fate. And I did. This was the most frightened I was and had every right to be. Nobody knew where the hell I was. Nobody in America knew where I was. So finally, I was told to go back then.

And they said, “We've decided you can go back through the Mandelbaum Gate, but you have to take everything with you and you have to be out of this country within three hours.

So I thought, *I can do that*.

Susan Neville: I can do that.

Dan Wakefield: I remember I got everything quickly. All I had to do was put the shirt and the thing. And I remember I went to the Mount of Olives, which was close to where I would go back to Israel, and I was so relieved and it was very peaceful. It was a beautiful day. And I sat there on the Mount of Olives with my knapsack and typewriter, and then after a couple hours went back through the gate. But that was uh... That was something.

Susan Neville: That's an amazing story. Do you remember anything that was in the notes from your interview, or from your visit to the refugee camp?

Dan Wakefield: Well, I remember that the mayor was telling how that was, you know, when, in 1948, when the Israelis took their land. I mean, that was what they basically did and what the Israelis said, “Oh, well, the Arabs got scared and they left their homes, they fled.” But they fled because they were being shot at, and their houses being burned, and everything else. And the refugee camp was just awful... And to think it's still there...

Susan Neville: Is it?

Dan Wakefield: People of whole generations have been born and grew up and died in that.

Susan Neville: Where's... The camp is in Jordan?

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: Does it have a name?

Dan Wakefield: I'm sure it did. I don't remember. May have been in my notes.

Susan Neville: Yeah. Now, which are forever gone. I wonder, if you can go back, we kind of skipped over the Golda Meir.

Dan Wakefield: Oh yeah.

Susan Neville: And also I wanted to say, I know you wrote an article called "Man from Occupied Territory," which obviously came from that experience in Easter. And was that article that was in *The Nation*?

Dan Wakefield: No, that was in *Commentary*. And it wasn't right after I came back. It was in the early 60s, I wrote that. I remember thinking, *Boy, there's a good story that I haven't written* and I just sat down.

Susan Neville: Actually, I'd love to talk to you about that, too, because that early 60s was a very political time. And I, you know, remember having friends who were moving to Israel then to live in Kibbutzims. And people on both sides were volunteering with the Palestinians, with the Israelis. So it was a very politicized time, so that's probably why you thought about writing that then.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah, by the way, I had been writing for *Commentary*. I wrote for both *Commentary* and *Common Oil* in the late 50s and early 60s. And my connection with *Commentary*... I met a great guy... In fact, his wife got me my passage on the *SS Israel* to go to Israel. Is... This is a guy, amazing guy by the name of Moshe du Havney.

This is in New York. And he lived on the Lower East Side and he was a journalist for the *Yiddish Daily Forward*, which only ended, I think, a couple of years ago, I think.

And I met him through Harvey's Swados, who was a novelist who I met through C. Wright Mills.

And I remember Moshe introduced me to an editor at *Commentary*. I wrote a piece for *Commentary* about the Lower East Side and they featured it. It was sort of, when you think of it... It was kind of unique, I think, that a young WASP guy would write the lead story and commentary on the Jewish settlement in the Lower East Side.

Susan Neville: Interesting.

Dan Wakefield: But it was a very still thriving settlement. I mean, within the Lower East Side, there was a Jewish theater, a Jewish newspaper, all kinds of Jewish orchestras, bands. So kind of cultural things. But I remember I was very proud of that, the piece that I wrote.

I later wrote a piece for them called "The Village and the Tiger," and it was about how the village independent Democrats, which is a group of young activists who were trying to get Tammany Hall out of the village, and Carmen de Savio was the head of Tammany, and it was a really interesting clash of sort of the old timers: the old Italian power structure and the new people from India and places like that.

Susan Neville: Interesting. Wow, there's so many different roads we could go down...

Dan Wakefield: But Golda Meir.

Susan Neville: Yeah, Golda Meir.

Dan Wakefield: Well, toward the end of my stay... Well, no, when... I think it was in March that my friend in the press office, Jackie Wolfsburg, took me saying... He was tremendously helpful with everything, and sometimes took me to dinner.

And he said, "How would you like to have the first foreign press interview with Golda now that she's become foreign minister?" And I thought, *That would be great*. And I was set up and I went to interview her. I sort of knew that she wasn't going to tell me some breaking news or something, but it was always... It was an honor to be there.

She was very polite and easy to talk to, but she reminded me of my school lady principal, Miss Fern Hall. I remember going into Miss Hall's office. And she wore a black dress and Golda wore a black dress, and had her hair pulled back and it was just... It was like an honor experience. And *The Nation* obviously, they were happy to have, you know, like something...

And I read up on her and found that she was, I think, she was born in Minsk in Russia and then from about the age of six, lived in Milwaukee.

Susan Neville: Did you talk with her at all about her first years living in the Middle East when she was in... Was still in mandatory Palestine?

Dan Wakefield: No, I, you know, I really didn't do any of the interesting things I should have done. I was just doing the pro forma: what's Israel's position on this and that? And what would they do if this and that happened? There was... It would have been much more interesting if I'd done what you said.

And you know, it reminds me also... Only recently did I read somewhere that when Bobby Kennedy was a young man, was just out of law school, he went to Palestine. And when I did that piece on him, I didn't even know that. That's one of my greatest regrets was that piece I did, that I didn't really prepare for and didn't ask the right questions.

Susan Neville: Earlier, when we were talking before we started taping, you said something about Golde Meir going into Jordan. And, so, I was thinking about that as you were talking about your own experience.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah. Well, she disguised herself as an Arab. Dressed as an Arab and went in, this was before Israel was a state, and it was some negotiation with King Hussein of Jordan. And she had made some relationship with him to be able to talk, but it was thought of as a very dangerous mission.

Susan Neville: So whenever I listen to you tell stories about your experiences and reporting in other countries, the stories are a novelist kind of stories, standing in the cold water under the stars. Did you feel, did you have strong political opinions at all when, when you were there?

Dan Wakefield: Well, yeah.

Susan Neville: That changed or—

Dan Wakefield: No, but I mean, one reason I went was because I was pro-Israel. And when I was there, I was... The governor's press office was very kind. Everyone was very kind. And so I came back for... I felt awful about the Arab refugee camps and all this stuff, but I didn't really put it all together. And it was just that in that era, most of the liberals I knew, which I was one of, was pro-Israel, because suddenly...

You know, this is after World War II. The Jews for the first time have a homeland. That's what it was all about. And I was proud to be part of that, or helping them, or being able to promote, though I was like a pro-Israeli guy at that time.

Susan Neville: You have done a lot of journalism traveling to other places, to Haiti for instance, and maybe later we can talk about some of your other adventures?

Dan Wakefield: Yeah, I wrote a piece in *The Nation* called, "Faces of Spain, 1958." And I don't remember at all what I said in it.

Susan Neville: Yeah.

Dan Wakefield: I would like to read that again. So I'm sure...

Susan Neville: It's probably online someplace.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah. It's funny how easy it is to forget. Well, also, that was... Let's see, 1958. How many years ago was that?

Susan Neville: I know, but you can remember 1956 really well.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: It's interesting. Actually, I wanted to say just for posterity's sake, that we are sitting on your front porch rather than being in the sound booth. Because this is May 4th. It's May the fourth be with you. Star Wars. But anyway, we're sitting out here because it's May 4th, 2020 and we are experiencing the Coronavirus pandemic and we are social distancing, but we couldn't be in the sound booth at Butler. So if you hear bird song in the background, cars going by, that's why.

Dan is taking out his mask and putting it on and oh, I should take a picture. Just love this picture. It will be great. Okay, yeah, this is great.

Dan Wakefield: Heim Blonc, the man I told you about, I kept in touch with, but I left Israel in May of 1956, or maybe June, but I think it was July that the Six Day war—

Susan Neville: —Oh, interesting—

Dan Wakefield: Occurred. By about a month, I missed the big war, but I still... In fact, I remember making calls from Boston to Jerusalem. Talked to Heim and Judy Blonc and, this is so typical of what Egypt was like at that time. That was like a little club. Everybody knew everybody.

When Moshe Dayan got his tank core ready to go in the desert to fight in Egypt, he first called up Hiam Blonc and said, listen, "We'll be taking prisoners. Do you want to record some Arab dialect?"

Susan Neville: Oh my goodness.

Dan Wakefield: And Heim went in a tank with Moshe Dayan into Egypt and when they captured Egyptian soldiers, he recorded. Asked them where they were from, and recorded dialect.

And also I remember once being in some apartment in Jerusalem with somebody I'd met, and we're hearing this cello. And it was very beautiful. I said, "Oh, who does that?"

And they said, "Oh, that's Golda Mier's daughter. She plays the cello."

But it was like that. And he was like, "Oh, you know, a guy in the Bedouins?"

"Yeah, go to the Cafe Arava."

It was great in that way.

Susan Neville: It does sound like New York in the 50s.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah, it was.

Susan Neville: So do you have another paragraph you're going to read from *Returning*?

Dan Wakefield: Yeah. By the way, the lake when I came back was occasioned by the fact that I was hitchhiking to a Kibbutz I'd heard about in the north called "Degania Alef." I wanted to go there because it was, I think the very first Kibbutz in Israel. And I was hitchhiking. I was in the back of a truck, a small truck.

And as we were getting to Degania Alef, I decided, *Well, this would be a good place to get off*, and I didn't really realize how fast we were going. So I just jumped off the truck and I broke my arm, broke out a front tooth, part of it... So I thought, *Jesus, I think I've had it*.

Susan Neville: Yeah.

Dan Wakefield: So... But I remember, I got back. I borrowed money to fly back. I flew to Rome, and I was in Rome and I had enough to pay for pension... And then I was really out of money and I remember meeting a woman in the pension, a young woman, who gave me an apple. And I ate that apple and I went to the American Consulate and said, "I need to get on the next flight."

And so they put me on a flight. And then on the flight, they put me in first class.

Susan Neville: Oh my goodness.

Dan Wakefield: So, here I had been eating nothing for a couple days, and I'm eating this fabulous meal. That was sort of amazing. So I came back... I remember when I got back, I weighed 120, I had my arm in a sling, and part of the tooth out. So it was like I was a war vet or something.

Susan Neville: It was yeah, interesting.

Dan Wakefield: Oh, yeah, the paragraph. This was about being on the boat in the Sea of Galilee. or Lake Tiberias, or Lake Kinneret, and Nasim was the boat captain:

"Nasim pushed an oar into my hands. It was not shaped and smooth like the oars I had held back home, but was simply a long, rough, heavy piece of wood that was larger at one end. There was no oarlock or any sort of metal fixture, the crude oar was simply attached to the boat with rope that fitted over a wooden peg. Abraham manned the other oar while Nasim and Ali laid the nets in the black water. The sound of wooden mallets being pounded on the bottom of boats to attract the fish came like some kind of tribal incantation across the sea. Nasim gave quiet commands of forward and back and we moved with them, pulling then pushing the heavy oars, Ali and Nasim lifting and laying the nets again. Sometimes I heard the sudden thrash of a fish and saw the silver shape flash in the dark in Nasim's hands, and then we pull on to another spot

moving in a slow rhythmic cycle, like the very tides, like the earth itself, as always, forever, in the long dream of life, and the time I had read about it in childhood stories of the Sea of Galilee was as real as the time of that night and that water I moved across in the dark.”

Susan Neville: Oh my God, that's gorgeous. Thank you, thank you, thank you so much.

Dan Wakefield: Thank you. Yes. Nobody else but Susan Neville would come out in the pandemic and me talk about Israel and my adventures of more than half a century ago. So, let it be part of the world record.

Susan Neville: Thank you. Thank you. I don't think there's anyone else I would come out to listen to the stories from and let's not tell my children that I'm out.

[Transitional Music]

Susan Neville: Thanks again to Mr. Wakefield, and thank you to our listeners for listening. Naptime is taped at Butler University's Irwin library with the help of Megan Rutledge-Grady. Funding for Naptown was provided by the Aris Fund National Endowment for the Humanities and Indiana Humanities. This is a Dominic Weldon-Rory Moore production. Again, this is your host, Susan Neville. See you next time in Naptown.

[Exiting Music]