



The Arabic – Hebrew Experience In Edmonton

By Soraya Zaki Hafez

In 1983, Edmonton Public School Board adopted two new Language Bilingual programs, Arabic and Chinese. Two curriculum writers were appointed for the new programs, Caroline Pei for the Chinese and Soraya Zaki Hafez for the Arabic.

On the first day of work at the school board, Caroline and Soraya were introduced to two other curriculum writers. One of them was Judith Sela from the Hebrew Language program at the Talmud Torah School. The Hebrew program had been in existence for seventy years within a private school, but the Jewish community decided to join the public school system in 1983.

For the first time in my life I had to share an office with a Jewish lady. For the first few weeks, I tried to be professional in my behaviour towards her. I was reserved and quiet not knowing how to deal with this person. Growing up, all I had read or heard about was the injustices done to the people of Palestine by her people and her government.

Then we started going for coffee. We talked about our families and found out that we both cared a lot about education and educating our children. We talked about the challenges we face in Canada trying to preserve the language and the culture. We talked about special celebrations. Then we talked about Arabic and Hebrew coming from the same root and the words that are the same in both languages.

We had started a friendship that allowed discussing everything except the Palestine issue, and we stayed away from that for good reasons. We knew that our friendship would continue as long as we followed our common interest and avoided politics.

There are three incidents that I would like to share:

- A friend of Judith came to visit her at the office. When she heard my name and where I came from, she was shocked that we were going for coffee and were so relaxed with each other. She spoke in Hebrew to Judith trying to understand how could this happen!
- My Arabic typist was a Palestinian. He came to the office one day sad and upset because his brother was killed in an explosion. Judith was horrified until we found out the cause of the explosion was during a Palestinian mountain road construction project.
- It was Christmas and the school board invited students from the bilingual programs to sing in the different languages. One of the school board officials invited the students from both the Arabic and the Hebrew programs to cross sides and hug one another.

Judith and I worked for several more years as curriculum writers, and we continued to have a very good working relationship.