

GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

FAWZY & ALEKSANDRA ABDELWAHED

By Sarah Dziejic

New York, NY

August 23, 2018

**Oral History Interview with Fawzy and Aleksandra Abdelwahed,
August 23, 2018**

Narrator(s)	Fawzy and Aleksandra “Ola” Abdelwahed (with Andy Reynolds)
Birthyear	–
Birthplace	Port Said, Egypt and Inowrocław, Poland
Narrator Age	–
Interviewer	Sarah Dziezic
Place of Interview	Neighborhood Preservation Center meeting room
Date of Interview	August 23, 2018
Duration of Interview	100 min
Number of Sessions	1
Waiver Signed/copy given	Y
Photographs	Y
Archival Format	.wav 44kHz/16bit
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Portions Omitted from Recordings	n/a
Order in Oral Histories	36 [#2 2018]



Aleksandra and Fawzy Abdelwahed outside of B&H Dairy, Photo by Andy Reynolds

Quotes from Oral History Interview with Fawzy and Aleksandra Abdelwahed

Sound-bite

“Hello, my name is Aleksandra Abdelwahed. I’m the co-owner of B&H, and I’m the wife of my husband, Fawzy Abdelwahed, and we both run the B&H restaurant.”

“Fawzy Abdelwahed, owner of B&H, running the business with my wife, Aleksandra...I had the first attention because B&H was vegetarian. It was not kosher at the time when I took over, but it was when it was established. It was the only vegetarian, like healthy food around. There was not too many in the neighborhood. That’s why they interest me. That was the first interest. So that’s why I spoke with my partner, when we had the falafel, he told me, “No, it’s not worth it. It’s only vegetarian.” I said, “No, this is the only—this is kinda unique. You’re gonna have the regular customers come in all the time because there’s not too many places like it... That was like, this is like a history. When you have a history, you cannot change it. Like a customer, he comes, he says, ‘Oh, my grandfather used to eat here with my grandmother. They meet here when the first time, before they get married,’ stuff like that. And they show the children and grandchildren what they ate, and where they sat. That was amazing. So that’s why I kept it the same. That was the secret to keeping the place open. And we have the customer begging for us all the time.”

“B&H is for customer. We just there to serve them, to show them our love for them, they visit us back. You know, so if you come, and you tell me your idea, of course very happy, we work together. I know you gonna come back, right? Nice.”

Additional Quotes

“...Originally I’m from Poland, from small town they call Inowroclaw. My dream create when I was, like, about twelve, when my neighbors went visit to Chicago. So in this moment I dream about my life in America. So each year I grow up, I say, “One day, one day.” And this day happened in 2004. All my family was so excited, and love it, and so proud of me, and I’m here. All this year, I’m very successful to become American, have my dream come true. So this is, that was my best dream ever happen.” (Aleksandra Abdelwahed p.2)

“That was 2003, we took over from Ziggy’s wife, her name is Kathy [phonetic]. She was a beautiful nice lady. She teach us how to run the business, how to deal with employees because the employees at B&H have been there for a long time. So she teach us, and she help us from beginning. She stayed with us, I remember, like two months. And then we take over. So that was very great time for us. That was a very great time. And all this time, I have a good friendship with Roman from Stage. So if I need any advice, for example, I go ask him. If he need something, he come; if I go short on some stuff, he get it for me. The same thing. So we used to have a very good friendship with all the neighbors. So that’s why we do succeed.” (Fawzy Abdelwahed p. 7)

“When I first moved to the US, my friend who was my cousin—I haven’t meet with him in a long time—I stay with him like two, three weeks. Then he send me to the employment agency, so I went to the employment agency, and then they get me a job. And actually, next to the B&H, in ‘96, I was working at Halal Snack at this time. After a couple years, I took over the business. That was Mediterranean cuisine, Mediterranean food, falafel, shawarma, stuff like that. And I was working all this time, and then I had partner with me. Then we took over the B&H in 2003, and then we split—he took care of the falafel shop, and then I took over the B&H. Because we, all the time—like when I had the falafel, we finish the work there, and then we used to go eat at the B&H, or at the Stage. That’s how we meet each other, all at once.” (Fawzy Abdelwahed p. 9)

“Very important: we kept the menu the same. This is very important. And I get all the recipes from the previous owner, and we kept it all the same. We have only changed, like, the only changes that we have now, the vegetarian liver, we don’t have it anymore because it was made from peanuts, and too much cholesterol, and that’s why we stopped making it. So this is the only change, but everything else we kept, it remained the same.” (Fawzy Abdelwahed p.11)

“Oh yeah, my favorite of course, is pierogi because when I was kid, I always tried to learn, and it’s very hard. I have so many brother and sisters, so I always was the one to go buy some flour or sugar, so I never have time to see exactly how they make it. So finally, when I start working at B&H, I learn because the lady, when she go on vacation, I must know. So first time

to make a pierogi takes me like four hours. I was like jumping to the sky, because first time in my life I do the pierogi.” (Aleksandra Abdelwahed p. 12–13)

“Ecuador, South American. So a lot of them spoke Spanish behind the counter. And then when I was there, or when I suggested the t-shirt—the thing was that you get challah with everything. So when you order bread, you always get challah. And the challah with soup. But that also would come, if you get the eggs, you get challah, you get challah almost while you’re waiting for something else. You get challah while you’re waiting for challah, I don’t know, but the thing is, you got it with everything, and a lot of the guys were speaking Spanish, and it just seemed to me that that would be a way of mixing the two cultures, just to say “Challah por favor,” because if you ask—someone’s at this end of the counter cutting up the challah, and someone’s down here doing the soup, and you order the soup down here, they’re gonna say, “Challah por favor.” You know, [laughter] it’s just how they ordered the food.” (Andy Reynolds, p. 21)

Summary of Oral History Interview with Fawzy and Aleksandra Abdelwahed

Fawzy Abdelwahed was born in Port Said, Egypt, where he worked in kitchens serving an international clientele. He emigrated to the United States and found work at a restaurant in the East Village, Halal Snack, near B&H Dairy where he would eat after his shifts. He eventually became part-owner of Halal Snack, and when the opportunity arose in 2003, he took over as owner of B&H Dairy.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed emigrated from Poland in 2004, and found work at the Stage Restaurant across the street from B&H. Aleksandra met Fawzy when he was a customer at the Stage, and developed a quick friendship. They were married two years later, and became co-owners of B&H. Together they run the restaurant following the original menu, and maintain the restaurant's kosher certification.

In 2015, B&H was shuttered by the City following the Second Avenue Fire, a gas explosion in a neighboring building that caused major fire damage and instigated a series of inspections and long-term shutdown of gas to the building. Ultimately, B&H remained closed for 5 months. During this time, a crowd-funding campaign emerged, led by neighbor Andy Reynolds, to support the restaurant while it was closed and to urge the City to complete its protracted inspection process. The campaign enabled B&H to stay afloat until it was permitted to reopen.

B&H was awarded the Village Award in 2017 from the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, and celebrated its 80th birthday in 2018.

Compiled by Sarah Dziedzic

General Interview Notes

This is a transcription of an Oral History that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

The GVSHP Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Greenwich Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

THANK YOU!

Oral History Interview Transcript

Dziedzic: All right, today's August 23, 2018, this is an interview for the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Oral History Project. My name is Sarah Dziedzic, could you each introduce yourselves and give a brief introduction?

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Hello, my name is Aleksandra Abdelwahed. I'm the co-owner of B&H, and I'm the wife of my husband, Fawzy Abdelwahed, and we both run the B&H restaurant. Good?

Dziedzic: Yes!

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Fawzy Abdelwahed, owner of B&H, running the business with my wife, Aleksandra.

Dziedzic: Thank you!

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Welcome.

Dziedzic: Do you want to also introduce yourself, Andy?

Reynolds: Yes, my name is Andy Reynolds. I am a neighbor and a friend, and I help B&H with all kinds of stuff, whatever they need. I did their t-shirts, I helped them back after the fire, with crowd funding. I'm a publicist by trade, so I help them get press. And, whatever they need creative stuff—helped with the party yesterday.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yeah. Actually, with everything. [laughs]

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Especially with media, and volunteers.

Reynolds: And I'm archiving old photos as I collect them from family members.

Dziedzic: And you helped us organize this interview today.

Reynolds: Yeah.

Dziedzic: All right. So I wanted to hear about the place where each of you grew up, actually, and then get into how you came to New York. So that's our long arc—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Oh yeah.

Dziedzic: —of this interview. So let's start with where each of you grew up.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Inowrocław.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Ok, originally I'm from Poland, from small town they call Inowrocław. My dream create when I was, like, about twelve, when my neighbors went visit to Chicago. So in this moment I dream about my life in America. So each year I grow up, I say, "One day, one day." And this day happened in 2004. All my family was so excited, and love it, and so proud of me, and I'm here. All this year, I'm very successful to become American, have my dream come true. So this is, that was my best dream ever happen. [laughs]

Dziedzic: What did you know about America when you were dreaming of coming here? Did you know people that had already come here?

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: In this time it's Communism, so it was a lot of people around after the war, so I hear everything only good. All the family was successful, and bringing more and more families. Chicago, it's like the biggest Polish community over there, help building the city. So this is how it was after the war, and especially in Poland, to say America is open for everybody. So this is what everybody loved and get jealous next to each other, when we live in, like neighbor, "Where are you going?" "America." "Oh no, I want to go, too." So everybody dream, and if you're really lucky, and you have a little bit of good luck, I think you can, you can do it. So like right now, I just visit my home in Poland, but after a while, I start missing [New York], I want to go back. And this is my life, this is my family, my friends my job—I love my job. I cannot see home, so this is, I think it's great.

Dziedzic: How were you able to get here? I know a lot of people have a lot of jobs, or they have a connection somewhere in the US that brings them over, or it's hard work to get here, so—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Actually, I think it's a gift. When I was pregnant, I had a very good boss, so when he hear I want to come to America—he was the owner of big company of the window—so I think he had some friends [laughs] so I, she just let me go get the visa. I think that was big lucky for me. Because so many people, they cannot get the visa and go out from the

country. [00:04:56] So and then, in 2002, I get the visa approved. So and this moment, I was like, not believe—still not believe—I am, I get it. So was big day for me. [laughs]

Dziedzic: Is there anything else you want to add?

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: It's very hard, in, I think, each country it's very hard to get a visa because people, maybe they don't use the good way, to get it just here, or get in a mess. If you have plan in your life to get good work and good life, you can help also America grow up, and show, this is a beautiful country for everyone. But you know, the life, the people change, and like our culture, it's a different mentality. To have two different mentalities together work sometimes is hard. So if you go to another country, you must respect, you must be comfortable with him, follow the rules, and I think then you can be successful. Otherwise, you can live in the street, and that's it, that dream is for everyone but it could be over. Yeah, so just be good, positive, and keep going up. That's good. [laughs]

Dziedzic: How about you, Fawzy?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Ok. I was born in Egypt, September 28, 1973. When I was a student, I was working part time and full time in the hotels and restaurants. And then in 1993 I start working a cruise ship. So in between Mediterranean, Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Turkey, til 1995. In '95, I was supposed to come to Baltimore to take a cruise from there. So I took a visa on the way to come get the job here on a cruise. And then [laughing] I love it, and then I stay. That was all my life, my dream, to start a new life in America. Like I do have the American dream. It's freedom country. It's a great country, and I think it's everybody's dream to live in. You can be what you want to be in the US. What you do here, you cannot do anywhere else. And I do appreciate it, and I love it, and this is my hometown now, my home country.

Dziedzic: What do you think that you would have been doing if you had stayed in Egypt?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Egypt is—I have a simple explanation. Egypt is like original mother, giving birth. Ok? But America is like the one who adopts you, give you everything, give you life, give you freedom, give you happiness. And Egypt is a very hard life. I was working so hard. There is no freedom there. I cannot say what I want to say, I cannot do what I want to do, I cannot be what I want to be. You run in a small circle. You keep close, and keep quiet; this is not

the simple life for me. That's why I was like, very amazed when I come to the US, because we're really enjoying the freedom here.

Dziedzic: Was working on a cruise ship something that was a common option, or was that something that you had to really look for to find?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: No, I have to really work hard to get it because it's not easy to get this job. You have to really be qualified, and then get the interview. When you pass the interview, then you have experience, and then you can get this job. But it's a great job, because it's in different countries, you have a lot of friends. I used to work with like twenty-two different nationalities on the same cruise. Speaking to many different languages, to many different religions. And you get to see, when I was young, get to see a lot of stuff, get to know a lot of people. That was a very good experience for me.

Dziedzic: What was the work that you had been doing that gave you all that experience?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Oh, I was working in the dining room. I was working in the bar, like a bar waiter, bartender. I was working in the kitchen sometimes, so that's what—in the hotel. Most of the job was in the hotel. It was luck.

Dziedzic: With a lot of international clientele, it sounds like.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Oh yeah, absolutely. And especially the American passengers. [00:09:55] They're kind of different, really, they're very, calm, they're very nice. They used to leave us a very good tip. [laughs] Alexandra smiles but it is the truth. [laughter] That's why we love it. Everybody from America give us a lot of history, and a lot of happiness about America. That's why that was everybody's dream.

Dziedzic: It's nice to hear.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: That's true. [laughs]

Dziedzic: I don't know if it's still like that. When did you come over here?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: I came September 11, 1996.

Dziedzic: And what had you been doing in Poland?

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Me, actually I did so many things. My father, he used to have his own store for furniture, and so he tried to push me to continue this, but it was not what I like. I tried to think about, go to the police because I have this feeling, like I want to be this person, but you must have money so the dream was collapsed. And I like so much to be with people, connection, I'm very open, a friendly person, so I follow business with my mom. So she teach me to do some paperwork in the store, some business between the company, so that's why I'm not scared of people, I'm not scared to travel, to go somewhere, meet someone. Maybe this can give you some power to not be scared to go anywhere. And then, actually, I came here when I was twenty-eight. The time flies. I have kids, so the time flies. But then I decide to stay here, fix everything, and 2007 I married my husband [laughs] so, the time flies, always.

Dziedzic: And you said you came first to Chicago?

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: No, I have never been to Chicago, no.

Dziedzic: So when you came to New York, where were you in the city?

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: I lived in Queens. I have friend, a roommate, so she took me to Manhattan, show me the subway, how everything works. We have, like every country, we have English in school, but it's not the same as American. So from beginning was very funny, to connect with people, to read the signs, and to follow all the rules and everything. From beginning was hard to find, I think, the right job. I have two offers, three offers, but each one, they collapse, you know? One, she just was different, completely, understood, you know? And one, in the Park Avenue, I have like a very big house, but this person also did not understand me, but he try.

And then, finally, I find in the newspaper on Second Avenue, Stage, and this is the Ukrainian owner Roman, I forget his last name¹. So he was the one, he helped me get the job. And so many times, I tried to quit, because the English held me back from the customer connection. But he say he going to promise, he going to help me, send me maybe to school, maybe give me some help from someone. Little by little.

I got this job in April and in June I meet Fawzy, so that was a short time. I work there for a year and a half, and Roman, he says Fawzy stole me from the Stage, across the street, to the B&H. [laughs] So there was, the most painful for him, and laughing to other people that live

¹ Roman Diakun

around him, because he say I go on vacation—I was across the street. But he was my customer, so he watched me for two weeks, what I'm doing, how I'm doing. And I just love—if I see something to clean, to do anything, I just do it. There was so much powerful—when you come from overseas and you have a good place and good people, you try to do everything the best, to show you are the right person in the right position. [00:15:07] So I really appreciate to him he helped me for the year and a half.

Dziedzic: And what did you do when you first moved to the US?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: When I first moved to the US, my friend who was my cousin—I haven't meet with him in a long time—I stay with him like two, three weeks. Then he send me to the employment agency, so I went to the employment agency, and then they get me a job. And actually, next to the B&H, in '96, I was working at Halal Snack at this time. After a couple years, I took over the business. That was Mediterranean cuisine, Mediterranean food, falafel, shawarma, stuff like that. And I was working all this time, and then I had partner with me. Then we took over the B&H in 2003, and then we split—he took care of the falafel shop, and then I took over the B&H. Because we, all the time—like when I had the falafel, we finish the work there, and then we used to go eat at the B&H, or at the Stage. That's how we meet each other, all at once. [laughter]

Dziedzic: So what was the name of the falafel place?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Mine, I call it Cinderella Falafel, that was very famous and very popular. But the one I worked at, that was the same shop but when I took over, I changed the name because it used to be a different corporation. They used to call Halal Snack, before.

Dziedzic: And what was the East Village like when you first arrived?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: What first interested me, it's so many different culture, so many different people, from all over the world. And I had made so many different friends, and I like it so much. I enjoy it so much, the East Village. I love it. I feel like this is—I'm part of it now. So I enjoy it. That's why I didn't go anywhere, I didn't move anywhere, I was staying. [laughs] I used to live on 9th Street. I used to live on 9th Street, and then I moved when we get married to get a bigger apartment in Queens.

Dziedzic: And where in Queens is your, are your connections?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Ok, we live in Ridgewood area called Maspeth, yeah, Fresh Pond, this is a Polish culture. This is what she like and this is her decision. So [laughs] I have to follow.
[laughter]

Dziedzic: Well, I live in Greenpoint.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Oh!

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Very close, yeah. Very close.

Dziedzic: Yes. And my family's Polish, too.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Wow.

Dziedzic: It's familiar.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: A-ha! You see?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Very nice. Very polite, I see some people, I see them smiling in the morning, say "Good morning." Other people, oh! [laughs]

Dziedzic: So when you first started working at B&H—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Right.

Dziedzic: —can you talk about that?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Oh yeah. That was 2003, we took over from Ziggy's wife, her name is Kathy [phonetic]. She was a beautiful nice lady. She teach us how to run the business, how to deal with employees because the employees at B&H have been there for a long time. So she teach us, and she help us from beginning. She stayed with us, I remember, like two months. And then we take over. So that was very great time for us. That was a very great time. And all this time, I have a good friendship with Roman from Stage. So if I need any advice, for example, I go ask him. If he need something, he come; if I go short on some stuff, he get it for me. The same thing. So we used to have a very good friendship with all the neighbors. So that's why we do succeed.

Dziedzic: So Roman wasn't just interested in helping people who were from, coming from Poland, but helping a lot of people in the East Village?

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yes. I remember when I worked there, one lady on the second floor, her name was Clara. She was about maybe eighty. I see every day, he take breakfast for her, dinner. If she need to go to the doctor, he drive her. [00:20:06] He was a very helpful person. For everyone. I remember when I have hard situation because my son, at this time he was in Poland, and he was very little, like five years old. So it was very hard for me to work and leave everything, and be there far away. So he helped me also to have hope, like everything gonna fix it, and I'm gonna be fine. So he, if you need any help, to talk, or to go somewhere, to do something, he was very helpful man. I'm very sad now, after the three years, and all these years—before the restaurant was fine, now the Stage is gone after the fire, explosion. It's gone so it's very painful for us that he is not there.

Dziedzic: So can you talk a little bit about, I mean, did you know Ziggy?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yeah, Ziggy and Kathy.

Dziedzic: Can you talk about him a little bit? What was he like?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: He was, the two partner, both engineers, and doesn't really work behind the counter. The wife, Kathy, she was running the business, and both of them just come Sunday to make a delivery and just take care of everything. But they're not working behind the counter. So they decided to sell the restaurant because they said, "We don't have enough time to run it, or to control it, that's why. There must be somebody there all the time. We cannot do this. That's why we decide to sell the restaurant." And I took over. It was my friends, and then they offer me, and I take the offer.

Dziedzic: How long did Ziggy and Kathy own the—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Ziggy and Kathy, they took over in '95.

Dziedzic: So '95 to—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: I'm sorry, '94.

Dziedzic: Ok.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: And then I took over in 2003.

Dziedzic: And you started, you were there as a customer—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yeah.

Dziedzic: —as early as 1996.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yes.

Dziedzic: Wow.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: I enjoyed so much getting the breakfast there. [laughs]

Dziedzic: So how did you decide to buy B&H? I mean, so you just said they knew you, and offered it, in a way, but how did, what was your thought process?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: I do have experience about running a restaurant. This is all my life, and this is all my job. So me and my partner, we had—I had the first attention because B&H was vegetarian. It was not kosher at the time when I took over, but it was when it was established. It was the only vegetarian, like healthy food around. There was not too many in the neighborhood. That's why they interest me. That was the first interest. So that's why I spoke with my partner, when we had the falafel, he told me, "No, it's not worth it. It's only vegetarian." I said, "No, this is the only—this is kinda unique. You're gonna have the regular customers come in all the time because there's not too many places like it." So that was my attention. Then, financially, we were ok, and we took some loans, and then I took over for B&H. That was a good decision, and I made it at the right time. [laughs] I was telling myself, because he thinks it's not really worth it, I said, "No, it's a unique place you cannot find anywhere."

Dziedzic: It's true. [laughs]

Fawzy Abdelwahed: That's true.

Dziedzic: So what changes did you make when you first started?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: The first one I changed, I get it back to kosher. This is the first. And then, first, I cleaned very good the restaurant. Cleaned very good. Upstairs, downstairs, in the basement—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Especially the—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: —I cleaned all the refrigerators.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: —the AC—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: The AC.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: —the big one.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: That was the first. The second, I did improve the quality of the food, the produce, the vegetable, fruits, all what we get in. All the supplies, I get in top quality. And then, we hired a very good chef at this time. We improved B&H from like sixty to ninety percent. [00:24:57] So the people come back. Like the Jewish, kosher—they start coming back to the place. Everybody start to like it, and we have a customer return.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Success, yeah.

Dziedzic: Why, do you know why it wasn't kosher?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: When Kathy and Ziggy took over, it was not kosher. It was kosher from early beginning. And then—because it was too many different owners since it was established. It's established 1938. It's been almost ten different owners, all this time. So that's why. Some people kept it kosher, some people not. But, the idea—it's very simple to make it kosher, because it's vegetarian. You don't have any meat, so it's simple. It's not hard to keep it kosher and get the—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Just need to find the right rabbi who follow the place, because our rabbi, he is there every week, two weeks. Sometimes he stops by today, and next day he comes by in the morning because he says, "I'm hungry." [laughs] So you never know. You don't expect when he gonna stop by. So this is good point about us—we are safe with him.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Like he's there all the time.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: He's all the time. He checks. If we need something, he prays to bless the place. This rabbi would ask. For all these years, he is a very nice person, and god bless him, of course, and I hope he stays with us as much—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: His name is Andre Malek. And it was a very simple point: we buy the product kosher. We buy kosher vegetable, kosher everything, cheese kosher. We keep it simple. It's not hard for us to not keep it kosher. So we keep it the same. [laughs]

SIDE CONVERSATION

Dziedzic: So was it a matter of—did you have to change the menu at all, or was it really just through, sort of, where you got your ingredients, and enlisting the services of a rabbi?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Very important: we kept the menu the same. This is very important. And I get all the recipes from the previous owner, and we kept it all the same. We have only changed, like, the only changes that we have now, the vegetarian liver, we don't have it anymore because it was made from peanuts, and too much cholesterol, and that's why we stopped making it. So this is the only change, but everything else we kept, it remained the same.

Dziedzic: And across all those owners, had the menu pretty much stayed the same? Is that something that you know?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yes. Yes, it stays from all this time. Breakfast lunch and dinner, special—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Maybe it's also a secret: the lady in the kitchen, she's Polish, like Europe style—I know, from my culture, they cook the best. [laughs]

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Like homemade, yeah, homemade cooking.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Homemade because they love cooking, they love making the house clean, and they love grandchildren. These three points, it's my mind forever. The best cooking. This lady and lady before who was with Fawzy, Sophia, she was a very attentive person, and even counted pierogi, how many she made every day. And if something changed, right away, she complains, and she say, "This is not the same thing. It cannot be flavored different." So you must follow the vegetable, the fruits or whatever she ordered. Must be good quality. Otherwise, the taste will be different. And this is what you must really focus on with the restaurant.

Dziedzic: Especially if you have so many customers who are coming back.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yes. One lady, for example, she wasn't in because she travels, she worked in other place like twenty years, and she eat always split pea. So she say, "Can I ask a question?" I say, "Ok." "Can you cook the split pea a little more? It must be open, and the flavor's gonna be different." [00:30:00] I said, "Oh, thank you so much." I never forget this, how she concerned about the split pea cooking a little bit, like five, ten minutes more. It's better taste. So the customer, they know exactly the menu, since long, long time, so you cannot make a change—it's good.

Dziedzic: So this person was commenting on the way that it used to be prepared—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yes.

Dziedzic: —at B&H.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yes. When she was a student at NYU. So she always came for breakfast, and for dinner, so she knows the flavor, the taste. Even she stop by once in a while with her parents. The split pea, it tastes the same, so she knows, when she comes to B&H, it's gonna be the same split pea. [laughs] And this time, we were very busy, and the five minutes different in the oven for the soup, it's of course different flavor. So she told me, a little bit longer, and it's gonna be perfect. So I learn from the customer, and I always ask them for if any question, any advice or something. I appreciate. So that's a very nice connection with the customer. I love it. [laughs]

Dziedzic: Can you talk about some of the specific foods on the menu that were, I guess, sort of familiar to you? Like the split pea.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Oh yeah, my favorite of course, is pierogi because when I was kid, I always tried to learn, and it's very hard. I have so many brother and sisters, so I always was the one to go buy some flour or sugar, so I never have time to see exactly how they make it. So finally, when I start working at B&H, I learn because the lady, when she go on vacation, I must know. So first time to make a pierogi takes me like four hours. I was like jumping to the sky, because first time in my life I do the pierogi. This is one, and the second one, blintzes. My home, we just make the dough, and you put whatever you like inside, and you roll it and you eat. When

I was little, my grandma, we have like a couple grandchildren, she give us blintzes to make us go out and play. In the B&H, we fry them in the pan. This one makes me, like, crazy, because it's crispy, and the cheese is very warm, and this is second thing make me like love it, and get a little bit fat. [laughs] But it's no bother to me, because two different things make me really love it. Whitefish, I never tasted whitefish like this, with salad. And I start to like tuna melt—I never tried before, ever, tuna melt. And of course—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Hot borscht.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: —in this one we have. But everything is no meat, and I grow up, I'm sorry, but with kielbasa in hand. So this is Europe, so we have this every day. So vegetarian place, it's different, you know? To learn to cook something without meat. So I was very curious, and go in the kitchen and look how she make it. She say, "This is secret." [laughs] So I love it. That's why I love this place so much. And I see customer, and they are excited about this, so I think this is like everything going into one. Nice.

Dziedzic: Was there anything that was familiar for you? I guess—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yeah.

Dziedzic: —if you'd been working in restaurants, there's going to be a lot of overlap.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Of course. Absolutely. Like the breakfast, the breakfast is very familiar because you have it everywhere. The eggs scrambled, fried, boiled. Homefries. The breakfast was very much familiar. But I like to try different other stuff. Of course, the French toast is amazing. And then my favorite, I like the matza ball soup. Once I try it, that was my soup all the time, I love it. Mac and cheese, I like it so much. Yes, so many different—because we have a special every day, so every day you can try something different. That was about B&H. That's why we all love it so much. The hot borscht. I like everything there, really, honestly.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: I have one thing that make us, like, surprised behind the counter, employees. One customer, he has idea, like, put macaroni and tomato sauce on the top. So I was like, "Ok, we try." But I try, and I like it. [00:34:56] Other customer, he want a grilled cheese with over-easy egg. I said, "Wow, it's gonna be all wet." But we try, and now I get it, this. So the customer give us idea, and we put in there, for example, like extra in the menu, if you like some,

because they love when you come to a restaurant and he say, “Can I get my sandwich?” in front of everybody. So we make customer happy, as they like to have his own, like, dish. We have Tieso, this person, he’s a big manager in Texas. When we were closed, there was like a page, funding page—

Reynolds: Crowd funding.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Crowd funding, yeah, so the dish was available, to create—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Named after him.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Named after him. He created two pierogi, one stuffed cabbage, potato pancakes, because he love it. When he come to New York, visit New York, he love it. So he created, and now his dish is in the front, like in the side, so—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Tieso Special.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Tieso Special. So the customer, they love something, they create— and they like if we appreciate or we work together. Not “No, this is not good idea”; “Why not? Give me idea.” B&H is for customer. We just there to serve them, to show them our love for them, they visit us back. You know, so if you come, and you tell me your idea, of course very happy, we work together. I know you gonna come back, right? Nice.

Dziedzic: So it sounds like even though it was important to keep the menu the same, from across all of the different iterations, there’s, this is how you find a way to be creative—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yes! A hundred percent. That was like, this is like a history. When you have a history, you cannot change it. Like a customer, he comes, he says, “Oh, my grandfather used to eat here with my grandmother. They meet here when the first time, before they get married,” stuff like that. And they show the children and grandchildren what they ate, and where they sat. That was amazing. So that’s why I kept it the same. That was the secret to keeping the place open. And we have the customer begging for us all the time.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Actually, right now, we have a very nice menu cover, with Andy. He made it for us. And the people love it, I should record it to prove for him. He made a really very nice job. Why? Because the first page is pictures of the food. Borscht, and blintzes, and egg salad

sandwich. So this is like, real. When you see the picture, the menu, it's like, real. So the people love it, and of course it's a juice bar, but behind is very nice salad. And inside the menu, it's one friend, and the friend, she drew for us pictures of blintzes, challah bread. She drew it by hand, and we make this menu really special now. It's like a new fashion, but it's pictures of the customers. They love it, you know? If they see each other, they say, "Oh my god, an all-new menu!" They're really excited. And they speak to each other, between each other, and they say, "Hey, it might be one day, I'm gonna be in the pictures." It's very nice. And thank you, of course, Andy, he help us with all these jobs.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yesterday, we had a family, they haven't seen each other for thirty years. Yesterday, they saw each other, both come to B&H. And this is, they see each other. After thirty years. You see what it's like, very important part of the history for everybody.

Dziedzic: I wanted to ask about how there's such a community around the restaurant, which is almost surprising in a way because the space is so small.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Oh yeah. [laughs]

Dziedzic: So it's not that everybody can be there at the same time and see each other, it has to happen in some other way. So can you talk a little bit more about those connections and how, like what you do to maintain those connections?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Oh yeah, sure. B&H is famous for a small space, and tiny, narrow—they call it "hole in the wall." So they are used to it, and they love it, and they know each other. So when they come, a lot of customers know each other by now. They're having a conversation, so it's very comfortable for them. [00:40:00] And they know how to maintain the space for them to eat. [laughs] To eat, and get food. And patient—they used to this. And this is like, people are very famous by like the small, tiny spot.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: I think they know each other by like—my space is the end of the counter, second place is Allen, and, so, for example, ten o'clock, they are in the one lane, and they have laughing conversation. And we have a big table in the back, like this family, they come now every—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Sunday, weekend.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: —every time. Sunday, weekend, with the kids. So they eat the food, they make conversation, they laugh, so I feel like—I’m behind the counter—when I see something like this, this is like one family. So it’s not bothering them it’s tiny. And everyone squeeze if somebody a little bit fat, so there’s touching with good spirit, and it’s not angry, this is nice. If we can stretch, it’s ok. But everybody else say B&H stretch, it’s not us. So that’s why the belly is excused.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: I want to mention one very important: it’s a very small, tiny place, but the people that built B&H, genius. They use each spot in the restaurant. Where to put the oven, where to put the stove, the grill, the counter. They use each space, so the way it built, [laughs] it cannot be anywhere else. It cannot do one more B&H like that. Never. Yeah, it’s very hard. [laughs]

Dziedzic: Does that seem like—I mean, to me, that seems like a special New York experience, right? Like we all have to learn how to live within such density—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yes.

Dziedzic: —you know, or else we’re gonna lose our minds. [laughs]

Reynolds: I’ll keep that in mind.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: And I want to say, something really funny: for the same sentence, in the restaurant, for example, you see somebody speak English, somebody speak Spanish, somebody speak Polish. They say, “Give me your,” like “Challah, por favor,” “Chleb², give me a bread.” You know, you hear it in three different languages, or four languages, at the same time. [laughs] But everybody understand everybody, it’s amazing. [laughs]

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: In the front, I speak Polish, and then Mike, he speaks Arabic, and Bogusia, Polish, and Spanish. So if we—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Customers are English.

² Polish for “bread”

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: —if we want to make fun, we speak all the languages the same time, [laughs] because we understand each other, because we learn a little bit of language of each other, so, this also make customer fun.

Reynolds: They have words—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yeah.

Reynolds: —like you always say “Give me three pierogis, borfa.” “Por favor,” but you know, it’s not, B-O-R-F-A. Again, you have four languages in one sentence, in one order.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Chleb, la glassa.

Reynolds: And then Mike and you will start talking, or you and Said will start talking, and it’s all Arabic. No one can understand what you say. And then the Polish, but then when you start mixing it all together, and begin to figure out what it is, you know? It’s the melting pot, for sure.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: And at the store, Bogusia answers in Polish, “Co mówisz?” It means, “What do you say?” And then he repeats for her Spanish. So it’s really funny sometimes, you can feel the atmosphere like a home; you are not working. You are not like somebody on top of you, even me, or Fawzy, it’s—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: It feels like family—employees, customers—and it feels really like we connect to each other, like each other. We like to work; it’s like one family. And this is what we like about it. [laughs]

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Like Mike, or Leo—Leo working for twenty-eight years, so a lot of customers—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: More, I think more.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: No, now it’s twenty-nine. They know him, so they say, “How come you are still here?” He says, yeah, but look—he’s bald. He says, “You see what happen? I lose my hair after all these years because I’m thinking will you come or not come?” So it’s—this is amazing. You must be there. Please stop by, you’re going see, you’re going to feel this—then you’re going to understand. When we say it’s like explanation, it’s different. [laughs]

Dziedzic: Well speaking of family, I want to ask about when you guys, when you met, and then when you became the co-owner.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: When we met, I was a very shy person to have any conversation, til I understand what he say. [00:45:02] So he tried to follow me twice, and one time, I had a piece in my ear, and he touch me, so when I turn around, I almost hit him. Because I think somebody robbed me—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Sweetheart, but you cleaned my glasses first. That’s what took my attention the first time. [Aleksandra laughs] At the table, when I came—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: He was my customer, yeah, and he leave always—when he eats, he was very shy, and one day, he leave his glasses. I see, like some—I hate this, so I take the wipe, and I clean it. And I leave it. I don’t give attention on him—I was worried about the glasses. And then, one time, and he look at me, and ok. But second time when he come and do the same thing—and again, I don’t talk to him, because I was shy to speak English. So he start to be curious and watch me for two weeks, and like follow me to see if I go out with someone, or what I’m doing.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: You start to go out. Our relationship, it start like friends first—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Friends, yeah.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: —and then become really, we a really good match, me and her, because she understand me, I understand her. We start the love story then.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yeah, love story from the glasses. [laughs] And there’s not too far, across the street, and everybody was laughing, because he sit in B&H, in the first chair, and I was behind the register [at Stage], and he was like, look at what I’m doing. So some customers say, “Hey, what you doing? What you looking for?” He was funny too, you know. And after we go out, we start to decide we want to see each other, understand, help each other. Like especially, I was here myself, and he was having some moment in life when he also need help. So when you have some friend, it’s also helpful to be ok here. [laughs]

Dziedzic: Yeah! And, what were your thoughts about—so, when you guys met, you were already the owner of B&H—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yes.

Dziedzic: —is that right? So what were your—what were your thoughts about that, I guess? Crossing the street, [laughter] and when did that become a conversation?

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: The place I work—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Ok, first—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: —they tell me, “No, he’s not going to look at you. He’s the owner of B&H, and you know, forget about it.” Like, hello, I’m from like bottom like this for him (who was at the top because he owned a restaurant). So I was like, surprised. [laughs]

Fawzy Abdelwahed: The first my attention took Ola, she’s a very hard working person—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Oh yeah.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: —and she like what she’s doing. And after we’d been dating for a while, we walk on Seventh Street by the church, and then Roman, he see us both together. That was a shock for us. And then from there, we started a confrontation, like she gonna move. And I go politely, and I ask him, I said, “I love her, and we’re going to be engaged, and don’t worry. She’s gonna be with me.” He said, “She’s a nice lady. Take care of her. As long as she’s been working with me, she was very honest, very nice, and good luck to you.” And then we decided from this time, I should have her come and work with me, and then becoming the co-owner with me at B&H.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yeah, see? Now my dream when I was a kid has really come true. [laughs] Find the right person with a big heart, and friendly. He’s very friendly, and love person. [laughs] And he’s not like a boss at the restaurant, he treats everybody very friendly, and understanding, and helpful, so I think it’s very important. [laughs]

Dziedzic: And when you got the license to come over to B&H and start working there, were there any things that you wanted to change? Or, like different ways of doing things that you brought?

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: For me—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: I really explained to her from beginning about the menu, about the restaurant, the hours, the employees and everything. I really explained. It was not hard for her to understand because basically, Stage is the same thing but with meat. And then she understand we must keep everything the same. We cannot add or remove. This is how we're supposed to run it, this way. And then she understand, and she follow. [00:49:53]

Dziedzic: And then you got to make these recipes—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Oh yeah, for the recipe, I remember Sophia, when she told me she could not go back to Poland after five years with her husband because of her age, they need rest. So she started to teach me cooking. That was like, I should record this and send to my mom: finally, I'm in the kitchen! [laughs] But it was, maybe because there's no meat, I love it. I like that smell, nice smell. Maybe the meat make me hate the kitchen in a way. Sophia also was very, like a patient person for me. That's why maybe she like me to work in the kitchen. So maybe in the future, from the counter, I move to the kitchen. [laughs] You know, this is always going to happen like this—when you're fifty, you have a very big patience for the cooking. So I, my plan is like this. [laughs] I look for young people at the counter, and I move to the kitchen. [laughs]

Dziedzic: You mentioned when you were talking about all the different languages and B&H being a melting pot—what was the response with the regular clientele when you started working there? I'm thinking about the “Challah por favor,” you know? [laughter] Maybe it would be—I can imagine how it could be a shock for some people who are going there to see what how this place has changed over thirty years, or twenty years or whatever, so. What was your perception of that?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: I was surprised. It was very surprising for me. And shocking, in the same time, because when I get to know what they're saying—it takes me a while because I must ask them, well, what is challah por favor? Then they explain it to me, so now when they say it, some

customers, they look, “What’d they say?” and some customers, they understand. So that was, it takes me a while to understand, and get into it, so—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Maybe—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: —very, very nice.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Maybe we ask Andy; he was customer too.

Reynolds: Well, there were always Latino employees, at least, as long as I went there, which was the early ‘90s. There was Raoul, and I don’t know if Ralph was Polish, or Mexican, or—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yeah, no, Ralph was from Ecuador.

Reynolds: Ecuador, South American. So a lot of them spoke Spanish behind the counter. And then when I was there, or when I suggested the t-shirt—the thing was that you get challah with everything. So when you order bread, you always get challah. And the challah with soup. But that also would come, if you get the eggs, you get challah, you get challah almost while you’re waiting for something else. You get challah while you’re waiting for challah, I don’t know, but the thing is, you got it with everything, and a lot of the guys were speaking Spanish, and it just seemed to me that that would be a way of mixing the two cultures, just to say “Challah por favor,” because if you ask—someone’s at this end of the counter cutting up the challah, and someone’s down here doing the soup, and you order the soup down here, they’re gonna say, “Challah por favor.” You know, [laughter] it’s just how they ordered the food. It wasn’t like—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: And this is how the kitchen—

Reynolds: —something coming out of outer space. But so it just, there’s always—what would have been different for people was when they started hearing Arabic behind the counter.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Correct. We don’t use that much Arabic, because it’s very complicated for them to understand.

Reynolds: Well yeah, but like sometimes when you’re there and Mike’s there—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Right, right, yes, yes.

Reynolds: —and Mike and Said. Yeah, I mean, you're there by yourself, you don't need to speak Arabic unless you've got customers who come in and speak Arabic.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yeah, that's true.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: So now, in our t-shirt, it's "Challah por favor." So we think to add one more word—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Andy created the t-shirt.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: —habibi. [laughs] So—

Reynolds: Habibi. But then Mike was worried people wouldn't understand because I was going to write it in Arabic.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Well, it was funny, because it was going to be three different worlds: challah, por favor, habibi.

Dziedzic: What does habibi mean?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Habibi—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: My sweetheart.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: —is my love if you translate it. But it doesn't mean just love, it means friends, like very close to me, like this. This was habibi. We use it for brothers, sisters, friends, family. Everybody. So. [laughs]

Dziedzic: That's really sweet.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: I like the t-shirt [referring to Reynolds' t-shirt], Love Saves the East Village.

Reynolds: That was from Love Saves the Day.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Oh yeah.

Reynolds: This was to raise money after the fire. An organization sold these to raise money for—because that store was gone after the fire. It was destroyed by the fire. [00:55:03] Or maybe it had closed by then.

Dziedzic: Well, I think we might be to the point of talking about that, actually. Talking about the fire, the explosion.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Oh yeah.

Dziedzic: So yeah, I guess I'd just like to hear that story of that day, and then, however you tell the story of everything that happened following.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Ok, on March 26 at 3:20pm, I was picking up my son from school. I have to come close in Williamsburg, to come pick up Ola because she was finishing at 3:00pm. And then, 3:20pm, 3:30pm, Ola, she calls me. She says, "It's a big fire in the East Village." I said, "What happened?" She told me that a couple blocks next to us, they have a fire. And the fire department is here and they evacuated the restaurant. We'll have to close." I said, "No problem. We're going to close, and then we're going to leave till everything settles."

So what happened is when I come, I see the fire, big fire, really big fire. Ok. So we waited at this time, from 3:30pm till like 12:00am at night. Of course, they evacuated the restaurant, and they evacuated the area completely. They shut it down, the sidewalk all across. And they said, "Ok, you have to wait a couple days because we couldn't get the gas off from all the neighbors." Because there was a gas explosion from the building next to us. We are in 127. The fire was 119, 121, 123. The three buildings. And then, they shut off the gas. I said, ok.

Then they said, "We're going to do an inspection. We're going to inspect the gas all over these places." It takes me, like, forever. I cannot open the restaurant because I don't have gas. And I cannot—it's a small place—I cannot connect the electric, everything online, electric. So I lose hope for a while because it takes me five months to re-open the store. So I do the update and upgrade. Ok, I have that inspection. The inspection says we have to change the gas meter. I have an inspection for the fire department, they said we have to change the exhaust, and we have to change the fan, we have to change all the fire system, and the restaurant will have to change it. And this is where we need permission—we need to get the architect, we need to get the company

to re-install it and remove the old one. I went through the process like I owned the restaurant from the beginning.

All this time, I'm paying the rent, and paying all the expenses to remain at the place. My landlord had told me, "I'm going to give you some time. If you want to open, what I can help you with is I can give you another location, and you can do the B&H." I said, "It cannot be. It must be the same place, it must be re-opened at B&H." He told me, "Ok, so I'm going to give you some time." I said ok. So we don't expect it's going to be five months. We expect like maybe two months. Honest, I am running out of money, that's it. Because I have my expenses, my rent, my mortgage, my—so we came by Andy, Sarah Romanoski. They said, "We're going to do a crowd funding to help you guys re-open the place and do the renovation."

Thank you, Andy. Really, it was helpful and help us to do the crowd funding. And that is, really, it was big support from all of our customers. I don't expect it's gonna be that way, and going to be the first. We have some customer, he wrote in letter to the mayor for us to speed more and re-open the place. Or the inspection, we have the lady from the city, what is her name?

Reynolds: Bernadette.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Bernadette [Mason].

Reynolds: Small business office.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Business office, who's like speeding up all the inspection appointments. Ok. And that was very big help, that crowd funding. And then, finally, we are open. [01:00:00] Ok, after five months. We closed for five months. And after five months, I had an inspector come. It's only five inspectors all over New York City. He was the supervisor. He comes. He told me, "I want you to come with me now," like after we opened, he is going to show me where are the old gas pipes, all over the building. I show him. He told me, "They're not supposed to close you, because you have a separate line from—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: After all this.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: —all the pipes. From the gas pipe you have especially a line from the building, so you can open yourself, and there's no problem." But it was too late already.

Reynolds: It had already been the five months.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yeah.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: After, after, yeah.

Reynolds: Yeah, after all the time, they said you didn't have to be closed that whole time.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yeah. [laughs]

Reynolds: Oh, god, it's awful.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: But that was because the supervisor, so this guy, he was like staying in the front of the restaurant and I was behind the counter. I said, "Oh my god, another inspector." So I was, like, shaking, and then he showed me with the hand, "Come one second." I go outside, he tells me, "I'm still here, and I can't understand why it was closed." I say, "Are you kidding me?" He say, [whispering] "Go to the court." What you can do?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Nothing you can do.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Because this, nothing you can do.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: [unclear]

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: So at least we were really—if it's not the old customers, like Andy, and all the friends around us, and because it's been just—we have both been working there, and we have a son. He has his mom here, so it was, like, really on a drop. So we have a big lesson to be really very big patient, and working hard, and focus on everything in the business. And also around you, like your neighbors, if they need help. If they need something, you must help, otherwise—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: There was a big support, really, from our customer, he call us at home, "How are you feeling?—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Oh yeah.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Do you need anything?" That was amazing. I don't expect it's gonna be like, but it really touched me. And when we open, like three months later on, the gas comes in

the building. So we open first, before the gas comes in the building. After three months, we get the gas. But for safety issues, we cannot say a word, because we have to, safety.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: But the restaurant has inspection every year. So how come the one time, they tell us to change everything? And it's over like fifty thousand. You cannot get it like this (immediately). Even you apply for loan they don't give it to you because they say, oh, you have a small issue, for example, from Macy's for five dollars. So that was very ridiculous, and it was behind us, as employers. It's like the first campaign, we give them some salary to survive, because they stay with us. You know, that was like a show, they will not take money from us. But he decide, no, we need to give them salary, at least, for each one, for one, two weeks. So they were very happy, and that's why everybody was back after the five months. They help us to clean the place, because two days before we re-open, they come, they clean the floor. Because it was a lot of mess after the construction people. The tables, counter—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: That was a big experience, and—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Really big experience.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: —hard experience, at the same time.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yeah.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: But it makes us stronger.

Dziedzic: And part of the issue of what caused the explosion was that somebody had illegally tapped the gas off of the mainline, right, and you're saying that you guys—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: That was not, a sushi—

Dziedzic: —weren't part of that, you had a direct line.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yeah, I have complete different line.

Dziedzic: So that's why the inspector was, the head inspector was like, why—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Because the building is divided. 129 is other side the building. 127 was half, and then 123, it's another half. So it's like three different conditions. And we are in the middle, and they think this is one building, so that was a mistake.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: But the idea, you remember, Andy, when the fire happened—they closed the gas all over the area. There was no gas for a while, for everybody.

Reynolds: Across the street.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yes! No—

Reynolds: Well that was different, that was a different situation.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: But, you don't have gas, too. You open place by place, place by place, like building by building.

Reynolds: Yeah, I mean the thing is, they shut the whole block off. They had a separate line for the whole building, for their store, that didn't even effect the apartments above. But they just put all the businesses under the microscope after that one, because the thing that she was saying was that they were inspected every year, and no one ever said anything about new ventilation, new extinguishers, any of this. [01:05:01] But when they really put them under the microscope, and looked, they're like, "You have to re-do all of this," because there was, like twenty, thirty thousand—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: It was big numbers to do, yeah.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: The mistake was, the one that—the business on the corner was shut for a couple years, and had no gas and nothing there. So the neighbors, they complained because the apartment is too cold. So she [the building owner] has the idea to go around, from the restaurant, with the pipes and everything, but it's just no imagining what they do, you know? And when this happened, the explosion, like, that was surprise. But this guy, he—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: But I remember, at this time also, with, it's very hard to get the permission—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: —for any changes because it’s a landmark. So we need permission from Landmark [Preservation Commission], to approve, like they can do the changes, with the exhaust on the roof, stuff like that. So they speed and, they help us at the same time, the Greenwich Village Society. They help us, you remember?

Reynolds: I remember, all those organizations and just sent letters to everybody that just said get it going.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: So B&H was not really alone, that’s—

Reynolds: Well, also, at the time, I helped with the second crowd funding campaign; I did a lot of press. So there were two articles in the *New York Times*, NY1. One was out there five times, all the different news—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: *Villager*.

Reynolds: —channels were out there. *New York Post*. Like every local newspaper covered it, but the *New York Times* twice in a month—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yeah.

Reynolds: —they wrote about it. So that helped raise some—because I thought, well, they can go to the press, and tell them, well, we’re waiting on City Hall, that that would help. I don’t know if it did or didn’t, but they did start coming around. And Bernadette Mason, she was really great, helpful, and she was working very hard to get things done. And she, well, yeah, she was calling everybody, she was calling—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Day by day, yes.

Reynolds: —the fire department, “You better get down there!” But even so it was still, even with her, and all that, it still was five months.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Still takes time, yeah.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: A big supervisor, she is. And still now, if she has time, she stops by in the restaurant on the weekend, get some blintzes. Since she visit B&H, she love it. So she takes me, of course, we are in touch on the phone, sometimes we text each other, she ask me how

is everything. I always invite her for Sunday and she says she's very busy, and this time she was like, have a lot of work. But she says, "I leave everything to come to B&H to help you." So we really appreciate for this person, yeah, she really help, you know? But I think the community and, for me, I'm completely from a different country, like, how everybody come together to save this little place was really amazing. I sit behind the chairs, and when I see the fire, I was like, praying, you know? Yeah.

Reynolds: Well, that fire was scary.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Scary.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yeah, yeah.

Reynolds: It was.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: I was by myself, and he cannot pass the bridge, he said, the smoke was like a black—like a storm was coming.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: I see the smoke from—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: The smoke was, like, going to the—

Reynolds: Yeah, I was—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Scary.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: I see the smoke from the Williamsburg—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Black!

Fawzy Abdelwahed: —it remind me like September 11th.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Pssh.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yeah.

Reynolds: I was, yeah, I was at Grand Central in a building, and people didn't know what it was, and that's just what everybody thought.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: You know, and when this happened—

Reynolds: Which is the worst. That's the worst thing to have to think: is it that? I mean, it's a fire, but the fire was bad. Awful. I mean, the whole building—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: When this happened, I was in the basement, and I was tying my shoe, so my head was down. And when this happened, I think the ceiling from the office fell down on my head. And I turn around, like, what's going on? I ran outside, and the girl, the girlfriend of the guy who passed away, she was standing in front of me, all her face and hair was a lot of glass, it was in blood. I say, "You can see this only in the movies." She told me, "I don't have eyes." So I, still I don't see what happened. I just went to the restaurant, I got towel, anything, to just wipe and see what's going on on her face. Some guy, he called the ambulance, so she was like, screaming, "I cannot see!" So somebody called, they tried to get her to the car. Then when I turn around, I see what's going on. I was like, "That's not my dream." And still, I don't hear, because I don't hear what everybody say. Then police, and the fire, and this. And what I was thinking was just for the employee to go out, you know? Close the place and basement because it was really scary. [01:10:05] Yeah, so. Everybody's safe, and—

Dziedzic: So you had to get everybody out.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yeah. Make sure no employee stay inside. And they say, "Hey, I have my bag downstairs." I said, "Listen, if you have any money, we have register. I give it to you, just run." You know? Try a taxi or something, just run from this place. And this is a shock, but still you can control so make sure everybody go out, and it was all of the police, so—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: But what interested me, the owner of the restaurant where the fire happened, instead of call 911, he called the landlord. And the landlord says, she told him, "Wait, I'm coming."

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Oh my god. Yeah.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: It's like, you could have saved somebody's life. When she called the landlord, she came. Was already too late.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: They were in the basement—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yeah.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: —when they ran outside, this was the witness, the girl. She said that two guys were coming from the basement with a bag. So she think maybe they dropped something, like a terrorist or something.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: And the owner disappeared after the fire, and went back home—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: So they left inside, the two people that were inside—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: —to Korea for good.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: —and instead of this you can say, “Run,” that’s it.

Reynolds: Oh yeah?

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: They could save the life, but. And the guy, Moisha and the other one, that happened Wednesday, and he was Monday in the restaurant, “Ola!” when they open. He was “Hola, como esta? Ok, I’m getting my sandwich,” usual. And Wednesday, the person—kid, a kid, twenty-six years old. Two kids. So it’s very sad, very sad. I know his father. One of the kids come every Sunday—he leaves a flower on the corner by his grave, and pray. And he told me, “Listen, I have a couple kids more, my wife. But me, I cannot forget. This is not possible. I never want to forget.” So he fight for this place to make it like a memory place or something. The corner memory? But I don’t know how everything is now going.

Reynolds: They did name the street.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Named the street, but they want to save this place.

Reynolds: Well, they’re gonna build—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: For him, you know what the feeling—like somebody want to put a building and stuff on his son’s grave. It’s a very big tragedy, you know? But. Ah, yeah.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: So she did illegal—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Illegal.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: —connection, a bad connection to the gas, because the son of the owner, he took over the place. They used to be called Love Saves the Day, it was a gift store, and collection and antiques. And then, it turned to be a bar and a restaurant. So she did the—

Reynolds: Oh right. Right, it was like that Asian place, Korean, or something, you know—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Korean, yeah. And—

Reynolds: —noodle shop.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Noodle shop.

Reynolds: Right.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: They cannot get the permit for gas, and that's why they do connection from the store to the other—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: To the other place.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: —the bar. And that was his son. That's why they're making this illegal pipe. When they done it, that's what happened. There was a leak and the explosion. Three buildings gone, three buildings.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: And one of the places was Jimmy's No. 43—was a very nice, old fashioned, like a bar. Everybody, when they come to East Village, they know about the place. It's gone so, it's very, very sad for one person, could happen all this. The deli, this guy, he was crying. He cry because he left a lot of money inside and never found it.

And the insurance, when they come, they come inside, "Oh, you're ok." And they left. I said, "Are you kidding me? All these years we pay, and you told me something like this." But you can't do anything if you're not in a bigger position, you cannot do anything.

Dziedzic: What are some of the, I guess the lasting changes from going through that, I guess for you guys, but also for the community? Going through that, the block going through that. I think, it sounds like your involvement [indicating Reynolds] is one of those lasting changes.

Reynolds: I just started to work with them a little more because up until then I'd only done the t-shirt, and I only did the t-shirt because I thought, you guys should do a t-shirt, people love this

place. If you can make a little money off the t-shirts, that makes the difference between another mom and pop closing or staying open, then sell the t-shirt. [01:15:01] I didn't take any money for the shirt, I just designed it and hooked it up with the printer, Works in Progress on 4th Street. And that's all I did. I would go pick the shirts up and drop them off and get them for them. But then, after the fire, I got more involved with just trying to make sure that they didn't close.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yeah.

Reynolds: Because in the beginning, everyone's coming by saying, "What's going on? Why are you still closed?" And then, when they started telling me, like, things are getting rough, I said, well, we've gotta do something. So then I got more involved with them. And now I do a little sign here and there, or do a menu, or do the calendars—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Day by day, he help us, day by day—

Reynolds: I just got closer to the restaurant. The people who pitched in, it just sort of strengthened that family bond with a lot of people. They all already loved the place, but when family members were threatened by this, people became much closer and loved the place that much more.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yeah. About the t-shirt, you remember the first time we have it because the restaurant was still closed, so Andy had the idea that we have the t-shirt, we're going to go outside. There was like a street by the church—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Oh yeah.

Reynolds: Oh, the church.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: —that gave us space. We sell t-shirts to over seven hundred. You know how many t-shirts? So the old customer, they run to us, and ask "What's going on with the B&H?" and everything. And then mention about the t-shirt, we have also a baby tee, of B&H t-shirt.

Reynolds: We've got baby onesies, which are really, really cute.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: So we have a lot of new babies. Like the guys, they meet each other, and one time, Fawzy, he make for them an engagement table, with the flower and a candle. So these people, they have a wedding—of course we do catering—and after this, they have baby. After a while, they have baby, so we decide, I think he got the idea about the baby shirt. So they are very little, so when we have the pictures on the Facebook, over twenty-four B&H kids. [laughs] All different ages. It's very cute, it's very cute, and I love it.

Reynolds: The onesies are really—because you've got the little wee baby wearing black, and it says "Challah por favor." You got that punk rock, East Village baby, with the green t-shirt. They're really cute.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: One time, I forgot to change out of the t-shirt. I was on my way home, and I stay in the subway, and I hold myself (on the pole). And one lady, she comes very close to me, and I tried to get something and I turn, and I got scared. And she says, "No, no, no, no! I try to read what—where is the restaurant?" It was so funny. She told me it's very nice, and I love this place—but I want to make sure very, like a nice person, lady. So everybody, like when you walk, they ask you, "What does this mean?" You know, challah, challah. It's, you see, it's about an emotion.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: So now, B&H been open for eighty years. So what we are thinking now, to keep it open for a long time, so, this is—

Reynolds: A hundred.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yeah, if we make a hundred—

Reynolds: One hundred years, at least.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yeah, we could make it.

Reynolds: Sure, that's—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yeah, twenty years.

Reynolds: Last night, they said "another eighty years." It's like, what's the world going to be like in eighty years? [laughter] Hopefully, it's going to be—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Some customers, they try to joke, “Oh, you look good for eighty.” [laughter] I said, “Yeah, because the food. And also I have some stretch.”

Reynolds: She was carrying balloons—we were carrying balloons to the party: “80”— “Hey, you look good for eighty.” She said, “Not me!”

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: But it’s funny, we cannot find an eighty for the cake, the eighty numbers for the cake? It’s only sixty. I said, wow—

Dziedzic: It’s the end—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: —this mean nobody lives to be eighty and have one “80” number? Must be only separate, 8 and 0. It was funny. And, you see, the B&H give you a lot of emotion, a lot of surprise, and everyday it’s something different’s going on, so, for, if somebody—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Like it’s a good spirit in the restaurant—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yeah.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: —with customers, employer. Don’t find it too many different places, it’s hard to get—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: I remember when we have idea about the Facebook, I have like a small piece of paper, and I asked each customer for their email or something like that, like I want to invite them to our page. So when we start it was like, thirty people the first couple months. And after all these years, we have now, you know the number?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Three thousand—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Three thousand seven hundred something, for Likes. So I hope we going to go up, up, up with the number. And that was a small idea but the Facebook helps us [01:20:06] a lot, for B&H, to know people from different countries, from Sweden and England—they visit us every year. You know, so this is very nice that each time they’re in New York, or US, they visit B&H. This is very nice of them.

Dziedzic: I think I have maybe one last question, which is that when you’re reading about the East Village, and reading a lot about what the Greenwich Village Society is doing, is a lot of,

battling NYU [laughs] from taking over a lot more real estate, and trying to preserve that sense of community that has existed for so long. So it really sounds like, from what you've said, that that community is really strong. And so, I just wanted to ask whether you feel like you get to see that a lot, or do you also get a sense that it's in danger, because of different real estate—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: We'll leave the last question for you then.

Reynolds: Well, my answer's going to probably be more personal, but I think you get the sense of community by going to a place, or places like B&H or Moishe's, or some of these mom and pop, particularly shops. Like if you do your shopping at little stores, instead of Whole Foods, or whatever, you get that sense of community because you see the same faces over and over, so it becomes a little bit of a neighborhood. But as far as outside of B&H, I think the neighborhood's terribly under threat, and has changed so much. I'm becoming one of those people that's saying this is not the city I moved to. Because I moved here in '91, and the money and all the stuff that's coming in the neighborhood, and NYU—all the bars and everything. But it's not just change, I mean, anything's gonna change. Roman changed, you know? But, in particular, a city like New York, the momentum is there. The problem is the pace. It's changed, it's got faster and faster and faster and faster. Every five years, it seems to have doubled the pace. Whereas, when I moved to the East Village in the early '90s, nothing really changed til after 2000. Then things changed down after 2001, but—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: It's getting very expensive.

Reynolds: Very expensive, too expensive.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yeah, it's like—

Reynolds: All the people who made the Village what it is have been pushed out. Many, so many of them are gone. And the people that are moving in, I don't think they even know what the East Village is. I think a lot of them don't get it. Some do—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Some do, yes—

Reynolds: —you have your customers at B&H who love it and get it, but it's very hard. You know. But B&H is definitely a beacon for people who want a sense of what old New York was

like because it's just sort of a lunch counter culture, just eating at a counter, it's anonymous. You could eat by yourself, and not feel like you're eating alone, and just the fact that you're eating in a place where people have been doing the same thing, eating the same dishes for, well now, eighty years. It ain't McDonald's—although I know McDonald's has been there forever, but anyway, it's just, places like B&H are very important as—I don't know, what do you call it—places like that are the foundation of the neighborhood now because they're here and there, they're around, and I'm sure you guys have a list of long-established businesses that are still going, and hopefully thriving. But a place like that is just, it's important, and it's important for people who have never been there to go. I mean, it's a happy experience—you're going to have food, for the most part, it's all comfort food, whether it's breakfast, or it's soup, or the blintzes. It's going to be a good experience. And also everyone there is so nice that maybe you start coming back, and you become part of that little B&H community. [01:24:55] I mean, there were people coming in yesterday that—what's the group that came in after the party—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yeah. [laughs]

Reynolds: —at the counter, they bought a t-shirt, and they were taking pictures, and maybe they—it wasn't their first time but they were young. My point was that they were young, and they were loving B&H, so that's really, really good.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: For me, in 2004, I see, yeah, the Village was a little bit different. I like the old fashion, the restaurant, the places. Now, after all those years, I see like they try to make it change for the old stuff—we're through it, we put in something new. You know, like destroyed the old fashion places, would make the New York for tourists. For the people, they're like unique, you know? This is like a very simple, we have this in Poland—Warsaw and Krakow, they are like two different cities, but Warsaw, they completely destroyed, and nobody really like it. So I hope it's not gonna happen here, in the East Village and New York City. Don't destroy the small business and what makes special this place.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: East Village has always been beautiful. Always been beautiful neighbors, and very good community. Main concern, that there be more safety. My concern is the homeless, they almost all over the place, at least lately. So they can't get in someplace. We don't mind,

give them food, free, we don't mind helping them. But what we do mind, they are all over the street, and also the safety issues.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: They push away the customer, yeah.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: This is my main concern. I didn't see this before. When I came to the East Village, they'd be hanging out in some certain places, but now they're all over the East Village.

Reynolds: Well, they used to be free in the park, and now you have that bunch on Second Avenue, between Second and Saint Mark's. And when Florence's³ family was here, they are all, like, what's going on? I mean, if they weren't there, you wouldn't really notice much around the neighborhood, but I mean, it's like twenty of them camped out on the sidewalk, dogs, and I mean, they're covered in dirt. So it's off-putting, if you're coming in, if you're not used to the East Village—and even if you're in the East Village. But it's changed.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: But there's no, the law, it's like nobody can really push them away, or talk to them, like to move, to do something.

Reynolds: Well—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: I'm surprised, because you're gonna kill the old businesses, which pay a lot of money for rent, the neighbors, everything, so for somebody don't want to work hard, and have free life, I don't mind, everybody choose his own life, but this is not the way.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Because like new people, new customers, they are afraid—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Afraid, yeah.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: —to go into place where too many homeless are around, and—

Reynolds: Yeah. I mean, they're harmless, for the most part. Other cities, not, I mean, you go to San Francisco or Los Angeles, they're very aggressive, but here—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yeah.

³ Florence Bergson Goldberg is the daughter of B&H founder Abe Bergson. She and her family attended the 80th anniversary yesterday, on August 22, 2018. Some family had not seen each other in 30 years.

Reynolds: —they don't really bother people so much. But, you just—if you've never seen that.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: What happens is that you call the police, they come, they move them, the police is gone, then they come back. [laughs]

Dziedzic: But you're also saying that the safe space for them used to be the park, but then the city decided to kick—

Reynolds: They used to live in, or whatever, Tompkins Square Park is where they all stayed, so, now, I don't know what the appeal of Second Avenue is. I know when it rains, they go under the theater where Stomp is say to stay dry, and they hang out around those kiosks with the Internet, some of them. But yesterday, they're all by where the buildings used to be, and there's no power or anything there. They're just like, all hanging out. Having a bad jam session, and all this stuff.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: A lot of them die too young. And I think the family, they worry about them, because you raise your child, and after this, this is not appreciated for parents. My nation, we never do something like this. We appreciate old people, we appreciate for everything that our parents give us, and create us, for good people. I don't mind, this is freedom for everybody. But this is not appreciated for, forget for life. He give it to you, so it's very sad to see this. We try to help, but sometimes they appreciate if we give them soup, or, like he do, sometimes Fawzy give them soup or some bread. Because some of them are really hungry, and look like they're really for a long time out from home. [01:29:57] But we cannot help everybody, and they try to come close to us, and one day they're gonna be inside the shops, so we scare from this. But this is everybody's choice, but I hope the East Village is going to be just a little bit more safety for people, for restaurants, for everybody. Yeah, so, I hope it's going to be fine.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Thank you so much for the interview.

Dziedzic: Yeah, is there anything else that you'd like to add before we wrap up?

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Last time, when we have the promotion, when we go for the ceremony, I have a recording, and I have a lot of pictures I sent to my family. Those, like, free emotion. I have big family in Poland, so they send to all over, and they say, congratulations, and they were so proud—your dream come true, and your work, and that's so happy—and they love

America. Everybody wants to [laughing] come here. So I said, listen, at least I'm here, as much I live, and everything's fine, more than welcome, everybody. Everybody love America, so—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: God bless America.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: —it's very nice, I'm very happy.

SIDE CONVERSATION

Dziedzic: I did want to ask you to write down the name of the town in Poland that you said you were from.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Inowrocław.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: [laughing] Inowrocław.

Reynolds: It's like Polish, everything's consonants. There's no vowels. [laughs]

Dziedzic: Oh, I know.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: It's a very small town, and we have a lot of old people that go there. This is like adult therapy. What do they call the building?

Reynolds: Spa?

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Like a spa, but more professional, from all over, even from Russia, from Ukraine. Because we have special stuff there, you know? Poland, they have everything—

Reynolds: Springs, are there springs there? Is it natural?

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Natural.

Reynolds: So steam and stuff.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yeah.

Reynolds: Ok.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yeah, especially, you know the black stuff? What do you, put it on yourself?

Reynolds: Mud?

Dziedzic: Clay?

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yeah. So this is—

Reynolds: Oh, the clay.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: —help a lot.

Dziedzic: Wow.

Reynolds: That's what people do in Iceland, right, they go to Iceland, they cover themselves with black. Everybody goes to Iceland to get that picture with the eyes.

Dziedzic: And then the steaming hot spring.

Reynolds: Yeah, everyone does the same thing, it's: look, my eyes, Iceland. [laughter]

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Do you want to know my city?

Dziedzic: Yeah, thank you.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: My city's very special, because it's between Europe, between Africa, Asia, so it's like in the Mediterranean, and between the Mediterranean Sea, Suez Canal, and the Red Sea. This is the point, it's like, amazing city.⁴

Dziedzic: Yes.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: And they have a lot of great fish, right?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yeah.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yeah, seafood, the best.

Dziedzic: Thank you.

Fawzy Abdelwahed: You're welcome.

⁴ Port Said, Egypt

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: So you see from beginning, he was Muslim, I was Christian, and we followed the Jewish place kosher, [laughs] so, yeah, this is—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Amazing.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: I remember the ceremony, the guy, his speech before everything started. Everybody was laughing so much, how this possible, you know?

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Only New York.

Reynolds: I mean, for the award? In the—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Yeah.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Everybody was like, ahh! So funny.

Reynolds: Well, because the guy who spoke before, he introduced you, he was like, it's a New York story. I think that's even on the website—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yeah, I still have all of the whole thing, when I want to have nice moment I press play, and it make me so much happy. And it was a great, great time for my life to have the awards. And especially for him, he was working very hard, and the place deserve— there was a lot of customers and they sit there, they record, they come to restaurant, congratulations. So I think the B&H is for all of them. It's very proud because they're a part of the restaurant. [01:34:52] My guests, there are so many people that say, "Happy birthday!" I say, "No, happy birthday you!" Because if it's not you, it's not us, so we are one now. So he say, oh my god, for eighty years, I look not bad. [laughter] Really very funny, we enjoy so much yesterday. [laughs] Very funny. Yeah.

Reynolds: Food was good.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Yeah, food!

Reynolds: Really good.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: And I said in the kitchen, "Speed up! Speed up!" [laughter]

Reynolds: It was free, but it was good. But it's funny because I didn't really eat until the very end, because I was helping them serve and stuff. And I don't get the pierogis that often because I think they're kind of indulgent, but I love them. And I had a fried spinach one—I cut in half and ate it, was like, oh my god! Forgot how good this stuff was, no wonder everyone's like [snorts], snarfing it down at the counter.

SIDE CONVERSATION

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: [recording begins] Oh, this is the awards⁵. [laughter]

Announcer: [applause] It's been a mainstay of the East Village since 1938, located on 127 Second Avenue, between 7th Street and Saint Mark's Place, literally serving generations of Lower East Side and East Village residents, and New Yorkers from every walk of life. Whether or not they come from Bedford or Red Hook, customers are mad for the B&H Vegetarian menu, the Jewish-Polish-Ukrainian soul food, the pierogis, the knishes, the blintzes, the borscht and the lox, as well as the diner essentials. But it's the ambiance as much as the food that keeps people coming back. A little over a decade ago, B&H owner Fawzy Abdelwahed wanted a break from his crowded lunch traffic, and ventured across the avenue for a burrito at the Stage. Can we hear it for the Stage? [applause]

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Stage, you see, everybody remember Stage.

Announcer: A new immigrant from Poland, Aleksandra Smigielska, Ola for short, not only took his order, but wiped his smudged eyeglasses. Shortly afterward, their relationship begins. That was it. Fawzy pursued Ola, a friendship was born, the couple married at Brooklyn Borough Hall in 2007, Ola became co-owner of B&H. And thus a former Catholic from Poland and a Muslim from Egypt became the proud standard-bearers of a kosher restaurant founded by Jews in the late 1930s. It's a New York love story! [applause]

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: [laughter] Believe me, everybody was laughing so much.

⁵ Article relating to B&H's nomination for the 2017 Village awards: <http://gvshp.org/blog/2017/05/10/congratulations-to-2017-village-awardee-b-h-dairy/> and video of the award presentation by Bob Holman: http://www.gvshp.org/_gvshp/events/awards-2017.htm

Dziedzic: Oh, that's so great!

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: But he was very nice, by the way.

Dziedzic: Who is the host?

Reynolds: I don't know, but you Google it on the blog, and you'll see, because I think that's where the video is. [Bob Holman presented the B&H award]

Dziedzic: Yeah. Oh, that's wonderful. Yeah, I'm definitely one of those people that goes there alone and then feels like I'm there with other people. [laughs] So I was kind of thinking, if I was hungry when we're done, maybe I would go. [laughter]

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Not too far.

Dziedzic: I know, yeah. Yeah, if I come here, I always think, well, maybe I should do some things while I'm in the neighborhood. B&H is one of them, one of the things that's always on my list. Yeah, well thank you so much for taking the time to, to do this—

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: That was a pleasure.

Dziedzic: I'm so glad we were able to get together, and congratulations—

Fawzy Abdelwahed: Thank you, thank you so much, Sarah. I appreciate it.

Dziedzic: —on the anniversary. [laughter]

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Thank you.

Reynolds: Anything you need, just email. I mean, I know you're probably going to be working on this for a while, but that email address is going to be good for—

Dziedzic: Great.

Reynolds: —eighty years. [laughter]

Dziedzic: Thank you.

Aleksandra Abdelwahed: Ok!

END OF INTERVIEW