

Jeffrey M. Strauss: Family Photo

October 2004. Maha Habib shows us old family photos. In one of them, she and her husband, Mamdouh, and their beautiful children are smiling, sitting on a sofa in what could have been my parents' living room (in fact it was their home in Australia), looking for all the world like my Uncle Howard and his Israeli wife, Gila, two of my favorite people when I was a teenager in Buffalo in the 1970s. In the photograph, Maha is wearing a skirt and makeup; her hair is uncovered. She is beautiful. I say, "Maha, I can see your knees!" She laughs. Today, you see, she is wearing the hijab, a modest long-sleeved blouse, and a full skirt to her ankles. The only exposed part of her skin is her face and her hands. She wears no makeup. Her face is drawn and pale. Her eyes are puffy. We have been meeting with her for several days. I have not seen her smile before.

Maha has traveled from Sydney to Chicago—without her husband or children—to meet with lawyers working on the Guantánamo litigation. The four children—including the youngest, four-year-old Hajer—are home in Australia. Her husband is not. He is at Guantánamo. She has not seen or spoken to him in three years.

I was apprehensive about meeting Maha. We knew almost nothing about Mamdouh. How serious were the government's "charges" against him? Would she trust us? Could we trust her?

When I walked into the conference room, Maha was sitting at the large marble table, her back to the door. I said "Salaam Aleikem." Peace be with you. She responded "Aleikem Salaam." We talked, gently, about her life with Mamdouh, who was born in Egypt and whose parents still lived there; about how Mamdouh met Maha, an Australian, when he visited Australia

in 1982, and how they married shortly thereafter; about his travels in Pakistan during the summer of 2001; about their children, especially the youngest, Hajer, who was only a year old when her father last saw her. I asked if she needed breaks for prayer during the day. We made sure to serve vegetarian food. We told her about the Halal restaurants on Devon Avenue on Chicago's far north side, where there are dozens of Pakistani and Indian shops. We asked hard questions. We understood that there were things that we would never know, that probably could not be known.

Hours passed. We began to feel comfortable with each other. We had been told that we were not to shake her hand, that she could not be alone in the room with us without another woman present. But by the second day of our meeting, when our female colleague left the room and the rest of us—all men—got up to leave, Maha said, “No, that’s all right.” We could stay. She had a spiral notebook, in which she had neatly written recollections about her husband, things she thought we would need to know, records of their life in Sydney. We went through it all—the details of their daily lives. It seemed almost too intimate a conversation to be having with a woman who was covered head-to-toe, whose husband was supposedly an enemy of the United States.

We came to be fond of Maha. I think she liked us, too. Several lawyers from our firm, Mayer Brown, took her to a family-style dinner on Devon Avenue. One went out on the last day to buy toys and games for the kids, including the Game Boy that Maha's older daughter had specifically asked her mom to bring back from America, and a stuffed animal for Hajer. There were so many things that Maha couldn't fit them all in her suitcase. I gave her my large Mayer Brown tote bag. We chatted more freely. Did she—an Australian—speak Arabic? No. But she was learning, so she could read the “holy Qur'an” in its original language. I told her how similar some Arabic words are to Hebrew. I showed her how her name looked written in Hebrew and

wrote her a note, in Hebrew, wishing her peace and a safe journey home. Before she stepped into the taxi to the airport, I felt like giving her a hug but didn't. She thanked us and shook our hands.

February 13, 2005. The U. S. government had released Mamdouh without charges and sent him back to Australia several weeks earlier. I am at home reading the Sunday *New York Times*. There is a front-page article about Mamdouh. The headline is “Detainee Says He Was Tortured While in U.S. Custody.” The article reports Mamdouh as saying that his supposed “confessions” were not true; that “I signed to survive;” that during his detention—including stops in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Egypt (where the U.S. sent him for “harsh interrogation”), and at Guantánamo—he had been beaten, questioned while wearing a wired helmet that delivered electric shocks, and “forced to look at photographs of his wife's face superimposed on images of naked women next to Osama bin Laden.”

“His wife’s face.” I thought, I have met his wife. When I last saw her she was carrying a Mayer Brown tote bag filled with toys for her children. *His* children. There is a photo of Mamdouh, one arm around one of his sons, the other arm around Maha, who is carrying Hajer. They are walking along a boardwalk by the water in Sydney. None of them is smiling.

It is nothing like the happy family photo Maha had shown us in Chicago.