

## Historical Enrichment The Heritage of All Mankind

### Oral History

History is commonly communicated in articles and books, both of which are written forms of history. Before written historical accounts, history was transferred by word of mouth. Oral history continues to be practiced around the world alongside written forms of historical documentation. Since recording technologies have been developed, some historians have taken a new approach to oral history, conducting, recording, and transcribing interviews with people who witnessed significant events or knew the individuals who contributed to modern or historical developments. Sometimes interviews can be conducted with the people directly involved in these developments. Oral histories can be a powerful tool to preserve history, avoiding future gaps in the historical narrative. Additionally, oral histories can be part of “bottom up” history, which consists of fewer official accounts. Edited textbooks are often without many of the details, mistakes, and complexities oral histories can contain.

### Interview of Gordon Feldman by Alexis De Greiff

The following interview is of theoretical physicist Dr. Gordon Feldman. Feldman worked with one of Abdus Salam’s close collaborators. Given their acquaintance, AIP’s Center for History of Physics interviewed Feldman about Salam. Alexis De Greiff conducted the interview. Included is only a brief excerpt, which focuses on Salam’s political goals. Blue indicates changes made to the transcript for clarity.

### Interview Transcript

**De Greiff:** How would you define [Abdus Salam’s](#) political goals?

**Feldman:** He did not have political goals. He had the goals of the [International Centre for Theoretical Physics](#).

**De Greiff:** In the widest sense of the word, what were his goals?

**Feldman:** I think his goal was to open up the world of, certainly physics if not science, to everybody in the world, not just the Western world. I think that was something which was certainly very important to him. Somehow, maybe he felt he owed it because here he was from a Third-World country, and he made it, and he contributed. He found no reason why other people in the same situation could not do the same thing. I think that was a principle goal. That was his politics, if you like.

**De Greiff:** Yes. Not referring to politics [inaudible] as part of his [inaudible]. His condition as an Ahmadiyyah, his belonging to a heterodox sect of Islam, did he talk about this, or do you think this was an important — Certainly, it was an important element in his life.

**Feldman:** I think he said maybe once he was upset about the way that his sect, his treatment because of that, you know. He was, I think, very religious. And I think his father was a big influence on him.

**De Greiff:** Do you remember more or less when he was so upset?

**Feldman:** Well, again you must tell me. When in Pakistan there was something in which his sect was forbidden?

**De Greiff:** Yes. 1974.

**Feldman:** In 1974. Yes. So, yes, I think that disturbed him. However, I was not close enough to him. As I said, we were very good friends but I think that was too close to him. He didn't want to discuss it. His feeling, I mean, he did not say anything against the Pakistani government. I think he was upset about it. But he did not show it to me. I think Salam was a fantastic politician, not in the sense of being in a party. He could charm almost anybody from whatever side. And I will bet you find this that on either side of any political spectrum, he could be friends with everyone if he wanted to if it was certainly necessary for his goals, so to speak. If the Institute was foremost in his mind, then he would do what he could to help that out. Like I say, he could charm people. I remember him once, it must have been at some conference, I don't remember, he was introducing Beradini, a very nice man. And Salam gave him the most wonderful introduction, you know, before Beradini was to speak and Salam introduced him. Just fantastic. And Beradini, when he got up said, "Professor Salam, thank you very much for a wonderful introduction. I wish I could believe it." But he was very good.

**De Greiff:** What consisted of Salam's charisma? What was it that made him so charismatic?

**Feldman:** He was vivacious. He always had a twinkle in his eye. He would laugh. And I do not think, you know, he probably never would say anything nasty about someone. I would guess everybody you talk to, I cannot believe you would find anybody who disliked Salam.

**De Greiff:** Well, I haven't been pointed to someone who disliked Salam.

**Feldman:** Yes. There are probably physicists do not like the way he did some of his physics.

### **Source**

Interview is used by permission, courtesy of the Niels Bohr Library and Archives:  
Interview of Gordon Feldman by Alexis De Greiff on 2000 November 16,  
Niels Bohr Library & Archives, American Institute of Physics,  
College Park, MD USA, <[www.aip.org/history-programs/niels-bohr-library/oral-histories/24722](http://www.aip.org/history-programs/niels-bohr-library/oral-histories/24722)>.

### Discussion Questions

1. What new information (that was not covered in the biography) did you pick up about Abdus Salam from this interview?
2. What are some considerations interviewers should keep in mind when conducting an interview? What are the characteristics of good questions?
3. You have now read both short segments of written and oral history. Compare them, discussing strengths and weakness of both media.
4. What aspects of Abdus Salam's character and life were clarified in the oral history interview?