

Chapter II

REFUGEES IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY

by Bénédicte

My name is Bénédicte. I am now 20 and studying Psychology . The Israeli-Palestinian conflict looked so far away and so intricate to me. But I think that with all the different meetings we had to prepare for the travel to Palestine, I have started to better understand what is at stake. In Palestine, I met many young people who are so very much like us but experience a quite different reality. I think that we, young Europeans, should all feel concerned when the rights of Man are flouted, wherever the place.

If I have chosen to write about the Palestinian refugees it is first of all because from now on, they are not an anonymous crowd anymore to me : they have a name - Mazen, Salam, Ribal, Youssef, Jamal... - and I hold all of them really dear. The ten days we spent together helped me understand what it means to « live displaced » in one's own country and taught me how life goes on in spite of all the difficulties met. I would like to write about what they told us as well as about what I saw, felt and experienced while being with them.

The second reason of my choice is that the problem of the refugees is indeed an important aspect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To create Israel, the Israelis uprooted whole Palestinian families from their villages : they had been living in camps for more than 60 years now, just as other people do in train-stations. And I do wonder how peace could become reality as long as these people are forbidden to go back home, get their villages, their history, their roots back...

Writing about the Palestinian refugees is writing about an essential part of the history of Palestine. For these people probably more than for any others, « history » is not synonymous with « past » : the tragedy of the occupation is 62 years old now and the problem of the refugees looks still quite far from being solved.

“70% of the Palestinian population, i.e. more than 4.6 million people today, are refugees or displaced people within their own country”, Matthias Burchard had told us during our preparation for the trip, “which makes them the largest and oldest established refugee people of all times”. “Today, i.e. 60 years later, J. Al Hussein* had added then, the UNRWA* estimates that 30% of the Palestinians live in the 58 official camps - especially in Jordan (42%), Gaza (20%), Syria (20%) and*

Lebanon (9%). Two million of non-registered refugees (1.2 million in the Arab countries) should be added to the number.”

“The issue of the Palestinian refugees is different from that of other refugees (for example from Rwanda or Kosovo)”, J. Al-Husseini had added, “who could either settle outside their native country, or were repatriated. The Palestinian refugees who had to leave Palestine are not only prevented from going back home by Israel, even though the UN Resolution 194 recognizes their right to return. They and their descendants are also kept stateless (i.e. the host countries, except Jordan, don’t grant them the nationality) “so their right to return is protected”) while being the victims of socio-economic discrimination despite the proclaimed equal status they are supposed to enjoy with the natives”.*

I am not going to write about the Palestinian refugees outside Palestine since we didn’t meet them during our April 2009 trip. I would like to focus here on the people who were displaced inside Palestine, and particularly on those we met in Jerusalem and in the West Bank³⁰.

The history of the Palestinian refugees of the camps started in 1947* when the Israeli army threw the inhabitants out of their houses. The latter took the road with nothing else but the clothes they had on and hid in the fields and woods nearby, hoping the situation would soon be back to normal and to be able to go back home soon. Unfortunately, this never came about... These men and women, from then on homeless, had to manage the situation all by themselves. First : nobody came to their rescue. Then, as it seemed things were not going to get better for a while, the UNO set out to organise the first camps and provided help, food and tents to these families who had lost everything.

“I was born in the refugee camp of Aida”, Abdelfattah, the director of Al-Rowwad cultural centre in Aida, told us. « There are only traces left of the village my parents are from, and the rusted key of the house they were forced to leave in 1948. My parents tried to go back home several times but they were fired at. They ended up settling in the tents pitched by the UNRWA on a field this organisation had bought. This camp was supposed to be temporary but it turned into a less and less temporary place to live in for the 1948 refugees who were rejoined by the 1967 refugees*. Poverty, exile, illnesses killed 10 of my parents’ 14 children. The first curfew (interdiction to leave the house, even to get food) I remember dates from my 4th birthday : I can still see the Israeli soldier standing in front of me. But I also remember what my parents were telling me about their beautiful village. Today, my mother is dead. Her grave is at the foot of the 12-meter-high wall that surrounds Aida on the North, East and West. I can’t go there : her grave is surrounded by barbwire”.*

Today’s refugee children didn’t experience the *Nakba** in the flesh but this catastrophe is at the heart of each Palestinian’s identity, whether born today or

³⁰ On the Palestinians of Gaza, read the excellent book “Gaza in my eyes”, by Marianne Blume (editions Cortext, 2008)

some 60 years ago. Remembering what happened is a way to resist the Israeli occupiers, a way to tell them : “However much land you take from us, you will never manage to blot out our history nor the link we have to our land...”

Today’s refugee children were born in the camps and have never had the opportunity (nor the permission) to go to their parents’ native village where it still exists. The fact is more than 500 villages were burnt or rased. It just goes to show how important elderly people’s role is : **Mourad***, the young leader of the video-workshop in Al-Rowwad (Aida camp) has filmed his own grand mother, an old lady, withered and tearful as she answers her ten-year-old grand-son’s questions. The boy wants to know what happened to the family and neighbours. She tells him about her terror before the sudden attack, the flight and the long march on the road with nowhere to go, the nights in the fields, the waiting and the hope. She shows the heavy key of the house door : everyone had taken his with him. They were so sure that, one day, they would be able to go back home. Then, they would just go on with their work, finish what they had been busy with when the Israeli troops arrived. And the child promises he will never forget. One day, he will go back there and take care the family’s olive-trees... *inch’ allah!*...

“I have never seen my native village”, Oussama (31) from the neighbouring refugee camp, told us. “I was born in Jordan and I grew up here, in Deheisheh, but if you ask me, I will tell you that I have the strange feeling I was there because my father and my mother have talked so much about it and have made me repeatedly promise I won’t forget it. Yes, they fed me with one idea : I must go back to it.”*

The older people tell the younger ones. So do the walls of the refugee camps too. In Aida, for example, there is a long and really beautiful fresco that bears witness of the 1948 *Nabka*, of the 1967 war and the flight of the Palestinian population before the armed soldiers. The naïve painting and mosaic stand testament to the bombing and firing, the dead and injured, the desecrated cemeteries and mosques and the nights spent hiding in the middle of the uprooted olive trees, far enough but not too far either from the burning fields and gardens. Other drawings tell about the *first Intifada** and the demonstrations the Palestinian people organized to demand the implementation of their rights. Yet nothing happened. Nobody in the West lifted a finger to defend them. The tents of the first camps were slowly but surely replaced by permanent structures and life just went on, despite poverty and the terrible helplessness they felt in the face of the injustice done to them. The children grew up, got married, had children in their turn while, one by one, the grand-parents die along with the roots and memories of the life before.

But the children of the first Palestinian refugees were not ready to let their lives get that easily wiped from the history of the world : in Aida, next to the historical fresco, they painted a series of pictures on the walls of the camp, each of them representing the place their family had been thrown out of : *Beit-Awa, Deir-Ayab, Al-Ramlah, Khouldah, Beit-Jibreem, Al-Quds...* , a long list of 27 villages that should be added to the lists set up by each of 58 refugee camps in the West Bank, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. A great way to jeopardize the Zionist propaganda* which would like the world to think that, indeed, before the Jews arrived there, there was nothing and nobody in Palestine (“a land without a people for a people

without a land"). False! There were Palestinians in Yafa, Haïfa (today Jaffa and Tel Aviv) and Nazareth... before Israel was born. Whether their houses were destroyed or are now inhabited by Israeli settlers makes no difference : Palestine is the land of their ancestors and as long there are young people to remember this, there is still hope that one day, they will go back home. As I looked at the painted walls of Aida, I could hear the whispered promise passed on from one generation to the next one: *"One day, we will return..."*

In Aida, many other details tell about the lost villages and life. First there is the huge key that overhangs the entrance to the camp as if to remind the passers-by that this should have been a temporary living place and that, a few kilometres away, their lands are waiting for them. Then there is this little boy, a little cartoon character drawn by **Naji Al Ali*** that tickled our curiosity : *"It is Handala, Salam* (18) explained to us. As you can see, he has only 10 hairs on the head, which shows he is only 10 : Handala isn't going to grow up until he is allowed to go back to his country. He's barefoot and all ragged, poor and helpless like all the refugees. We can only see his back because his eyes are riveted to his village, where he is dreaming of going back to one day. Handala holds his hand behind his back, to show he refuses to take part in what is going on and to make peace until he can go back home. And he refuses to have to give anything in exchange for his own country. It belongs to him. It was stolen from him and must be handed back without his having to pay for it..."*

The tents of the first camps have gone indeed, but the feeling of pain and injustice and the will to go back to the villages of one's roots have stood the test of time. They are maybe even more vivid among the new generations...

*"We are the children of the camp
We were born foreigners in our own country
We lived in the camps
We were called refugees
This land is our land
It is the land of our fathers and grand-fathers
We have lived here for years and years
We have lived and grown up here(...)*

*Behind the hill lies the tomb of my grand-father
My grandmother gave birth to my father under the olive tree they uprooted by
there
And my father cried
My never cries, but when they uprooted the olive trees he cried(...)*

*From here they want to uproot us
But our roots are deep here
From here they want to uproot our memories
But our roots are deep here
From here they want to uproot our eyes and feelings
But we are here rooted as beech trees"³¹*

³¹

Sung by the children of Aida camp. Theatre play "We are the children of the camp", by A. Abu-Srouer

This is it for Aida, the refugee camp we stayed in for ten days, a place where it was impossible not to notice how wearied the fathers were, who spend their days sitting on the doorstep watching life pass. A place where children running everywhere in the narrow dusty streets go without stopping past the tens of bullet holes in the walls of the houses ; a place at the foot of the Wall, this 8-meter-high concrete wall sections put together to form a blind barrier on the North, East and West of the camp...

We also had the opportunity to visit **Oussama** and **Tareq**, both working at Al-Rowwad centre but living in the neighbouring refugee camps of Deheisheh and Al-Aaroub : there again, imprisonment, poverty, boredom, helplessness in face of the arbitrary nature of it all and of Israel's impunity... What kind of a future is there for the people there ?... We already felt like calling out the injustice of it all. Yet, we hadn't seen the worst of it.

Our visit of Balata camp* was one of the most difficult and moving moments of our trip. It had started smoothly though. We had first been welcomed in **Yafa Cultural Centre***, the equivalent to Aida's Al-Rowwad. But what **Ahmad**, the director of the centre told us about Balata let us guess that what we were about to discover here was going to be a change from the « comfort » we enjoyed in Aida.

“The refugee camps are the living testimonies of the Nakba that was inflicted on the Palestinian people in 1948 and 1967”, he first tells us. “The deterioration of the refugees’ living conditions (social, economic, sanitary and environmental) has turned the camps into places of deep human distress. This camp was opened in 1951 on land belonging to the UN to accommodate the 6000 Palestinians driven out from their village by the Israeli army in the area of Yafa (Jaffa). As with the other camps, Balata was supposed to be temporary but has become a permanent living place for the refugees and their descendants”.

Then he set out to describe “his” camp : *“Balata is the largest refugee camp in the West Bank : 25.000 people are currently living on a one-square-kilometre-large territory. The houses of the camp are in fact breeze-block buildings, each with 3 or 4 floors as the population increases. There is only one room per family, without any comfort nor style. The young people who get married can't afford to live on their own : they live at their parents' who had to stay at their own parents' too”*

“Thanks to the help we get from the Nablus town council, a sewage system was installed in Balata but the ventilation system of the camp is of poor quality, there is much damage caused by damp in the houses, which is responsible for breathing problems and more especially among the children, skin problems because they don't spend enough time in the sun... You'll understand why when you go through the camp...”

Ahmad went on : *“Balata is a pioneer camp in political activism : not a day goes by without an inhabitant being arrested or released by the Israeli police (hence these*

cheers in the street today !). The Israelis don't like us. They consider Balata as a terrorists' pocket, but everything is a question of viewpoint : from the point of view of the Palestinians shut up in the camps, the people the Israeli army call « terrorists » are in fact men and women fighting for our freedom, our right to return to our lands and the end of the vexations, humiliations and sufferings we have been subjected to as "exiled in our own country" for so long. There have been too many promises, of which none has been kept : nothing has changed for the inhabitants of Balata since 1951. And he added: "You'll see nothing and will be able to go round the camp safely in the daytime, but our nights resound with shouts, bomb explosions, machine-gun fire launched by Israeli soldiers who bolt daily into the camp to carry out a few arrests."

"There are currently thousands of Palestinians in jail, 80% of whom under 18. They have committed no crime apart from being Palestinian. Nobody is safe from an arbitrary arrest : the Israelis don't knock at the doors, they throw grenades that send them flying off, make holes in the house walls so they can move from one room to another and shoot at anybody who is in their way, children, old people, women."

"The largest part of the population in Balata lives under the poverty line. But, they were not born poor", he made clear, "some owned their own farm, others were thriving businessmen. But they lost everything with the Nakba."

"The main victims of the occupation are the children. They live in poverty, some are handicapped as a consequence of the attacks by the Israeli soldiers, others are orphans or have a relative in prison. Many of them saw people being killed and many suffer from important psychological problems... then, they have no place to go and play : there are no gardens, nor parks in Balata. Only the street and its problems..."

"A special effort is made to supervise the children : the three schools of Balata take more than 6000 7-to-15-years old children and here in the YCC, we organize different activities : music, dance, computers, theatre and reading. We have also set up a programme of psychological aid to help the women and children manage the sufferings inflicted by the Israeli occupation as well as training under the supervision of professional volunteers. It is all about offering the people of Balata things to do, creating a place where they could feel safe and have a bit of pleasure. The aim of all the activities is to try to bring a smile back on their faces, make them aware of their rights and enable them to build themselves a better future".

Ahmad's introduction, though already quite alarming, had prepared us only partially to the shock we underwent as soon as we left the cultural centre. There is no word, no picture to render the tension, the wretchedness and dereliction reigning inside Balata. 25,000 people cram in 4 districts that are separated by two 5-to-6-meter-wide streets, the main streets. That's where the few little shops are, where men and male teenagers hang around at a loose end in the sun and watch the visitors go by. How out of place and ill at ease we felt passing them ! Even the kids who followed us asking for our names (*shusmak?*, *shusmik?*) and trying to get at our rucksacks were frightening.

The YCC guide was nervous and always insisted that we should keep together, which made us feel even more out of place. In Aida, we had got used to walking around on our own or in very small groups as it makes creating contact, interacting with others easier. But the man in charge of the visits wouldn't budge an inch : we had no choice but to as he said. We understood later that this was the only way our security inside the camp could be ensured.

Inside the "districts", it is sheer horror : the streets, or rather the alleys are so narrow that we had to move in a single file. Sometimes we even had to turn sideways to edge our way through them. The breeze-block buildings are both too high and too close to each other to allow the sun in, which gives rise to an eerie dampness and darkness inside and outside the houses. We came across little kids in there, who were playing without seeing nor feeling the sun on their skin.

One question was nagging us all throughout our "visit" to Balata : how can these people put up with this all ? How can they live day after day in such a dump ? The guide's answer was so simple : *"We have no other choice... The fact is if a refugee decided to go and live outside the camp (let's just imagine he could afford it), he would lose his registration on the UNO lists and would consequently lose his right to return."*

No wonder then to find posters of martyrs or calls to join activists on the walls of the camp... Seeing the grinding poverty these people are reduced to living in, how can we complain that some of them resort to violence to demand their fundamental rights be respected ? Not a European would accept that for his dog.

When we finally emerged from these squalid districts back onto a larger street, we felt awful and in a hurry to leave this oppressive place. We weren't that proud of ourselves. Not proud to have been shy of the people, of the kids either. Indeed, it required a real effort from us all not to get caught in the "fear of the terrorists" and to remember these men, women and children are the victims of an unbearable situation.

Yet in Balata too, just like in Aida, people resist dehumanisation : the YCC cultural centre offers a non-violent and constructive alternative to armed struggle. The leaders of the different workshops are intent to help the kids of Balata resort to words and mutual understanding rather than to weapons and violence, once they are old enough to defend their rights.³²

Oussama, Tareq and Mohammed who had spent the day with us (which brought us trouble and brutality at the checkpoints³³) had never been to Nablus nor Balata before. They didn't miss a scrap of what they were discovering : there are even much worse places than Aida, Deheisheh and Al-Aroub, about which they knew nothing. The separating wall is indeed doing its job and doing it well...

³² See chapter 5 : the Beautiful Resistance of the Palestinians

³³ See chapter 3 : The Palestinian archipelago, Hebron and Nablus