

Chapter IV

LIVING = RESISTING

by Laetitia

My name is Laetitia, I am 28. I work with homeless people in Brussels. When I accompanied the Taayoush group into the occupied territories, I was just coming back from a trip to Asia. Homeless people, immigrants, untouchables... What all these populations share is probably an extraordinary ability to be still standing and to distinguish between the beautiful and the ugly. This does impress me.

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The Palestinian people have been under occupation for more than forty years now. Sixty-three years have passed since the 1947 Division Plan that cut their country into two so painfully⁴⁶. But why do they put so much energy into remembering the *Nakba* *? Why can't these women and men just accept their lot and look to the future?

I admit I wondered for a while. But as I was living with the young Palestinians of Aida camp and the other places we went to, as I listened to them and watched them live, I understood two important things. First : remembering the past, taking care of one's roots doesn't prevent one from looking into the future. Second : the Palestinians can't accept their lot as refugees. Because it is unacceptable and because accepting it would be renouncing all dignity.

I remember how **Daoud*** was prevented to come with us on the esplanade leading to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem⁴⁷. I think of **Ribal*** who can never be sure he will manage to reach his university nor be able to go abroad to present his theatre show. I still have the inhabitants of Bethany in my mind, a population trapped between the Wall of Apartheid and the old city of Jerusalem and I can still hear **Youssef*** say: *"We are like In a prison here in Aida, a small prison. Three months ago, I tried to drive two Americans to Jerusalem, which is only 10 km away from here. I took all kinds of twists and turns, a real zig-zag route to try to avoid the wall, the flying checkpoints. I spent more than 7 hours in the car, in vain..."*

I can still see the 8-metre high wall around Aida camp and across the Palestinian countryside, these roads and streets that lead to nowhere anymore as they have been abruptly cut by the Wall or by earth or rubble mounds - a striking contrast to the modern road-network that is for the exclusive use of the Israeli settlers. I have

⁴⁶ See Historic at the end of the book

⁴⁷ Cf. Chapter 3 : the Palestinian Archipelago

another look at the maps : the division of Hebron into two zones, the arbitrary carving up of all the occupied territories of the West Bank into A-B-C zones. And I work it out : currently, more than 60% of the territory is inaccessible for the Palestinian inhabitants of the West Bank and East- Jerusalem.

Above all, I will never forget the difficulty we had at the checkpoints and the way the soldiers dealt with us. For us the checks lasted only a few minutes but the procedure is a constantly ongoing ordeal for every Palestinian wishing to go from one place to another in the West Bank.

Should the Palestinians accept all this? Should they accept to be kept imprisoned as if they were guilty of something. Should they accept to be constantly watched over, checked, searched and infantilised? Should they accept to be repeatedly humiliated and mere puppets in the hands of soldiers who are more often than not much younger than them and free to take any decision arbitrarily? Should they accept to eternally have to account for anything they do and never know what their days and nights materialise since it is simply impossible for them to organise nor plan anything?

“In Aida, 68% of the population is under 18, 77% of the people are unemployed, 80% of the population live under the poverty line, trapped at the foot of an illegal Israeli settlement”, Abdelfattah told us. But he made things clear once and for all : “We are not a humanitarian case : Palestine is not poor because it lacks resources but because we were put in need. But we are no beggars...”

During the ten days we spent in Aida, I had plenty of opportunities to notice how far from Europe’s (or Tel Aviv’s) consumption society the refugees are. There is no shopping street in the camp. Only here and there, small shops selling basic fruit and vegetables, fallafels and by way of a « supermarket », a 40 square meter size room in which you’re better off entering alone or with only one other person to get the nappies for your baby, the chocolate spread for the kids, bread, soap, tea, eggs... nothing but the bare essentials. Same situation in Balata.

The houses in the camps are rough and ready breeze-block structures with no heating, no garden, no terrace to hang clothes up to dry. On the flat roofs, water tanks collect the rainwater and build up reserves for the cooking and washing. As Salam* said : *“Here, there are all these boxes built so close together here : we have no room, no privacy”*. And she added with a sweet smile : *“ I would like to leave. Not to travel abroad but to go back to my village.”*

When we met Tareq⁴⁸, he was living in his cousin’s flat in Al-Aaroub, the smallest refugee camp around Bethlehem. Yet, as he explained to us, *“In Palestine, it is customary for a man who wants to get married to build his own house, which in the current situation of occupation comes down to building an additional floor to one’s parents’ house where it is still possible”*. But Tareq didn’t have enough money to do this. His young wife, Sarah, who is an English teacher, has been unemployed since their little baby Watan (“homeland”) was born : they couldn’t afford to save money on the salary Tareq earned for the work he was doing at Al-

⁴⁸ Cf. Chapter 1 : Living under Occupation

Rowwad. *“The problem is my cousin is getting married too, so he will need his flat back soon. I really don’t know where we’ll go then.”*

Finding a place to live is a niggling question for all those who, still today, are being thrown out of their houses. The kids of Silwan⁴⁹, what’s left of the bombed house Sandra showed to us in Bethlehem, the family in Hebron whose house the Israeli settlers burnt because they had refused to let it go.

And when it comes to finding a job, there is no work for the Palestinians. If they are lucky enough to have a position, they can lose it because of arbitrary decisions that deprive them of their means of working - Nidal cultural centre, where **Daoud** was working when we met him, has been closed under a security pretext ; God knows how long for. Or the goods can’t move freely and the shopkeepers of Bethany, Hebron and other towns and villages of the occupied Palestine have no choice but to close down, one after the other. How long will **Allah’s** little souvenir shop in Bethlehem stand the strain ?

As for health and medical care, **Martine** and **Sandra**, both volunteers for Aida, gave us an insight into the physical destitution in which the sick and handicapped people live in the camp. They simply can’t afford the medical treatment they need urgently. There are UNRWA clinics in the camps, which offer free medical care, yet only primary ones. No help is provided in case of long-term treatment needs (dental care) or heavy pathology (cancer, surgery, heart problems, strokes, dialyses...) This is the case with **Ali Jiddah**⁵⁰, who is 67 today. He had welcomed us into his little study-living room in East-Jerusalem and had told us about the story of the Afro-Palestinians and about his own itinerary through the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As he was talking, he often rubbed his right hand, paralysed after he was hurt : *“There is a price to be paid for all those who get involved and participate in the conflict, he told us. I’m still paying the price for it. For example, according to the law, I should get medical treatment for my hand and my leg but the Israelis refuse to give me the necessary medicines. They said ‘no” to me, “ no way , no way”...*

And I ask : should the Palestinians tolerate all this too ? Should they put up with being dispossessed of their properties, with living in poverty and being kept in the precarious living conditions the Israeli occupiers impose on them ?

All of them, children and adults, live in a world of violence and armed aggressions where their basic security guarantees are totally absent. *“ In Aida, Abdelfattah Abu-Srouf had told us before we went to Palestine, we are subjected to regular incursions or military training with tear-gas, bombs and firing by the Israeli army”*. **Jean-François*** had warned us: *“You should know that in the refugee camps, night belongs to the Israeli military. It is a special feeling to be woken up at 4 a.m. by the muezzin’s call and the Israeli soldiers’ siren, gunshots and noise bombs. There are tragedies everyday. You may have to attend one.”* And on the phone, before we left, **Martine** had told us about our security : *“Should arrests take place inside the camp, they will most probably happen after the curfew. So don’t go out at night. This is just a matter of common sense. And if anything*

⁴⁹ Cf. Chapter one : Living under Occupation

⁵⁰ See Chapter 5 : the Beautiful Resistance of the Palestinians

happens during the day, the rule is to keep away. Always remember that where there are soldiers, there will most probably be noise bombs, tear gas or even firing. They make no distinction between the Palestinians and foreigners. The one thing to avoid is trying to intervene : go back home, and make a detour if you see a military vehicle. In a word, don't draw attention to yourselves."

I can still hear the young **Riwae** telling us how the soldiers broke into her house in 2002. I can still see **Ayssar** inside the chicken wire of the Israeli jeep in Hebron. I imagine **Tareq** and **Marwa's** young brother taken to prison without any fair trial.⁵¹

For all the Palestinians, there is a constant need to keep a low profile : the looming threat of armed confrontation is always there. In front, the soldiers and the settlers have weapons and the support of the authorities. *"They deprive us of our dignity"*, **Oussama** whispered watching the young soldiers toy with the Palestinian students they had ordered to get down their coach at Howara checkpoint. Not only that : they keep the Palestinians in a state of permanent stress.

Should the Palestinian tolerate to be that much humiliated ?

One more thing, which probably more specifically concerns the inhabitants of the refugee camps : if statelessness is a painful situation for the refugees who had to settle outside Palestine⁵², building one's identity is a complex task for the displaced people inside the country too. *"It's difficult to answer people who ask you where you are from. You answer, "I live in Aida but in fact I'm from this or that village"*, **Salam*** told us. *"It's difficult to make them understand that we were transferred from our country to another part of our country, that we are refugees within our own country."*

It is not only difficult to build up one's identity as a Palestinian man or woman but also to have it recognized abroad as **AbdelFattah Abu-Srouf's** experience shows : *"In 1985, I got a scholarship to go and study in France. Let me tell you about how I went through Customs : according to my ID, I'm from Jordan (a "dictatorship" under Israeli ("a democracy") mandate). I corrected the customs officer " I am a Palestinian under Israeli occupation". The bewildered officer registered me as "from undetermined nationality", since Palestine doesn't exist. Same scene in the USA where the officer asked me where I was born. - In Aida. Where is that ? - It was in Palestine under the Jordanians. - I don't have « Palestine » on my computer. Where was your father born ? - In ... (name of a Palestinian village). - Where is that village ? - It was in Palestine. The Israelis destroyed it. - I don't have "Palestine" on my computer. If it is occupied by Israel, it is in Israel⁵³."*

Should the Palestinians accept to have no existence whatsoever in the eyes of the world ?

⁵¹ Cf. Chapter 1 : Living under Occupation

⁵² Cf. Chapter 2 : refugees in their own country

⁵³ Palestine can't be found on any airport computers, except maybe by Ryanair

I read what I've just written again. Next to me, the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights adopted by the general Assembly of the United Nations on December, 10, 1948 in Paris :

- Article 13, 1 : *Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.*

What about Daoud, Ribal, Youssef and all the Palestinians who are trapped behind the wall and in the checkpoints ?

- Article 17, 2 : *No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.*

- Article 23, 1 : *Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.*

- Article 25, 1 : *Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.*

What about Salam, Tareq, all the men of Balata, the children of Silwan, the shopkeepers of hebron, the heavily ill, the handicapped people?

- Article 3 : *Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.*

- Article 9 : *No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.*

What about Ayssar, Marwa's brother and all the people who are in the Israeli prisons today ? What about the inhabitants of the camps who are regularly subjected to military incursions ?

- Article 15, 1 : *Everyone has the right to a nationality.*

- Article 15, 2 : *No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.*

- Article 13, 2 : *Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.*

Articles to which to add Resolution 194 (adopted on December 11, 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations) which, after the forced departure of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, decides that : *"the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible.*

What about all these men, women and children then who, more than 60 years later, still live in refugee camps in and outside Palestine?

The assessment is painful but clear : the Palestinians have all been deprived of a number of rights yet recognized by the international Community. Tacked on to this pain is for the refugees the additional pain of not being allowed to go and meet their family, see their villages, go back to their houses, get their properties (farm, industry...) back, which were either confiscated, or destroyed...

No, decidedly no : how could the Palestinians accept their lot of refugees and occupied? This would amount to giving up all dignity. Above all, it would mean

accepting that their children will have no better life than they, their parents and grand-parents had.

Living is resisting, Sophie said in conclusion of Chapter 3. I feel like adding : and resisting is living.

Of course, the way to is important. The way adopted by the Palestinians we met is simply admirable.