

# Ever since I was young

I have wanted to know just how my families were evicted from Haifa. In 1948 my father was 20 and my mother was 17. I had some fragments of stories from my paternal grandmother, who was a teacher at a school in Haifa, but never the full story. My father always complained that he was tired after long hours of work, and that it was difficult for him to remember. I would chase him at weekends without success. One day I confronted him, accusing him of hiding a shameful experience. Considering my provocation an insult, he refused to speak to me for a week. Suddenly, one Friday morning, he started talking about his exodus story. During the following year - it was 1999 - I asked Palestinian friends and acquaintances whether their parents had told them about their own exodus experiences. Out of 28 people, only three received the full story.

My father's solemn voice started to shake when he spoke about what he had seen on his way north from Haifa to Bint Jbail in Lebanon, about being spotted by an armoured vehicle that opened fire on him. He talked bitterly about his *shame* at the weakness of the Palestinians and their betrayal by Arab "bystanders". My father, who loved poetry and spoke eloquent, spontaneous Arabic, suddenly became speechless, searching for words to express the experiences of the final months before fleeing to Lebanon.

In spite of his time spent fighting in the Army of Salvation, his testimony was in no way heroic. Similar private testimony, which I heard on other occasions, is very different from the publicly-staged statements celebrating Palestinian heroism and martyrdom compared with brutal massacres by the Israeli enemy. However one does not often find the fabric of daily life in pre-war Palestine discussed by either side.

To cope with the needs of a family with five children, my father had two jobs: a schoolteacher and an assistant-pharmacist at my uncle's pharmacy. Leaving around seven in the morning and coming home late every evening, he often had his dinner alone, and he would ask my mother not to warm the food. Food, for him, was for "filling the stomach in order not to feel hungry" and "One doesn't

live to eat, but one eats to live". He often repeated, "I am done with life", as if his watch had stopped in 1948 and that any time after was a supplement, a sort of overtime in his melancholic existence. He always said, "We, Arabs, go from defeat to defeat".

In 2002 I decided to test my theory about the inability of 1948 expellees to discuss these issues with their children. SHAMIL, the Palestinian Refugee and Diaspora Centre, carried out an oral history research project in the Jenin camp. Around 100 in-depth interviews were conducted, of which half were with young people. The results showed a relatively important contrast with my experience (and that of my acquaintances). Only one third of the young people hadn't heard about the eviction experience of their parents. This can be explained by the relative proximity of Jenin to the place of origin ('Ain Hod, Haifa, Zara'in, etc.) compared to the Yarmouk camp in Damascus where I had been living, but also by a growing awareness of oral history.

Among projects started in the 1990s, Palestine Remembered ([www.palestineremembered.com](http://www.palestineremembered.com)) is the most significant. Its website carries interactive material about each city and village of historical Palestine. Archive fever is, as Bishara Doumani points out, spreading among Palestinians everywhere. Whether in Ramallah or Haifa or Beirut or elsewhere in the world, someone or some group is busy interviewing old people and compiling genealogies, searching for photographs and letters, collecting textiles and folksongs, visiting and renovating graveyards, scanning and repairing manuscripts, compiling dossiers on old houses and destroyed villages.

So, during the last ten years or so, the silent victims have been liberated from their "shame". Three factors are key. First, the changing local/regional context: victims see the peace process/return of PLO leaders/the intifada as new hopes that necessitate opening all the files and playing all the cards. Secondly, the role of TV stations like al-Jazeera and al-Arabiyya is crucial: many documentary films and programmes based on Palestinian testimonies are being produced and screened. Finally, oral history is seen by many Palestinian refugees as a response to Zionist narratives and has mirrored and counteracted the efforts of Zionists.

In the forum created by Palestine Remembered, one of the participants wrote: "Many Palestinians want to help and do not know how but what some of us forget is that remembering our history and our heritage is just as important as raising money, writing books or engaging in politics. We need to know what we are defending and

why. Part of the effort of the Zionist movement is to replace not only our land, but our tongue, our olive trees and our history with theirs. If we don't know who we are, who will? And if we won't speak on our own behalf, who will?"

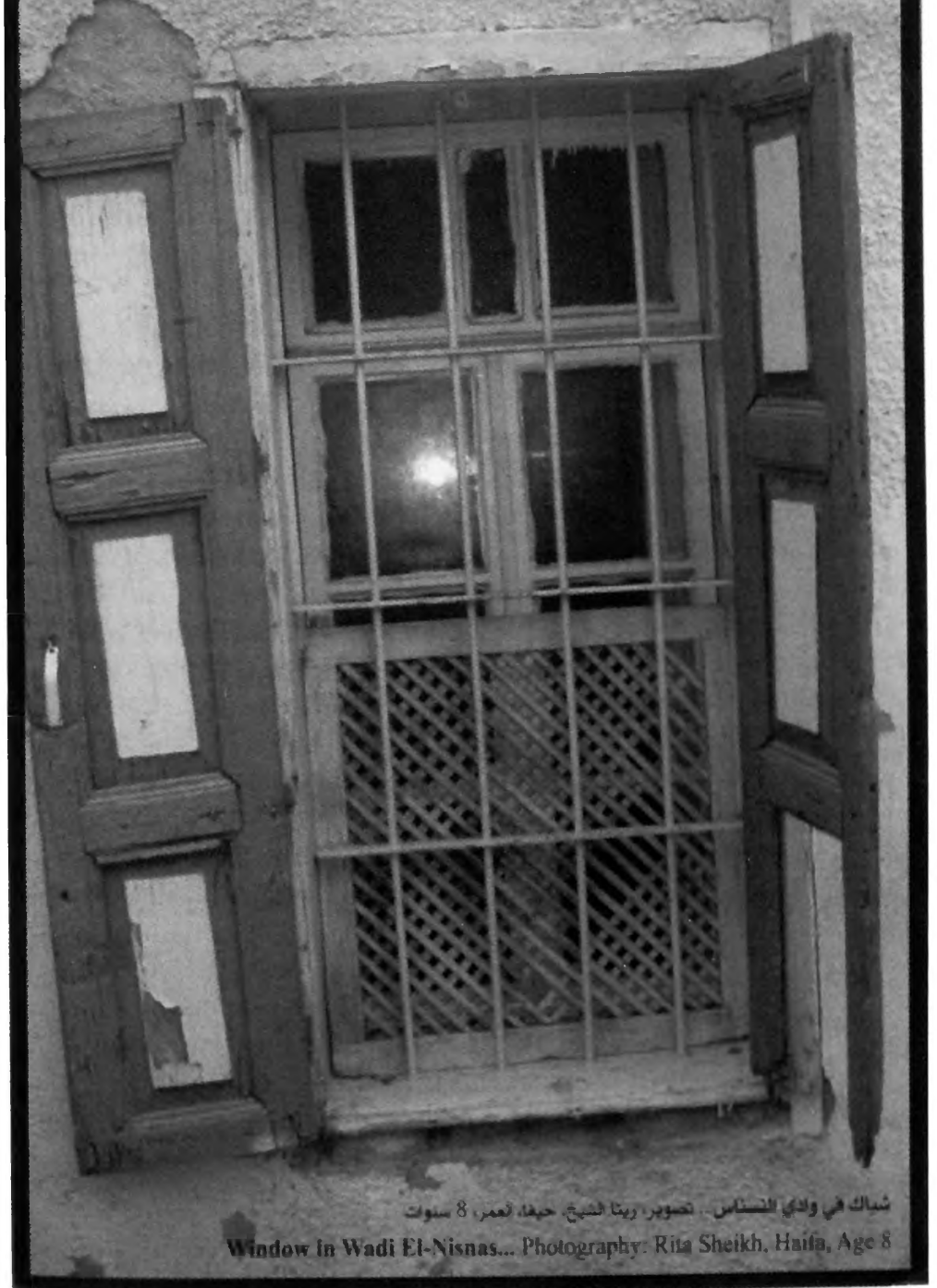
Over the last ten years, the Institute of Palestine Studies and its affiliated Institute of Jerusalem Studies have published a growing number of memoirs, diaries and letters by prominent Palestinians. Now ordinary people from Palestinian refugee camps in Syria are, remarkably, writing their own memoirs, sometimes having them published professionally (by Dar al-shajara in Yarmouk camp, for instance) or via self-publishing. However, these new memoirs are usually eyewitness accounts of the war of 1948 and the later exodus. Publications recording the fabric of daily life and the cultural history of Palestine or the Palestinians remain very rare.

Two trends can be found: a mainstream trend where the re-imagining of pre-1948 Palestine was "romanticised", full of "visions of escapism, like images of the citrus plantation" and "nostalgic", a sort of freezing the homeland into "frames of pastoral, idyllic, paradise lost". The second trend is more complex and critical, presented by ordinary people, returnees, novelists and scholars.

People lost many of their personal documents, photos, and property records, which were often burned when the Israelis took over their homes. Even official documents in municipalities often disappeared. Additionally, the Arab community originating from Haifa, scattered around Syria, Lebanon, Israel and the West Bank, did not traditionally keep written records.

Oral history is vulnerable to the selectivity of the narrator's memory - what the witness wants to remember and to overstate, and what he or she wants to forget. There is the forgotten and the forgettable, but also the problem of self-censorship, or of people saying one thing to one person and another thing to another.

When I visited my family in Yarmouk camp my father refused to look at photos I had taken in Haifa because, in his words, it was not "his Haifa". Haifa was now an Israeli city, he declared, and he insisted that he could not return so long as it remained under Israeli sovereignty. The very next day, however, a Swiss journalist friend of mine interviewed my father and asked him if he would return to Haifa if it became possible. Suddenly ideological and eloquent, he announced that, "as a Palestinian, like anyone, I long to return no matter the conditions". Another example comes from Jenin camp. The properties declared by the Palestinian refugees are clearly overstated. The *mukhtars* (village leaders) of Zarain and Ain



شباك في وادي النسناس... تصوير، ريتا الشيخ، حيفا، لعمر، 8 سنوات

Window in Wadi El-Nisnas... Photography: Rita Sheikh, Haifa, Age 8

*Reproduction of Postcard paintings from the Children's art exhibition and Creative Workshop.  
Supervisor: Abed 'Abedi, Haifa, 2007*

Hod provide evidence about properties which showed the problem of selectivity and exaggeration.

Paul Ricoeur makes a key distinction between individual memory and collective memory. For him, with no memories there can be no history involving people. An individual remembers what was done or suffered. At the same time, individuals share common memories with other members of their group. Our individual memories take shape against the backdrop of this collective memory, and it is often difficult for the individual to sing outside the chorus.

Then there is the question of to what extent oral history includes not only the victims' perspective, but also that of the perpetrators. The American historian Raoul Hilberg, author of the groundbreaking book *Destruction of the European Jews*, is highly critical of history based on victims' or survivors' narratives. He bases his work on the perpetrators' and executors' documents and testimonies. Hannah Arendt claims that the history of the Holocaust was not written by the victims themselves, but was written after the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem when the perpetrators had spoken. She justified her absolute need to attend the Eichmann trial by writing "I wanted to expose myself not to the actions themselves - which are after all already known - but to the ones who did them". Researchers - Palestinians, Israelis and foreigners alike - have long neglected the need to carry out interviews with Israelis on the social, economic and political life in Palestine prior to 1948 and their participation in the war.

What distinguishes the testimony of Palestinian refugees from Haifa is that their reference point is not the land of their ancestors, but the city and cosmopolitan life of twentieth-century Haifa.

The most poignant of the Nakba oral testimonies deal with how they heard the Haganah, the Jewish paramilitary groups, broadcast terror messages, via loudspeakers, to scare Arab inhabitants into fleeing. This has been confirmed by the work of the historian Benny Morris. Palestinian accounts are contested by some Israelis who point out that the leftist, tolerant mayor of Haifa told the Arab population not to leave. This is contradicted by Morris: "In Haifa, the civilian authorities were saying one thing and the Haganah was doing something else altogether. Moreover, Haganah units in the field acted inconsistently and in a manner often unintelligible to the Arab population".

Two bitter issues are raised by some who fought, interviewed in the Yarmouk and Jenin camps. The first is the

political fragmentation of Haifa at that time, with leaders divided over different agendas. The second is faulty munitions and the lack of military training, confirmed by the memoir of Rashid al-Hajj Ibrahim.

Haifa was not only divided politically, but also socially. It is interesting to contrast the testimony of my paternal grandfather, Muhamed al-Hanafi, and that of my maternal uncle. My grandfather had moved to Haifa in 1921 with Izzedin al-Qassam from Jabla near Latakia in Syria, fleeing French repression. The charismatic Syrian cleric, who preached a powerful mixture of Islamic reformism and national resistance, found fertile soil for his message in Haifa, especially among the destitute urban community. My grandfather described a Haifa of migrants from Syria, Egypt and Lebanon and a working class in the port, the railway and oil refinery.

My uncle talks about young people from all over northern Palestine drinking alcohol in Haifa's bars. By the early 1920s, the influx of Russian and Eastern European Jews and then, in the early 1930s, the immigration of a large number of German Jews, made the city open to many influences. May Seikaly describes it as a pleasant city, whose famous orchards brimmed with orange and lemon trees. Many popular poets talk about Haifa as a place for entertainment: walking, swimming, bars, good restaurants, and so on.

Add this to the French missionaries and German Templar immigrants with their educational institutions. Haifa became a place of extraordinary encounters. Unlike the other large towns with mixed populations, however, Haifa was relatively new, and was unhampered by long tradition and history. For this reason, Haifa was more receptive to change than other places.

What was the relationship between Jews and Palestinians in mixed cities like Haifa? Zachary Lockman suggests a dual society paradigm as a lens by which Mandate Palestine can be seen. Influential writers like S. N. Eisenstadt, Dan Horowitz and Moshe Lissak embrace the dual society model. But as Talal Asad has shown, Palestinian Arabs play virtually no role whatsoever in Eisenstadt's analysis: the Yishuv appears to have developed in a vacuum, entirely disconnected from and uninfluenced by the Arab society in its midst. Instead, for Eisenstadt and many other sociologists and historians, the contours and dynamics of Jewish society in Palestine, and of the future Israeli society, were shaped decisively early in the twentieth century by the generation of Zionist "pioneers" who brought with them from eastern Europe those values most conducive to successful

institution-building and launched the Yishuv on its own distinct trajectory toward statehood.

Palestinian historians, broadly speaking, also fail to depict the relationship between Jews and Arabs at that time. The dual society paradigm allows one only to see the conflictual and violent mode of interaction between Arabs and Jews in Palestine. Written material among historians rarely goes beyond this; important exceptions are worth noting. For example, the work of Ruth Kark & Joseph B. Glass (on a Sephardi family, the Valero, and their relations in Ottoman and Mandatory Jerusalem, and the work of Salim Tamari about Ishaq Shami and what he called *Arab Jews* and not European settler Jews).

The differences are significant if one takes into account the distinctive social history of both groups, and the way Zionism tried to manipulate the first group. According to Tamari, in most places in the world today, the term "Arab Jew" is considered an oxymoron. Oral history material shows different levels of relationships and encounters: in the neighbourhood, at work and in bars. In neighbourhoods like Hadar in Haifa, many contacts were established between Jewish and Arab families. Even when the Palestinians speak about the different worlds they give many examples of encounters, as in the case of L.S., a 77-year old housewife: "we used to invite each other. My mother loved their food, especially a sort of shakshuka with eggs. My family used to see our Jewish neighbour Umm Yaqub almost every week. [...] Among the topics we talked about was the invasion of Haifa by many Jewish foreigners. [...] Even Umm Yaqub talked about them as invaders and was worried about their immorality. You should understand that Jews and Arabs are conservative and were always shocked by the women's dress of the European Jews."

Zionist ideology prevented Arab Jews from speaking Arabic or sympathising excessively with their national brothers. This is brilliantly depicted in *Forget Baghdad*, a documentary by the Iraqi director Samir, which tackles the dilemma of Iraqi Jews in Israel (Shimon Ballas, Samir Naqqash, Moshe Hourri, and Ella Shohat). Sami Michael, in this documentary, depicts the dilemma that some Iraqi Jews face in Israel. Michael reflects eloquently that: "It is as if, sometimes, I feel I am two persons. One is an Arab Iraqi, the other an Israeli Jew. [...] During the war on Iraq, I felt as if they were bombing my childhood." The other side of the problem was, unfortunately, how the Arabs dealt with these Jews, and how all contact was forbidden, as if a human being could only belong to one side.

Isaac Shami (1888–1949) who lived in Haifa and was considered by critics to be one of the most brilliant writers in

Palestine at that time, reflected through his person and literature a phenomenon on its way to extinction, namely the identity of the Arab Jew. His dilemma constitutes a perfect example of this problem. The Balfour Declaration placed Arab Jews and the Sefardim who identified with Arabic culture in Palestine in an awkward position. Their resistance to the imposition of the Zionist identity was mostly a cultural resistance, not an ideological one. On the other hand, some of them saw in the Zionist movement the seduction of modernity, which they experienced as the seduction of European culture and socialist thought.

In the realm of work, Haifa also was an exceptional place. Unlike nearly all Arab-owned enterprises and most Jewish-owned enterprises in Palestine, the Palestine Railways employed both Arabs and Jews. It was one of the few enterprises in which Arabs and Jews worked side by side, encountering similar conditions and being compelled to interact in the search for solutions to their problems. According to Lockman, "The Palestine Railways was also one of the country's largest employers, with a workforce that numbered about 2,400 in 1924 and reached a war-swollen peak of 7,800 in 1943. This workforce comprised numerous unskilled Arab peasants hired to build and maintain roadbed and track, but it also included substantial numbers of skilled personnel in the running and traffic departments and at stations across the country and (in 1943) some 1,200 Arab and Jewish workers were employed at the Haifa repair and maintenance workshops. Indeed, until the establishment of an oil refinery in Haifa at the start of the Second World War and then the proliferation of British military bases during the war, the Haifa workshops constituted Palestine's largest concentration of industrial wage workers."

Oral testimony among Palestinian refugees highlighted the discrimination against the Arab workers. Jewish workers were paid up to twice as much as their Arab colleagues. One Palestinian refugee, a leader of Arab workers in the port, reported this anecdote: "After a strike we carried out around 1938, the Histadrut [Jewish Workers Union] succeeded in increasing the wages for Jewish employees. I went with some Arab workers to protest. The British supervisor justified the raise for the Jewish workers by the fact that they are accustomed to eating chocolate and this was costly."

In addition to the impact of the political system, another social class issue was to arise. The Palestinians inside Israel had become much wealthier than their relatives who were living as refugees in the occupied territories. Haidar notes that visits after



1967 stopped quickly. One interviewee who lived in Haifa explained that he had become too upset when he accompanied people to their former homes in Wadi Salib and other parts of Haifa, and that he had to stop doing this.

There are many explanations for this gap between the citizens of Haifa and refugees living in the Palestinian territories and abroad. The Palestinians of Israel channeled the power of Israeli society, absorbed it and then exercised it against Palestinians living under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as Cedric Parizot argues. Differences in their socio-economic situation created a feeling of superiority. The sociologist Nabil Saleh argues that the Palestinians of Israel did not worry about what the occupation meant for the Palestinian territories. He remembered from his childhood how the Palestinians of Israel would say that the West Bank was "opened" rather than "occupied."

On their first trip to East Jerusalem in 1967, Palestinians from Haifa took pictures of Israeli soldiers in uniform with their guns. According to the Palestinian historian Adel Manna, who studied the case of 350 Palestinian families from the north of Israel who moved to East Jerusalem to be closer to Palestinian universities, some of them felt like a minority both in a racist Israeli society and state, as well as among the Palestinians of Jerusalem.

One can argue that these prejudices among different groups are no different when a Palestinian Bedouin of Beersheba goes to live in Haifa. In highly-segmented and tribal Palestinian society, prejudices are aggravated by border separation. The current Israeli politics of space also hinders connections between Palestinians inside the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In the long term, borders are created in the minds of people. A border does not necessarily change national identity, but it does change the everyday practices of people, including their willingness to move to places of origin.

The Palestinian refugees of the West Bank and Gaza, as well as those of the diaspora, have a greater attachment to the land of Palestine than they do to the people of Palestine. In interviews, refugees often insist on talking about property, land, the Mediterranean Sea, the Khader tomb, al-Aqsa Mosque, Biri` m Church and so on, avoiding the question of how they might live, and with whom.

I am not suggesting here the impossibility of cooperation between Palestinian returnees and their Jewish neighbours, but the necessity of thinking of return not only in terms of geography but

also in terms of social relations. The Palestinian refugees should not create a myth of a land without a people for refugees without a land. This is nothing more than a parody of the Zionist myth.

Establishing the right of return – the key to any durable solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict – will open up the various choices available to Palestinian refugees after more than 60 years of exile. SHAMIL's fieldwork and my own studies in Palestinian diaspora countries from 1990 to 1995 uncovered a very heterogeneous population of five million, all of whom would claim the right of return but would not necessarily exercise it. It seems that a smaller number are objectively ready to return.

In this article I have explored the Palestinian memory at work and the fact that refugees bearing witness to the Nakba have taken a long time to have a detached perspective, assimilate their experiences and present their reminiscences with meaning and form. I pointed out some of the ways in which Palestinian refugees from Haifa have remembered the war of 1948, their expulsion, and the social and cultural life of pre-war Haifa, including encounters between Arabs and Jews. In these encounters, there is a discrepancy between written and oral history. Oral testimonies can carry deep truths. As Ahamd Saadi and Leila Abu Lughod have shown, it is only through such testimonies that breakthroughs can be made in the wall of the dominant 1948 narrative.

Oral history has highlighted the heterogeneity of Palestinian society around the world, often overlooked in favour of a unified national character. This heterogeneity reflects social and cultural diversity and political fragmentation of pre-1948 Haifa, which continue to exist. This aids the meticulous and persistent efforts of the Israeli intelligence apparatus to create hard and fast social boundaries between Palestinians. To that one should add the physical borders that separate Palestinian communities. Aziz Haidar observed that encounters after the 1967 War between Palestinian refugees living in the newly-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip and their relatives within the 1948 borders were problematic. After many years of separation, people quickly understood the differences. Occupation, surveillance, and control had created a new Palestinian world inside Israel.

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