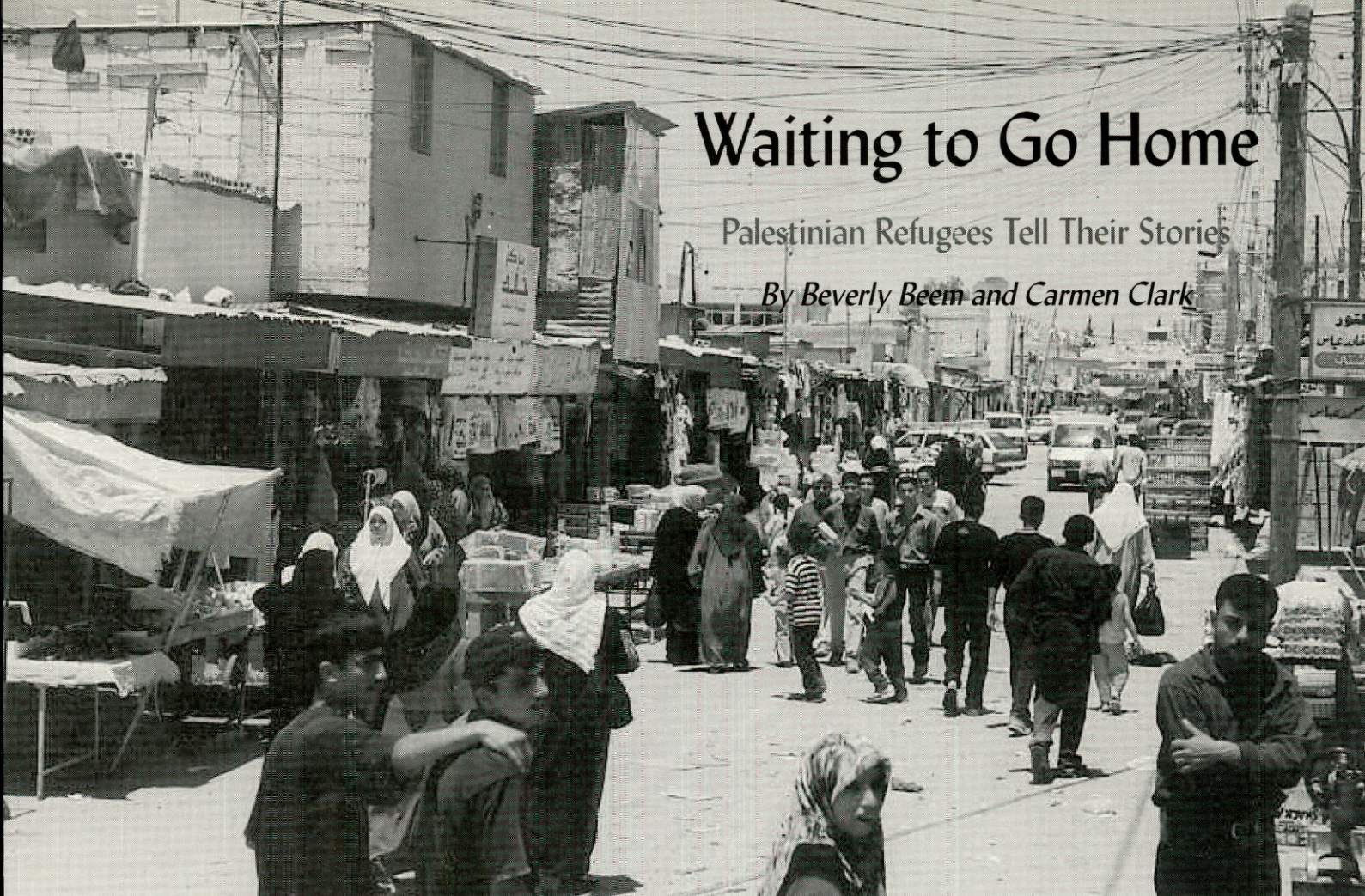


Waiting to Go Home

Palestinian Refugees Tell Their Stories

By Beverly Beem and Carmen Clark



Street in Baqa' refugee camp, Amman, Jordan. Photo: Carmen Clark

Are the streets always this crowded or are all these people out for market day?" we asked Imad as he drove us through the narrow streets of the Baqa' refugee camp on the northern outskirts of Amman.

"No," he said, "it is always like this." The roads were filled from one side to the other with people weaving among the small shops and stands. We were American women looking for the Jordanian Women's Union, where we hoped to learn more about the Palestinian women who lived there.¹

While Imad, a Palestinian man of about thirty-five, navigated, we turned our attention to the sights and sounds that passed by our window. "What is this?" we asked, pointing to the leafy branches with pods we saw being sold along the streets.

In answer, Imad stopped and a young merchant handed us a bundle of fresh green garbanzos to eat right off the stem. But we weren't there for sightseeing. We had a more serious purpose. We wanted to talk to the Palestinian women in the camp to learn their stories.

We had a lot to learn about why these refugees were there. We looked to the Jordanian Women's Union, a center established to aid women in domestic, legal, and social concerns, to help us. We were ushered into a simply furnished room where we were immediately greeted with tradi-

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because it seemed their stay would be prolonged.

tional Arab hospitality. We were full of questions, which Imad, who now became our interpreter, conveyed for us.

What is this place? Who are the people who live here? How did they get here? What is their experience? What did they leave behind? What are their lives like now? What is their hope for the future?

The Baqa' refugee camp was set up during the Six Day War, which Israel and its Arab neighbors fought in 1967. When Israel occupied territory, taken from Jordan and Egypt, many Palestinians in those regions, fearing for their safety, abandoned their homes and fled to the surrounding countries. Many went to Jordan, where food was provided and tents were quickly erected to house the influx of refugees.

One hundred twenty thousand people currently live in the camp on one to two square kilometers of land, or about one-half of a square mile. Our hosts pointed to pictures on the wall of people packing to leave their homes from the occupied territories and making their way on foot to what they believed would be a short stay away from home. Many thought they would return to their homes when the fighting died down, but when they attempted to cross back into the West Bank they found the roads blocked.

They and their children and grandchildren are still there, thirty-five years later, many still hoping to go home. Even some of the elderly among them, whose whole lives have been shaped by the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, believe they will live to see their homeland again. They are from Jaffa, Haifa, Hebron, Nablus, and the surrounding villages.

Some left their original homes in 1948, when they were pressed out by the establishment of the state of Israel and fled to the West Bank, which was administered by Jordan. Then in 1967 they fled again from the West Bank to the camps in Jordan and other sur-

rounding countries. In each case, the move was thought to be a temporary escape from the violence; refugees felt they would soon go home. Now they wish they had not left their land, even if their homes were destroyed and loved ones killed. They understand how difficult it is to return.

In the beginning, each family was allowed ninety square meters, which is less than one thousand square feet, regardless of the family's size. At the outset, each family had one space, but now extended families have grown to include three or four family groups in the same space.

It soon became clear that the refugees would not return home within a matter of years, and temporary structures with walls and tin roofs replaced the tents. The refugees used concrete to build structures of only one floor at first, then they added another story or two with more permanent roofing because it seemed their stay would be prolonged.

Aside from houses, the camp has many shops, which serve the everyday needs of the community, and Palestinians who achieve a level of prosperity are most likely to be in business. A college education is valued, and a family often saves money to send one child to college. However, after graduation these students often find that few jobs are available for Palestinians. This situation makes it difficult for a family to raise its standard of living. Families that can afford to move out are free to leave at any time, but they usually stay close to keep in touch with friends and family, who are still part of the camp community. Most people who live around Baqa' are originally from the Baqa' camp. Some are reluctant to move out, believing that such a move is a denial of their hope of return to their homeland.

After our orientation at the Jordanian Women's Union we went to several homes to talk with the people. Here we would see how the history of the

migration and the statistics of building sites were translated into the lives of families. Our visit in each home was totally unexpected, but we were greeted warmly, immediately welcomed with offers of tea or coffee and served with Arab hospitality, even before our hosts or hostesses knew who we were or what we wanted.

As we entered the first home, we walked through an enclosed cemented courtyard and into a small room, about twelve by fourteen feet, which served as a bedroom and living room, as well as the pantry for the kitchen. A refrigerator and a cabinet of tea sets stood along one wall. Narrow foam pads were stacked against another. The pads were taken down and spread on the floor for sleeping at night, then taken up again during the day so the room could be used as a living area. Three rooms serve an extended family, which currently includes twelve people in residence. The ceiling was made of tin, and when the rains come it leaks.

Our hostess was Umm Mahmood, from Hebron. The "umm" means "mother of." Many times, friends never know the real name of a woman because she uses a name that means "mother of her first-born son." Similarly, the father is known as Abu Mahmood.

We asked about her family. She said she has ten children and thirty-three grandchildren. Two of her children are still at home. We later learned that these ten children are sons, and that she also has seven girls. She had lived in a small town outside Gaza, which Israeli soldiers took over in 1948, forcing her to move to Hebron. We knew something of the political situation, but not of her experience. That was what we wanted to understand.

"What was it like to be in Hebron during the war?" one of us asked. They feared for their lives, she explained. Smoke bombs filled the villages, and rumors of the rape and mutilation of women by Israeli soldiers

Photo: Carmen Clark



Another street in Baqa' refugee camp, Amman, Jordan.

spread like wildfire through the villages, inspiring terror. She remembered how she smeared grime from the bottom of cooking pots on her face in order to look ugly. She and her girlfriends thought that if they were ugly the soldiers would not harm them.

As she spoke, Imad declined to translate details. Muslim instincts and sensitivities also motivated many to leave Palestine; men felt it a matter of duty and honor to protect the women in their families. When the war was finished and the danger over, they expected to return home in ten to twelve days. They buried their valuables near their homes and walked toward the West Bank, carrying only water and the few possessions needed for the trip.

She told us, "Americans believe we are killing Israelis for nothing, but we are fighting for our homeland." Looking at us directly, she added, "If an American were to take everything of yours, what would you do?" At this point, she suddenly realized we were Americans. She was very embarrassed and looked down silently, apparently feeling that she had insulted her guests.

We quickly let her know that it was OK, that we wanted to know how she really felt, and, with just a momentary pause, we continued the conversation. With a sweep of her hand around the room, she looked at us and demanded, "Is this house good for anyone in America?" It was a rhetorical question, and in our silence she went on: "We can be cold and that's OK; we can be hungry and that's OK; but we just want our land. We are good people. We just want peace, but we want to have a life and land—a good life. We want to be left as we are on our own land."

Umm Mahmood is waiting to return to Palestine.

Upon entering the second home, we arrived in a small open courtyard and sat on stools that our hostess provided. Immediately, the traditional hospitality was served. The hostess also came from the Hebron area. Her family's reason for leaving Palestine in 1948 was also fear. For several years, while Palestine was under the mandate of the British, British troops had gone house to house taking all the weapons from the Palestinians, including even the cooking knives. Without any means of protection, the Palestinians instinctively fled after hearing about fifty-eight people who were killed in Deir Yassin and of twenty-seven who were killed elsewhere, at a wedding.

We asked, "How long did you have to pack and leave?"

She answered, "Two days, and then we started walking." At that time, she was eighteen years old with two children. They didn't return because, again, they were afraid. Two of her family were killed and her house was immediately occupied by Israelis after the family left.

Four women were all talking at once. Word spread through the neighborhood that we were there, and more women came from other homes to meet us and join in the conversation. They were all angry and wanted to



Photo: Carmen Clark

Cars and people share the street in Baqa' refugee camp, Amman, Jordan

tell us their stories, and we were eager to hear them.

One woman who joined the conversation told us her mother's experience. Her mother went to fetch water and was separated from her daughter. Village people nearby told her to go and look for her daughter in a group of lost children a short distance away. If she could not find her daughter, they told her, she should just take any one. There were many children separated from their families and in need of new parents.

The Palestinians left the occupied towns and villages in groups. Women and children led the way, and the men formed the rear guard, putting themselves between their families and the Hagganah, the Israeli militant group that followed them. The Palestinians expected to return after the fighting ended.

"It was planned to have it happen like this," the woman said, meaning that they would leave thinking the move was temporary only to discover that they could never return. More recently, people have stayed at home during the Intifada. Even when their houses and shops are destroyed, and hospitals and schools are massively damaged, they will not leave. They will stay in the rubble. They know from their experience in 1948 and 1967 that if they leave they will not return.

Our hostess showed us the smiling picture of her

“Is this house good for anyone in America?”

Our hostess showed us the smiling picture of her “sister’s son” from Jenin, the concept of nephew always being expressed in relational terms. He was a second-year student at the university. Then she showed us his picture in the newspaper, where he was depicted carrying a machine gun. He had been a suicide bomber in Jerusalem during the recent visit to Israel of U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell.

“What motivated him?” we asked. “Why would he do such a thing?” His aunt recounted how two of his friends had been killed by an Apache helicopter while driving in the West Bank. Five friends of the two young men were all equally willing to execute a suicide mission as revenge, and the day before they flipped a coin to decide who would go. Her nephew was chosen.

The woman told us that at first the family was puzzled and angry that their own son could do such a thing, then they were sad, and finally they were proud that he had sacrificed himself for the common cause of the Palestinians and were glad he had gone to be with God.

“What else was there to do?” she continued. “Sharon’s retaliation creates hundreds more willing to do this. There is just too much anger. If Sharon thinks he has won, it is not true. Fight stone for stone!”

The third home we visited was in a different refugee camp, Wahdat, inside the city of Amman. We were offered seats on a couch in the small living room about ten by ten feet. The husband was present, as well as the wife and one married daughter. A college-age son later joined in the conversation, as well. Twelve family members, including two students, live in this house. All the children greeted us with kisses as we sat down to talk and enjoy the tea.

When asked why they had left Palestine, they answered in a manner similar to the others we had heard. They were afraid. The daughter compared their experience to what had recently happened in

Jenin. We told her that Americans were very concerned about what had happened in Jenin, that the pictures they saw on the television news were horrifying.

Her response was immediate and passionate: “This has been going on for fifty-four years and *now* you take notice because of Jenin?”

Among the Palestinians to whom we talked we found a general perception that America shares in Israel’s guilt. The helicopters from which the Israel defense forces shoot missiles are American. The weapons and most of the funding are American. The Palestinians see no corresponding concern for Palestinian interests. American politics, they believe, is controlled by powerful Jewish lobbyists.

“If America gave Palestinians 10 percent of what they give Israel, that would make a difference for us.” What they want, they said, is freedom, peace, and land. “It’s just land, just land. That’s the issue. There is no reason to attack Israel if we have our land. It is fighting guns against knives. All we have is rocks.”

Palestinians consider the American government complicit in the bloodshed that has stained a land holy to Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike, but they are quick to separate the American people from their politics. While offering us more tea, one hostess said, “People are people, and we can believe that the American people mean well.”

We asked, “Is there anything we can do as individuals to help you?” She responded: “Just tell our stories.”

So, here we are, telling their stories.

Everywhere we went, we realized that we were looking at people with stories to tell. We knew something about the story of Mohammad, the cook at the American Center of Oriental Research (ACOR) in



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Umm Mahmood and some of her grandchildren with Carmen Clark.
Photo by Imad

Amman. He, too, had come to Jordan in two stages.

In 1948, Mohammad was ten years old, living with his parents and brother and three sisters in Zakariyyeh, a small village in the middle of Palestine. He remembers hearing the news of the invasions of villages along the sea. At that time, the Palestinians started to leave their homes. In Zakariyyeh, Mohammad and his family saw refugees passing by the village from the coast to villages inland, from the sea to the hills.

The migration started in 1947, but Mohammad and his family stayed in their village until 1948. He said, "My own story is how we became refugees. Israelis came to take our villages, village by village, until they came closer to us," he said. "They would come to a village, destroying and killing, and the people would run away. The soldiers came at night and planted mines to explode houses. When they came to the village next to us, our parents with the

other parents of the village took the women and children out of the houses and into the fields at night, so that if the Israeli soldiers came at night, no people would be in the houses."

"One night they came and took four people from the fields and took them five to ten kilometers away and killed them. We didn't know that they killed them; we only knew that they took them, but later people discovered that the victims had been killed. We spent the nights in the fields and the days in the village for about two months before the Israeli soldiers took the village. In October 1948, our family left the village for good. We went to a village near Hebron and were there about one month."

Mohammad and his family heard that camps for refugees were being built in Jericho. Because they had no money to buy a house, they needed to move. They were unable to take anything with them, not even papers or deeds, only the clothes on their backs and the keys to their houses. They lived in the Jericho refugee camp for twenty years, first in tents, for about two to three years, and then they were able to build small houses with reeds for roofs. They expected to go back to Zakariyyeh in a month or two, or maybe six months or a year. For twenty years, they expected to go back.

Mohammad worked as a cook in the Albright Center in Jerusalem, but there was no transportation between Jerusalem and Jericho except by foot. Many walked along the tortuous thirty-five kilometer road between the two cities. One day when Mohammad had walked three-quarters of the distance, an Israeli army truck stopped the group he was with and told them to wait.

"We want to bring trucks to carry you," they said. They brought the trucks, which carried them not to Jerusalem but to the Jordan River. The soldiers then told the group to cross the river.

"We didn't want to cross," Mohammad said, "but they started shooting and we had to cross the river. My family—my wife and three-month old twin sons—was in Jericho and I was in Jordan. Fortu-



Khala, one of the staff members, in the door of the Jordanian Women's Union

nately, I had friends in Jordan and could stay with them for three months and my family was able to come and join me. But we were refugees again—with nothing. Since we were from the West Bank we had Jordanian citizenship and I was able to work.”

Now that Mohammad has established himself and his family in another place we wondered if he, too, still wanted to go back. We asked him if he wanted to return if the situation changed.

He said, “I have been a refugee twice. There is nothing worse than being a refugee. People can be very poor in their own homeland and feel very happy. Unless you have been a refugee you don’t know how people look at you. If a Palestinian state appears, the question is who will be allowed to go to it. If allowed, of course, we will go at least to take our children there and plant them there again.”

“What makes it difficult for refugees is to see their own homeland occupied by another people who have no right to be there and to be strangers in another people’s homeland. You see strangers in your home and you are a stranger in another’s home. If you have a homeland you can go anywhere and then always go back home. You are never lost because you always have a place to go.”

Notes and References

1. All quotations are reconstructed from the authors’ collective memory.

Beverly Beem is a professor of English at Walla Walla College. She is working with Doug and Carmen Clark to study the geographical sites connected with the biblical book of Judges. Carmen Clark is a bookkeeper in a dental clinic in Walla Walla, Washington. She helped dig at Tall al-‘Umayri and worked as the site’s object registrar.

Beverly Beem wishes to acknowledge with thanks the generosity of the Faculty Research Grant Committee of Walla Walla College, which allowed her to visit Jordan.