

FROM MESOAMERICA TO THE MIDDLE EAST

I : Exile

When I lived in Guatemala in the mid 1990s I was told a story about Palestine. During the time of the worst military repression in Guatemala, in the early 1980s, when hundreds of villages were wiped off the map, the teller of the story, José, had lived in an area of the country where many settlements had been founded by religious people. The radio was one of the few ways by which people could find out what was going on. One day José was listening to the news and to his horror he heard that there were bombs being dropped on the nearby village of Palestina. He thought that meant that his village would be next so he rushed around warning everyone to get out, that the soldiers were coming. The villagers, thinking they were about to be killed, fled into the surrounding countryside. Only some hours later did they realise that it was a false alarm and that the radio report had actually been about the situation in the Middle East.

José was still chuckling when he told this story more than a decade later, humour being a crucial survival technique for Guatemalans affected by the civil war which lasted from 1960 to 1996. I remembered José's story one day during my recent trip to the West Bank as Samir, our Palestinian guide for the day, let us in on some of the jokes Palestinians tell each other, admitting that dark humour is something which keeps their spirits up. For example he took great delight in telling us about being held up for hours at a European airport for questioning. In the end the only accusation that could be made against him was that he was travelling on a false passport, to which he responded, "if I were a terrorist and wanted to travel around the world on a false passport do you think I would choose a Palestinian one?"

One of the places Samir took us to was the Deheishe refugee camp near Bethlehem. This camp has been in existence since 1948, when Palestinians who had lived in what is now Israel fled to Arab controlled areas leaving everything associated with their former homes behind as what Israelis call the 'War of Independence' erupted. Many of the villages the Palestinians abandoned were destroyed and then built over by the Israelis. In the process, massacres of Palestinian civilians occurred, one of the most notorious and well documented being at Deir Yassin near Jerusalem. In an uncanny parallel with the Guatemalan experience, the disappearance of some 400 Palestinian villages has been documented¹. During the worst years of the Guatemalan dictatorships, in the early 1980s, an equal number of villages were wiped off the map according to a project dedicated to the recovery of historical memory which published a report in 1998². The physical destruction of villages went along with the massacre and enforced flight of their inhabitants.

I know from the Guatemalan experience that this kind of violent dispossession and the uprooting of communities leads to profound trauma and cultural dislocation, not just in the generation that have suffered directly, but in new generations born into an exile culture. The Palestinians call what happened to them in 1948 the *Nakba* (Catastrophe). In Deheishe Mahmoud, a young man of about 20, showed us the huge iron key to his family's house which was in a village which is now part of Israel. This rusty piece of iron represented Mahmoud's longing for a home he had never seen and which no longer existed; this key was all he had to tie him to his family's past. With the physical obliteration of communities where people have lived for generations and the lack of acknowledgement of this history, or recompense for their loss, it is a struggle for the people affected to bring hope and renewal into the future.

Hearing Palestinians talk about being forgotten by the world and about their story not being acknowledged I was reminded again of the Guatemalan situation. Thousands of indigenous Mayan Guatemalans were massacred in the early 1980s in the Army's campaign to wipe out the social base of the guerrilla movement and many more thousands fled for their lives into

¹ Obstacles to Peace: A Re-Framing of the Palestinian - Israeli Conflict. Jeff Halper and Michael Younan, ICAHD, 2004

² Guatemala: Never Again!, Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala, 1998

neighbouring Mexico. They left everything they possessed behind them; they ran in the dark, under the cover of the jungle, with the eyes of the world elsewhere. Later, the Guatemalan military denied that the massacres had taken place, that people had been tortured, women raped, property destroyed. That is why now, initiatives such as the Catholic Church's Recovery of Historical Memory Project, are hugely important to the recovery process, not just for the individuals affected but for the Mayan community as a whole and for the peaceful existence of the entire country.

In Palestine there are similar initiatives to recover the historical memory of the *Nakba*, forming part of the Palestinian struggle to have their narrative acknowledged and to be compensated for what they lost. I believe that telling the Palestinian story is vital to all the people who share the land of historical Palestine. Just as Jewish suffering and the annihilation committed during the Holocaust is a valid backdrop to the right for a Jewish collective life, so the *Nakba* must be recognised by Israelis and Diaspora Jews as a justified reason for the recognition of Palestinian rights. I find it unbearable that the dispossession and ethnic cleansing which we Jews have survived be translated into violence, rather than humanity, towards others.

Almost 60 years after the *Nakba*, Deheishe refugee camp now has the character of a small town in many ways. The word 'camp' implies temporary structures but Deheishe has been there so long that buildings which once might have been intended as temporary have become rooted. The houses pile one on top of each other in ramshackle, close proximity with narrow, winding streets between them creating a medieval, oppressive feel.

At first the camp was in an area designated for the Palestinians but under the administration of Jordan; later the refugees became residents of an occupation, when Israel seized the West Bank in 1967³. Samir, our Palestinian guide, told us that after 1967 the camp had been enclosed in barbed wire as a way of controlling and containing the refugees who were considered by the Israelis to be potential terrorists. The barbed wire is no longer in place, but the one turnstile gate that was the only way in and out of the encircled camp remains as a reminder of those times.

Hearing this story about Deheishe took me back to a visit I had made in Guatemala to a community of returned refugees who had been interned in a camp in Honduras during the 1980s. This was during the Cold War and the height of the United States' interference in Central America. The refugees were labelled as Communist subversives by the Honduran government which was receiving massive amounts of US support in return for allowing Honduran territory to be used by 'Contras' fighting to bring down the left wing, democratically elected government of Nicaragua. The Honduran camp had the ironic name of *El Tesoro* (Treasure) but was described to me as like a prison, surrounded by barbed wire and impossible to leave without permission. Doña Paula, who told me about *El Tesoro*, said that once a man had been shot for leaving the camp without a permit. Innocent people who had fled for their lives, leaving behind everything they had, losing family members to massacres, were then subjected to further inhuman treatment and suffering. Having such a personal connection with Guatemalan refugees helped me to understand something of the profound suffering the people we met in Palestine had undergone.

The trauma of exile through the generations is compounded by dependency and a feeling of abandonment. Residents of Deheishe are still reliant on United Nations support and international aid and 70% of the 11,000 inhabitants are unemployed. The employment situation has considerably deteriorated since the start of the second Intifada in 2000 and the building of the 'separation barrier', whereby travel for residents of the West Bank is very restricted.⁴ Previously many more people were able to travel into Israel and work. Without land, property or the prospect of employment it is almost impossible to get out of the dependency cycle. As Ziad Abbas, director of the Ibdaa Cultural Centre in Deheishe, put it, "I am not a citizen but a United Nations number".

³ Palestine has more refugees than any other country, some 5 million, of which in 1998 652,855 lived in the West Bank. Towns and Villages Depopulated by the Zionist Invasion of 1948. Salman Abu Sitta, 1998

⁴ I will talk more in a later article about the 'Separation Barrier', sometimes called the 'Apartheid Wall'.

There is an obvious contrast with the Guatemalans I worked with as the Palestinian refugees have not been able to go back to the land they were born in because Israel does not recognise their right to return. The Guatemalan refugees managed to achieve something unique. After seven or eight years in exile, organised groups formed in the refugee camps in southern Mexico and with the support of the UN and the governments of various countries, including Mexico, they negotiated the terms of an organised and collective return to Guatemala. This negotiation took place in the context of the restoration of democracy in Guatemala (a very flawed democracy it is true, but at least it was not military dictatorship). Since the first collective refugee returns to Guatemala in 1993 there have been numerous obstacles to reintegration, but it is a success story when compared with the Palestinian experience.

However, listening to the Palestinians talking in Deheishe I was struck by some parallels with the Guatemalan refugees which illustrate a more positive side of the exile experience. For example, there have been more opportunities for women to organise than would likely have been possible within Palestinian society at large. Deheishe has the first women's volleyball and basketball teams in a refugee camp. Ziad Abbas acknowledges that a significant amount of money coming in from abroad to support projects in the camp comes from women's organising ability, for example setting up micro enterprises to sell their embroidery to people in Japan and the USA. This parallels developments for women Guatemalan refugees in Mexican camps and constitutes an irony whereby the experience of exile acts as a catalyst to the development and recognition of women's rights and contributions.

Another side effect of long term refugee status for both people has been the importance of education. In Mexico many Guatemalan refugees had access to education through services provided through official aid agencies and non governmental organisations (NGOs). I have friends who arrived in the camps with not even a primary school education and left with qualifications as health or education promoters. In Deheishe education services are extremely limited and only cover primary education. If young people are to continue to high school they have to go outside the camp and this costs money. However, often the community helps out even though people have such limited resources because, as Ziad told us, education is highly prized as a route out of a dead end where families have lost their land and property. As happened in the Mexican camps, education serves both as a form of self help and as route out of dependency.

In the case of Palestine, there is another factor which has led to the acquisition of education. Almost every Palestinian man we talked to had been in prison at least once. These were people who were intelligent, held down responsible jobs and contributed to their communities: in other words did not fulfil the typical offender profile. In fact an estimated 40% of Palestinian males have been in Israeli jails⁵. Ziad Abbas spoke excellent English which he had learned in an Israeli prison. There is something satisfyingly subversive about this: Israel's criminalisation of its 'enemies' who emerge from incarceration better prepared in many ways to resist.

The Palestinians I met are determined to continue striving for their rights and believe that this is best done by non-violent means in collaboration with Israeli Jews committed to an equal and just solution for all people sharing the tiny piece of Earth that is historical Palestine. However, I believe that unless a solution is found to the Palestinian refugee issue, the lack of justice, stretching back to the past and into the future, will corrode and undermine prospects for peace for both Palestinians and Israelis.

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⁵ ADDAMEER (Prisoners' Support and Human Rights Association, www.addameer.org)