



The Exile and the Pilgrim

A screening of
Ticket to Jerusalem
in Baddawi Camp, Lebanon

Rasha Salti

Girls at a blackboard in Ein al-Helwa Refugee
Camp. Source: Stephen Wallace

Um Nazhem remembers well being called human detritus. She recalls the moment with a mischievously defiant smile. A woman of 80 years, seated, her legs folded on a mattress in her humble room. Her entire home: four walls, one room. Against one of the walls, there stands a bed. Its mattress and frame, exhausted from decades of tossing and turning, creak with pain at the slight weight of Aya, one of Um Nazhem's gorgeous grandchildren. Facing that wall, a sofa and two plastic chairs generously invite visitors. A large wooden closet marks the third wall and, adjacent to the closet, stands the residence's centrepiece, a television set resting on a small table. Against the fourth wall leans a short cabinet, and in front of that, facing the television set, is a mattress, with Umm Nazhem piled on it, floating in the folds of her long dress.

Eighty years young, her eyes brim with life, wit and humour. The walls around her are adorned by portraits of four handsome men, and a photocopied portrait of 'Ammar, the Palestinian contender for the television title of "Superstar of the Arabs". Um Nazhem

rents a room in the meanders of Shatila, the most dire, if not the poorest, of the Palestinian camps in Lebanon.

Lodged stubbornly in the midst of Beirut's working poor neighbourhoods, the human settlement referred to as the Shatila camp is more akin to a shipyard of wrecked vessels, where Lebanon's role in intra-regional politics is exposed in stranded human faces, broken bodies and limbs. In addition to housing Palestinian refugees, this is the residence of illegal migrant workers (Syrian, Egyptian, Sudanese, Iraqi...), political refugees without papers, labourers who work for nothing, and citizens forced to live outside citizenship. The scars from the Israeli siege (1982), its ensuing massacre and the two-year-long 'War of the Camps' (1986-1988) remain wide open gaping wounds.

"We live from lack of dying," chorus the residents of these camps, in answer to the obvious query. So commonly is that answer heard, it now echoes like an adage. Ironically, when UN-sponsored aid, the most sustained source of livelihood and social services to the camps, was threatening to end, residents had to go on hunger strikes to pressure 'higher-ups' to change the plan.

Um Nazhem is not among the 'original' inhabitants of Shatila; in fact, her family has practically toured Lebanon's camps. She enjoys receiving visitors from abroad who pilgrimage to the camps in sympathy. That afternoon, I and another friend of Um Nazhem accompanied another friend visiting from Algeria to see her. He wanted to put a face and personal story to the Palestinians in Lebanon. She was delighted to tell her story, delighted that her own account would travel outside the censorious confines of her predicament. Upon learning he was from Algeria, she smiled and launched into a rebuke: "Algeria?! What have you done with your independence and sovereignty?" she asked. "Are you not ashamed? We had so much hope in you, the Algerians. People would come by the camps collecting money and donations for the Algerian resistance, and we, despite our destitution and despair, gave money. My mother gave up a gold bracelet. We looked up to you, and this is what you do?"

The man was taken aback. Um Nazhem held lock of his hand as she scolded him. She reminded him of his mother. He had been moved to tears at the sight of the camps; he could never have imagined such dire living conditions in contrast with the boastful wealth and prosperity he had encountered elsewhere in Beirut. She greeted him as if he were Ben Bella, or his official emissary. He had come with his own stories of Palestine, compelling accounts of Algerian militants who had walked from their hometowns to Palestine to fight side-by-side with their brethren in Palestine's war of liberation.

Um Nazhem had told her refugee saga innumerable times, but she did not tire from recounting it again. She was from Cabri, a modest village not far from the Lebanese border in the north of the Galilee. As she began to narrate her story, I realized that I had read bits and pieces of it in Elias Khoury's wondrous epic, *Bab esh-Shams* [*Gate of the Son*]. After *Jaysh al-Inqath* [the Army of Salvation] had pushed away the

Zionist army, and moved on to defend other fronts, Cabri fell into the hands of the enemy and its residents had to flee overnight, on foot. Um Nazhem was 12 years old in 1948, when she and her family walked through orchards, hills, and valleys under cover of night to reach Lebanon. Believing the war would only take a few weeks, her father rented a room from Lebanese villagers, not far from the city of Tyre. Months passed, and they were horded into the Burj al-Shamali camp. One day busses arrived and the family was summoned to board. "Where to? Palestine?" they asked. "No, the Beqa'a Valley."

They were taken to a refugee camp in 'Anjar. They lived in tents, soaked in mud. And then winter came, with storms and snow and she thought they were going to die from cold. "We were better off in the south, where it was warm, and we could work the fields and be close to our land." Months passed and one day busses arrived and they were summoned to board, again. "Where to? Palestine?" they asked. "No, Tripoli."

They were driven to the Baddawi camp. "We were very poor, very hungry all the time. We did everything and anything, earning hardly enough to eat. In Palestine, we were not rich, but we had a small plot of land around the house, we grew our food, we raised chicken, a sheep or two. We were never hungry." Her father worked in the port of Tripoli; she and her siblings worked odd jobs. "We were in Baddawi," Um Nazhem, turning her gaze to the Algerian and pointing her finger, continued, "when the volunteers from Algeria showed up, carrying baskets and collecting donations. My mother gave up her gold bracelet, and I gave them my day's earnings. We were so inspired by the Algerian resistance. They were teaching the French the lessons we were not able to teach the British and the Zionists. And they had to win; we wanted them to because their victory would be our own. And one day we would teach the Zionists the same lesson." Um Nazhem was married in Baddawi, at age fourteen, as was the convention then.

Work was scarce, so she moved with her husband to Tall ez-Za'atar. He worked at a factory in Naba'a. One of her sons was martyred in the 1976 Phalangist siege and massacre in the camp, but the rest of her family survived by what she described as a miracle. She and her family relocated to the Damour area, and then, after violent clashes erupted, they moved under fire and shelling to the Burj al-Barajneh camp in Beirut. She recalled being more comfortable in Burj al-Barajneh, but they had to move again, to Shatila, because her brother-in-law was accused of having murdered someone in the camp, and there was bad blood. It was right after the 1982 Israeli siege and Phalangist massacre in Shatila; the camp was in ruins. Her belly had carried twenty children during her peregrinations from one camp to the next. Nine survived. Of those nine, four sons had been killed. Their handsome portraits hung all around her, on the four walls of her room. Her husband had passed away in Shatila - from sorrow, she said - over the martyrdom of their eldest son, which happened in the war of the camps. "His heart gave out," she explained, and wiped a tear, smiling. "He could not take the pain."

Her only happy days were lived in Palestine. “Our country is beautiful,” she said, with joy. “We lived from little, but we were never cold, never hungry, never, ever, did we have to beg. We had our dignity. We enjoyed the seasons, we worked the land. We loved our land. Look at me, I am 80 years old. I am still poor. I can still barely live. This room, my home, is beyond my means. I am tired of living humiliated.” Her voice broke with emotion. “I am ready to die. I still hope to see Palestine one day, but I am tired of living like this. My only worries now are my grandchildren.” Her eldest grandchild, a young bright woman, born months after the death of her eldest, martyred son, had just passed her baccalaureate exams with high marks. She lives with her mother in the Burj al-Shamali camp in the south. She wants to go to university “to become a journalist”, said Um Nazhem, swelling with pride. But her mother cannot afford to pay the tuition, and the various charity and welfare organizations have turned down her application for tuition aid. “I went to see that man at the welfare office, and explained to him that she was the child of a martyr, that I wanted a future for her out of these camps. I have never begged for help, but for her, I did. And the man said to me that times were hard, and it was pointless to beg.”

A Hostage Freed

After I grew familiar with the camps, the absurdity of drawing distinctions of ‘better’ and ‘worse’, ‘beautiful’ and ‘ugly’, ‘animated’ and ‘somnolent’ dissipated. While Shatila is described by Palestinians themselves as ‘ugly’ and ‘atrophied’, in contrast, the Baddawi camp at the edge of Tripoli, is ‘pretty’ and ‘dynamic’. In its younger years, the Baddawi camp was comprised of modest homes surrounded by gardens, fruit trees and flowers. With demographic explosion and migration from other camps, pressure to fit in more lodgings mounted, and the gardens began to disappear. Despite the narrow meanders laying a course between buildings, Baddawi is a less chaotic urban settlement than Shatila, ordered by the desire of its residents to preserve a sense of civility against the insuperable odds stacked against them. There are no piles of garbage festering on corners; people do not glare at passers-by with nagging suspicion. Placed against Bab al-Tabbaneh, Tripoli’s poorest neighbourhoods and home of recent social and political unrest, Baddawi seems to breathe a cheerful welcome to its visitors. At one of its ‘entrances’, a stupendous mural, painted along the length of a tall building, depicts in bright colours elements of the imaginings of Palestine in the camps: the flag, the map, al-Aqsa mosque and a young man, his head raised high and rocks in his hand. Driving further along that road, on a wall fencing homes at the edge of the camp, an amusing caricature mocking Arab officials and their ‘defence’ of Palestine greets passers-by with humour and wit.

Accompanied by friends, I entered Baddawi that Saturday afternoon with ambitions of screening Hani Abu Assa‘ad’s *Ford Transit* at a culture and youth centre in the camp. The idea was to see how the screening would fare, in hopes of later hosting a full-fledged festival of recent Palestinian films in collaboration with the New York-based organization, Dreams of a Nation, which has organized festivals of Palestinian cinema

with resounding success in New York and the occupied territories. In our party that afternoon was one of the group's founding members.

The culture and youth centre was the initiative of a group of dynamic, admirable young men and women, and provided a myriad of exciting programs for children, young adults and residents of the camp at large. The centre was one-and-a-half stories high. The ground floor was a relatively large hall that hosted performances, poetry recitals, musical concerts, and arts and crafts workshops. Stairs going to the upper level led to a wide open terrace, an office and a playroom for children. Despite patches of paint peeling off the walls, bare light bulbs dangling from the ceiling, uneven concrete floor, and tired furniture, the centre exuded hopeful, vivacious life. Walls awash with the laughter of play; paper maché masks stacked along shelves that had been crafted with endearing care by dozens of small hands; paintings in bright gouache colours pasted everywhere depicting an imagined Palestine and everyday life in the camps all narrated a childhood that had found a way to exist, despite being held hostage. Our hosts had decided to screen the film in the open-air terrace. It was framed by a large wall on one side, the would-be screen, and a protective concrete ledge on the opposite side. Plastic white chairs had been stacked to welcome residents of the camp.

We were to wait for nightfall. It was a humid summer day, and a shy breeze began to blow clemency as we hustled to prepare for the screening. The chairs were soon full enough, women, men and children streaming in, greeting one another, and sitting patiently. A mural reproduction of a drawing by cartoonist Naji al-'Ali coloured one half of the length of our would-be screen. The other half, almost white, was adorned with faint graffiti in green that read "*al-Qudsu lana*" ["Jerusalem is ours"]. The film would be screened atop that inscription. My immediate reaction was to worry about the quality of the image screened, how the filmmaker would feel had he been among us, and how important it was to secure the best technical conditions possible. But I was just as immediately humbled - a smidgen shamed - by the obliviousness of the residents and our hosts. There was such exhilaration at hosting the screening, at welcoming one of the organizers of Dreams of a Nation, who had come all the way from New York City to meet them, collaborate with them, and be amongst them, that my concerns seemed ungracious. I did not dare make note of the inscription to our hosts.

Night fell, and darkness surrounded us. I was summoned to introduce the guest from New York, to stand in front of a white wall now illuminated by an Yves Klein blue square reading "Stop", which streamed from the video projector. Then, in the middle of the New Yorker's speech, a young man walked over and screwed in a light bulb dangling from an electrical wire. Drenched in its light and blinded, with great relief I could no longer meet the eyes of my audience. They seemed to understand English, and did not really need my awkward translation; their generous applause spoke of kindness and diligence. The light bulb was unscrewed, and a hustle around the video projector announced the beginning of the screening.

The videotape copy of *Ford Transit*, having travelled all the way from New York to Baddawi, stubbornly displayed irreconcilable incompatibility with the video projector. The image quivered, and the sound was garbled. I was so frantic I thought I was going to faint. Meanwhile the young men hosting us were joking, calmly, taunting one another. The audience stared intently at the screen, their composure polite and kind. In addition to denying them basic civil rights, the edicts governing the lives of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon forbid them from practicing 72 professions, leaving only menial jobs in construction and related trades. With standards and conditions for primary and elementary education rendered dismal, public policy for residents of the camps has geared young Palestinians towards 'technical schooling'. As a result, half of the young men attending the screening turned out to be certified electricians. At the first sign of technical trouble, the more impetuous had risen and gathered around the video projector to diagnose the problem. In their gracious hospitality, they were all eager to find fault with every stage of the process - except the tape itself.

As minutes passed, more certified electricians began to convene and in a quarter of an hour (which I endured as pure agony), they had reached a consensus: the standard electrical supply was not sufficient or stable enough. They would use the more stable supply of the generator. They unplugged the entire showcase, and the dark blue of summer nights in Lebanon fell on us like a cloak. I was devastated to have orchestrated such a low-quality screening; it felt as if I had disrespected them, and the darkness veiled my shame. By then, the convention of electricians had divided into squadrons and, under the directives of our senior host, had been dispatched to various tasks. Suddenly, the roar of the generator broke the hushed chit-chat on the terrace, the blue screen once again lit the wall etched with "al-Qudsu lana", and the team next to the video projector kneeled into action. The image was much improved, but the sound was not.

Sweating, I proposed to our guest from New York that we screen another film, from another tape. We opted for Rashid Meshharawi's *Ticket to Jerusalem*. While Hani Abu Assa'ad had granted permission to screen his film, Rashid had not been contacted. We would not only be defiling a sacrosanct rule, but also breaking a bond of trust between the filmmaker and Dreams of a Nation. I felt we had no other option. Measuring the disappointment, anxiety and shame painted on my face, my friend from New York agreed.

The second tape of *Ticket to Jerusalem* was fed to the projector in nervous haste. The quality of the image was significantly improved. The sound seemed fine, but it was too low. Someone in the squad of electricians murmured, "Amplifier". Another squadron leapt to the office only to emerge seconds later lugging a large amplifier. They hurried to the projector, a third squadron now joining them armed with flashlights and in excited debate. Then a voice rose above the rest, "Tri-phase". A squadron detached from the convention and scuttled to the stairs, rushing into the night. At that stage, I was on the brink of an infarction, but I managed to smile at the returning squadron as they climbed the stairs, brandishing with an air of victory, an electrical wire. The

electricians huddled around the video-projector, nervously plugging and unplugging wires. Ghassan Abbas' portrait, currently illuminating the wall, was tattooed with "al-Qudsu lana". It seemed surreal that he now appeared on a wall in Lebanon, in the fiction of returned refugee Rashid Mesharawi, playing the part of a projectionist seeking against desperate odds to screen films in Jerusalem's Old City, his face all the while emblazoned with the reassurance that Jerusalem belongs to us, him and the band of electricians scuffling to make his voice audible.

And then it happened. From the depth of the darkness, the *muezzin's* voice, crystal clear and amplified to fill our terrace and the entirety of the camp, chanted the call to prayer. I gasped and thought my end was near. The voice, beautiful, was amplified with such tenacious precision that we could hear the *muezzin* clearing his throat. The admirable squadron of electricians, momentarily deterred in their mission, began to pace. There were sparse light-hearted chuckles from the audience at the sight of my crestfallen silhouette. A young man walked over and patted me on the shoulder: "You are not used to the mosque, are you? Don't worry, it happens all the time here. It will only take about ten minutes. Relax. We are all enjoying this. Really." He smiled gently.

Eventually, the projector, amplifier and "triphase" wire all worked and *Ticket to Jerusalem* was screened and heard. Under the direction of Rashid Mesharawi, actor Ghassan Abbas was also able to screen his film in a niche within Jerusalem's Old City. His wife joined him, against all the odds of the occupation. A man sitting next to me whispered in my ear, chuckling: "The filmmaker should have made a sequel about us and our screening." A round of applause concluded the film and tea was served.

Visual Feast

Life in Shatila is hostage to despair. In that 'island of insecurity', as officialdom would have it, there are also islands of hope. They are born through the sheer will of young men and women, residents of the camps and natives of the camps, some who have been able to escape the ruthless grip of despair and poverty, and others who still live there but defy complacency tirelessly. A culture and youth centre, not unlike the one in Baddawi, was established by a group of these young men and women. The centre assists schoolchildren with homework after school. It hosts lectures, workshops and theatrical performances with the help of Lebanese friends and Europeans. Last summer, a group of Italian artist activists spent a month camping in the centre, living with its residents, organizing a drama workshop. "We ate pasta all the time with them," recalled one of the organizers, laughing candidly. "It was great fun to have them. The kids loved them."

A group of Lebanese and Palestinian medical students, residents, interns and young physicians from the American University of Beirut, have also set up a Voluntary Outreach Clinic to assist in extending scarce medical services to the camp residents.

And since the beginning of the summer, the grey brutality of the concrete colouring the lodgings and meanders of Shatila has been transformed beyond recognition. A coat of white has washed away its grubby despair, and the walls are now etched with luminous drawings, graffiti and murals reclaiming Palestine in image and word. Abdel-Rahman, 18- or 19-years old, tall and wiry, his hope-filled gait twisted by diabetes, decided one day to put his gift for drawing to collective good use. Despite the lugubrious means of his family, he enrolled himself in the Academy of Fine Arts at the Lebanese University. This summer, he and a band of brothers in Shatila knocked on every Palestinian door in the camp, collecting 500 Lebanese pounds from each family - the equivalent of 30 American cents. Then they bought paint, and adorned the walls of the camp. The skin of Shatila now speaks, sings, chants and recites poetry in life-affirming colours, Palestine proudly celebrated in a visual feast. Here and there, the oranges of Jaffa, the pomegranates of Nazareth, and the al-Aqsa mosque are restored as the camp's own. And everywhere you go, wherever your eyes fall, Naji al-'Ali's *Handalah*, the Palestinian everyman, stubbornly watches his people, his hands behind his back, his feet bare and his garb patched. Handalah watches, his back turned to the viewer, his eyes gazing into the walls that make up the rooms of Um Nazhem, her kin and her people.

Rasha Salti works with ArteEast, a non-profit promoter of Mid-East film, and Ashkal-Alwan, the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts.

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