



## My Grandmother and Other Stories

### *Histories of the Palestinians as Social Biographies*

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Bethlehem women at home drinking coffee  
and smoking narghileh.

*Source: Before Their Diaspora, p. 59*

It is ironic that the intense concern about and the numerous historical studies on Palestine, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and Palestinian nationalist movements has kept the lives of ordinary Palestinians outside the purview of most scholars. These studies are expansive about the political history of the violence, territorial partition, and massive demographic displacement that are the hallmarks of modern state formation and nationalist conflicts. Precisely for that reason, however, they are largely silent when it comes to the social and cultural history of the overwhelming majority of the Palestinians.<sup>1</sup>

Innovative and accessible narratives about a people who have become a household word, but about whom we know surprisingly little can point to new analytical horizons and political possibilities. Indeed, without stories in which ordinary Palestinians take their proper place in the historical stage, it is difficult to imagine how they can achieve political self-determination or take responsibility for their own actions. Writing Palestinians into history is critical, therefore,

to more democratic and inclusive participation of Palestinians in the socioeconomic and cultural processes that shape their lives.

By way of making a small contribution to this larger goal, the Institute of Jerusalem Studies provided the institutional platform for a series of workshops I led in the occupied Palestinian territories in July and August, 2007 on the theme “Silenced Histories: Towards an Agenda of Research on the Social and Cultural History of the Palestinians.” The Institute hosted the first two workshops and helped organize the others.<sup>2</sup> The essays in this volume are a partial product of this combined effort.

The workshops, as originally envisioned, had three specific goals. One was to take stock of the many studies on Palestinian social and cultural life published over the past two decades. What explains the new trends in scholarly output? What places, periods, and social groups do they privilege or ignore? What new sources are they drawing on and in what ways? Have they made a difference in how we divide the past into discrete periods or in how we conceive of the dynamics of change? Do these new social and cultural histories set themselves apart from the dominant political narratives or do they argue for a new understanding of what constitutes the political? In what ways are Palestinian scholars trying to take ownership of Palestinian history? And in what directions do they want to push agendas for future research?

In order to bring these issues into greater focus, I asked each participant to prepare for the workshops by writing an essay on the life of her or his grandmother or grandfather.<sup>3</sup> The idea behind this second goal was to expose a set of relationships normally hidden in the shadows of political history, and to reflect on how these relationships can lead us to re-imagine the histories of the Palestinians. Taking advantage of the fact that most of the participants are of middle-age, the third goal is to shed light on the most important and, until now, greatly under-studied rupture in Palestinian life prior to 1948: the enormously destructive and transformative impact of World War I on Palestinian society, economy, culture, and identity.

In writing the social biography of his or her grandmother, each participant was asked to consider what is at stake on the political and methodological levels, in addition to the meta-historical ones alluded to by the questions above. On the political level, what are the implications of delving into the rich diversity, internal contradictions and conflicting trajectories of Palestinian life? Is there a danger that the messiness of the past will make impossible a politically useful historical narrative at a time when the Palestinians need such a narrative more than ever? For example, what do the terms “indigenous” and “people” mean in the context of the vast multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire that ruled this region for four centuries (1516-1917), or in the context of the borders of the British Mandate (1922-1948) that were imposed by imperial fiat?

What kind of rights, legal standing and political expectations do such terms imply at a time when the very foundations of international law and state sovereignty are being undermined? And what, if anything, makes the conventional Palestinian nationalist narrative any different from the generic schema of origins, persecution, exile, and redemption common to most nationalist constructions of the past?<sup>4</sup>

I am aware that explorations of the past from a post-nationalist perspective subvert the political language of a people who have not yet achieved the right of self-determination.<sup>5</sup> This is not a trivial matter, nor an idle intellectual concern. The stakes are considerable, at least when measured by the yardstick of academics. Israeli revisionist historians can afford to expose Zionist nationalist mythology precisely because Israel is the superpower of the Middle East and Israelis have reached a high level of self-confidence and achievement. The Palestinians, in contrast, are by far the weaker party in an ongoing conflict. Their material and cultural patrimony, from places to place names, have been and continue to be subject to a systematic process of physical erasure and discursive silencing. This, along with the absence of national institutions and the series of severe ruptures, such as the 1948 war, is why Palestinian narratives are fragmented and revolve entirely around two binaries: erasure/affirmation and occupation/resistance.<sup>6</sup> The first focuses on identity politics and assumes the very things that ought to be explained. The latter focuses on the nationalist confrontation with the Other and trades in the hard work of agency for the moral high ground of victim-hood. Neither can lay the foundation for a new political language, for they do not pay much attention to social and cultural practices of everyday life that produce and transform the meanings of being Palestinian across time and space.

On the methodological level, there is no shortage of vital issues raised in the process of scholarly labour into social biographies. The two most obvious are, first, the advantages and disadvantages of social biography as a way of doing history; and, second, the possibilities and limitations of the kinds of sources usually used in social biography, which, unlike conventional archives, are usually not authorized by states institutions.

Social biography and the related genre of micro-history are exciting to research and entertaining to read. The singularity of the person, place, thing or event under study imparts a built-in coherence without unduly prejudicing or restricting the emplotment of the story. As has long been the case in literature, larger arguments or insights about dynamics of state and society are rendered immediate, intimate, and accessible through connections to specific personal stories. Social biography also allows for a highly textured account that highlights the overlapping spaces or inter-relations between economy, culture, and politics instead of separating them into discrete thematic fields of inquiry. Of course, there is no straight line between personal experience and the 'Big Picture' – hence, the preoccupation of historiographical

debates with theorising the relationship between the micro and the macro. In the minds of many scholars, social biographies are nothing more than minute and fleeting eddies in a large moving river, knowledge about which would best be captured by a satellite image. This intellectual stance, as harsh and as positivist as it maybe, reminds us that social biography works best when supported by systematic research whose scope goes well beyond investigating specific lives. It is this combination that makes possible robust generalizations and provides stronger foundations for meta-narratives.<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this special issue, the limitations of social biography are not an important concern, as the primary goal is to expose instead of capture the complexity of daily life and the multiple historical trajectories, both of which are masked by nationalist constructions of the past.

As to sources, it is significant that the primary evidentiary base of the essays in this special issue of the *Jerusalem Quarterly* consists entirely of private and locally-produced sources such as memoirs, dairies, annotated calendars, family papers, the built environment, and oral transmission. Adel Manna' is able to reconstruct the key turning points in the life of his grandmother, Zahra, who lived in a largely illiterate peasant society, not just through family stories but also, crucially, through the discovery of personal notebook kept by a villager, Abu Jamil, in which he recorded the dates of important events ranging from marriage and childbirth to police raids and local conflicts. Villa Harun al-Rashid, the house that Hanna Ibrahim Bisharat built in the Talbiyeh quarter of West Jerusalem becomes the central material document as well as an historical actor in its own right in a poignant and beautifully written act of remembrance by George Bisharat, Hanna's grandson, that not only brings the world of his grandfather to life, but also shows how formative it has been of his own and his children's lives. The skilful interrogation by Salim Tamari of a soldier's diary during World War One opens a rare window on a young man's experiences of daily life in Jerusalem and of the travails of Ottoman military service during the crucial moment of transition from Empire to colonial state in the Middle East. Sonia Nimr brings her skills as an ethnographer and oral historian to bear on the reconstruction of the life of her grandfather, a doctor who both witnessed and played a role in the dramatic turning points of Palestinian life from the last days of Ottoman rule through the Great Revolt of 1936-1939 and the Nakba of 1948, to the 1967 War. She also makes use of an unpublished memoir by her uncle that, otherwise, would not have come to light. One wonders how many memoirs are kept in shelves and drawers waiting to be read. For Nazmi Jubeh, the primary source is a human time capsule: the discovery of a forgotten man by the name of Sheikh Hassan who spent his life in prison and in mental hospitals since the late 1930s. As he writes, "Sheikh Hassan ... piqued the curiosity of a historian into whose hands had fallen a rare document no one before had seen." But it is precisely his inability to unlock the memories of this sheikh that led to an investigative journey of unsurpassed symbolic richness. This journey, moreover, nicely illustrates how social biographies and micro-history allow for much greater freedom of

analytical positioning and narrative trajectories than more conventional forms.

Theoretically speaking, the availability of sources is only limited by the kinds of questions we ask of the past and by the technologies that could be brought to bear. New questions often reveal the existence of sources hitherto located outside the historian's imagination. Family papers and records of the Islamic Law courts (*sijillat al-mahakim al-shar'iyya*) in the Middle East are two cases in point. In the 1930s the great Lebanese historian, Asad Rustum, used both along with more traditional archival sources to construct a vivid and multi-layered narrative about the causes, articulations, and local consequences of a pivotal historical moment: the Egyptian occupation of Greater Syria, 1831-1840. Yet, the focus on Western-inspired modernization was so intense and the dependency on European archives so strong that historians, despite Rustum's influential example, would not pay attention to family papers and Islamic Court Records until several decades later.<sup>8</sup>

It is traditionally expected of editors to summarize the main arguments and to point out the larger significance of each contribution. I will resist the temptation to comply. Nor will I compile for the benefit of the reader a list of the key themes – such as the centrality of connections to land and the very complex relations with Jewish settlers – that emerge in the wonderful stories by George Bisharat, Nazmi Jubeh, Adel Manna', Issam Nassar, Sonia Nimr, and Salim Tamari. It is better at this point to allow them to speak for themselves.

Suffice it to say three things in conclusion. First, the field of social and cultural history of the Palestinians is still in its early stages and there is a great deal to be done. A cursory look at the essays reveals many silences. They are, with notable exceptions, mostly about educated men, some of them well to do, who spent most of their lives in urban settings. Of course, these essays were not meant to be comprehensive in coverage. I make this observation only to point out the necessarily uneven gaze of the historian and the asymmetry in conditions of possibility when it comes addressing the gender, class, place, and rural/urban/pastor-nomadic divides. Thus, histories of peasants, women, Bedouin, artisans, the urban poor, and migrants, to mention but a few social categories, are comparatively few or non-existent. Similarly, one can point to specific places and time periods that tend to be ignored.

Second, grandmother stories are all about the meanings of family, place, and the relationship between the two. The dire need for in-depth studies of the modern history of family life and complex range of relationships to land constitutes perhaps the toughest challenge for social historians. The kin/land matrix in agriculturally-based societies characterized by deeply-rooted regional identities is much too materially central and discursively hegemonic to be objectified and abstracted. The opposite is true, of course, once communities are displaced and out of place. It stands to reason,

therefore, that the greater the distance from the kin/land matrix, the more constitutive it is of one's political identity. In George Bisharat's wonderful phrase, recovering the family/place connection becomes a vehicle for "remembering the future." In yet another symbolically-laden observation, Nazmi Jubeh tells us how Sheikh Hassan during his decades' long confinement in mental hospitals kept this connection alive by carefully unwrapping and wrapping a handkerchief containing a handful of dirt five times a day for the purpose of wudu' (washing before prayer).

Third, writing Palestinians into history raises difficult questions about what is universal and what is specific in the modern human experience; about the messiness and vagaries of contingency in history; and, not least, about the nature and possibilities of agency. 'My grandmother' stories suggest the need for an approach that privileges daily life without the romance and that recognizes collective tragedies without shirking responsibility or ignoring the larger transnational context. That is, an approach that foregrounds the hybridity of the quotidian yet recognizes the awesome homogenising power of politics and violence. Applying such an approach makes it possible to imagine a point of departure that can defend a notion of collective rights without essentialising the concepts of 'indigenous' and 'people' that lie at the heart of nationalist mythology. It makes it possible to build into the struggle for freedom and self-determination a process of critical questioning about what kind of a state and society Palestinians want to live in.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> There is, in contrast, a rich memorial literature in Arabic produced almost entirely by non-academics, hence, considered outside the corpus of scholarly works. These memorial books about specific families, clans, villages, towns, and regions are often published locally at the author's expense and thus not easily available. This phenomenon has historic roots, and is not specific to Palestine. Moreover, the last three decades have witnessed a phenomenal rate of publication of such works in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine; suggesting that this development is partly the product of the declining relevance of state institutions in people's lives. For an in-depth discussion of memorial literature, see Susan Sylomovics, *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998). For an analysis of Palestinian memorial books, see Rochelle Davis, "The Altar of History: Palestinian Narratives

of Life before 1948," University of Michigan, 2002. For a discussion of contemporary conditions feeding this boom, see Anne Marie Baylouny, "Privatizing Welfare, Creating Families: The Politics of Social Provision in Jordan," University of California, Berkeley, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> The workshops brought together academics and intellectuals from a variety of disciplines and professions. The first two workshops were held in Ramallah in the offices of the Institute for Jerusalem Studies on 8, 17 July, 2006. The third workshop was held in Riwaq (Center for Architectural Conservation) in Ramallah on 28 July, 2006. The fourth was held in Al-Quds University's Centre for Jerusalem Studies on 14 August, 2006. The scheduled workshop in Haifa in cooperation with the Arab Centre for Applied Research had to be cancelled due to security concerns after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. I mention an event that did not take place by way of alerting

the reader to the enormous difficulties Palestinian scholars face in simply meeting with each other face to face. Those living under Israeli occupation find it almost impossible to travel into Israel proper and vice versa. Although most Palestinians live within short driving distances of each other—such as those in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem as well as those in Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria—they are subject to vastly dissimilar legal regimes, which greatly reduces their mobility and freedom of interaction.

<sup>3</sup> Participants had the options of writing a social biography of any individual they have come to know intimately through experience or research (see, for example, the essay by Nazmi Jubeh) or of any other repository or locus of memory such as a particular thing, place, or event.

<sup>4</sup> The stripped-down Palestinian nationalist narrative goes something like this: The Palestinians are the indigenous people of Palestine. Their history is one of resistance to British colonial rule and to a European-born Zionist project that eventually dispossessed and dispersed them. They are fighting for the right of return and self-determination.

<sup>5</sup> This can be seen in the paucity of critical reflection on notions such as ‘people hood’ in the essays despite vibrant discussions of this issue during the workshop discussions.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of these two narrative binaries see Beshara Doumani, “Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine: Writing Palestinians into History.” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 21:2 (Winter 1992), 5-28.

<sup>7</sup> To my mind, the most concise and useful discussion of social biography in the context of Middle East studies remains the introduction by Edmund Burke III to his best-selling edited volume, *Struggle and Survival in the Modern Middle East*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 1-27. A second revised and expanded edition with David Yaghubian as co-editor was published in 2006.

<sup>8</sup> There is by now a substantial literature on Islamic court records. For further discussion of the above point along with a survey of available records in Palestine, see Beshara Doumani, “Palestinian Islamic Court Records: a Source for Socioeconomic History.” *MESA Bulletin*, 19:2 (December, 1985), 155-172.