



‘I Come From There and Remember’

A Coming Photography Exhibit Commemorating the Nakba

Gina Benevento,
with Issam Nassar

Photos courtesy of UNRWA.

It’s a cold and wet Jerusalem winter afternoon and already my desk is awash in requests for photographs. As chief of public information for UNRWA, the UN agency that has provided humanitarian and development services to Palestine refugees since 1950, my office is the port of call for anyone tracking down photographs of Palestine refugees. And while 15 May, 2008, the sixtieth anniversary of the *Nakba*, is still months away, there seems no end to the appetite for images of the 1948 refugee exodus. This morning, requests from two European newspapers; yesterday requests from an American NGO and *al-Jazeera*.

Looking over the photographs that Amani Shaltout, our dedicated archivist, sends out in response, my eyes linger on the faces. What happened to the old man being helped aboard a departing boat? Where is the young woman staring out at us from the back of a Haganah truck? There is almost a uniformity to these images. The faces inevitably express fear, confusion, sadness. The bodies are in flight – walking, running, being carried – helped by trucks and boats. And there are always tents – single tents, then rows, opening up to reveal fields of tents as far as the camera and eye can see.

But one photograph makes me stop. It is a photograph of two young girls pushing carts stuffed with bedding. I’ve seen the frightened, sad faces before. But it is what is behind the young girls that stops me: two large stone buildings, built in a popular early twentieth century European style. Palestinian refugee iconography (refugee iconography in general) focuses on that which is temporal – tents, trucks, boats, mattresses slung over shoulders – all symbols of dispersion. But



these buildings are permanent – homes and shops – part of what was once a stable and thriving Palestinian community. Only minutes earlier these young girls were not refugees. Their home, their school, their playground – everything that was familiar and dear to them – are all still a few short blocks away.

I go back and look again at the other photos. Who were these people before they were turned overnight into refugees? I suddenly remember words from a poem by Mahmoud Darwish:

*I come from there and I remember
Born as mortals are, I have a mother
And a house with many windows...*

The old man and woman staring at us so stoically from the entrance to their tent: did their home have many windows? Had their life been a happy one? The 120,000 Palestinians who fled Haifa, the 123,000 who fled Jaffa – whom had they loved and married? What had they taught their children? What was their life a year, a week, a moment before? How many worlds were lost?

And so began the work on “I Come from There and Remember”, a photo exhibition evoking the life of pre-1948 Palestine, UNRWA’s commemoration to mark the 60th anniversary of the *Nakba*. The exhibit premieres simultaneously in six locations – Jerusalem, Ramallah, Gaza City, Amman, Beirut and Damascus – on 15 May, 2008. Musical performances and lectures will be held around the exhibition’s theme of pre-1948 Palestine, and after two weeks the six exhibits will begin tours to universities, municipalities and refugee camps. The exhibition is also available for hosting and touring, regionally or internationally.

Sponsors of “I Come From There and Remember” are the Swiss Development for Cooperation (SDC), British Consulate General, Arab Fund for Arts & Culture, and the Qattan Foundation. Gina Benevento (co-curator) has curated exhibitions on Palestinian themes regionally and internationally and is the former chief of public information for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Jerusalem Quarterly Associate Editor Issam Nassar is co-curator of the exhibit.