



Five Minutes from Home

EDITORIAL

Norma Hawitt with siblings on the wing
of a UN aircraft. *Photo Source: Collection
Norma Hawitt, 1948.*

The theme of space runs throughout the articles in this issue, with authors focusing on the experience and interpretation of place and space, whether in relation to travel and the experiences of Palestinians around the world, or to the struggle over the meaning of locations and their transformation. The articles on the Jerusalem Airport and the current status of the site reveal histories past and present of this location. The articles on the Jaffa protest and Huleh swamps reveal the different meaning and interpretation of space by different sectors of society and address the contestation of space as a territorial homeland between the Zionist movement and the Palestinians.

The question of the Jerusalem Airport, sits in juxtaposition to the article on the life of Katrina, an essay which casts light on the life of a woman who moved across continents, and shows how Palestinians had business enterprises in various countries beyond the region, and whose

life was embedded in a network of global diaspora communities. It also shows the independence and entrepreneurship of this young woman and the personal constraints that she overcame in her lifetime. It reveals how the community of Palestinians were connected to cities and economies and played a part in the making of the modern world. Both Awwad's and Kenny's research are examples of women authors who are researching and writing about forgotten histories and the experiences of place.

“Five Minutes from Home” is the very appropriate title of a archive exhibit about the lamented closure of the Jerusalem Airport, which drew large crowds in the International Academy of the Art, Palestine in Ramallah this summer. The exhibit was organized by filmmaker Nahed Awwad, and curated by Reem Fadda in Al Bireh. A documentary film, by the same title has been released by Awwad in April 2008, based on her three-year research on the subject involving interviews with retired pilots, stewardesses, traffic air controllers and scores of passengers, sales clerks, travel agents, and porters whose window to the outside world was Qalandia. This issue contains a double feature on the Jerusalem Airport—a history of the airport and the research by Awwad, and a political report on the future of the Airport by Marian Houk.

Most people outside this country are not aware that Palestinians are not allowed to travel from local (Israeli) airports. They have to travel to neighbouring countries, to Jordan and Egypt by land, in a long and arduous journey in order to travel abroad. For this reason it takes a minimum of four days for any passenger to travel say from Nablus to Istanbul and back. Probably the same time it took during the Ottoman era, and with significantly more checkpoints to cross.

This is one main reason why this revival of the history of the Jerusalem Airport evoked such iconic status. It conjures imagery of the loss of freedom of movement, and openness to the outside world which Palestinians took for granted until 1967. After the war, the airport was taken over by the Israeli military and was transformed into an airport for local travel, mostly utilised by Arkia, the Israeli internal airline. The airport was permanently closed to travel after 1992 during the first Intifada. Schemes were floated about building a Jewish settlement in Qalandia, in an area which Israel claims as the site of a pre-1948 Jewish settlement. The area designated presumably includes the runway of Qalandia airport. After 2000 Palestinians living in the OPT were banned from using Tel Aviv Airport, and Haifa harbour for their travel.

Marian Houk in her article on Atarot and Qalandia (as the Jerusalem Airport is popularly known) reveals in this issue that the Israeli government has cancelled the settlement activities in Atarot, and there is talk of an Israeli government withdrawal from the Qalandia and the Al Ram areas to points adjacent to the Apartheid Wall now being constructed north of Jerusalem. Obviously such a withdrawal is part of the overall negotiations over the status of Jerusalem, and do not necessarily mean that the Jerusalem Airport is about to be restored to its former glory. The exhibit, the film, and the history of the airport here have coincided with this political development, all of which will create a necessary debate about freedom of movement and travel.