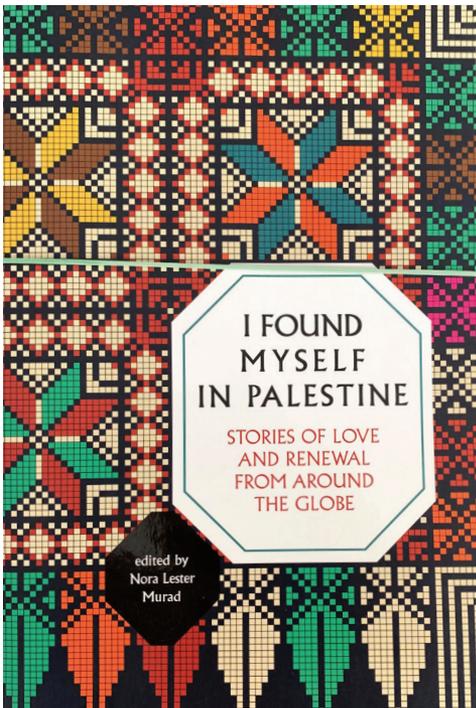


Is the Palestine Virus Incurable?

I Found Myself in Palestine: Stories of Love and Renewal from Around the Globe, edited by Nora Lester Murad. 174 pages. Olive Branch Press, 2020. \$20 paperback.

Review by Penny Johnson



Abstract

The review explores the reflections of twenty-two “foreigners” who have visited or lived in Palestine previously or who live there currently. These personal narratives highlight how the various writers’ experiences of Palestine have shaped their life trajectories, affiliations, family life, and political commitments. Penny Johnson questions notions of generic “foreigners” as tending to create generic “Palestinians,” but also highlights how the enduring experience of Palestinian life can travel with those who leave as well as those who stay.

Keywords

Palestine; foreigners; affiliation; Galilee; global community; Nazareth; Ramallah; human rights.

In this collection edited by writer and social justice activist Nora Lester Murad, twenty-two “foreigners” who have visited or lived in Palestine previously or who live there currently reflect on their experiences and how Palestine has shaped their life trajectories. With origins from Chile, Bolivia, Holland, Greece, Germany, South Africa, the United Kingdom, Japan, Sudan, and the United States, the writers both find Palestine and also discover themselves in brief contributions that are often engaging, sometimes amusing, and rarely heavy-handed.

This is a book of personal narratives, but it is intriguing that the particular experiences of spouses, teachers,

activists, and travelers have a tendency to morph into an unquestioning general acceptance of categorization, both by others and self, as “*ajaneb*” (foreigners), even for those who have lived in Palestine for decades and raised Palestinian children. This may come partly from an admirable desire not to speak for Palestinians – or to deploy privilege – but strikes me as worthy of further reflection. Generic “foreigners” tend to produce, in seeming opposition, generic “Palestinians,” losing the richness (and contradictions) of actual family, social, and political life that these slender narratives contain. I was most engaged with the narratives when the writers follow Theodore Adorno’s call (albeit without his weighty conceptual machinery) for “lingering with the particular.”¹

Another less surprising conformity is the long-term and universal commitment by the writers to work for justice for “Palestine” and the Palestinian people, both from those who stay and those who leave. A question arises that is only partly ironic: Is the “Palestine virus” incurable? Do people ever recover from Palestine? Cody O’Rourke, a former hard-living construction worker from Michigan, arrived in Palestine after having overcome alcoholism. Searching for meaning in his life, he had taken the recommendation of a mentor to join the Christian Peacemakers Team in Hebron. He is shaken by what he sees and on the airplane back home he, “without thinking,” asked the flight attendant to round up a few beers. He stayed “more or less drunk” for the next six months “trying to sort out what the hell I had experienced” (102). Fortunately, he sobered up and his mentor recommended that he use his skills to return to Palestine and rebuild demolished houses. With quite a few life bumps, he married and had a child. He now lives with his son in Bayt Jala. His entry is called “Trying to be a Good Dad in a Complicated Neighborhood.”

If Cody’s story grabbed the attention of readers of this review, others in the volume will as well. Saul Jihad Takahashi, who comes to Palestine as deputy head of the UN High Commission for Human Rights in Occupied Palestine (whew!), leaves with a yearning that brings him to embrace Islam as “a framework of belief that fits perfectly with my work as a human rights lawyer” (54). Hence his new name, Jihad. Or Arabic-speaking Zeena Salman, originally from Sudan and a pediatric cancer specialist, who admits, “I did not know that I was an *ajnabiya*. It never occurred to me” (43). Her repeated encounters with Palestinians who question (or outright deny) her Arab identity because she is black, including a storekeeper who insists she must be from India, bemuse her. Or there is Donn Hutchison, who raised his two children in Ramallah after his wife Sina died of cancer. When his daughter in the United States called him to announce she was engaged to an American, he answered “but he’s a *foreigner*.” She gently reminded him, “Baba, habibi, you are an *ajnabi*” (90).

There are the requisite number of spouses, both men and women, settling into large Palestinian families and grappling with family dynamics. Some of the observations may be trite, but all ring true to particular experiences. Samira Safadi, born in East Berlin, offers a series of acerbic dialogues of her experiences coming to Jerusalem to marry Mahmoud and to become part of his large family. As her wedding approaches, she tells her future husband, “I thought we agreed to invite only around seventy

people.” He notes that “actually” there may be around two hundred and anyway he has printed seven hundred invitation cards (78).

For Samira, Jerusalem itself is represented only through her sour encounters with the Ministry of Interior and a more amusing exchange in the Islamic court. The city itself has no presence. And indeed, there is a striking absence of place – of Palestine in its natural rural and urban environments – in many of the narratives. Aside from scattered mentions of olive trees (and of the sea for Galilee residents), Palestine itself is rather ghostly, although Palestinians as families, colleagues, and friends are vividly present.

And not everyone has had the opportunity to experience either people or place at great length. There is Nadia Hasan, born and raised in Chile, for whom the number of her deportations and bannings from Palestine by the Israeli authorities is dizzying. It is also a reminder that there is another definition of “foreigner,” one many are all too familiar with, including faculty at Birzeit University, Palestinian and non-Palestinian, who do not have residency. That definition, employed by the Israeli state and its Israeli Civil Administration and Ministry of Interior arms, stands counter to the Palestinian use of *ajaneb*, which is often teasing and affectionate, sometimes just plain puzzled, but never punitive.

The bulk of the entries are from generations older than Nadia’s. Marty Rosenbluth, who was a human and labor rights worker in Palestine from 1985 to 1993 (with stops at Amnesty International and law school), is presently an immigration lawyer at the “worst immigration court in the country” in the deprived town of Lumpkin, Georgia (no, I did not make up the name!). He writes that he would not have been able to handle it without the experiences of his years in Palestine where he “developed a high tolerance for frustration.” My personal memory of Marty from his years in Ramallah: in the late 1980s, Marty was detained by the Israeli army and became yet another resident of the dank cells in the Ramallah police station (thankfully briefly). When I called the U.S. Consulate, the voice over the phone said, as if by rote, “I am sorry, we can do nothing.”

Palestine in Lumpkin, this image lingered with me. Indeed, the Palestine “virus” may well be a vaccine enabling those like Marty to work against the odds: the approval rate for asylum seekers at the Lumpkin court was only 5 percent when Marty arrived. Perhaps Palestine can contribute this vaccine to a world governed increasingly by uncertainty and insecurity.

Penny Johnson is a member of JQ’s Editorial Committee. Her book, Companions in Conflict: Animals in Occupied Palestine was published in 2019.

Endnotes

- 1 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (Verso, 2005), 77.