

The “Wall Museum” – Palestinian Stories on the Wall in Bethlehem

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Once the area around Rachel’s Tomb, a pilgrimage place for Muslims, Christians and Jews, was one of the liveliest in Bethlehem. The Hebron Road connected Jerusalem with Bethlehem: its northern section was the busiest street in town. It was the gateway from Jerusalem into Bethlehem. After entering Bethlehem along the main road, visitors either chose the direction to Hebron or the road to the Church of the Nativity.

Times have changed. During the 1990s Rachel’s Tomb became an Israeli military stronghold with the Jerusalem-Bethlehem checkpoint close by. As such it was a focus of Palestinian protests, especially during the second intifada after September 2000. In 2004-05 Israel built walls near the Tomb and a surrounding enclave, both of which it had already annexed to Jerusalem. The Tomb thus became forbidden territory to inhabitants of Bethlehem. In the course of time no less than sixty-four shops, garages, and workshops along the Hebron Road closed their doors. This was not just because of the fighting, shooting and shelling going on during the second intifada, but also because the area became desolate as a result of the Wall. Parents warned their children not to visit the area with its imposing 8-9 meter high concrete Wall – almost twice as high as the Berlin Wall.

Those inhabitants who did not want to leave the area, or could not, thought what to do. How to create life in a dead and deadening environment? Among different initiatives, the Arab Educational Institute (AEI), member of the international peace movement Pax Christi, opened the Sumud Story House there in 2009. Four women’s groups, including one made up of women from the neighborhood, came together for weekly meetings and various social activities. Among those activities were cultural events like the formation of a large human Bethlehem star; singing and playing

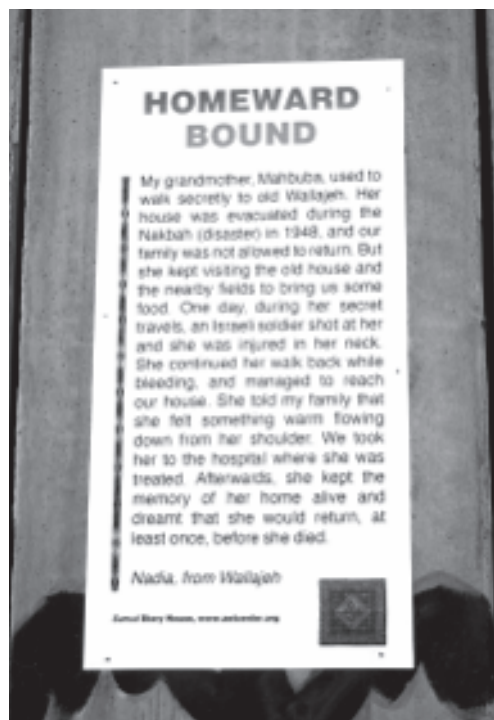
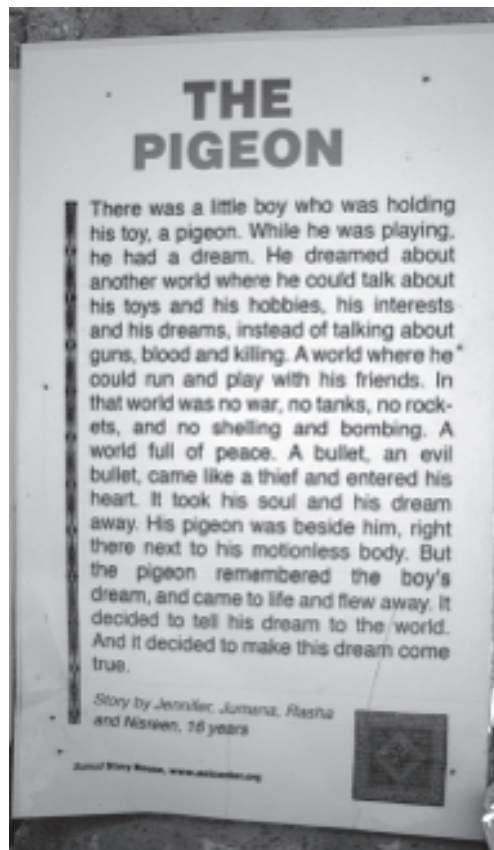
from roofs and balconies along the streets; a concert beneath a military watchtower; meditation and inter-religious sessions, and the establishment of a women's choir performing next to the Wall. In 2009 AEI also launched a modest but annual Sumud Festival in the area. Other Wall-torn cities, like Berlin and Belfast, provided inspiring models.

The "Wall Museum" is the latest stage of these cultural activities. The use of inverted commas around "museum" is deliberate. The museum is not intended to become permanent. It is in fact our hope that the Wall museum stories contribute to cracks in the Wall, to its breaking down, and in fact to the collapse of all walls around us and around the Palestinian people in particular. In other words, we hope that the "Wall Museum" by its very success will eventually destroy itself.

In this context the human stories shown on the posters cannot but have a very special meaning. The fragile, human, personal stories stand in a stark and total contrast to the concrete Wall. The personal story humanizes, opens up, asks for human understanding, whereas the Wall kills the environment, closes up, takes away the human horizon, "warehouses" people behind the Wall. By preserving and communicating memory, the human story is a challenge to the Wall.

In total 120 stories have been attached to the Wall in the period 2011-2014. They are stories of Palestinian women, and lately also of youth, from primarily the three neighboring towns, Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour, and the surrounding villages.

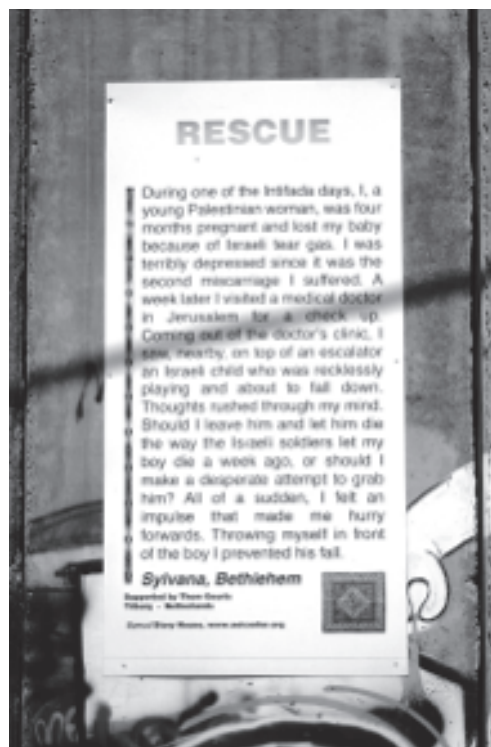
The "Museum" is still very much a work in progress. It is ongoing, with new ideas coming. In the near future, new stories and



genres will appear: dream stories, stories of refugees from nearby Aida camp and elsewhere who lost their land during the *Nakba* of 1948 and afterwards, and old photos of Palestinian towns. Also West Bank areas beside Bethlehem will be visited by the “museum.” The stories together chronicle the suffering, loss and resilience of the Palestinian people. Personal stories converge into community stories that reflect a national narrative denied by the stereotypical images surrounding Palestinians which form another layer of seemingly impenetrable walls.

The photos here show a sample of wall poster stories that were originally written in Arabic, then translated into English, and condensed to suit the wall poster format. The stories show women’s *sumud* or steadfastness when practicing caring and justice in daily life. The stories relay the need to heal, hold together the home, and uphold life over destruction. An older woman saves young men from being beaten by soldiers. Another saves an Israeli baby after losing her own unborn child due to teargas. In a fantasy story, some teenage girls imagine a dove snatching the soul of a killed boy to bring a message of peace. A woman does not let herself be intimidated by a soldier who does not want her to hang her laundry outside. Another tells how she is shot during her courageous daily returns to pre-1948 fields. A child holds the hand of her father to prevent him from leaving during the 1967 war.

Taking a perspective from the inside, the stories bring out the human agency that international media portraits of Palestinians so often lack or downplay. Further, the stories provide a sense of history and suggest the possibility of change in daily life and beyond – a possibility seemingly



denied by the Wall's very appearance.

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