

Oral History in Action



By Sam Bahour

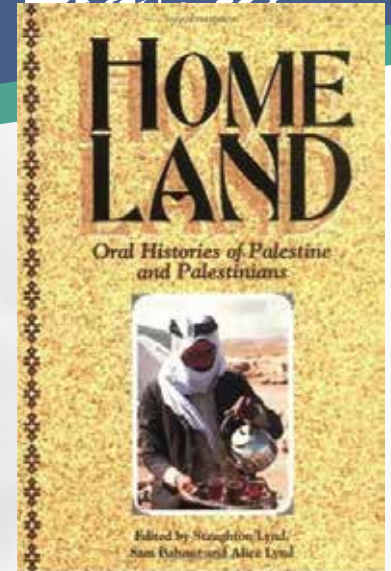


Oral history is much more than words on paper or voices on tape. It is a tool of resistance, an act of remembrance, and a platform to educate. As a foreign visitor to Palestine recently noted to me in a meeting, while unable to remember the exact quote or to whom it is credited: "History is meaningless if it does not inform today."

The first Gulf War, coined by the US as Operation Desert Storm, began on August 2, 1990, and ended on February 28, 1991. During the height of the devastation of Iraq by the US military and its allies during that period, I was active in the anti-war movement in Youngstown, Ohio. It was during this time that I sat at the head table at the First Presbyterian Church near Youngtown State University, leading a public meeting to plan the next set of activities against the war. At the end of the meeting, an elderly couple came up to speak to me. They both spoke slowly and purposefully as they introduced themselves. I had never heard of either of them. They asked if they could visit me in my home to understand more on the issue

of Palestine because they had heard me state in the meeting that Palestine was key to Middle East peace, not Iraq, which the entire world was transfixed on at the time. I agreed to talk with them. What followed was a friendship and mentorship that I will forever be indebted to them for.

The couple were Staughton and Alice Lynd, each a legend in their own right. Staughton is a renowned attorney, historian, and activist. He was the principal administrator of the Freedom Schools for the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964 and chaired the first anti-Vietnam war march in Washington DC in 1965. Alice is also an attorney and an advocate against the death penalty. During the Vietnam War, she counseled hundreds of young men facing the draft. Staughton and Alice have worked side-by-side with people facing injustice in communities throughout the world, from Vietnam to El Salvador. Now that I had an idea



of who they were, I looked forward to receiving them at my home.

After a few living room meetings in Youngstown, we dived into the intricacies of the Palestinian struggle for freedom and independence. They wasted no time in making a strategic request. They were thirsty to learn more and said that the way they learn is by embarking on producing an oral history of the issue under study. They

Oral history is a verb, an action, and something that looks into the past to inform the present. Sam Bahour provides a flashback of his original encounter with engaging in oral history and shows how he supports various forms of the discipline today by supporting woman writers, poets, and theater professionals.

had already used this technique to document people's struggles in Latin America and the US labor movement. I was taken aback. First, I was not exactly sure what producing an oral history entailed. In addition, they were speaking of travelling to Palestine to interview subjects for the oral history book. I was not sure I was up to it, but I took a decision to invest some time to make it happen, and invest some time I did!

Two years later we had traveled to Palestine multiple times and interviewed dozens of persons in Palestine and the US: Palestinian refugee students from the camps in South Lebanon, prisoners released from Israeli jails, armed militants, women, youth, diaspora, and prominent figures, as well as unknown soldiers and housewives. Every interview was meticulously prepared for, diligently taped, painstakingly transcribed, and endlessly cross-checked. When all was edited and an overall story line crafted, Alice did her magic. She read through the accounts, stopping anywhere that our interviewees had made a claim, be it that the narrator was tortured in prison or had land confiscated, etc. For every claim, she researched and footnoted the book in great detail, to the point where the oral history book we produced, *Homeland: Oral Histories of Palestine and Palestinians*, can be read as two

books. The top parts of the pages are the accounts of our subjects, and the bottom parts are a rich reference to international law, historical documents, and news items, all corroborating the stories we were told.

Corroborating is a word I learned to appreciate during this process. Oral history is easily discounted if an individual's account of history cannot be matched to what others recall. Corroborating the details of accounts can be a powerful tool when the powers that be are bent on whitewashing their acts of ethnic cleansing.

Alix Naff of the Smithsonian Institution had this to say about our final product, "Riveting and moving...*Homeland* will make an invaluable resource for the study of...the social history of the Palestinians..."

Fast-forward 20 years, I have now lived in Palestine for two decades and have embarked on supporting women artists as part of my commitment to civil society. The three women I support are amazing persons. Each is a leader in her own field and is documenting our society in creative and entertaining ways, taking oral history to new dimensions.

Fida Jiryis is a Palestinian writer who was born in Lebanon, lived in Cyprus, Britain, Canada, and Israel, and is currently living in Ramallah. Drawing on her life experiences while reckoning with life in a traditional society, Fida effortlessly brings her friends and readers in touch with their deepest emotions: sometimes laughter and joy, other times sadness and pain, but always with an underlining respect for life, love, and humanity. Over the last years, Fida has published her stories in the Arab and Western press and, in June 2010, published her first Arabic book of short stories, *Hayatuna Elsagheera* (Our Small Life), depicting the intricate dynamics of Palestinian village life. This was followed by a sequel, *Al-Khawaja* (The Gentleman),



Left to right, Faten, Sonia, and Fida.

published in February 2014. She recently completed her first English fiction manuscript, *Forty-Six Pounds*, which she is seeking to publish, and is in the midst of completing an autobiography of what it was like for her to be a diaspora Palestinian who, due to the signing of the Oslo Accords, found herself "returning" to her father's village of Fassouta, in the north of historical Palestine, and assuming Israeli citizenship overnight. Her story will be one you will not want to miss.

Faten Khoury is a Palestinian actress and drama trainer from Nazareth living in Ramallah. She holds a bachelor's in theatre (acting) and history of art from Haifa University, and has been active in live theater performances for over ten years. Faten's main focus of work in the last few years has been in the realm of bridging art and theater with current issues, such as Palestinian fragmentation and identity. She has held numerous workshops to bring together Palestinian youth from across historical Palestine, with the aim of communication and exploring shared identity, based on her belief that art is a living form and a means of vital expression. Through this work and through understanding the extent of alienation of young Palestinians from their history and culture, Faten has discovered the need for documenting and presenting Palestinian oral history as a means of preserving it. It is her dream to realize a theatrical museum of

oral history, which she hopes will be a valuable addition to Palestinian efforts to preserve our heritage and history.

Sonia Khader is a leading Palestinian poet based in Ramallah. Writing in Arabic (with her newest collection published in Algeria in Arabic and French), Sonia steps away from the political world and brings her readers in touch with the human aspects of Palestinian life; actually, her work transcends being Palestinian and really touches on human life, wherever it resides. Her poems are deep and thoughtful reflections on love, pain, motherhood, abuse, discrimination, and much more. Sonia not only writes outstanding poetry, but she engages the topics that her poetry addresses in venues throughout Palestine and the Arab World. She is studying the feasibility of establishing a publishing house, one that will put writers back in the driver's seat of an industry that is fragmented and struggling to keep up with the times.

I'm proud to be able to claim these three Palestinian women artists as friends. They are bringing new meaning to the discipline of oral history. While doing so, they are educating younger generations about life in Palestine and life in general. Whether through short stories, poetry, or theater, the medium is merely the vehicle to move thoughts and insights from one person to another. The power of their work is their ability to be in touch with their own feelings, connect with the world around them, and respect their society, while at the same time challenging its shortcomings and, above all, using their creative gifts to ensure that our past informs our present, which ensures our future.

Sam Bahour is a Palestinian business consultant from the Palestinian city of El Bireh. He blogs at www.epalestine.com. To read Fida's books, go to www.fidajiryis.net. Sonia's work will soon be available at www.soniakhader.ps (under construction).