

Life in a Palestinian Refugee Camp



Grace Halsell

Award-Winning Journalist and Author

It is predawn, and Sameetha has overslept. Bashir, her husband, calls her. He speaks in Arabic... I do not understand the Arabic words, yet I understand his tone, gestures, and the diurnal pattern: Bashir rises early; Sameetha wants to sleep.

Bashir, forty-eight, thinks his job important. For three decades he has lived in the refugee camp, and he has been out of work as often as not. Now, through a United Nations agency, he has a porter's job. With a protective leather pad on his back, he hoists and carries steamer trunks, huge bags of produce, or pieces of furniture. As a one-man moving van, he earns the equivalent of fifty dollars a month.

Sameetha and Bashir are the parents of five children, the youngest named Nahla. Meeting Nahla, who is sixteen, I at once feel an affinity for her. Like Kareemi [a young Palestinian woman, who Halsell stayed with several times], she is tall and slender and has dark hair and dark eyes. Unlike

Kareemi, she is painfully shy, turned in on herself, even furtive, like an animal in a cage. About her there seems to be the humility that comes with knowing you are living in a very limited space belonging to others who are more powerful than you.

I come to know Nahla in this way. I am visiting Bir Zeit campus and mention to one of Kareemi's professors, Lisa Tariki, that I would like to live awhile in a refugee camp. "No problem," she replies. "We have many students here who live in refugee camps." And she introduces me to Ahmad, twenty, a scholarship student, who is Nahla's brother. It came as a surprise to me that Palestinians from refugee camps were at Bir Zeit. Until then I had somehow imagined all the refugees were removed from the mainstream of life, perhaps like Indians on United States reservations whom we Anglos for so long kept hidden from sight.

I talk with Ahmad, and he agrees at once that I will be welcome in his family's home. About a week later we meet in Ramallah. We walk along streets crowded with Arab Palestinians, looking into shop windows filled with TV's and even commodes, and I realize anew that the world is divided between those who can buy and those who cannot. Then we board an ancient bus and after a fifteen-minute ride get out on the outskirts of town and walk a short distance to the camp.

Entering the refugee camp, I feel I am entering some medieval ghetto. I walk along a narrow alleyway, skirting an open sewage ditch. I pass tens of dozens of one- and two-room houses, each leaning on the other for support. I am in a ghetto without streets, sidewalks, gardens, patios, trees, flowers, plazas, or shops--among an uprooted, stateless, scattered people who, like the Jews before them, are in a tragic diaspora. I pass scores of small children, the third generation of Palestinians born in the ghetto that has almost as long a history as the state of Israel itself. Someone has said that for every Jew who was brought in to create a new state, a Palestinian Arab was uprooted and left homeless.

We enter the door of a dwelling, not distinguishable to my eyes from hundreds of others like it, and I see two women on their hands and knees, both in shirts and pants, scrubbing a concrete floor. They rise, one somewhat laboriously, as she is heavy with child, and the other, the mother of Nahla

and Ahmad and other sons, a woman made old before her time by endlessly making do in a makeshift home, a home that is only this room with a concrete floor and blankets stacked against the walls for beds. And, for a toilet, a closeted hole in the floor. Nahla has never known the convenience of a tub or a commode, nor do any members of her family enjoy that greatest of all luxuries, a room or even space into which one can for an hour or a few moments of each day retire, and in solitude meld mind, body, and soul.

The United Nations provides funds to meet basic needs, such as medical clinics and schooling. But no one has extended the kind of help that would allow people like Sameetha and Bashir to somehow help themselves, to somehow propel themselves into a bigger space, a fuller life. Americans, for example, annually give five hundred and twenty-eight dollars per capita to Israelis and three dollars per capita to the Palestinians.

"We are only seven," Nahla comments the first evening, as we sit on the floor. Members of the family--in addition to Nahla, her parents, and her brother Ahmad, include her eldest brother Zayid, twenty-four, a construction worker, and his wife, Rima, nineteen, who is nine months pregnant. Nahla has two other brothers, Abdul and Salah, who are not at home. She does not tell me immediately, but in time Nahla says they are both in Israeli prisons.

Living with Nahla and her family, I am astonished both by their poverty and also by their will to survive under the weight of being a people without a political party, a government, a land, a people without an identity and without a promise for tomorrow. I learn they unite through the shared experience of exile. Once Nahla introduces me to an old man in the alleyway near her home, and she tells me he is the head man of the camp, having once been a village mukhtar in the area of Lydda. Her parents and others like them from Lydda wandered from camp to camp until they found this old man, their mukhtar, and other friends from home and then they set up the same kind of community, as best they could, that they had known before the 1948 war that disrupted their lives.

I sit beside Nahla listening to her read her English lesson. On the sides I hear a cacophony of radios, loud voices, and wailing babies. Nahla, like every child in this camp, is handicapped in her attempts to study. Moreover,

Sameetha constantly asks Nahla's help in household chores. She has no time to think or plan a future outside the camp.

"I feel buried here," Nahla tells me. "I know there is a world out there"--and her eyes seek space beyond the ghetto walls.

Nahla's family does not own a television set, but hundreds of camp refugees do, and Nahla sees, in regularly rerun Hollywood movies, luxurious homes with carpeting and bathrooms and kitchens, and a thousand amenities missing in her life.

For so young a person, she seems uncommonly perceptive about human nature and the unnaturalness of the crowded conditions in which she lives.

"My brothers knew when I began my period. Living so close, none of us is ignorant about the changes in our bodies, about life," she confides, adding that often she must undress before Ahmad and that he trains his eyes not see, psychologically, what in truth he sees. "Once, removing my dress I deliberately studied his face. I saw that his features did not change. I knew he was 'not seeing.'" Only in this way, she explains, does each member of the family give the other a sense of space, of living in a room of one's own.

Nahla hopes to go beyond the nightmare of her parents' past. And she has one dream--to continue her education, and then--her eyes widen at the possibility--to leave the camp and get a job. I ask casually, What kind of job? And then I realize I am thinking of Nahla and her future as if she were living in America, in a land that still provides alternatives. But I am in Nahla's world, where as many as three generations are born in a cramped room, and their only alternatives are to survive or not survive.

Also, I am in a world where women have traditionally never left home, and those who work outside the camp are liberated only to the point of being "free" to labor in Israeli factories and return to what is too often called woman's work.

I watch Sameetha, seated cross-legged on the concrete floor, mixing flour and water, and kneading dough into flat, round, pizza-sized loaves. She has only a hot plate, no oven. She must send the loaves outside her home to be baked.

For meals, we sit on the floor around a low table. We do not use spoons, knives, or forks. At each meal, Sameetha distributes freshly baked bread

loaves, the main staple at all meals. I place my loaf on my lap, tear off a chunk and use it to spoon spicy crushed chickpeas with garlic sauce. I lift small bits of food such as olives, eaten at most meals, with the fingers of my right hand. Sometimes we eat sliced cucumbers seasoned with mint and mixed with thinned yogurt. Most frequently, we dip chunks of bread first into a bowl of olive oil--a big staple in the diet--then into another small bowl of thyme.

Once, we are all sitting on the floor, eating. Sameetha brings a pot of hot tea. As she bends to serve, Bashir inadvertently turns and hits the pot, sending the boiling tea pouring down Sameetha's thighs. She screams, curses, and slaps Bashir, who cowers like a beaten animal.

"Get the paste!" Sameetha shouts to Nahla, who runs to a small cardboard box of possessions and returns not with a medication but with the only salve they have, a tube of Crest toothpaste. Sameetha, still grimacing in pain, lifts her skirt and Nahla applies the paste.

After supper, Sameetha sits on the floor before an old sewing machine with no legs. She motions to a space beside her on the floor, and she shows me how she changes a bobbin, threads the machine, and turns its wheel. She is using these gestures to tell me that the storm--with her angry unleashing of words and her blow at Bashir--is past, and she and her husband will continue to care for the family and continue in the way they know to survive, and that her striking out at Bashir was her desperate attempt to hit not him but the fate that had brought them to this level.

Often Sameetha conveys a hatred for Bashir. Or rather, a hatred for what life has done to him. In more than three decades, Bashir, who looks twenty years older than his age, has never been able to find himself, which is to say he has never been able to find a means to extricate himself and his family from the slough of poverty and despondency in which they seem mired. He comes home from his porter's job looking demeaned, brutalized. He reminds me of a bewildered Navajo Indian I once saw in a crowded city. Separated from his land, the Navajo lost his sense of Indianness, his sense of self. Now Bashir, separated from his "mother earth"--an expression both the Navajos and the Palestinians repeatedly use--feels orphaned, alien, lost.

I meet other men who feel brutalized by living in the camp. They talk of

their villages where they "grew up and laughed." Laughter is only a remembered experience. Ibrahim, the baker is an example.

I accompany Nahla, with a tray of pie-shaped dough, to a small shop where refugees pay a few pennies to get the dough baked. I find myself in a cramped, dark room with a low ceiling. The room is filled with smoke and seems like a dungeon. Ibrahim, a stooped, dark-skinned man of about fifty who seems at the end of his tether, says he starts work at 5:00 A.M., finishes at 7:00 P.M. and bakes about a thousand loaves a day.

"I am on my feet all day, my legs ache, and my head aches from the smoke, fumes, and heat. I work fourteen hours a day to make enough to feed my family. My health, perhaps also my mind, is breaking from the strain. The camp produces one generation after another of people who are trapped."

Is he training his eldest son, I ask, to take over as baker?

"I am trying to teach him to get out of this camp!" he bellows, as if I have hit his sorest nerve. His eldest son is named Fouzi. He is seventeen and has been invited to Russia to study art.

"Wherever he goes," Ibrahim says, "I am glad to see him escape from the camp."

Walking back to her home, I ask Nahla: Is Ibrahim a Communist?

"I don't know. The Communists reached in to help him," Nahla replies, adding, "Many Israelis claim that if we recover a portion of our Palestine we will create a Communist state. But I do not think so. We are Muslim, and there is a big difference between the beliefs of our religion and Communism."

One morning I walk with Nahla to her school, and she shows me several of her classrooms and takes me to the office of one of the administrators, a Palestinian in his late fifties, who invites me to stay for a coffee. Nahla leaves us, and the administrator begins by telling me he earned degrees in Boston and Chicago universities, and that he was a teacher "in Palestine" before the creation of Israel.

"This is one of ninety-four schools for thirty-five thousand refugee children on the West Bank," he tells me, adding that West Bank and Gaza refugee schools, as well as all Palestinian refugee schools in the Middle East, have for three decades been operated by the UN Relief and Works Administration (UNRWA).

"Overcrowded classrooms are our worst problem. We have not been permitted by Israeli authorities to build new schools since they occupied the area in 1967. Our school population, now more than one thousand in this school, has more than doubled. Consequently, we have to use our schools on double shifts.

"Censorship is another problem," he continues. "We made a list of 117 textbooks we think necessary for the elementary and preparatory cycles. But the Israeli government censored 42 of these. As a result, our students in several courses must rely entirely on classroom lectures.

"About ninety percent of our resources come from voluntary contributions by governments," he continues. "The remaining ten percent is provided by the UN. The Arab countries saved us from bankruptcy in 1979 when Saudi Arabia provided the money we needed at the last minute. But the Arabs believe that the refugee camps were created by the West, and that the Western countries must finance UNRWA."

The administrator pauses to sip his coffee, and I glance around his office, bare save for his desk and three chairs. I see no wall decorations, no photographs, diplomas, or books. What, I ask, does he need most? It is a perfunctory question, and pencil poised, I await a perfunctory answer, such as, We need more books. But he is done with discussing school needs as such.

"Our freedom! Our freedom!" he replies fervently. "We are a people exiled and held under the yoke of tyranny. We number nearly four million. Three million of us now live in exile--in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Persian Gulf countries, and in scattered groups throughout the world. Only six hundred thousand of us remain in that part of Palestine that became Israel.

"About half of the Palestinian people living outside Israel are still considered refugees, and about twenty percent continue to live in refugee camps. In our refugee school, I see the psychological effect of the prolonged stays in camps: an atrophy of initiative, an increased tendency toward passivity and fatalistic attitudes. It seems contradictory to say our young students are passive, with loss of self-confidence and increased dependence, and at the same time to say that they have mounting drives of vengeance. But their hatred builds on their lack of freedom. Israel forcibly produces a generation of tongueless people, and we will, in the end, speak with fire.

"For thirteen years, the Israelis have chosen not to hear us and not to see us. An Israeli premier, Golda Meir, said 'There are no Palestinian people.' But ignoring us does not make us go away. Nor will the Israelis prevent our attaining national independence. Since Israel became a state scores of nations have won national independence, including some that number no more than a few hundreds of thousands. No power on earth can stop a people from throwing off foreign rule, once they have made up their mind to do so. Israel with all its guns and power will not stop us.

"The Israelis give two reasons for not allowing refugees to return to their homeland," the administrator continues. "First, the Israelis say the Palestinians who returned home would create a problem of security in case of war with the Arab states. But Palestinians within Israel are peaceful and quiet compared with Nahla and the thousands like her trapped in refugee camps. The Palestinians within Israel do not wish to be punished or expelled. The refugees such as Nahla, however, have nothing to lose. She will risk life itself to escape.

"The Israelis say, as the second reason why they will not permit Palestinians to return to their homeland, that to do so would make Israel bi-national and they don't want that. They want the state to remain Jewish. The Zionists from the beginning, although they themselves were secular, wanted a totally Jewish state. This is why they felt forced to drive out the Palestinian Arabs in 1948. And that is why they rejected the Palestine Liberation Organization's solution of a democratic state in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims would have equal rights.

"High school students are among the most politically active in the West Bank," the administrator says. "In America, high school students, even college students, are not politically aware, especially nowadays. Here, on the contrary, students are the most vocal group. The high school students are much more numerous and more visible. Teenagers originate almost all the demonstrations and protests. They are very politically aware, and the teenage girls, particularly, are always out demonstrating."

Nahla, he continues, helped stage a demonstration on the school

grounds. "It was at the time of the arrest by the Israelis of the mayor of Nablus, Basam Shaka. She and other teenagers marched near the school one day carrying a placard stating, 'We are Palestinians. We must be free.'

"Six armed men who spoke Hebrew--later identified as religious zealots from a nearby Jewish settlement--jumped from a car and chased them onto the school grounds. They fired their pistols and rifles around the students who were in class.

"The assailants chased Nahla and the other girls from the school into the refugee camp and began throwing stones at women and children who were outside their homes. They even threw stones at one woman who was holding her six-month-old infant in her arms. She ran into her house, but the attackers threw stones through her windows and fired shots into a water tank on the roof.

"The civilian religious zealots left. Then Israeli soldiers carrying guns rushed onto our school grounds and arrested Nahla and other teenagers and kept them in jail for two days."

Later, when I ask Nahla about the arrest, and whether she and her family have felt humiliated about her having been in jail, she replies, "No.

Nowadays it is kind of a badge of honor."

That evening, Nahla and I walk with Rima--her face chalk white--to a nearby clinic, where Rima gives birth to a boy, who she names for her husband, Zayid. Rima returns home the next day. There are only 293 hospital beds available for all the refugees in all the West Bank camps--one for every thousand. And there is only one doctor for every ten thousand refugees.

Zayid looks like all newborn babies, amazingly small and fragile. Yet Rima and the other members of the family insist I hold him and join them in their celebration. They all accept another mouth to feed as a marvelous gift of God. And where will this life end?

Bashir and Sameetha had come to the camp as teenagers, had married, had five children, and had now become grandparents of a child born in the camp. And would the child in two decades foster more children in this same

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camp?

We in the West are easily critical of those in refugee camps who have many children. Such families have few amenities and forms of recreation save perhaps, the finest of all--building a family and surviving through the strength of that family. The diaspora of the Jews and their suffering in ghettos did not destroy their families. Neither has the diaspora of the Palestinians and their suffering in refugee camps destroyed the strength and unity of their families.

Nahla learns poetry by heart, and one evening she quotes a poem by a Palestinian, Tawfiq Zayad, as expressing her determination to live, free of occupational forces.

As if we were a thousand prodigies
Spreading everywhere
In Lydda, in Ramallah,
In the Galilee...
Here we shall stay,
A wall upon your breast,
And in your throat we shall stay,
A piece of glass, a cactus thorn,
And in your eyes,
A blazing fire.

The walls of the room have one decoration, a calendar with a drawing of olive trees. Nahla takes the calendar from the wall and translates its Arabic inscription:

I believe in a tomorrow.
And in the struggle;
I have faith in olive trees.

She explains the olive tree represents the future and the past of the Palestinians. "The olive tree has strength because of its long, tough roots. Our Arabic literature mentions the olive tree as the cure of all diseases, and in the holy Koran, the Prophet Muhammad says, 'Take care of the holy olive tree; from it you will gain your benediction.' The color green and the olive trees represent our future. We have roots here. This we know is our homeland."

That evening Bashir tells a story he must have repeated many times. The year is 1948.

"We were about fifty thousand Palestinians living in and near Lydda [near the present Tel Aviv airport].

"The fighting rages around us, and we saw the Israelis advancing. We heard shouts and an Israeli soldier told us they were ordered not to leave any Arab civilians at their rear--to leave no one in or near Lydda. The Israeli soldiers at gun point drove us out." The decision to drive out the Palestinians, he adds, had been taken by David Ben-Gurion, one of Israel's founders and its first prime minister.

"We were all villagers and none of us, none of the people like my mother and father or anyone in my family, had ever owned a gun, nor did I know anyone who was a soldier. We had nothing to do with the war or the struggle of the European Jews to find a homeland. Yet we were being collectively punished.

"I was same age as Nahla--sixteen--and I remember the armed Jewish soldiers encircling our home and firing shots and shouting in Arabic that they would kill us if we did not leave at once. Yet no one obeyed; it was as if we felt ourselves tied to our soil. Soldiers dragged women by their hair, and my father shouted he could not leave his garden, his trees, and a soldier knocked him to the floor. I had a pet lamb, and I ran to hold the lamb. I was not thinking of my mother or father or our home but of that small animal.

"I watched families fleeing as from a fire, and soldiers shot around them and over their heads, driving them like cattle. Soldiers pushed us out of the house with their guns. We soon found ourselves among thousands of women and children. Some old men could barely walk and mothers carried babies in their arms, and led small children. The children were crying and begging for water, all of us fleeing we knew not where. No one was given time to collect even the necessities, no food or provisions. I mindlessly grabbed my baby lamb, and another neighbor boy carried a pigeon. On the first day of the march I lost my little lamb. Others carried a chicken, a blanket, or a sack of flour that represented their entire possessions on this earth. My mother begged to return to her village to recover her small stove, her few heirlooms, but she was forced to keep moving. On the third day I saw my mother fall. I

thought she had fainted. I felt her heart and she was dead. Then later, my father died. The other Palestinians dug holes in the ground and buried first my mother and then my father. I saw many old people and children fall and die because of the heat and exhaustion."

He sighs deeply, and goes on, "One day we were Palestinians living in Palestine; the next day we were Palestinians driven from a land called Israel.

"We were tens of thousands kicked out by force, our villages destroyed. Even the Jews admit there is not a single Jewish village in their country that is not built on the site of an Arab village. They built the Jewish village of Nahala on the Arab village of Mahloul, and the Jews built Gifat on the Arab village of Jifta.

"The drove us out, they bulldozed our homes, and they built new villages.

"In 1948 I lived in one of about six hundred Arab villages in the part of Palestine that was taken by Israelis. My village was one of about five hundred bulldozed and destroyed. Now you will not find more than one hundred Arab villages in the part of Palestine taken by the Zionists. The Israeli leaders admit they did this. They are not ashamed. They do not try to undo what they did to us. They justify their acts and glorify them."

Once again he speaks of his family's farm and admits he was never able to find himself, "living on a slab of concrete. I tried--but I failed. Now my spirit is gone."

He looks to Nahla as he talks, wanting her to understand his burden and hers. Bashir knows he is spent by life, but he says, "Nahla, you, and others like you, will make the struggle."

Excerpted from *Journey to Jerusalem*

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Life in a Palestinian Refugee Camp excepted from *Journey to Jerusalem*

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About Grace Halsell

Grace Halsell covered both Korea and Vietnam as a journalist, was a White House speech-writer under Lyndon Johnson, and wrote eleven books, among them the well-received *Soul Sister*. This essay was excerpted from her 1981 book *Journey to Jerusalem*.

Grace Halsell is listed in *Who's Who in America*. She was named the Green Honors Chair Professor of Journalism at Texas Christian University and has received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the University of Pennsylvania.

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