

Women of Palestine

Jehan Helou, *Making Palestine's History: Women's Testimonies*, Spokesman Books, 2022, 236 pages, paperback ISBN 9780851249056, £14.99, Kindle Edition £8.99

When Germany lay in ruins after World War Two the men were absent and it was the women – *die Trümmerfrauen* – who, we're told, cleared the rubble and rebuilt the shattered cities. It seems the same happened in the ruined Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Women alone rebuilt Ain al-Hilweh camp, which the Israelis had flattened by massive aerial bombardment.

There's much evidence in *Making Palestine's History* of women clearing rubble, rebuilding homes, digging wells, organising sewers, paving roads and cleaning, cleaning, cleaning. They sourced food, medicines, blood, even guns – thus keeping everything going while under fire from the Israelis, the Lebanese, and sometimes from factions within their own ranks. At one point, it was four young women refusing to leave a battle scene who shamed the few young men left into staying, thereby saving Miyye wa Miyye camp following an attack by right-wing Lebanese Christian militia in 1982. (p181)

Author Jehan Helou, herself a distinguished activist, conducted 53 interviews in her bid to record the crucial role of women in the Palestinian Revolution during the 1970s and early '80s. It is clear that in taking part in the political and armed struggle to liberate Palestine, these women found themselves struggling for their own liberation. Muyassar Ismail documents the change:

'As for the age of marriage before the Revolution, it was young – 13 to 15 – due to the large number of family members – often from six to 13 in one family and so the father would want his daughters to get married, enabling him to be free of the burden and responsibility for them ... (the revolution helped) ... some girls reach high educational levels such as doctor or teacher. It also contributed to improvements in the economic situation of the family ... the marriage ages of girls increased to between 18 – 20 years old.'

Shadia Helou records her personal awakening:

'The revolution is my life. I became aware with the revolution and I developed

with it. Before I didn't know where I was. It opened up a whole new world, a world related to politics, sociology, philosophy and religion. All my culture was turned upside down. Before I was an ordinary Palestinian girl wandering. I was still young. No, it is certain that the revolution made deep changes in my life.' (p70)

Because these Palestinian sisters stayed out all night with men on operations, wore their hair uncovered, chose their own husbands, and trained as wireless operators, engineers and soldiers, previously conservative parents came round to accepting this and their fellow revolutionaries – men – realised that they were truly equal.

'I was the only woman among 75 men: I took it in my stride. All the training that took place was with the attitude that we were all brothers and sisters in struggle and there was a common purpose. My parents knew ... but did not object ... in fact my mother prayed for me,' says Amal Masri. (p100)

There were no so-called honour killings during this period and one woman sets her dowry at one Palestinian pound. Although they were never previously coerced, we're told, now they chose their own husbands or, indeed, chose not to marry at all.

Lots of the women travelled: some went to Vietnam to learn of women's involvement in the struggle against the United States' disastrous proxy war against communism. Others attended the UN Women's Congress in Mexico in 1975 where they succeeded in having Zionism condemned as a racist endeavour (later rescinded, unfortunately). And, like many of their brothers, hundreds of them travelled to the Soviet Union to receive their university education: all this at a time when their sisters in some other Arab countries couldn't leave home unless accompanied by a male relative. This was happening at the same time as the second wave of Women's Liberation swept over the West led by Betty Friedan,¹ Germaine Greer² and Kate Millet.³

Most of these Palestinian women are not particularly famous themselves but there are cameo appearances by those who strode the world stage at the time. Leaving Yasser Arafat aside, Palestinian-American academic Edward Said mentors one of the interviewees. Leila Khaled, who came to public attention through her involvement in hijacking planes, and diminutive Chinese surgeon Dr Swee Chai Ang, who testified against (then) Israeli defence minister Ariel Sharon, get a brief mention.

But these unknown women were the grass roots who enabled the

Palestinian Revolution and *Making Palestine's History* provides a valuable resource for those who will study the much-neglected role of women in this period of Palestine's history in years to come.

So the Palestinian Revolution – not usually named as such outside the Middle East – begins with the emergence of Yasser Arafat who gave the Palestinians back their dignity following the humiliation, dispossession and disorientation of losing their homeland to the nascent Israeli state, created by the UN. It is seen here as really having come to an end when Arafat did a deal with the Israelis and relocated the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) from Lebanon to Tunis in 1982. At that point the infamous massacres in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila took place. Israel, then occupying Beirut and Southern Lebanon, facilitated the right-wing Christian Lebanese militias who entered the camps to slaughter the women, children and non-combatants left behind; an appalling event which seared – and continues to sear – the soul of every Palestinian.

It's interesting to note the attitude of the interviewees to Arafat – Abu Ammar. They love and revere him with many a 'God rest his soul', when they mention him but they are also exasperated that he doesn't get it. Amal Masri:

'The PLO worked to build female cadres to qualify them for leadership of organisational positions: but the liberation of women was not their concern ... There was not a single woman on the executive committee. Why? We used to laugh about it.' (p102)

And Hasna Rida:

'All the women who made it to Fatah's executive committee got there because their husbands were martyrs, not because they were elected or because the leadership acknowledged their role ... As for the educated men, most of them, with very few exceptions, admired the struggle of the women as long as she was not their wife! This changed over the years ... However, if there had been awareness at leadership level that women's liberation was a priority and a basic right, there would have been more positive outcomes and achievements.' (p133-134)

Since then things have gone backwards – it is very notable in the photos and drawings of the interviewees only one wears the hijab. In Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon in the late 1960s and early 70s the hijab was not common. It is more than common now. Muyassar Ismail:

'Women's situation regressed after the withdrawal of the Revolution in the area in 1982. There was reneging on the reform regarding marriage, and early marriage was practised again for girls and even for boys ... Religious currents and organisations benefited from the setback of the Revolution ... the Revolution had not realised the ambitions of the masses ... the oppressed reverted to religion hoping to find there the solutions to their problems.' (p90 - 91)

Ironically, perhaps, Muyassar is the only woman in the book pictured in a hijab.

Fadia Foda said: *'I feel sorry for the current generation which is lost between the religious streams that are trying to put them back in boxes.'*

The interviewees, now elderly (or even deceased), are admirable in their devotion to their own long-suffering people, their willing self-sacrifice to the ideology which supports their life's work. Their terminology is mostly rather formal and there is a lack of concern for the personal. At one point a woman mentions that her husband took a second wife. We don't know whether she is divorced or if she remains married to him. It's as if her private life is of no account in the great scheme of things. It makes the narrative all the more poignant when emotions are alluded to – see Shadia Helou's account of own awakening, cited above.

Making Palestine's History finishes with the testimony of the only man we hear from: Kassem Aina. He alone seems to stand back and takes an overall view from a very human and humane stance. His focus is on giving children orphaned by the struggle a happy and secure family life. His feeling for women's position is manifest. He says:

'The Revolution helped bring out the capabilities of a woman, giving her some freedom, respecting her as a human being, ensuring she was a partner in the building of society and family. We were all drawn towards political activity; it's a short period from 1970 to 1982, and it's good that these achievements took place. We made it internationally; our battle was not only inside but outside also. I think the Women's Union played a positive role, but it was cut short as a result of the defeat. 1982 was a defeat.' (p235)

Sharen Green

Notes:

- i. *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963
- ii. *The Female Eunuch*, 1970
- iii. *Sexual Politics*, 1970