

## **REPORT: PALESTINIAN LIBRARIES**

### **PALESTINIAN LIBRARIES: LITTLE PIECES OF HEAVEN IN HELL**

**by Ghada Elturk**

**J**uly 2002 is a memorable month for me. It was the month I went back to my birthplace for the first time since 1983. I went to see my father, whose health is deteriorating, and to visit with other family members, including sisters and a brother I haven't seen in twenty-two years.

Soon enough, on arriving there everything around me seemed like the ultimate hell. Everything and everywhere – in Beirut, Lebanon, in Ramallah and in Jenin on the West Bank in Palestine.

In Beirut, living conditions in the refugee camps, in the aftermath of so many wars launched against Palestinian civilians, were heartbreaking and disorienting. I had worked in those camps before. Living conditions were bad back then, but now they seemed unreal, as if in a movie: exaggerated horror, subhuman and filthy. Lebanese army checkpoints surround the outskirts of these camps; Palestinian checkpoints posted on the inside. Poverty, garbage, crowded streets and markets. Everything – buildings, streets, people – seemed dying and beyond help or recovery. Walking through the camps was easier than driving, but when you walk, you trip over garbage and skirt open sewage, while your hands and arms make a path for your body through the throngs of people rubbing and sliding closely all around – a sickening dance. The stench of everything combined beyond words.

The Palestinians in Lebanon are forbidden from working in some 70 or more professions, one cause of hardship and poverty. The situation in the Palestinian camps is not of their own making. The camps were never like this during the time I lived in Beirut before 1983. There was poverty but not filth, destruction, and more filth. These Palestinian refugee camps are like big jails and strikingly similar to the camps in the Gaza Strip.

In Ramallah and Jenin, living conditions were similar, but painted with

occupation, siege, curfews, checkpoints, arrests and random and planned killing. Poverty, unemployment, political uncertainty, lack of food, were obvious. You didn't need a second look to realize you were living in a war zone, no matter how close you are to "borders." Curfews are lifted at random, announced only to the baker, who calls his customers, who call their friends and neighbors – thus word that a curfew has been lifted is spread. Curfews are re-instated without notice. You are stuck wherever you happen to be when a curfew is imposed, whether at work or the market. You wait for the curfew to lift to go back home, but the checkpoints get you first and you might be stuck for the rest of the day or the night if you're not allowed to pass. Israeli checkpoints are posted between villages, in the middle of dying olive tree orchards, in the middle of dust and heat.

It is my habit, wherever I land, to visit libraries and bookstores. I am a librarian after all, and to me such visits are, beyond doubt, the most satisfying part of the time I spend in "new" places. Not only because they are my "natural" environment, but also because I talk with the people around me and feel the pulse of a newly encountered place, hitherto unknown to me.

In the refugee camps, I did not find life. I found what I call "surviving hells." Family gatherings, unlike the old times, consist of just sitting around, just being there between one battle and another, one curfew and another, one electricity blackout and another. Politics and economics all contribute to devastating and inhuman conditions under which civilians try to hold on to some semblance of normalcy in the midst of a surreal and life-threatening existence.

But even in this "surviving hell," bookstores and libraries exist. The bookstores I visited have very limited and old publications to offer customers. The stores that have a larger selection are connected to universities, stocked primarily with textbooks, journals and specialized magazines – most of which are out-of-date, incomplete and limited. In spite of their sparseness, however, the shelves present an order, a contemplative atmosphere creating the little heavens of sanity that seem to be all that's left for the Palestinians.

When you walk to a library or cultural center in the West Bank, you walk across tracks left by military tanks that crush street and sidewalk pavements, smash cars, and eat parts of fences and homes. When you walk to a library or a youth center in Lebanon, you walk through garbage, dust, noise and the

certain feeling of so much violence in the air, and mass graves all around you. As you step into one of these little heavens, you are surrounded by organized space, colored painting on the walls, posters. And you appreciate the quiet, the quiet we amuse ourselves with here when we associate a librarian with “ssshhhhh.”

While in Ramallah, I took advantage of a curfew that was lifted from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. to visit four libraries.

The Public Library of Ramallah Municipality is a public lending library, in a three-story building with the children’s department on the lower level. Here, the damage left by more than two Israeli military invasions was not very obvious. The building, furniture, the collection, everything was very impressive, considering the situation, clean and well organized. Staff was working hard before the curfew was re-instated. I spoke with patrons and staff. Understandably, not many children were using the library. Instead parents were checking out books for their children.

The staff told me they had a full summer program for children and youth, but they didn’t want to take a chance and go ahead with the programs because they did not want to risk children’s lives or well-being should anything happen.

The staff shared with me a flyer produced for the summer program, which had been planned to run Saturdays through Mondays for children ages 8 to 13. At the library facility, the children would have watched plays and puppet theatre, film screenings and music concerts; they would have attended lectures on the environment, enjoyed storytelling, participated in book discussions and writing; they would have engaged in art exhibitions, drawing, art and crafts. They would have gone on fieldtrips to the Palestinian Legislative Council and to the Ramallah Municipal Park and Gardens. Children and youth would have, but for the danger did not.

Indeed, another great concern was that some of the performers, storytellers and artists would have to travel to Ramallah from other cities, towns, and villages, and due to curfew and unpredictable Israeli military actions, the library staff also did not want to risk bringing these people to Ramallah.

At the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center Foundation, a non-profit organization, destruction by Israeli military action was more obvious, and despite attempts to fix previous damage, newer damage to the walls, glass, furni-

ture, doors was apparent. The Sakakini Center is a beautiful, old, three-story historical site. A music hall is on the third floor, offices and small exhibit spaces are on the second floor and an art gallery is on the first. The Center offers art, poetry, music and film programs for children, youth, families and adults. The staff said they had decided to take their chances with curfews and military actions, but made changes to the programs with respect to time, materials and audience participation, due to the military situation.

The Center continued to offer programs and activities because they wanted, among other things, to “provide badly needed outlets for creativity, entertainment and relaxation to the public attending them.” Some of the programs offered explored arts in various mediums, provided open summer night concerts that gave voice and space to the talents of mainly amateur young musicians, poets, dancers and singers. During Ramadan 2001, the Center held “solidarity iftars” for those who were alone during the holiday as a consequence of the violent events: students who live away from home and low ranking soldiers who live outside their headquarters. The four evenings consisted of a break-the-fast meal, a concert and the distribution of care packages. CNN aired a positive report of this activity.

The making of four patchwork quilts was a project arising from the consequences of current events. One hundred and fifty-six mothers who have lost their children since September 2000 embroidered a loving tribute to the lives of their sons and daughters. The goal of the project is to help the mothers deal with their grief and teach them a new and income-generating craft. The quilts are in their final stages and will be show-cased around the world.

The damage and destruction were very obvious and alarming in the Al-Quds University Institute of Modern Media and Al-Quds Educational Television in Ramallah (Al-Quds means Jerusalem). The Israeli army occupied the university compound for 17 days and transformed it into a headquarters and a detention center. Furniture, computers, equipment, cameras, walls, windows...everything – every single item – seemed to have had a blow, a total or disabling blow. Staff continue to work as do so many others between one curfew and another, faces stunned yet trying so hard to conduct daily business as normally as possible.

I also visited the Museum of History and Archeology. Destruction is obvious there as well. Some was repaired but more damage had occurred later. All the collection was in boxes. Staff was maintaining and cleaning,

but, again, just trying to deal with reality.

Most of the adults I saw in the libraries and bookstores were students from various universities who could not attend classes or take exams. They were meeting with professors, who were conducting classes in the library. This was a practice that I saw often wherever I went – in bookstores, cafés, ice cream parlors, and restaurants. You would see a table with one or two professors and students either listening to a lecture or submitting papers, asking questions about research, bemoaning the lack of resources, and trying to convince the professors to accept their papers with the limited resources cited. The students lacked access to what the professors were asking them to read. Because of the economic situation, unemployment, and extremely low incomes, the majority of students cannot afford to buy required textbooks, let alone additional supporting and enriching material.

During the time I was in Ramallah, graduating high school students were not able to take their final exams – “Tawjeheyah.” This not only affected individual students and the school system but also the universities, because neither the universities nor the students knew how many students would be eligible to attend the upcoming school year.

In Jenin, the educational achievement of children I met was next to nil. Young elementary school age children could barely identify letters and numbers. Many had no attention span whatsoever, even for the most animated and diverse storytelling and games I tried to engage with them. When electricity was available during programs televised for children, they watched television. I am not sure of the quality of what they watched. Traditional home activities for children are lost in the current climate under occupation, since family gatherings that once included storytelling and games, among other things, seldom do so now. Ironically, with the curfews, children spend much of the time locked in their homes playing “war.” They use blank white paper torn from their school supplies to make play guns. When curfew is lifted they run to the store to buy stale candy and sweets.

Civil and governmental life is interrupted, due to a major loss of equipment, databases, and documents. There is so much destruction. Tom Twiss’s compilation of the damage to the libraries and cultural centers is comprehensive and accurate, as I saw at the places I was able to visit and meet with staff, or talk to people who saw the sites I was not able to visit.

Following is a summary of the needs I gathered from conversations with library staff in the West Bank, regarding what concerned librarians in the U.S. can do to help them out:

- a) Help pay for periodical subscriptions so they don’t lose them or have a gap, since mail is unreliable and they might not have money to pay for subscriptions.
- b) Help them bring some of their art exhibits and programs to tour the United States of America, since it’s the hardest country for them to get into.

I think we need to keep assessing the situation. We need to establish contacts there and use them when opportunities arise to help rebuild.

Also we might want to consider “adoption” – establishing brother and sister libraries. Libraries here in the U.S. can establish relations with a library, cultural center, a children’s or youth program, and coordinate with each entity or program to help meet their needs.

In my opinion, I think it is easier to work through non-governmental organizations (NGO) rather than through the Palestinian or Israeli authorities. We might also work through willing Israeli universities, which could forward our support and donations to Palestinian libraries and educational centers.

Our support might help ease the daily burdens these librarians and affected civilians deal with, help focus attention on coping with reality, and come up with programs and services to a population that is robbed of its cultural life and cultural facilities.

While in Beirut, I spent more time in two Palestinian refugee camps, worked with children and youth, and met with librarians and general staff. I was amazed at the energy, dedication, and innovation that all these people demonstrate in the face of the harsh situation surrounding them. The quantity and quality of programs and services they offer the children and youth are amazingly high. The understanding of library personnel of their profession and role is on the cutting edge.

I met with children’s librarians, a blind director for special services, art and dance teachers, environmental coordinators, and health-care providers who

were leading diverse programs and workshops for children and youth. All were providing excellent programs and offering a wide range of services to their students and the refugee population at large.

Some of the needs they expressed during our conversations were for Braille books and material for the blind such as talking books, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and library supplies such as labels for call numbers. The sighted librarian emphasized the special-needs requests, since their needs are particularly poorly met. I was very impressed by her professionalism and ability to stick to the big picture, rather than trying to get her own library's needs listed as priorities.

In libraries in this devastated region you find a different kind of life, the life that should be, where everyone is practicing their human and civil right to learn and improve the educational and intellectual aspects of their lives. In the libraries you find a cultural atmosphere, books and reading materials all around, computers, book discussions, civic and environmental gatherings, music, dance, songs, children's involvement, youth taking charge — all in the midst of chaos, devastation and destruction. I can't think of anything else that is more humane and in so much demand, yet has the least support, than the Palestinian libraries.

The Palestinian people live in isolation. Without our support based on justice and fairness, they do not stand a chance for survival.



Ghassan Kanafani Cultural Foundation Library at Ein El Helwe Refugee Camp in Lebanon, photo by the author, July 2002

## DAMAGE TO PALESTINIAN LIBRARIES & ARCHIVES DURING THE SPRING OF 2002

report compiled by Tom Twiss

*This report, compiled in August 2002, does not pretend to be comprehensive. Included here are examples of damage to libraries, archives, and government files by Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Also included are examples of damage to government computers, which may have housed government files. Reports of damage to cultural sites or institutions which do not contain libraries or archives are not included. For the most part, reports of damage to materials other than library or archival materials are not included or are summarized in brackets. Each entry includes the place of destruction, a citation of the source of information, and a brief description of the extent and nature of the destruction.*

### Nongovernmental Libraries and Archives

#### 1) Ajyal and Angham FM Radio Stations, Ramallah

- Palestinian NGO Emergency Initiative in Jerusalem, "DESTRUCTION OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN RAMALLAH Caused by IDF Forces Between March 29 and April 21, 2002 Updated report, April 22" (<http://www.pna.gov.ps/new/repintrod01.pdf>).

The doorman of the building was forced to open the station door to soldiers who used sledgehammers to destroy the two studios. . . [including equipment] and the entire music and program library. Destruction was total.

#### 2) Al-Haq Human Rights Organization, Ramallah.

- Palestinian NGO Emergency Initiative in Jerusalem, "DESTRUCTION OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN RAMALLAH Caused by IDF Forces Between March 29 and April 21, 2002, Updated report, April 22" (<http://www.pna.gov.ps/new/repintrod01.pdf>).