

Descent Into the Water

Palestinian Notes in Arab Exile

Descent into the Water: Palestinian Notes from Arab Exile by Muin Bseiso, is autobiographical in style. Yet Bseiso's purpose was not to tell about himself. Rather through his own experience, he recounts the reality of Palestinian refugee existence, especially in the Gaza Strip, and how Palestinian communists worked among the people, starting in the fifties. The book represents a literary history, packed with expressive metaphors of the Palestinian experience, as well as with much concrete information about the conditions and forms of struggle at that time. In the preface, Bseiso explains that he wrote the book for a specific purpose: to combat the anti-communist sentiment that was on the rise in the Arab world in the late seventies. The book was published in English in 1980, by Medina Press, Wilmette Illinois, USA, as No. 13 in the Arab American University Graduates Monograph Series. We have chosen the following selection because it deals with the first struggles against attempts to resettle the Palestinians, a struggle that has current relevance with the revival of the Israeli efforts in this direction.

I reached Gaza in the summer of 1953 and began to teach English at the Burayj Secondary School which was administered by UNRWA. S.B. and M.N. were like two stalks of wheat in a field of locusts. Together, we formed a cell and began to grow as Communists. We were joined by a worker who mixed powdered milk in water and distributed it among the schoolchildren in the Burayj camp. Later we were joined by another who eventually was fired by UNRWA for refusing to make bricks from soil and grass. He said, "The fabricated stone is more dangerous than the fabricated bank note."

Thus I began teaching English to the children of the Palestinian refugees at the Burayj camp. But I was teaching them a different language.

In the camp the Palestinians who had been expelled from the southern villages hung up their rags and waited to return home to their trees. They began to deceive themselves, though, and planted trees in the camp. They planted vines. But the cluster of grapes in Barbara village is different from that in the Maghazi camp. And the wooden and steel keys which they carried with them from their old homes turned, with the long wait, into nails in their bones.

And they began to talk. The voice of the rags and the wooden key and the cluster of grapes began to rise: A people has been expelled from its land! And the cities and villages have turned into camps! But the refugees banded together. UNRWA tried to eradicate them with water, but in the rain they knew how to turn their bodies into small ships.

They always knew that their enemies were against the Palestinian fingers, fingers that press on the trigger as well as on the chalk stick.

A vegetable box became a blackboard, and with a piece of lime the teachers wrote on the boards they had painted them-

selves. They began teaching the children, and hope began to spread. When the Palestinian child in the camp - at Burayj, Nusayrat, Maghazi, Arrimal, Jabalya, Rafah, Khan Unis, Deir al-Balah, and Beit Hanoun held a pencil in his hand and made his voice appear on paper, his father felt that the child would someday carry a weapon. The son pressed on the pencil, and the father began to dream of pressing on the trigger.

At the end of the month the teacher received his reward: a bundle of onions and some dried fish.

Egyptian papers began writing about the camps, about the tuberculosis hospital in Burayj and about these Palestinian birds whose necks were like strings. Israeli raids on the camps began. At the same time explorers from UNRWA discovered an island in the midst of the Sinai sand which they saw fit as a place to settle the Gaza refugees.

Thus the first Israeli raid on the Burayj camp took place. When our bus stopped that morning in front of the Burayj Secondary School, the raid was already over: twenty-six dead, dozens wounded, and many homes destroyed.

From the door of the school we marched to the Nusayrat camp, where we stripped the secret police of their weapons. When the peasant women saw us with rifles in our hands, they let out cries of joy.

Together with my students, I entered prison.

"Their blood was heated, so they demonstrated." That was what some moderates said.

"Our fight is not for the camps, but for the Qur'an," others said.

"Let them go free, but keep them away from the schools."

And so I was dismissed from my job. But the Party had begun walking in the camps.

Sheikh 'Izz al-Din, a Muslim Brother who had been excited by the demonstration, gathered the elementary school children and led them in a march from Nusayrat beach to Gaza beach. He was arrested, but the children were left free. They had not yet learned to arrest Palestinian children seven and eight years old. But the Palestinian children, whom the Party had taught to cross from Nusayrat beach to Gaza beach, later began to cross the Jordan River with rifles in hand...

We decided to hold the first conference of Palestinian Communists. The National Liberation Group had become the Jordan Communist party, and those Communists remaining under Israeli occupation had joined Rakah. Palestinian Communists as such only remained in Gaza.

We prepared the Party's program. At the top of it was the derailment of the Sinai project, which Mahmoud Fawzi, the foreign minister of Egypt, had agreed to in exchange for a fistful of dollars...

Efforts to carry out the Sinai project intensified. The Agency was supported by some of the mukhtars who wanted to present the eyes of the Palestinian children as boiled eggs to the Egyptian secret police.

The Party and its patriotic friends were given an office across from police headquarters, and there Abdallah Abu Sitta sat under the constant watch of the police. Thus we had to go to the camps.

The Gaza peasant cuts the barbed wire and returns to his fields to sow the wheat. He cuts the barbed wire again at harvest time. He returns with a bundle of wheat stalks and is shot dead on the wire. The next day it is proclaimed that an infiltrator has been killed.