

A Piece of Paradise

by Rich Wiles

Looking into the eyes of Fatima Alkhwaja as she talks about her life in Ajjur village, the village she was forced to leave nearly 60 years ago, you can begin to understand what she lost, or rather had taken from her, in 1948 - the year of the Nakba. There is a sparkle in her eyes as she remembers Ajjur, but also pain, a deep throbbing pain that seems as vivid now as it no doubt was all those years ago.



AJJUR village today – In 1945, this thriving agricultural village had a population of 3,730 Palestinians. There were two schools and two mosques and acres of ancient olive groves. Today, there are only three houses left standing after Israeli forces destroyed the village in 1948 and ethnically cleansed it of its Palestinian inhabitants.

When she begins to talk about life, as it was then in Ajjur, her body language speaks volumes. She looks up to the sky and sighs deeply, very deeply, as if preparing herself:



"If you are not in your land you do not have the life like before. We had delicious food, now we must wait for help from the U.N. to provide it."

Her family lived in six houses in the village which is located about 30 kms west of Bethlehem. The houses were built from traditional stone and in each one lived five or six people. As with most rural Palestinian villages, life in Ajjur was built on agriculture. People had land then and utilized it to its fullest. The Alkhwajas kept animals such as sheep and cows but also grew vegetables and fruit. They were self-sufficient:

"We loved the life in the village. We grew all our own food. I used to love eating saba (cactus fruit), we had to buy nothing. Now we must buy tomatoes wrapped in plastic from Israel."

But it's not just food and stone that Fatima remembers so fondly yet misses so painfully. She goes on to talk about the colour, space and light that have also vanished from her life:



"We don't see the sunrise anymore. We have nowhere to sit, there are too many people. We used to have a lot of land. From the house we could see trees and sit to watch the sunrise. Now I am sick, I have bad legs, I never see green anymore - there is no grass, no land, nothing."

The glint in her eyes vanishes instantly when she moves on to talk about how everything changed. She slaps her leg and stares away into the distance. It is clearly still very painful looking back to that day in 1948:



"The soldiers came into the village, they were on the roof of the mosque and on the minaret shooting everywhere. We were very afraid. We waited until it went quiet for a while then we went, we escaped. I wrapped two of my children in a



headscarf and carried them over my shoulders. I had another child in each hand. We took nothing but our children. A few of the old people in the village stayed behind, they were too sick or old to run. They hoped it might finish quickly. A few weeks later a few of the other old people tried to go back to Ajjur but the soldiers caught them and asked them "Where is everyone else? Where are the women and girls?". We were scared the soldiers would do bad things to the women and girls. In another village the soldiers had taken away all the girls and we heard that they had raped them. We knew the soldiers were coming and what they had already done. Zaccaria, Beit Jibreen, Ras Beit Natif and Ajjur were four of the last villages. We'd heard the stories from other villages and we were expecting them but we were very scared, particularly about the girls."





Not everybody left together or even went in the same direction. Some people went straight through to Jordan as did half of Fatima's family. But Fatima and a few other family members stopped when they reached the village of Halhoul on the outskirts of Hebron. But why did they decide to stop there? The answer is frighteningly simple:

"We kept going until we could no longer hear shooting. We knew they were far away then, so we felt safe."



The family only stayed in Halhoul for about twenty days. They managed to rent some houses for the family but the major problem was access to clean water, a problem that was to plague them for much of their lives:



"We had to go to the well every day. It was only about 1km but we had to stand in a queue with all the other women. Sometimes I would set off for the well at 6am and not return until nightfall with the water."



After their brief stay in Halhoul they decided to move on again. They decided to head west to the Christian village of Beit Sahour. There they rented caves in the mountains off the landowners. Many rural Palestinians used to live in caves and even today some communities are still living like this is the Yatta area south of Hebron. They rented the caves for 5 Jordanian Dinars a month and up to five families would live in one cave. They stayed in Beit Sahour for two years until they heard about camps being set up in Bethlehem for refugees:

"We heard news from others that tents were being set up in Dehaishah and Azzeh (also known as Beit Jibreen Camp because so many of its residents came from the village). By the time we got there all the tents had been taken by other families so we had to go back to Beit Sahour. But then we heard about Aida, a new camp being set up, so we came here."

Fatima isn't good with actual dates but given the time line of their travels this was probably sometime in mid to late 1950. She still remembers how she felt, and how she cried, when she first saw the tents:



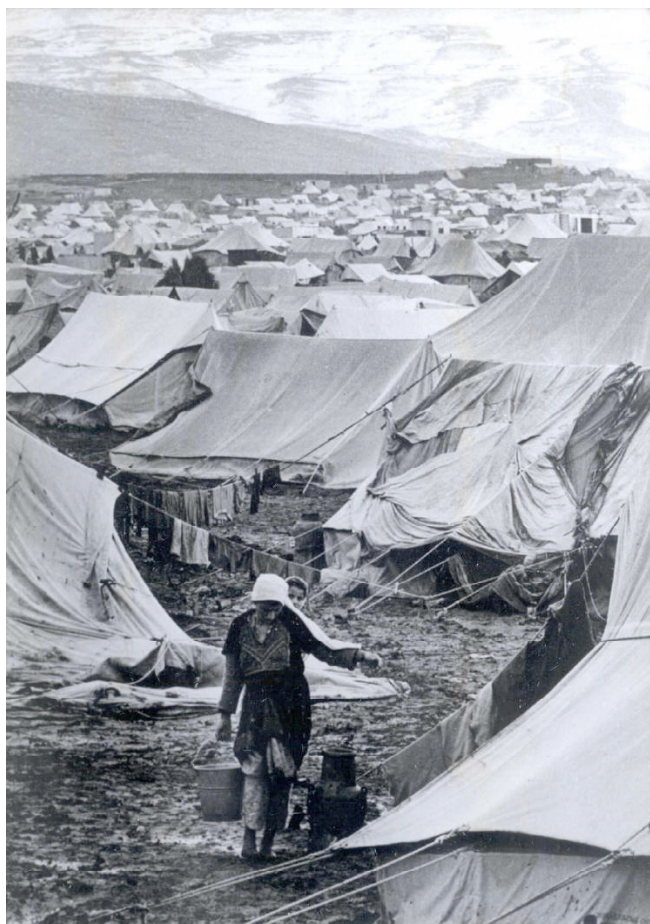
"I thought we were going back but when I saw the tents I started crying, it filled me with sadness. We had left behind beautiful houses and now we had only tents. The U.N. promised us we would only stay for 2 or 3 years at the most and then the 'strong states' (Britain and the U.S.) would intervene and grant us the Right of Return. The Jordanian Government was here at that time but they did nothing for us."



Everybody was registered by the U.N. and given their official U.N. refugee card. Each person was given five kilos of flour but that was all so people needed to find work:



"We started collecting small bushes which we sold to the bakery in the camp for firewood. The men would collect the wood into piles us women would then carry it back to the bakery. We got paid in bread."



As in Halhoul there was no clean water in the camp and it was always the women who went to collect it whilst the men looked for work. There was some water in the camp but it was used by animals so it couldn't be used for drinking. The nearest clean water was in Artas village about 4kms away. Each family had a small tank next to their tent which was used to store water, so the trip to Artas was only made every three or four days. The Alkhwajas also had some small kerosene stoves and lamps which they had bought in Hebron. They would sometimes get kerosene from the U.N.:

"We still have the stoves but they're so noisy. They have a 'voice' like a train, you couldn't hear people talking."

There were people from 27 different villages in Aida camp but they were all in the same situation. People generally got on well together and helped each other out as much as possible:

"We had to (get on together), we were all in the same situation so looked out for one and other. If somebody died we mourned together, if somebody got married we celebrated together, we shared life together."

Not being strong with dates would Fatima know how long the family had spent in tents before the first houses were built in Aida?

"It was six years in the tents. I know this because I had three more children and I had a child every second year."



The houses, or rather rooms, that the U.N. built around 1956 measured just nine square metres. Each room would house a family of five or six people. Fatima's family was larger, there were twelve of them and they were given two rooms. Two of these houses still remain in Aida camp today. They are now used for storage but also serve as a reminder, a memory to many, a piece of history to the youth. There was still no fresh water or toilets in the camp.



Water didn't come until about 1960. Only four taps were provided for all the camps' residents, about 1500 people by this time. This was clearly an improvement on the trek to Artas but it still had its problems:



"Often we had to wait in long lines all day to get our 40 litres. The 'strong' women would sometimes try to get ahead in the queue. We sometimes fought with other women to get nearer the front."

In 1967 there was another exodus, this time from the camp itself. When Israel invaded and began its occupation of the West Bank some people fled immediately to Jordan. Others left the camp temporarily looking for refuge locally. The Alkhwajas took the latter option; they weren't going to be forced out again:



"There were many soldiers here and a lot of shooting. We went to the church near the camp because we felt safe there. After six days we decided to move to the Mosque at Rachel's Tomb. One day a soldier came to the mosque, he was an Iraqi Jew and wanted to help us. He told us to go back to our house and he promised us we would be safe there if we put white flags on our roof."

The family obviously trusted the soldier as they returned to their small house and did as he had suggested. Thankfully the soldier was good to his word and family remained in that house until 1980. It speaks volumes about the family's belief in the Right of Return that the ever expanding family took nearly 25 years to build a larger house.

The years of waiting for the Right of Return sometimes show in the eyes of Fatima Alkhawaja but the belief is still there. She has visited Ajjur twice since 1948 but seeing what had become of her village, and not being able to stay, clearly added to the pain:



"We went to the well that we used to drink from but it had been filled with stones, I started to cry. The houses had been destroyed, I hit my face, I was crying again. We didn't see any Jewish people living in the village. We sat down under a tree and ate saba again, Ajjur saba. Then soldiers came and asked us what we were doing? 'This is our land and we have come here to eat fruit.' They told us we could eat but we couldn't take any fruit with us. They said it was not our land and that we must leave now. When I returned to the camp I was sick for a long time after that. My brother refused to go with us to Ajjur, he couldn't bear to see other people in his land."

For someone who has lived through so much, Fatima, like Palestinians in general, is incredibly strong. She may not have the same good health of her younger years but she still knows what she has lost, what she wants and what is rightfully hers:

"I want the youth to never forget our land and our history. They must help us return and they must return one day. Now I am old but I still hope to return. Maybe I can't return but my if grandchildren can then that is good. If you told me today I could return I would go and sleep under the trees in my village."

According to the infamous and yet to be enforced U.N. resolution 194 Palestinian refugees must be granted the Right of Return and paid due compensation "for loss of or damage to property". Of what use would compensation be to Fatima and her family?



Today, nothing remains of the centuries' old olive groves that covered the landscape before Israeli forces decimated Ajjur village in 1948.

"We have never been offered any compensation but if they did, if they filled a house with money I would refuse it. I must return. Do you know how much land I had? So much.... so much land. My land was a piece of paradise."

RICH WILES is a British photographer and is currently visiting the West Bank. He is writing reports on the situation and memories of Palestinians in the camps and is taking photographs of the life these refugees are living now for a proposed exhibition.

Women for Palestine has selected the various photographs used in this report from the Palestinian National Authority's State Information Services Nakba Photo Gallery and also from the Palestine Remembered website.