

Contending Nakba-denial: The Role of Oral and Visual Testimonies

Written by Una McGahern

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UNA MCGAHERN, AUG 28 2014

If there is one thing which the latest devastation in Gaza exposes beyond the importance of what narratives get told, who tells them, and who listens, it is the long and pressing shadows cast by a past ignored and denied. Last month I had the opportunity to visit the Umm el-Fahem art gallery for the first time. Founded in 1996 by local Palestinian residents and artists from the Wadi 'Ara area, it consists of a range of exhibits dealing with various aspects of the life and history of the city. Two in particular stood out for me. *Shadows of Time* is a photographic documentation project of the 'elders' – residents over the age of 70 – of Wadi 'Ara compiled over a five year period between 2007 and 2012. Based on striking and beautiful portrait shots (usually in black and white, but occasionally in colour) taken in the front room (*diwan*) of their homes, the exhibit not only provides an intimate glimpse into the richness of contemporary Palestinian culture and heritage but also a very poignant and silent contrast between past and present.

Alongside the visual archives, the gallery's historical archive of photographs of the city through time as well as video testimonies of residents' personal accounts of the Nakba (meaning disaster or catastrophe in Arabic) – a series of events in 1948 which saw the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem, the destruction of over 400 Arab towns and villages inside Israel, and the beginning of a painful process of internal migration, territorial concentration and involuntary urbanisation which radically disrupted and transformed the lives of the remaining 156,000 Palestinians who became citizens of the state of Israel – was equally memorable. A small and insignificant village at the end of the British mandate, Umm al Fahem was, as a result of these processes, transformed into a large (the second largest Arab-only city in Israel, after Nazareth) and congested city with a population of approximately 50 thousand people – the vast majority of whom are the descendants of internally displaced Palestinians from destroyed neighbouring villages.

The power of oral testimonies – of giving voice to the past – has long been embraced as an effective means of challenging positivist historical narratives which centralise a particular rendering of the past as fact and which rely upon a narrow range of (usually written) sources to lend a greater sense of authority to, and over, those narratives. Palestinian oral histories are relative latecomers to this tradition. Beginning in the late 1990s, An-Najah University in Nablus provided a listing of oral history interviews as part of its academic programme for the study of involuntary migration. Online communities, such as Palestine Remembered, have also used video podcasts of oral histories since 2003. While these resources speak to the broader historical experience of Palestinian loss and dislocation, they do little to address the complex experience of those who remained inside the borders of the new state. Given the dwindling number of Palestinian citizens with direct experiences of 1948 and the ongoing and pervasive nature of Nakba denial in Israel, the art gallery of Umm al Fahem has embraced the use of oral and visual testimonies as an alternative means to document, recognise and engage with the past. It is not, however, the first or only one of its kind in Israel.

During my previous research on state attitudes towards Palestinian Christians in Israel, I encountered a number of projects and initiatives which have engaged in oral testimonies in an innovative way. A powerful example is *The Sons of Eilaboun*, a short documentary film produced and directed in 2007 by native Hisham Zreiq, which documents the execution, in October 1948, of twelve young men from the mainly Christian Maronite village of Eilaboun and the subsequent (temporary) expulsion of its residents to the Miyveh Miyveh refugee camp south of Sidon in Lebanon.

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Despite increasing awareness of more than 30 documented massacres of Palestinians which took place between 1947-9, and the role which targeted massacres played in “Plan Dalet” – a plan of Arab de-territorialisation and depopulation of the Galilee – the physical and psychological trauma experienced by Palestinians on a personal and collective level remains largely ignored. Subtitled in Hebrew and English, the film uses moving personal testimonies of survivors and relatives who witnessed the execution to both document and humanise this past.

A more well-known example of the use of oral testimonies to engage with both the past and the present involves the Christian village of Iqrit. A small village with a population of approximately 500 mostly Greek Catholics at the end of British mandate, its residents were ordered to evacuate the village in October 1948 for two weeks on security grounds. They were, however, never allowed to return. Following two years of internal displacement in neighbouring villages and towns, the residents appealed their case to the Israeli Supreme Court which they eventually won in July 1951. The military authorities were, however, opposed to the Supreme Court’s decision and, on Christmas Day 1951, destroyed the village. Soon after, a kibbutz (called Yoqrat) was established on part of the land formerly belonging to the village, followed by a number of other Jewish settlements which sprung up nearby. Using oral testimonies and photographic evidence of the destruction of Arab homes and the construction of Jewish settlements on expropriated village land to support their legal battles to return to their homes, the villagers and their descendants began using increasingly innovative and proactive techniques to demonstrate their ongoing attachment to the land. They organise regular tours, annual youth camps, celebrated mass and other important communal celebrations, and even rebuilt living quarters next to the church building; many of which are recorded and shared online in video diaries such as this one.

Faced with mounting political and financial pressures, online dissemination is likely to remain the main method of communicating Palestinian oral testimonies. The greater potential of oral testimonies lies, however, in their ability to create spaces of human interaction in those areas where recognition and engagement are not usually forthcoming. It is in this regard that the dedicated “in situ” venue provided by the Umm el Fahem art gallery to both local residents and Palestinian and Jewish school groups alike provides something new and exciting.

About the author:

Una McGahern is author of *Palestinian Christians in Israel: State Attitudes towards Non-Muslims in a Jewish State* (Routledge, 2011). She is a Lecturer in Politics at Newcastle University, and her current project examines issues relating to minority policing in Israel. She also teaches Middle East politics, and is interested in dynamics of power, contention and security across the region.