Rue on Dunsky, 'Stories from Palestine: Narratives of Resilience'

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Marda Dunsky has written a compelling book about Palestinians that intertwines narratives of ordinary people, Israeli-Palestinian history, and her own scholarly artistry as a writer. Through the eyes of women and men she charts a complete landscape that will be the future State of Palestine. In agriculture, education, and cultural pursuits in the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza, life under occupation unfolds through Dunsky’s insightful interviews that are artfully placed against a current and historical backdrop of Palestinian struggles with the Israeli government for identity and independence. What is revealed in *Stories from Palestine* is the astonishing resilience and creativity of the Palestinian people in spite of seventy-three years of living under occupation.

Having briefly lived in Aida Refugee Camp on a home stay (provided by Noor Weg Women’s Empowerment Group), I was happy to see the story of Abdelfattah Abusrour, founder of Alrowwad Cultural and Arts Society in Aida camp. As we begin his story, Dunsky’s scholarship provides the disturbing history of Aida camp’s creation during the catastrophe (*Nakba*) of 1948. Begun in 1998, Alrowwad (Arabic for “pioneer”) is the only cultural center in Aida’s .071 square kilometer camp, with 77, 464 persons per square kilometer. Alrowwad encompasses classes in theatre, dance, music, photography, and video. “Whatever it takes to get our young people to see their potential, living for Palestine rather than dying for Palestine” says Abusrour (p. 83). Alrowwad’s focus is to give children a means for self-expression and resilience under the harsh realities of the Israeli occupation. Two-thirds of Aida residents are under the age of twenty-four. Since daily survival is an act of resistance, Abusrour calls the core of Alrowwad’s self-expression “beautiful resistance.”

“Beautiful Resistance” is in fact the title of this chapter that flows imaginatively from Abusrour’s life and work to another inspiring Palestinian artist, Shyrine Ziahdeh. In Ramallah, as a dancer, she founded the Ramallah Ballet Center (RBC). “Dance makes me feel happy. It also saved me as a woman in an Arab society where women’s rights are not very equal and systematically trampled. Dance was my only weapon to achieve freedom” (p. 90). The happiness of dancing for Shyrine is also its ability as art to provoke. Her full-length production of *The Princess Behind the Wall* staged defiant scenes against the backdrop of the Israeli separation barrier. Dunsky again artfully combines descriptions of the production with the history of the separation wall. RBC is a place of people wanting to live life, and express themselves. “We are developing our country through art” Shyrine reflects (p. 91).
In the middle of this same chapter on Palestinian culture, Dunsky analyzes life under occupation and the crucial part that culture plays in creating identity, dynamism, and agency. She reviews the history of Palestine’s acceptance by UNESCO as a full member and the continual efforts of the United States and Israel to block any recognition of Palestine (pp. 97-101).

Other chapters attest to the extraordinary human potential of Palestinian society. Through interviews and Dunsky’s scholarly artistry, the reader encounters, among others, an entrepreneur who markets the yields of Palestinian farmers resolved to cultivate their own land despite the incursion of Israeli settlers; a professor and medical doctor who is improving health in local Palestinian communities; and a visionary woman, Al-Hroub, who was awarded the Global Teacher Prize: “I provide my Palestinian children peace inside the classroom. I provide them an environment void of violence, an environment full of respect and love,” she says (p. 58).

But it is, from this reviewer’s vantage, the Palestinian minister of education, Sabri Saidam, who offers a ringing, lyrical challenge: “In Palestine there is a dual mission: to liberate minds and geography. And that makes education in a nation that lives under the circumstances we’re in the platform for the liberation of geography” (p. 61). “We are here,” Saidam says, “to bring life to the State of Palestine, where the prosperity of our children and the freedom to exist and to move become the endeavor of the entire society” (p. 62).

Marda Dunsky provides us with the clarity of Palestinian voices to which she adds her own creativity in the weaving of *Stories from Palestine: Narratives of Resilience*.


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