

From Three Mothers, Three Daughters:  
Palestinian Women's Stories, by  
Michael Gorkin + Rafiqar Dthman

## Samira

On the outskirts of Bethlehem, just off the main Jerusalem-Hebron road, sits Camp Aida—a Palestinian refugee camp built by UNRWA\* in 1967. It's a small camp, about 2,300 people in all, and from the main road it appears less impoverished than the large camps in Gaza or elsewhere in the West Bank. Within Camp Aida, however, there are the usual telltale signs of a refugee camp: narrow dirt lanes, sewage flowing in open gutters, and small children darting to and fro.

It is here that Samira grew up along with her eight brothers and two sisters, and it is here that she got married and is raising her two children. Today, her house is a far more substantial place than the one-room (later, two-room) house where she was raised. It is a two-story concrete dwelling with a huge visitor's salon downstairs, and two bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen upstairs. A television and videocassette recorder sit in one corner of the living room, and bookshelves (with many political books) sit in another corner. Hanging on the walls are some Palestinian-

\* Even today the United Nations Relief Work Agency (UNRWA) assists Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, and provides various services in Camp Aida.

style embroidery and a large wedding photograph of her brother and his wife who, like Samira and her husband, paid a heavy price for their involvement in the Palestinian national struggle.

Today, at the age of thirty-one, Samira has little about her person to suggest that she has been a political activist for most of her life and spent three years in jail for throwing a Molotov cocktail at Israeli soldiers. Deferential in manner, she has a soft, even girlish voice; and when she speaks, there is an openness about her. Indeed, of all the women in this study, she was perhaps the most candid and self-critical.

Michael Gorkin had met Samira briefly at a workshop for Jewish and Arab mental health workers. A mutual friend who knew about the book suggested that Samira might be an appropriate subject for the study. As it turned out, Samira was our most enthusiastic participant. More than the others, she seemed to have a quick understanding of the nature of our project; in fact, she herself had read a number of books on Arab women and immediately agreed to talk to us.

We met with Samira eight times over a period of ten months. Every meeting was in the living room of her house, usually in the afternoons when she returned from her job as a social worker in a rehabilitation center. Typically her six-year-old son and infant daughter were with her, while her husband—who fully supported her participation—was away. Two or three times Samira's mother came to sit with us for a short while. Yet she seldom joined in or engaged in dialogue with Samira. A mutual respect, and perhaps an element of distance, seemed to exist between them. And Samira made it quite clear that she preferred talking to us without her mother nearby.

In these excerpts from our first interviews with Samira, she recalls in a matter-of-fact style some of her early experiences as the daughter of refugee parents. She also reflects on how these experiences led to her early initiation as a political activist.



I was born when my family was still living in Beit Jala, about a kilometer from where we are today. I'm the fourth child and the oldest daughter. I remember hardly anything from those years in Beit Jala. Only the house. It was a tiny house with one room and a kitchen. It was built below the level of the street that passed by, so from the street you couldn't see anyone was living there. I remember we had this German Christian woman as a neighbor, a very nice lady, and she would always bring me presents. I remember also that my mother used to stay up late at night sewing embroidery on dresses, beautiful peasant dresses, and for this she'd get paid. Much more than that I don't remember.

When I was five we moved to Camp Aida. By then I had another brother, Hatem, the one whose picture is on the wall here. And then my mother gave birth to my sister, Sarah, and then five more—Ismail, Fawaz, Mahmud, Maysun, and Jamil.

I remember those first years we moved to the camp but really I wish I could forget them. It was a hard time then and when I look back it seems even harder. Until I was eleven or twelve years old, our house was only one room and a kitchen—much too small for all of us. At night we'd sleep in the same room on the floor, except for some of my brothers who went to sleep at my grandmother's house in the camp. Each of us had our own place. Mine was in the corner beside Sarah. When my mother gave birth we'd all move into the kitchen. That happened a few times, and I can remember being very upset each time. We saw nothing, but we'd hear my mother moaning and crying out. Nobody ever said anything to us—it's a mistake, don't you think? I was frightened, I didn't say anything either.

Those years, and even later when we built another room onto the house, were very tough. My father hardly earned any money. He's a plasterer, that's his trade, but he didn't like to work. Even when he was a boy in his village he didn't work hard in the fields. That's what I was told. His oldest brother was the one who did the work. My father was lazy then and he didn't change even when he had children. This caused

problems between him and my mother. She had to bring in money by sewing. Also my brothers worked. My oldest brother, Abdullah, dropped out of school when he was fourteen in order to help support the family. And my other brothers, when they were on vacation from school, they worked too.

We were barely able to manage. I mean, we actually didn't have enough to eat. What did we have? Well, in the mornings my mother would give us bread and tea. Sometimes there was some olive oil too. Next to our house there were some olive trees, and we'd get some of the harvest for watching over the trees. In the afternoons we'd always eat fried potatoes, and once in a while something else. In the evenings, if there was no food my mother would give us tea again. That was the usual fare. Maybe once a month or on holidays we'd have something special. My favorite was the chicken my mother made in our *tabun*. That was delicious! And I can remember having ice cream or candies every now and then. But most days we ate the usual—tea, bread, potatoes. Actually, I didn't know back then just how poor we were. Almost everyone I knew was living in the camp. All of us had pretty much the same harsh conditions. All my friends were like me. So I didn't really see the harshness of our situation the way I see it today.

The really hard thing back then for me was all the fighting between my mother and father. And a lot of this was brought on by my father's mother, my grandmother. She hated my mother. She was against their marriage, she never accepted my mother as her daughter-in-law. She used to whisper all kinds of things into my father's ear and then he'd go after my mother. The truth is, my grandmother was a difficult person. She used to live near the entrance of the camp and everyone knew her. She had run-ins with lots of people. She was tough, hard. Maybe because she was left a widow at a young age, thirty or so, and she had eight children to raise by herself. I don't know. I do know that my father admired her strength, and she had a lot of influence with him. I can remember in the later years of her life—she died fifteen years ago at the age of eighty—she was partially paralyzed and couldn't take care of her-



self. My brother Yusef and I used to go take care of her and sleep at her house. I had to clean and feed her, often in the middle of the night. This was when I was about fifteen years old. I did that for her and not once did she ever say thank you. I'd bring her food that my mother had cooked and she'd send me back with it—once, twice, three times. She wanted her son, my father, to bring it instead. Or my oldest brother, Abdullah, he was her favorite. She preferred boys to girls. She never loved me and I didn't love her either. The truth is, she was a bad person. She made our lives miserable, particularly my mother's life. As if we didn't have problems enough without all that!

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Since I was the oldest daughter, I was given lots of responsibilities around the house. That's the way it goes, doesn't it? Whenever my mother left the house, went to the market or something like that, I was in charge of the younger children. I have a retarded brother, he didn't walk until he was five years old. I'd take care of him, clean him, dress him. Doing all this used to bother me. I was only ten at the time, it was too much for me. And doing housework—I couldn't stand it. I still can't stand it. Back then, I couldn't wait to get out of the house and play, to be free.

My father didn't stop me from going out and playing. A friend of mine, Samira—we had the same name—and another friend, Imiyaz, used to go with me and we'd play five stones [a game like jacks], or we'd play with dolls that we'd make out of sticks. We'd dress these dolls up, make a house, and then play mother and children. Samira's father used to beat her for leaving her house to come play with us, but she was brave. She'd escape with us and just take her beatings. Besides playing with Samira and Imiyaz, sometimes I'd play with boys. I'd play soccer with them. My father and mother didn't say anything about it. Not until I got a little older, anyway—like about ten years old. Although, really, I don't remember either of them ever saying, "No, it's an *eidh*!" Nothing like that happened. It happened in a natural way. At about that age I just stopped playing with boys.

What I enjoyed also was going to school. It was another way of being outside the house and being with friends. I was a diligent student, smart. I wasn't the best, but one of the good ones. When I look back on it, though, I can't say that these schools were good ones, or that the teachers were good either. From first to ninth grade I went to UNRWA girls' schools. They were overcrowded, sometimes forty or fifty of us in classrooms that had no air in them and no heating. The teachers were tough on us, they'd hit us a lot on the hands and face. I can remember getting slapped in second grade, in math class, because I had left a blank page in my notebook. Can you imagine it? And we used to wear these uniforms to school, blue and white striped dresses. You can still see girls today going to school in these uniforms. Me, I was embarrassed by it because I had the same dress for years. It got so old that it had patches in the elbows, patches of a different color than the dress. I didn't have winter shoes. I used to yell at my mother, "Why don't you buy me a new dress, new shoes?" My mother used to sit there listening, not saying a word, just crying quietly to herself. Back then, I really couldn't understand what she was going through. Only later I realized.

My mother, she's illiterate. She always wanted to learn to read, but she never did. It's terribly embarrassing for her when she has to sign her name. All she is able to do is give a thumb print. When we were children some of us tried to teach her to read, but we didn't show her enough patience, so she never learned. My father can read. He went to school up through sixth grade, so he's able to read the newspaper, the Koran. He didn't think to teach her to read. Look, when I was in school and had problems with my homework, I didn't go to him for help either. I wouldn't have been comfortable asking for his help. And my brother were all too busy. I learned early that if I was going to do well in school it was up to me alone. I had to rely on myself.

From seventh grade on, I began to have some friends who came from outside the camp. We were going to the UNRWA junior high school here together, and it was through them that I began to get interested in



politics. I started to write about my feelings—about poverty and suffering. My friends gave me political books to read, things about the Palestinian struggle, books on Marxism and class struggle. I was about thirteen then. I'd hide these books in my school books so my father wouldn't see them. It was from these things that I began to understand about the Israeli Occupation, and about the national struggle against the Occupation—why we had to go on strike, demonstrate, and fight. Always though, when I was reading these books I was afraid of my father catching me. The truth is, I was more scared of him than of the Israelis! And he did catch me a few times. Then, he'd fly into a rage. He'd grab the books from me, tear them up and burn them. "*Haraml Haraml!*" he'd scream. He's a religious man, and he thought my books were an-tireligious. He was also worried that I or my brothers might get politically involved, and he was afraid of what the Israelis might do to us. He tried to put a stop to it, but I wasn't about to let him.

In school, too, I had trouble with some of my teachers. In ninth grade I had this teacher who was very religious. He caught me reading some Marxist literature. He slapped me and accused me in front of the class of being a *kefer* [heretic]. He then told our class and several other classes too that we had to stay after school for a lecture on the danger of these kinds of books. I didn't stay, I knew what was coming. I was a stubborn kid. I was not about to listen to his criticizing me more. My girlfriends who did go to the lecture told me what he said and how he spoke about me in a humiliating way. I was very angry, furious. Though, I admit it, I wanted to get him annoyed. And after this humiliation, I was even more determined to rebel. It was the same with my father. The more he tried to stop me from reading books on Marxism or that kind of thing, the more I was determined to read them. I don't like to give in or be weak. It's a mistake, but that's the way I am.

I also was having trouble with the principal of that junior high school. My friends and I were going out on strike days then. This was before the Intifada, in the late 1970s. If there was a memorial day for some

occasion—like Black September\*—we'd go out on strike. Or sometimes, frankly, we'd go out on strike just for the fun of it because we didn't feel like going to school that day. The principal would then pounce on me and insist I bring my father to school. But I never brought him, since he might have yanked me out of school altogether. Instead, I'd bring in my older brother, Yusef. He may not have believed in what I was doing, but he loved me and so he never told my father.

By the time I got to high school, tenth through twelfth grades, I already had developed strong political opinions. More than that, I had begun to see that I wanted to fight for my views. I was reading all kinds of things—books by Victor Hugo, Maxim Gorky. And more political books. I remember one book that really excited me. It was called *Al-Fedayin* [The guerrillas]. It's a book that talked about the *fedayin* camps in Jordan, the training the fighters went through, and some of the actions they went on. I began to feel I wanted to be like them.

By that time I knew that our plight as refugees, our poverty, was the result of a great injustice that had been done to Palestinians. The Israelis had come as colonists, they forced us out of our villages, and they took our land. This same Israeli army that I saw every day in front of our camp had committed the injustices of 1948. My parents deserved to still be in their village, Al-Qabu. About this, my father and mother were in agreement with me, of course. What we should do about our situation—that was another story. But that *our* place was Al-Qabu—well, I'd heard stories about that all my life.

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From the time I was old enough to sit and listen, both my parents used to tell us about Al-Qabu. They told us how in 1948 their families had

\* In September 1970 the forces of King Hussein of Jordan attacked Palestinian *fedayin* [guerrillas] in their bases and refugee camps within Jordan. Several thousand Palestinians were killed during these attacks, and Palestinian resistance groups moved their main bases to Lebanon.