

It is 40 years since the massacres in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut, which took place over several days in September 1982. Those terrible crimes, committed by Lebanese Forces with Israeli complicity, have largely gone unpunished although not unnoticed. The memories endure, as Jehan Helou records in her landmark oral history now published in English under the title *Making Palestine's History: Women's Testimonies*. We include Jehan's Preface to her groundbreaking book, as well as an excerpt about Sabra and Shatila from Hadla Ayoubi's testimony. In addition, we republish Tony Simpson's eyewitness account from Beirut, which he visited a few weeks before the massacres. Subsequent events were to prove far worse than he anticipated for many residents of Beirut.



Making Palestine's History

Jehan Helou

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Women's Testimonies



Jehan Helou

Jehan Helou was born in Haifa in 1943. Soon, al Nakba uprooted her family to Lebanon. For long years she was a pioneer in the Palestinian national struggle and the women's liberation movement. More recently, her fervour is directed towards children's culture; she is president of the Palestinian section of the International Board on Books for Young People.

Out of the Shadows: Palestinian women narrate their vital role in making history

The history of the Palestinian Revolution is full of leaps and twists, victories and defeats; it has many untold stories, rich and unique; experiences not recorded, and not yet studied; experiences that will disappear with those who lived them. What about the beginnings, sacrifices, the initiatives, the ebb and flow? Much needs to be told, much about the women revolutionaries, who, if they were mentioned at all, it was only peripherally.

The Palestinian women's struggle in the National Liberation Movement is intertwined with the struggle for women's liberation. This book aims to give a voice to those women, the 'unknown soldiers' of the Revolution, with their heroic struggle and bold initiatives. These women were at times decision makers or influenced the progress of the struggle despite the fact they were denied leadership positions.

Few publications cover this subject – certainly not with the same outlook, approach and with an active observer involved. These testimonies are mainly the stories of the Nakba generation spontaneously narrating their dispossession, suffering and heroic struggle. These remarkable testimonies give them a voice not heard before.

As I was part of the Palestinian National Liberation and women's liberation struggle at the time, I believe it is our duty to document this rich experience. The main documents of the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) were lost during the Israeli aggression in 1982. I tried

to meet this challenge through higher studies at Birkbeck College, London University; unfortunately, financial and personal reasons halted that. This is how I started to search for other means to accomplish what has become a national duty.

The idea started to grow with me of the importance of recording – before memory is lost and the body gone – the rich and distinguished experiences of Palestinian women in Lebanon, women who contributed to their people's honourable history. The project started in 1993-1994 but was interrupted for personal and objective reasons, and resumed in 2007. I conducted and recorded 53 interviews and had them transcribed. The resulting testimonies were based on personal live interviews, inspired by oral history technique as the best method of documenting the untold part of people's history.

The narrators were mostly women leaders and cadres of the General Union of Palestinian Women – General Secretariat and of the Lebanese Branch – drawn from the different political factions. They were mainly women who struggled at grassroots level and played an important role in defending the Revolution and empowering and mobilizing thousands of women. Moreover there was a very interesting roundtable discussion with women cadres based in South Lebanon about their experience after the Israeli invasion and occupation in 1982. Each interviewee had the full space to tell her story: the process of transformation, personal difficulties and achievements, and her position on related issues of social change. Different angles of broad questions were covered according to the individual's experience. Each testimony is published as told with minor editing to avoid repetition and retain accuracy.

I opted to interview cadres and leaders of GUPW because it covers their grassroots struggle mostly in crisis situations as well as their projects and work among women. Organizational work and political issues inside different Palestinian factions were rarely addressed, though most interviewees belonged to the different groups.

These testimonies formed the book published in Arabic in 2009 by UNESCO through the Palestinian Women's Research and Documentation Center in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The book was launched in Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan and was well reviewed in Arabic newspapers. Extracts were translated and published in English

I personally conducted all interviews. I was part of the struggle on both grassroots and leadership levels and I knew most of the interviewees and could check the accuracy of the information. This facilitated the interviewees' quick response and cooperation. I thank them

wholeheartedly for their willing cooperation and warm encouragement that provided me with the incentive to complete the work despite tremendous difficulties.

Publishing this English edition has been a long and thorny task. Translating from colloquial Arabic was demanding and needed to be checked thoroughly before the draft was sent to a patient and professional editor. The translation took two years to prepare. This English edition is based on the Arabic one and includes 17 of the most important testimonies. It is edited to keep answers as narrated (my questions and unnecessary details omitted) with further work by a professional editor. A short profile introducing each interviewee is included. There are excerpts from three important testimonies by leading women whose experiences in the struggle have been published by others. It was vital to include the testimony of the Director of the GUPW Institute for the Children of Martyrs (BAS) for its richness.

We hope this book will become part of the literature recording the international heritage of national liberation movements and women's liberation struggles. It is a rich resource for research and analysis. I genuinely hope this book will motivate research centres to support further studies of the various aspects of this rich experience of Palestinian women.

Jehan Helou, February 2022
[First published as the Preface
to *Making Palestine's History*]

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In this short extract, the lawyer Hadla Ayoubi (1940-2018) describes some of the horrors of the Sabra/Shatila massacre.

ENTERING SABRA AND SHATILA

When I and my colleague Wijdan Siyam entered Sabra and Shatila with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) immediately after the massacre, the dead bodies were still on the ground. We went on the third day. The representative accompanying us advised us not to get too close, saying 'what you see will live with you for the rest of your lives'. We saw from afar and saw enough to send us both into shock.

People persevered. They returned to the camp. Imagine, before sunset

they would not go out of their homes – even if a cat moved outside they would not go out. They lived in terror, but despite that they would not leave the camp because part of the plan of the Lebanese Forces was for them to leave Lebanon. Even those who left for just two or three days, some to the Red Cross in Ras Beirut, returned – they all returned. They wanted to keep their identity and, in any case, where would they go? They wanted to preserve what they had. The Gaza Hospital was no longer a hospital. Displaced Palestinian families and Lebanese lived there – Lebanese people in the camp were also killed.

We opened our centres and put the Red Cross sign over the Gaza Hospital. The Red Cross representative installed a communications system with the Hamra office for immediate notification of any events. There were two operators of the wireless system. Following the massacre, on at least half a dozen occasions, people would suddenly cry: ‘The Lebanese Forces are here,’ and they would run away from the camp in fear. One morning I was going to Gaza Hospital with a representative from the ICRC, a young Dutch volunteer, and a young Lebanese woman. As we stood there someone shouted: ‘the Lebanese Forces have arrived’. I cannot describe the scene of people running — you know how sheep run when they are taken for slaughter. The Red Cross representative told me to take the young women and run. We ran, and the people ran, but the ICRC representative stayed. When we got to the end of the camp we waited outside. After half an hour they announced that it had been a false alarm.

Afterwards, the Red Cross representative told me he would have been among the first to be killed, since he had lost his identification card and had no proof that he was a Red Cross representative. We cleaned the Gaza Hospital from end to end and the staff returned to work, gradually regaining confidence, and we re-opened all our centres. Thank God, we had support from people around the world, some of whom would come and visit us. I was extremely affected by this.

I wanted so much to stay in Lebanon but, unfortunately, I have a Jordanian passport and my residence permit had expired and the Lebanese authorities would not renew it. So I had to leave Lebanon. By then I was in a state of collapse. I had done what I had to do during those events.

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Making Palestine’s History

Women’s Testimonies

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