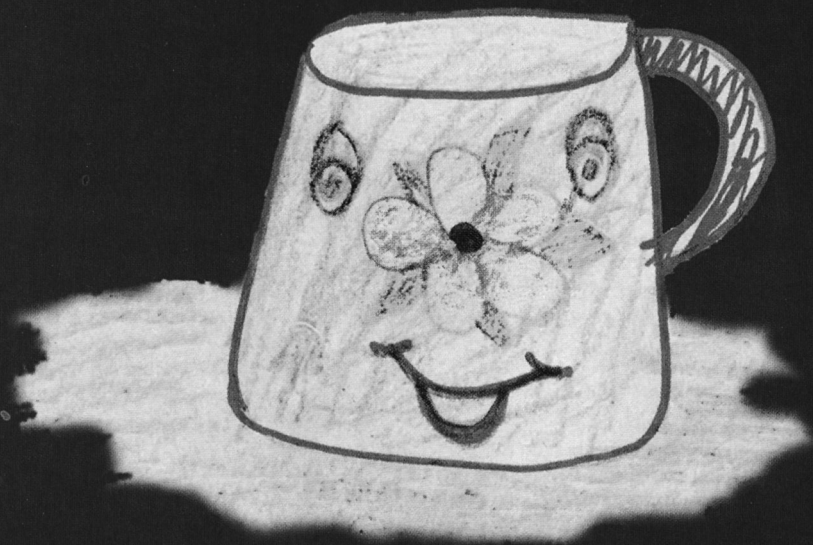


Children of Palestine tell their stories

by JEHAN HELOU



Jehan Helou is President of the Palestinian section of IBBY and a member of the IBBY Executive Committee. She served as the General director of the Tamer Institute for Community Education from 2000-2006.



The author shares excerpts of stories written by children as part of writing programs in Palestine that provide outlets for coping with war and conflict so children can “grow totally like the flower between the rocks.”

Good stories promote people's cultures and lives effectively. Edward Said emphasized the importance of stories, mostly those of the colonized people observing, "... Stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity, and the existence of their own history."¹ History is not only events and dates, and not only the narrative of the powerful and the victorious; history is also the stories of ordinary people, their social values, culture, daily lives, agonies and hopes. Author Elsa Marston reflected on the importance of such stories, as well, saying, "I believe, fiction can have a lasting effect on the reader. A good story offers characters with whom the reader or listener can identify; it grabs attention, appeals to the emotions, and lingers in the mind and heart."² Marston believes that stories that reflect an author's drive for justice are very powerful, stating, "... young Americans can now glimpse the lives of their peers in Palestine through a window that defies walls of separation."³

It is heartwarming to see the fervent welcome that a book like *Tasting the Sky* by Ibtisam Barakat has received, even by those who have never heard the stories of the Palestinians and their dispossession. One of the main strengths of *Tasting the Sky* is that it is written in a gripping literary style, with the spirit of a child, without inhibitions and self censorship; in addition, it tackles a story of human suffering and struggle for survival and justice. When asked why she wrote her book, Ibtisam said, “*I grew up in a world that ached for freedom but could not touch it! So I wrote as an exercise in freedom and as an expression of it...*”⁴

Stories from the children

Are children's own writings part of “children's literature?” The great writer Leo Tolstoy wrote about the power of children's stories in an essay entitled, “Who should learn to write from whom?”

Are children's own writings part of “children's literature?”

Should the peasant children learn to write from us, or should we learn to write from them?”⁵ Michael Armstrong highlighted the importance of Tolstoy's essay in emphasizing the literary abilities of children. He observed, “Tolstoy seeks to revolutionize our understanding of children's thought.... the essay explores a vast theme: the literary consciousness of childhood, its implication for education and more broadly for thought about culture and its inheritance. It challenges what still passes for conventional wisdom about the transmission of knowledge, the acquisition of literacy, and the induction of children into culture.”⁶

Palestinian children have a lot to write about, to tell about their agonies and hopes, without any intervention from parents and teachers. This provides a breakthrough, as traditional norms do not give children the space for such self-expression. Palestinian children feel that their stories give them a voice to fight for their stolen rights. Moreover, writing stories is very therapeutic for traumatized and stressed children, and one of the best means to release their frustration and express their

aspirations. More children are writing their stories now under the sponsorship of different institutes and programs. During the last war on Gaza, and immediately in its aftermath, the Palestinian section of IBBY received very touching stories written by children in library programs.

One of the most unique experiences in encouraging creative writing and self-expression of children is a yearly competition organized by the Tamer Institute for Community Education.

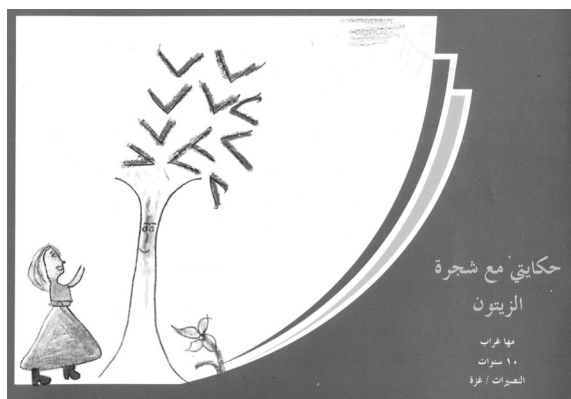
Palestinians who lost their basic rights as a result of dispossession and long years of Israeli occupation, treasured education and believed that it was instrumental in the struggle for liberation. Due to the disruption of the educational process, non-formal education became popular and an especially important tool for knowledge building. One of the most unique experiences in encouraging creative writing and self-expression of children is a yearly competition organized by the Tamer Institute for Community Education. Children write and illustrate what is called *My First Book*. (“First Books” were first published in 1997.) The Tamer Institute for Community Education is an educational non-governmental non-profit organization established in 1989 and recipient of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in 2009 for the promotion of books and reading.

Palestinian children, in general, write about many topics, including friendship, coping with disabilities, struggling for equality in the family, etc. However, the best stories are about their daily sufferings, hopes, and dreams. The stories are personal stories, or fictional stories inspired by their life realities and culture, or imaginary stories influenced by local folk and fairy tales. The stories inspired by the children's lives are particularly powerful. Each story is usually illustrated by the

child who writes it, or (sometimes) by another child.

It is remarkable that adults and children can express similar feelings in their writings. In writing the memoir *Tasting the Sky*, Ibtisam Barakat noted, "When I lived in Ramallah, there was the sense that anything I loved or owned could be taken away from me in an instant. In writing this book, I finally could own a piece of my childhood, which itself felt like a piece of Ramallah, in the form of story"⁷. It is interesting that a little Palestinian girl (Lamis Audeh) from Gaza says a similar thing when she describes the siege and the horrific war on Gaza saying, "They killed everything we love."

Here is just a sampling of children's original stories from the "My First Book" program sponsored by the Tamer Institute for Community Education.



"My Story with the Olive Tree"

By Maha Ghurab, 10 years old

Tamer Institute for Community Education, 2003

The olive tree is very symbolic in Palestinian life. Many writers and artists have reflected on the emotional relationship between Palestinians and the olive tree. Maha, who is 10 years, wrote a poetic and touching story about the agony of losing her friend, the olive tree. It is reminiscent of what the great artist Paul Cezanne said about it: "The olive tree is like an old friend. It knows all my life and gives me wise counsel. I should like to be buried under it."

"I always felt its shadow playing with me and relieving me of the fatigue of the school day. I imagined it telling my story to the ancestors... I even talked to it as a friend.... One day the Israeli forces invaded our camp with tanks, and so we had to stay home for a few days. Going back to school, and on my way back home, I went to lay down under the tree that was part of my little angelic and loving world, the world that doesn't know pain or grief. I walked towards the tree with an unusual bad feeling. Reaching the tree I knew the reason for what I felt, the tree was uprooted and thrown to the ground. Its leaves were drying up. They have uprooted it... they haven't even listened to its screaming and moaning... They pulled up the hope I grew and dreamed of underneath its shade. They didn't treat it with compassion because it symbolized peace and was planted in the land of peace..."



"The Story of 'God's Will'"

By Joanna Shama, 9 years old

Tamer Institute for Community Education, 1997

Joanna, from Nazareth, tells her story. She challenges the backward outlook in our society regarding children and people with special needs. Joanna was born with her left eye almost closed, although she could see with it. She complains how her peers mocked and depressed her tremendously by calling her names such as "blind," "one-eyed,"

and “squint-eyed.” Doctors advised her to exercise her eye, assuring her that when she grows up, it will open like the other eye. Joanna ends by writing, “I exercise daily to fulfill my dreams... I will become an eye doctor... I will help the blind and people with special needs, telling them from all my heart not to lose hope!”

Last year, Joanna reflected on the story and wrote to me saying, “The story has empowered me... My parents were amazed when they read it, they were not aware of my agony. Many parents and people read my story and told me that it made them aware of the importance of accepting the ‘other’ and ‘people with special needs.’” Joanna ends: “The story was successful because it was real and concrete!”

I’m also happy to report that Joanna’s eye is opened now. She is studying in Germany to become an eye doctor.



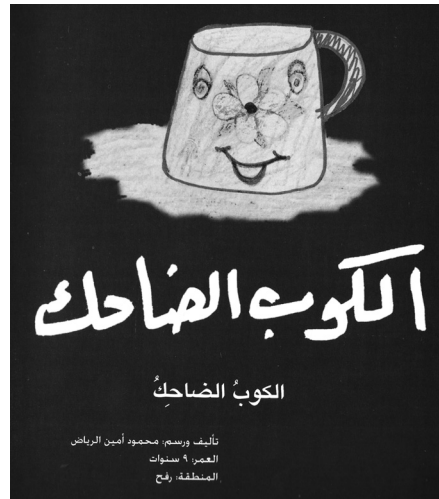
"The Wasted Childhood"

By Musheera Al-Hajj, 16 years old
Illustrated by Hanan al-Qadi, 14 years old
Tamer Institute for Community Education, 2003

Musheera Al-Hajj wrote a powerful story, written in an imaginative style. He was critical of tribal values, and addressed the absurdity of treating a child like an adult. His story describes how, a child who is 10 years old, who is the son of the Head of a

Bedouin Tribe “used to join the elders of the Bedouin tribe in their gatherings. He sits near his father and listens to the talk of glory and eternity. The sheikh of the tribe is teaching the boy how to be a man and hence, the boy’s dream is to become one. After the gatherings, the boy rests his head, the head which is full of so many thoughts, beside his grandmother and listens to her stories, as she tells them every night. But tonight it is different. The boy dreams of a chat with a cloud that tells him: Hello boy. Hello! But I’m a man not a boy. But the cloud talks to him about childhood...”

The story ends: “We have to live our childhoods without any barrier to that right; the right that we will be satisfied to have. We engrave on the cloud: ‘childhood.’”



"The Laughing Cup"

By Mahmoud al Riyad, 9 years old
Tamer Institute for Community Education, 2002

Many stories tackle directly or indirectly the issue of loss. At age 9, Mahmoud al Riyad had a gift of a “laughing cup” which he liked very much. This cup was borrowed by his friend but ...on the second day, when asked about the cup, his friend started to cry and said that “his younger brother had broken the cup. I was very sad and never bought another cup. I don't want to be friends with any cup, because I don't want to feel sad when I lose it.”



“The Gone Voice”

By Maha Akel, 13 years old

Tamer Institute for Community Education, 2003

The daily loss of the beloved as a result of the oppression of occupation causes great suffering to family and friends. Hala, whose brother died, feels the great loss of a brother and a friend, and she goes to his room where she “smells his clothes and touches the beautiful presents he brought her last year on her birthday. Basil is gone. She raised her voice and cried out, perhaps that he would hear her cry, but nothing. ... She cried out in her bed and she cried out everywhere, then she stopped. Her voice was gone. ...”

Hala’s voice is gone. There is no use of a voice that cannot be heard. Hala is sad and quiet, sitting near Basil’s bed with no voice, no hope and no brother.



“The Lost Childhood”

By Mustafa Bakire, 14 years old

Tamer Institute for Community Education, 2002

This story reflects the expectations of Palestinians who were allowed to return to the Occupied Territory after the Oslo Accords. Many thought that it was the end to occupation, but the reality on the ground was different. Mustafa, who tells his story with such insight and deep reflection of his internal conflicts, said that he was happy to return to Gaza and thought he would be living like a normal child, like he used to live in exile in Tunisia. He discovered that children in Gaza played war games and were suffering from a lack of facilities to play. At the beginning he was shocked, disturbed and did not adapt. After some time, he started to change and wrote, *"In a moment of truth I discovered that I was a stranger in my homeland, and I wanted to abandon other children and wished to go back to Tunisia. I was petty in this thinking. ... Suddenly, I felt a strong urge to destroy all my toys that decorated my room! I ran to the street to join the children and adults of my Palestine in their resistance to occupation."*



“Despair and Hope in Life – Going to the Moon”

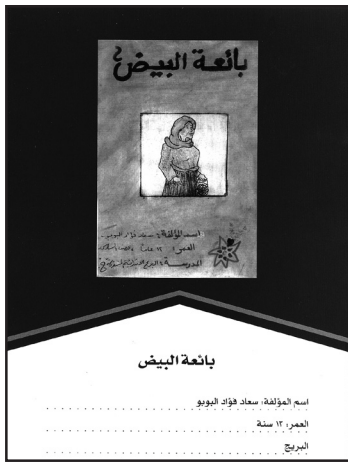
By Dua'a Allouh, 13 years old

Illustrations by Dua'a Mehdine, 13 years old

Tamer Institute for Community Education, 2005

Some of stories written by the children have a sense of humor or play on words.

"Two children from Gaza heard about trips to the moon and decided to go to live happily there, as they were leading a very miserable life under occupation, facing death, checkpoints and closures. In a few days, they made all the necessary preparations. One early morning, they took the necessary food and clothing and sneaked from their homes. They rode by car to the passage of Beit Hanoun... But, they were shocked to see that they cannot go to the moon as the passage of Beit Hanoun was closed!"



"The Egg Seller"

By Suad Fouad Al-Bobo, 12 years old
Tamer Institute for Community Education, 2005

A cynical story that includes a pun, this selection reflects the struggle of women to support their families. Fatima, the egg seller has to support her family since her husband became a political detainee five years ago. Fatima left her home in the refugee camp after long days of curfew. She collected the eggs her hens produced and went to the market to sell them, hoping to be able to take care of some of her children's needs and get new clothing for the feast. Fatima started to calculate what she could bring to her 5 children with little money.

"While she was deep into her thoughts, a thick voice speaking weak Arabic pierced her ears. When she raised her eyes to the source of the voice, she was met by one of the Israeli soldiers. She whispered to herself, 'He

will buy all the eggs. I will sell him the eggs for 6 Liras each instead of 5.' The soldier yelled, '4 liras and I will buy all that you have.' Fatima said, 'These are organic eggs, fateh⁸ (the start) for the chick.' She had barely finished her sentence when the soldier started kicking the eggs as a mad person and breaking them with his feet saying, 'Fateh...even in the eggs, fateh.' Fatima rose to her feet trying to protect the eggs from the feet of the crazed soldier, murmuring in shock, 'The boy's trousers, the girl's dress!'"

Libraries get involved

The stories written by the children in the two PBBY libraries are also very touching. It was amazing how the children could express their feelings against war and their dreams for a just and peaceful world in short sentences and titles like: *I Wouldn't Sleep, so as not to Dream* (Rana Al-Basyouni), *Isn't it my Right to Live Happily?* (Amal Al-Hissi), *They Killed Everything We Love* (Lamis Audeh), *Why Do They Oppress Us?* (Yusra Al-Basyouni), and *We Little Children Hate War and Hate those who Like Killing and Destruction* (Isra' Sehwal). Here's an excerpt of one example.

"Dust and Fire"

By Ala' Hassan, 18 years old
IBBY library in Gaza (not published)

This final story describes the cruelty of war and the fears of a child waiting for her mother and father who are caught in the fire of war.

My mother was working in Gaza as usual, and for the first time I felt like those destined to lose a loved one. Fear crept to my heart telling me I might lose my mother. I had heard so much shelling and cruel cannon fire that I imagined I would never see my mother again. Ah! My heartbeats insisted on disobeying me and kept going as fast as an Arab horse. Hours of bombardment, of worry and waiting passed, and my mother is still not near us, while shells come from every corner killing here and wounding there. In the darkness of this waiting, my mother finally arrived home, and joy was lit inside me..."