

Lest We Lose Memory

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Oral history is the story preserved in the memory of people and transmitted orally from one generation to another. It is distinguished by its spontaneity and its remove from the filter of historians and history books. Its purpose is not to document events of a past that is gone, but to meet the needs of the present and the future. This does not mean that oral histories proceed randomly, but rather according to the goals set by those who collect oral testimonies. Historians gather them and order them according to professional standards so as to revive the cultural reserves of eyewitnesses, to make them into a historical narrative that strengthens Palestinians' identities, and to present them in a historical text that is accessible to all.

Since the end of the 20th century, many historians have viewed oral history as a source to be used in the writing of history, treating it similarly to written texts, which have long enjoyed a status of excessive reverence.

Palestinian oral history occupies an important place in the writing of modern Palestinian history. This is a result of the looting of libraries and archives both public and private since the Nakba, and the continuing attempts to occupy Palestinian consciousness and Judaize spaces, which ultimately results in the distortion of the indigenous inhabitants' narrative. Notwithstanding the ongoing debate among historians around the credibility of oral history in writing political and social history, oral history has certainly become a cornerstone in the maintenance of Palestinians' identity and in the formulation of their collective memory. It is necessary to point out, however, that the history of dominant groups has not avoided using oral history to strengthen its control. Thus we see that the Zionist historical narrative has given (and continues to give) oral testimony great significance not only in terms of building Jewish identity, but also in building a nation

that forges together, in a single cultural and political crucible, groups and communities coming to Palestine from some 120 different countries.

Memories of the Nakba's tragedy are no longer the single center of interest for historians; rather, oral testimonies are becoming increasingly important in the process of investigating the depths of national and cultural identity and the rediscovery of the features of public life in Palestine before and after 1948.

Given the reality of dispossession and dispersal, grandmothers and mothers wove the story of place into the consciousness of the generations born outside their homes and their homeland. They did this through spontaneous oral histories about Palestinian life in the traditional Palestinian village. They gave substance in this consciousness to the features of the houses and the neighborhoods, to the harvest seasons, to weddings and popular celebrations, to the threshing floors, the orchards, and the fields. In order to keep this awareness vibrant and alive, it is necessary to transform spontaneous narratives into testimonies organized according to the professional principles of oral history. The vitality of oral narratives is magnified in the case of Palestinians inside Israel, who live in the “belly of the whale”—a whale that swallows much of their collective memory and distorts their national identity. This is particularly crucial as 70 percent of Palestinians in Israel are under 30 years old. They have not only been deprived of much of the cultural heritage of their ancestors, but they are subjected daily to systematic schemes that seek to forge an alternative identity, that of the “Arab-Israeli.” Since 1948, Israeli institutions have raced to atomize them in order to cut their links with their indigenous culture and alienate them from their national and cultural milieu, imposing on them a tightly cordoned isolation. Citing alleged security concerns, a military regime lasting two decades was formed and this was the first instrument to achieve this end. But the Israeli authorities were not satisfied with separating “the meat from the bone” by cutting the bonds of communication between the Palestinians in Israel and the rest of their people in the West Bank, Gaza, and the diaspora. Israeli authorities also undertook the application of an educational curricula whose goal was to brainwash Palestinians culturally, to remove their consciousness, and thus to domesticate them. This is all in preparation for

making them victims of a Zionist policy that seeks to alienate them from the Palestinian cause and prevent their participation in the development of a unifying cultural identity.

Since the Nakba, Israeli decision makers warned that they had made an historic mistake when they allowed a branch of the Palestinian tree that they uprooted to remain in Palestine. Thus they put into place plans to contain this remaining branch (about 130,000 inhabitants in 1948) with the aim of “Israelizing” them. The educational system was the most important means of order and control, as the Mizrahi Jewish Arabists worked to prepare curricula that adopted content leading to the Israelization of space and the imposition of a historical narrative that changed terminologies and nomenclatures. From here manifested the importance of oral history, which restores the names and terminology and gives shape to a history that has been erased from the Israeli curricula. Without a doubt, oral history is able to restore memory to events that the official educational institution has attempted to conceal. For example, most Arab schools continue to ignore commemorations of the Nakba, the Kafr Qasim massacre, Land Day, and other national events. Examining the educational curricula in Arab schools, one notices that they are expansive in presenting and studying Israeli spaces, such as kibbutzim and moshavim, while neglecting Palestinian villages and cities that are still standing, displaced, or unrecognized. Likewise, one notices that historical events such as the Buraq Uprising of 1929 or the Great Revolt of 1936, among others, go unmentioned, as if they had never happened.

Perhaps the oral history of Palestinians inside Israel (as opposed to the oral history of Palestinians in the diaspora) remains spontaneous and unorganized, varying from one family to another, and is therefore in need of work that saves these first-hand testimonies. This task seems particularly urgent because of the presence of a local Palestinian media that does not properly appreciate the importance of oral history in preserving collective memory and national identity. This media is more adept at criticizing the “Israeli blackout” policies than at lighting candles or sponsoring real projects to preserve memory and protect identity. We must not limit ourselves to discussions and studies indicating the failure of Israeli institutions to achieve the official education system’s goals of obscuring Palestinian identity. We must organize oral

histories of Palestinians inside Israel until we are able to ensure the stability of this identity, and to ensure the inability of these institutions to realize their schemes of division, fragmentation, Israelization, and domestication. Only then can we use oral history as a fence that guards collective memory and national identity, thus securing a future in which these memories will not be lost to future generations.

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