



PALESTINIAN VOICES: THE 1948 WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH

UM JABR WISHAH

These excerpts are from the 36,000-word “life history” of Um Jabr Wishah, who lives in the al-Bureij refugee camp in the Gaza Strip; excerpts dealing with life in her village before 1948 appeared in JPS 138 (winter 2006). A future issue of JPS will carry Um Jabr’s account of organizing prison visits in the 1980s and 1990s.

Um Jabr describes what befell her family and fellow villagers during the 1948 war. Her account covers mainly the period between the conquest of her village, Bayt ‘Affa, during the Israeli army’s July offensive, and her family’s settlement in al-Bureij refugee camp outside Gaza City in 1950. Bayt ‘Affa, located between al-Majdal and Faluja, was within the area allotted by the UN partition plan to the Arabs but lay close to territory allotted to the Jews, notably the narrow corridor linking the coastal area to the north and the Negev area in the south (where some twenty-five mostly military Jewish settlements had been established, including twelve in one night about a year before the UN partition resolution). The Israeli July offensive and subsequent offensives against the Egyptian forces resulted in the conquest and annexation to Israel of the majority of the Gaza district’s rich agricultural lands, including forty-five villages. Um Jabr’s odyssey, compelled by the changing course of the fighting (typical of the experiences of tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees at the time) took her to one village after another. Um Jabr does not give dates, but from the evolution of the fighting it is clear that within the space of some three months, her family moved from Bayt ‘Affa to Karatiyya to Faluja to Barbara to Hiribya. It was probably during the latter part of October, when Israel launched its all-out assault code-named Operation Yoav, that the family fled to the besieged Gaza City, which became part of the Egyptian-administered Gaza Strip after the armistices of 1949.

Um Jabr’s “life history” is one of seven collected as part of an oral history project, as yet unpublished, of seven women living in various parts of the Gaza Strip who were old enough to have clear memories of the pre-1948 period. Each woman was interviewed a number of times, with the interviews being conducted in the second half of 2001; Um Jabr was in her early 70s at the time. After the tape transcripts were transcribed, the memories were set down exactly as they were told; the only “editing” was integrating details or elaborations supplied during subsequent interviews at the appropriate chronological place. The “life histories” were collected by Barbara Bill, an Australian who worked with the Women’s Empowerment Project of the Gaza Community Mental Health Program starting from 1996, and Ghada Ageel,

a refugee from al-Bureij refugee camp now working on her Ph.D. in Middle Eastern politics at the University of Exeter in England.

WHEN THE ENGLISH BEGAN LEAVING PALESTINE, Michael, the leader of Negba settlement, told our *mukhtar* [of Bayt 'Affa village] to put white flags on the roofs of our houses. He said that now the English would withdraw and the Haganah gangs would come, and he didn't know exactly what they would do to us. But if we raised these flags he would not let them do anything to us and we would be treated the same as the settlement. But after a meeting in the village our *mukhtar* refused because he considered that putting white flags above our homes meant that we had surrendered our village and ourselves to the Jews, who would then control us, and we would not accept that.

From that time on, the young men and the fighters guarded the village, and many Jewish convoys of jeeps and weapons passed through Bayt 'Affa on their way to and from Tel Aviv. We only had a few very old rifles, which were illegal and kept hidden. As villagers, we had pitchforks for the harvest, and these were our main weapons to defend our land and ourselves from the terrorist gangs.

One day the *feda'yeen* attacked a military convoy of Jewish soldiers who were coming to strengthen the settlements. One Jew was killed and three wounded, and the body of the dead soldier was taken to the settlement. Two Palestinians were also killed but the others escaped, though some were injured.

Two or three days later the Jews attacked our village at one o'clock in the morning on the first day of Ramadan.* I was baking bread for our meal before the fast started at daybreak and heard the shooting, so I left the bread in the oven and carried my son to the house, but I could not find my husband and did not know where he was. I ran to a neighbor's house with my husband's brother and some relatives and neighbors and I found the men hiding under piles of straw in the storeroom so I did the same. I covered my son with some white cloth, hugged him to my chest, and we buried ourselves in the straw. We stayed there until 8:00 A.M. while the shooting continued. Then Jewish soldiers knocked at every door, and shot into the rooms to frighten the people, and ordered everyone to surrender and come out of their houses. When we heard the shots and shouting we went out because we were sure that they would search the houses later and if they found us they might kill us. I went out, holding my son in one arm, and the other hand raised in the air. The Jews assembled all the men who remained in the village, tied their hands, blindfolded them, and put them outside in the sun. They put us women in another place and then went through the village to make sure that nobody was left hiding in the houses. One of the soldiers made a call on his radio. Afterwards he told the women to take their children and go to their houses, but the men were not released and

* The Israelis seized the village from Palestinian militiamen in mid-July 1948, during the period known as the "Ten Days" between the first and second truce. The Egyptians captured it soon after.

were kept there. We were afraid to return to our homes because we might be killed like they were in Dayr Yasin. Still I went to my home to take my gold and hid it in my waist *shash* and then continued toward Karatiyya village, about a twenty-minute walk away.

While I was walking a soldier came up to me and asked where I was going. I told him I was going home and he followed me. I saw Jews everywhere in my village and was afraid that they might start to massacre everyone. While I was walking this soldier, who was carrying a knife and a rifle, asked me what I was holding. I said it was my child and he asked whether it was a boy or a girl. I lied. I told him it was a girl. He said okay, it was good that it was a girl, if it was a boy he would have slashed his throat, and he pointed with his knife. I was terrified, scared that he might ask me to show him the baby, and it felt like my blood had escaped because if he knew he would have killed us both. I thanked God he did not check.

I continued walking and he continued following until he met a group of soldiers and told them that I was going to my home. He left me then and I kept walking. I saw another group of Jews with a Palestinian and I could tell by his face that he was terrified. This man was being forced to give information about people from my village. When they saw me they asked where I was going and I said that I was going to my home. They asked me where my home was, and I pointed to the first house I saw because I was so afraid. They asked the man if that was my home and he said yes, even though he knew it wasn't. I walked towards the house, knowing that in front there was a big field of corn ready for harvest, and when I was exactly in front of the house I ran into the cornfield. As soon as I entered the cornfield they started shooting very heavily at me. The sound of the bullets with the wind was very loud, and I was very frightened. I was barefoot and now it was difficult to run quickly because there were prickles so I fell to the ground and crawled through the field, pushing myself forward with my free hand and legs.

After I crossed the cornfield I reached Karatiyya and saw soldiers. . . . An officer called to me, and at that same moment I saw my brother, who had been asking everyone coming from our village about my husband and me. I had been very afraid when I saw soldiers again, but my brother told me not to be afraid, that they were Arabs. The soldiers were from the Egyptian army. The officer asked me what had happened [in Bayt 'Affa], but I was very thirsty so they gave me water and let me sit down. I told him to find the big white building there, and that the men of the village were sitting outside, blindfolded and with their hands tied. I said the women and children had been released. He asked me whether anyone was killed and I said yes. . . . The Jews killed ten from our village while entering the first night, even though they had not done anything. They were just in the way and the Jews showed no mercy, then or now, because they have one aim, to have this land without people. . . . The Egyptian officer then questioned me about the Jews, how many there were and where they were, and then he said goodbye and promised me that they would get the Jews out of my village and liberate it. . . .

The Egyptian soldiers liberated our village and moved through the streets, shouting that it was safe for villagers to come out of their houses. We later heard that one Jewish soldier hid in a grain store in one of the houses at the edge of Bayt 'Affa for forty-five days and survived by eating wheat, which he soaked in water. Nobody knew about him but in the end he surrendered to the Egyptian soldiers and was taken away.

When I left my village I did not know where my husband was or whether he was alive or dead, so I left my son at Karatiyya and returned to Bayt 'Affa, where I found him hidden in some straw. If the Jews had burned the houses like they did in other villages he would surely have been burnt to death. After the Egyptians reoccupied our village they told us to return, but we refused because we knew that it was only a battle and still the war had not ended, and we were sure that the Jews would kill us in revenge. . . . So my husband and I stayed with relatives at Karatiyya.

We were told to wait for seven days for the 1948 war to end, and if I had known that it would not happen and this would be the situation, I would never have left my home, even if I died there. It was at the time of the ceasefire agreements* between the Jews and the Arab armies, but in the same night they occupied at least another five or ten villages. The next morning when people heard that more villages were occupied, they said, "What happened? How did this happen?" And others told them, "The Jews attacked and broke the ceasefire." They used to cut the paths to villages, isolate them, attack them, and occupy them. They are using the same methods now: cutting the territories and attacking them.

So instead of the seven days, we waited for months [in nearby villages] and during this time people went to Bayt 'Affa at night by camel or donkey to bring food, clothes, blankets, and their money or gold. The Jews [must have] killed many because they rarely returned. The Jews wanted to frighten people from returning to their villages, but even with the danger of these trips they continued going to their homes. I swear to God I had just finished storing butter but I left it all at my home because I thought we were going to return after a few hours or days. . . .

The Egyptians stayed at Bayt 'Affa for six or seven months. . . . My mother, two brothers, and three nephews, along with my sister and her family, had remained there, and they fled with other refugees to al-Faluja with the Egyptian army when it withdrew from Bayt 'Affa. My sister, with her baby son in her arms, rode a camel [when fleeing Bayt 'Affa] and her husband walked in front, leading another camel carrying their older son. The Jews had cut the roads and besieged al-Faluja and mined the area and the roads close by. I think a mine exploded while they were entering the village and the clashes started between the Egyptian army and the Jews. My sister was wounded in the chest by a big piece of the mine, and her son was killed in her arms. Parts of the mine from

*The "Second Truce," 18 July-15 October 1948.

the explosion also wounded her other son in his leg, and even now he has problems when he walks. Her husband took her to the military first aid tent in al-Faluja where the Egyptians stopped the bleeding. She needed an operation but there were no supplies due to the siege and nothing could be done. Her son was buried in al-Faluja and after the siege ended she was taken to Hebron and then to Jericho, where she died. She died and was buried and I was not able to see my only sister. Her life was full of suffering and ended in terrible tragedy.

There is now one surviving son from my sister. I was only able to visit him and his father in Jericho after the 1967 war ended and the road was open, and I attended his wedding. At the time my sister's husband wanted to give me her gold and *thawb* [traditional dress], which she had made with her own hands and which was so full of embroidery that there was no space to put a needle anywhere. I refused to take them and told him they should be for his family, to remember her. I had lost her, what would I do with the *thawb* and gold? I consider her son my own because he is part of her and she was part of me. Now he has eleven children.

At the same time that my sister was wounded a man from our village put his son on his back and ran from the fighting, but the boy was shot on his father's shoulders. He didn't know his son was wounded and bleeding but when he reached a safe place and took his son from his back he was dead. He went crazy because he had not realized his son had been wounded. Yes, these things happened in al-Faluja. Many people were shot, and both my mother and brother were wounded—my brother from shrapnel that passed through his shoulder. . . .

(By the time the Egyptians had to withdraw from al-Faluja,* we were already in al-Nussayrat.† I was very sad when I saw the Egyptian army, with all their things, passing along the main street on their way to Egypt.)

After Karatiyya we went to al-Faluja. I put my son in some cloth, tied it at my head and waist, and with him on my back we walked like bedouin. When I became tired I gave him to my husband, who also carried him on his back. We spent three months in al-Faluja, and then on to Barbara village. From these villages I used to return to Bayt 'Affa to bring wheat and flour and sometimes worked in the fields. The Jewish planes attacked us day and night; every day they bombed the people from the air so we started using the tracks in the fields rather than the main roads to go to our villages to bring things. But the planes followed us and bombed the fields. They did not want people to return or even set foot in their villages so the number of people returning to their villages decreased. Once a bomb fell in the middle of Barbara village and left a very big hole so people started to leave.

* In February 1949, according to the terms of the Israeli-Egyptian armistice agreements, the Egyptians had to hand over the "Faluja pocket" to Israel.

† Al-Nussayrat, south of Gaza City, witnessed no fighting and became part of the Egyptian-administered Gaza Strip.

We stayed in Barbara for three months and then the Jews occupied the junction near Hulayqat village and cut the roads and attacked the surrounding villages, so we escaped with Barbara villagers to Hiribya village. There, with many people also trying to find shelter, we hid in a big cave. I was with my husband and his family. There were many, many people. The place was awful because it was so crowded, very crowded, and people were very afraid, crying and shouting, and the smell of urine was everywhere. But there was no choice; we had to find protection from the bombing and the bullets. As the Jews attacked one village we escaped to the next. They used to attack after midnight when it was hard to move and find shelter and we saw the red bullets, like continuous fire in the sky. Even if we found a protected place for the children to sleep we could not stay, all we could do was escape in the opposite direction from where the bullets were coming. Most of the villagers did not have weapons. We were civilians and all we had after we left our homes were our children, our families, and ourselves. So we escaped.

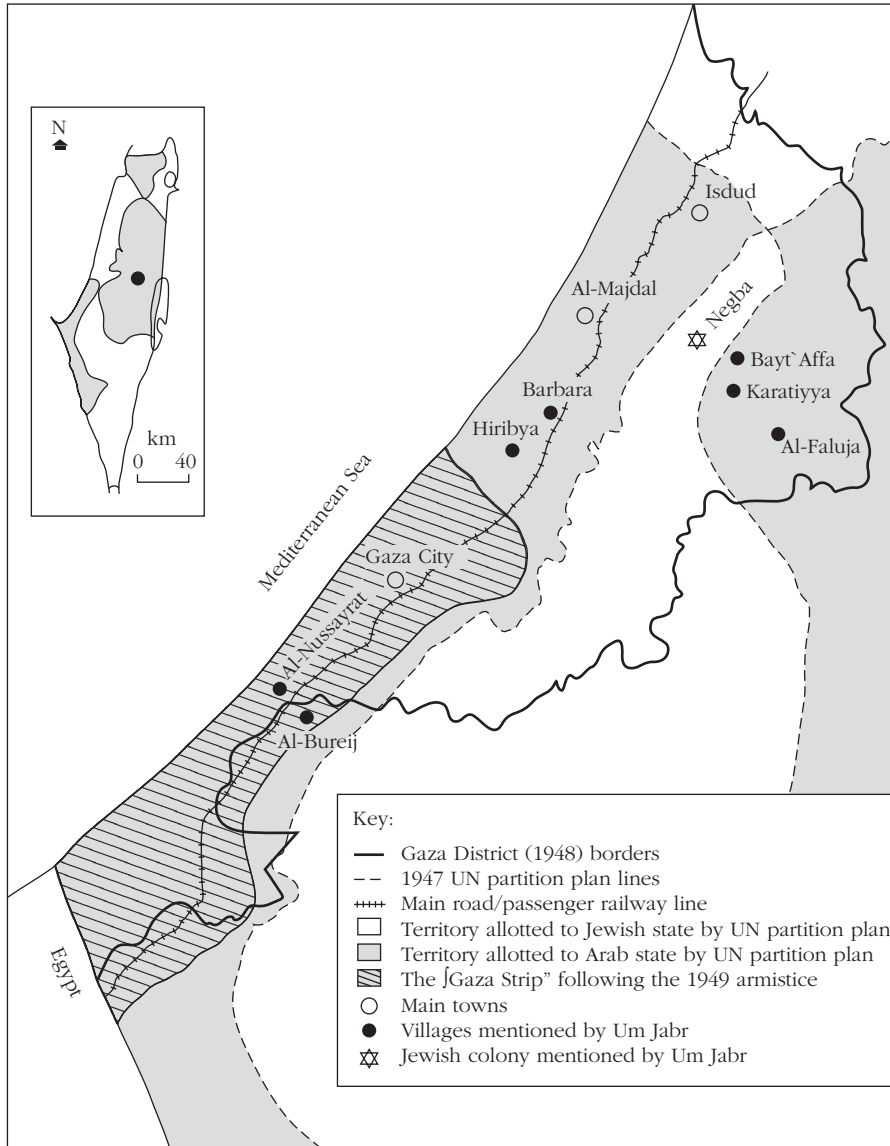
When it was quiet we fled to Gaza by the beach, slowly, slowly during the night. My husband took his parents first and told me to be ready when he returned. We loaded our things on [his family's] donkey and they went with the cow and goats, walking the coastal way to Gaza. There he left them in the Old City of Gaza and returned the same night for me. People were running everywhere; they were like ants. Some people rented fishing boats to carry their things to Gaza. We did not take anything; I only carried my son on my back. I think the Jews knew we were escaping and in fact they made it easy for us. If they had wanted to bomb us it would have been easy. At sunrise we reached the place where my husband's family waited and I felt my head was upside down. We had been in so many different places I could not recognize where the sun rose and I thought it was rising from the west. It was a terrible day in my life; I was so sick, so sad, so frustrated.

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My husband rented a place for us in a potter's yard, and then we searched for firewood. I had brought all my money and gold with us, so my husband bought some wheat and I made bread and we ate that day. We lived in that rented place in Gaza for two weeks but found that we all couldn't live there, my husband's family and us with the cow, donkey, and goats, so my husband went to search for a better place. He thought al-Nussayrat would be more suitable because there were fields and open spaces, similar to where we used to live, so we went to al-Nussayrat and stayed for some time. We lived with my husband's parents and his two brothers, aged four and ten years. Of course we could not let them live alone, so when we moved they moved because we were close.

In al-Bureij and al-Nussayrat there were English military barracks made of thick concrete blocks. One of them was very big and one hundred people lived there, and built walls to separate the families. In al-Nussayrat there was a very big place with many small cells, surrounded by a wall with a gate. It had

THE GAZA DISTRICT, 1948-49



The Gaza District under the Mandate contained some 50 villages, 45 of which—all north of Gaza City—were occupied in 1948–1949 and later destroyed. Only the villages mentioned by Um Jabr and the main towns are shown on the map.”

been a prison called al-Kalabush, and used by the British for prisoners from all over Palestine. We lived [in that prison] for two or three months with a very good family from Qatra village. We cooked and ate together. Many refugees from different parts of Palestine, like Jaffa or Haifa, and villagers from Bayt Daras, 'Ibdis, and Karatiyya lived there and did not find [living in tiny cells] to be a problem, but I could not because it was very noisy and I cannot live in a small closed place. I was used to having space and a wide area and living separately from other families. . . .

Then the Quakers came, registered the people and gave them registration cards, and distributed food supplies like butter, wheat, flour, oil, sugar, and cans of beans. Later they distributed tents, every two or three families together in one tent, because at the beginning there were few tents. The tents were placed beside one another with almost no space between them. We helped and supported one another in the tents, and treated each other like we were from the same family even if we were from distant villages. Life was very difficult and there was no privacy at all. Tents are suitable for armies or camps, something temporary, but not for family living. Sometimes two or three families lived in one tent and every family tried to put flour or rice sacks, their belongings, or even kitchen equipment to separate themselves [from the other families], and when they slept their heads were against the divisions so any talk or activity was heard on the other side. No privacy at all. Then later UNRWA [UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East] brought us tents: a big tent with two tent poles for families consisting of ten members or more, and a smaller tent with one tent pole for families with five or fewer members.

Winter came and we were very cold in the tents. Sometimes the wind blew the tent flaps open in the middle of the night and we woke up and tried to fix them again but only the lucky ones could close them. Then a measles epidemic broke out and there was no medicine and no warmth. In our villages we were able to take care of children with this disease, but in the tents and in that situation we could not. There were no doctors, no medicine, and most of the children who were at their mothers' breasts died from measles. A few were lucky and survived. We lost our son Ibrahim at that time with the others. He died in al-Nussayrat six months after the war and is buried there. Then I became pregnant again and had another son; we called Ibrahim after the first, because he was our first child and we loved him very much. This second Ibrahim lived for forty-five days and died because of the cold, the life in the tents, and the lack of care or doctors. Then UNRWA started and there was one doctor for the whole camp and sometimes one doctor for the two camps of al-Bureij and al-Nussayrat. This was the beginning of the UNRWA services. UNRWA distributed milk powder and we mixed it with water, but only half strength to make it last. I made cheese and yogurt from the milk powder they gave us. . . . The children suffered because of the very cold weather, rain, diseases, no doctors, and no care. This is why we lost that generation of children born in those years. It was a difficult life.

I still remember when I brought a bag of grass for our goats in winter and while I was returning I met a wall of water from Wadi Gaza, which reached my chest. My *thawb* filled with air and water like an umbrella so I could not see, and I was lucky the water did not carry me out to sea. I even saw my death before my eye, and it was a miracle I survived and did not drown. This was our life in the tents in al-Nussayrat.

We lived in the tents for two or three years. Actually we cannot consider life at that time as normal, especially after being expelled from our land, where we were happy, enjoying our life, having big spaces in big houses, having all kinds of animals, and then coming to live in a tent and facing all these problems. Whatever I tell you, I cannot describe the happiness we had there [before the war], even if I spend day and night telling you about my life there.

The Egyptians were very good to us and tried to help us manage our lives. They gave us time to exchange what money we had, such as the English pounds we had brought with us from our villages. I exchanged our money but much of its value was lost.

We lived for some time in al-Nussayrat and then moved to al-Bureij. At the beginning, when we were still at al-Nussayrat, people were totally convinced that they would stay there for a short time, some even counting the days before they returned; I do not know why, but I had the feeling that it would take longer. Yes, I was younger than many people and was recently married with one child, and others were older and more experienced than me. But I knew from what was going on that we would not be able to return as soon as they thought, so I urged my husband to search for work. This is why we left al-Nussayrat and came to al-Bureij in 1950, and here I had a son whom we named Jabr, which means "one given by God after a great need." We were still in tents at the time. One day I went out of the tent, not too far away, to bring a bowl to wash him, and when I returned I found it had collapsed because of a strong wind and all our bedding had fallen onto Jabr's bed. Without even thinking, I searched for him and I do not know where I got the strength to lift the tent and mattresses. When I found him he was totally blue and his mouth was open, and I could not believe he was alive, but he was. After this incident I decided that we had to leave the tent and build anything that resembled a room to live in. I hated the days of the tents and the life there; it was terrible and I hate to remember it. I said then that anything we did was better than living in a tent; it was impossible for me to live there because we were farmers and used to open places and fresh air. . . . [Soon] we found large, empty land in al-Bureij where we built two rooms, and next to them a small shop, three meters by two meters. . . . This place was in block nine in al-Bureij camp.