
Although we are not given many details, it is clear that Rich Wiles, described on the dust jacket as a British photographic artist and human rights activist, has made a commitment to the Palestinian people and their struggle that goes far beyond narrating their stories drawn from happenings in the course of their daily existence. In his introduction Wiles tells us that he initially visited Palestine in 2003, thinking he understood the conflict, but learned how ‘misguided those beliefs were’. Far more persuasive than changing his ideas about the conflict, Wiles changed his life. He tells us that he now lives full-time ‘in a small apartment’ in the Aida Refugee Camp (near Bethlehem), having given up his apartment back in Hull, England (p. xvi). The decision to take up residence voluntarily in a Palestinian refugee camp is quite extraordinary on its own if one realizes the extreme austerity of material conditions, the frequency of violent interaction with the Israel Occupation Forces, and the suffocating isolation resulting from Israeli checkpoints and the wall that has seemingly become the destiny of Palestinians living as West Bank refugees. This spirit of engagement and identification comes through in the book, blurring the boundaries separating the storyteller from the story.

Although Wiles is mainly known as a photographer, with an impressive sampling used to reinforce the themes of the book, the main undertaking here is the presentation of stories of the Palestinians he has come to know since living there. These stories convey the fused realities of Palestinian grief and perseverance in deadly embrace with the cruel criminality of the Israelis and their colonialist expansionism. If a picture is worth a thousand words, surely one of these stories is worth a thousand pictures, as it so well connects the visual portrayal with illuminating aspects of Palestinian experience. Any reader with even the pretense of an open mind cannot finish this book without feeling more intensely than ever before the Palestinian pain, the Israeli abusive occupation, and the Euro-American complicity in this 62-year ordeal that still shows no signs of coming to an end. Recent dramatic developments, especially
the three weeks of air/sea/land military offensive against an essentially defenseless Gaza in the winter of 2009 and the lethal nighttime attack on the humanitarian aid ships comprising the Freedom Flotilla at the end of May 2010, have begun to expose the essential structure of this conflict—among the longest lasting of world conflicts—to a much wider public view.

As Wiles knows, reminding readers at several points, the thirty stories contained in this volume are but illustrative of various dimensions of suffering and resistance. The number of Palestinian stories available could be multiplied almost indefinitely. Each and every Palestinian has memories of stories that exhibit the basic fabric of life under occupation; there is not a single Palestinian without such rending stories to tell. Those so brilliantly chosen and narrated by Wiles touch a raw nerve of human solidarity, but the more brutal realization emerges when one considers that even one hundred or more collections of such stories would not exhaust the material. It is brutal precisely because it tells so much about the bloody reality of life under prolonged occupation.

Should we not ask ourselves whether we are being unfairly manipulated by Wiles? Could not a pro-Israeli partisan produce an equally rending collection of Israeli stories, told by those living for years in fear of nightly rocket attacks in the southern border town of Sderot or by those who lost a child or parent to suicide bombing? The easy answer is ‘yes’. The more illuminating reality is ‘yes, but’. The biggest difference is that to collect Israeli stories of similar gravity would require a much greater effort. It would require searching for those relatively few Israelis who have had the misfortune of being severely victimized by unlawful forms of Palestinian resistance, limited as it is to a few places, and always the unhappy misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

In contrast, the Palestinian experience of victimization is all-encompassing in time and space, there is no escape, and there is not a single Palestinian without many heartbreaking stories to tell. Without doubt the stories of the oppressor are always far fewer, although not necessarily less moving humanly, than are the stories of the oppressed. And the options of an oppressor are numerous, including to tighten still further the screws of domination or to move away from sites of danger, while the only option of the oppressed, other than escalated resistance with grave consequences, is to persevere, and hope to avoid the worst. In an important sense the Israeli stories are of incidents, while the Palestinian stories are about structures that generate events, and these structures are particularly oppressive, having lasted now for several generations.

Perhaps, inevitably and appropriately, Wiles does not distance himself from the Palestinian struggle. This is evident from his language and his choice to see the world from the vantage point of a Palestinian refugee camp, the place he now calls home. For instance, what for Israelis is a ‘security wall’, becomes for