

Palestine and Music

My New Passion after 60



By Lena Saleh

I was born and bred in pre-1948 Jaffa, and I grew up cherishing the memories of a beautiful, vibrant, flourishing city, remembering the times when my father would take us for a swim before dropping us off at school; me at the Scottish Mission School, then known as Ms. Bain School, and my brother at the Greek Orthodox School. What a privilege, and what a delight!

Then came May 1948. We took refuge in Alexandria at my maternal great grandmother's home, herself a Greek refugee from Antalya; actually my mother saw herself as a double refugee, first in 1918 from Antalya and thirty years later from Palestine. I am sure that it is

With Anni Kanafaneh (facing Lena) and Hanna Abu Khadra at a cafe overlooking Eden Rock, near Beirut.



Lena with precious friends who share a passion for music in Ramallah.

the stories that she shared with us of her childhood days that developed in me the yearning to find out more about the people and places that framed my own childhood.

In 1951 the family came back to partitioned Palestine and settled in Bethlehem. It did not take me long to realize the tragedy that had befallen our people – dispossessed, dispersed, shaken by the terrible earthquake that hit the homeland. Yet one thing struck me at the time: there was a bond that developed between the families, many of whom were living together under one roof. We were one such family.

I started my professional career in 1959, in the city of Nablus, with Yusra Salah, an educator of high standing. Indeed she marked the early years of my career. With us at the time was Hala Khalil Sakakini, another jewel, gentle and humble, a wonderful educator, and a very special friend. People such as these were my assets and treasures.

After a short period I moved on to Ramallah, then Lebanon for thirteen years of innovation and development, and then to Jordan. The accumulation

of this solid experience, coupled with my higher education and cooperation with international organizations paved the way to my entrance to UNESCO in 1978. Little did I know then that I would spend the bulk of my formal professional years at this organization. Of course, I felt it was an honor to serve at that level and work with all regions of the world, yet I felt it was also a big responsibility to cooperate with colleagues and partners to address various educational challenges that countries were struggling with.

In January 2000 came my official administrative retirement. My colleagues were certain that I would be hovering around them for some time and that, with my long-term passionate involvement in UNESCO's special needs education program, and the inclusive education path that was launched in the nineties, it would be very difficult for me to detach myself abruptly and completely. To my great surprise, and to theirs as well, this was not the case. After a few years of freelance consultancies, a common route for many, I decided to look for new horizons, and my first choice was to

re-connect with the homeland, back to the roots. Though I never disconnected from Palestine, this time, however, I was out searching for something new, something different, that had meaning and value and that would also give me personal fulfillment and inner joy. Yes, I went looking for joy and some glimmer of hope from under the rubble!

found myself responsible for leading a team of four young people and assuming the task of networking with national and international institutions and organizations in order to enhance the conservatory's mission. I was recruited as a UN volunteer, the only way for me to get to Jerusalem to work with the central team based at the conservatory branch there. Jerusalem

two security checks and ID control every day. But to me the best part was going along the route overlooking the hills and olives groves, and once in a while we were lucky to see gazelles racing by. I never tire of driving through our beautiful landscape.

My experience has brought me in close contact with the young people

cultural identity. And although it is a channel for inner peace and harmony, it is also a way of survival and resistance and steadfastness, considering the hurdles and obstacles imposed by the occupation, and the difficulties people face on a daily basis.

In 2009 I had the possibility of accompanying a group of fifteen young student musicians (Oriental Music Ensemble) from the Bethlehem branch of the conservatory on a trip to Chile. They were hosted by the Bethlehem 2000 Association. In one week they gave four concerts, three in Santiago and one in Valparaíso; the first gala concert was attended by Michelle Bachelet, then president of Chile. Chile has the largest Palestinian community originating from the Bethlehem region, and the audience was moved to tears to see and hear the children and what they could produce despite the weight of the occupation.

After ending my assignment, I have continued my cooperation with the conservatory over the past years, facilitating networking and contacts with the outside. My greatest personal gratification continues to be my association with the Palestine Youth Orchestra (PYO), a unique ensemble that brings together some 65 Palestinian youth from the occupied Palestinian territory, from 1948 Palestine, and from the diaspora. When performing abroad, they are usually joined by 15 to 20 guest-student musicians from the countries that host them in the Arab region, Europe, and the Americas, creating a quality national youth orchestra on a par with similar groups worldwide. They have played in Jordan, Syria, Germany, Bahrain, Lebanon (Beiteddine Festival), Athens, Italy, France, and this coming July, it will be a tour in the United Kingdom.

The above is a glimpse of the artistic and cultural expression of a people; their coming together and bonding is a way to chase away the *Nakba* and keep hope and truth alive.



The horn section of the PYO in a performance at the Royal Opera House in Muscat, Oman. Photo by Dana Albouz.

So after making a few contacts I was fortunate to fall into the lap of the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music, a full-fledged national institution founded in 1993 that has been instrumental in putting music on the cultural map of Palestine.

With an assignment as Deputy Director for Programs and Public Relations, I

is out of bounds for Palestinians who hold West Bank identity cards.

Living in Ramallah, I commuted daily with the UNDP bus, arriving in Jerusalem at eight in the morning. I was literally the first one to open the building's main gate. I have beautiful memories of these daily rides, sharing stories and jokes, and going through

studying at and performing with the conservatory, and in them I see a new face of Palestine, a generation that loves life and loves music, keen to share this feeling with the outside world. In fact, when they come on stage to perform as a group, they radiate positive energy that carries the audience with them. To them, music is a new path to their