

Meeting Amal

A dispatch from Stewart Coffin, November 24, 2003

Last weekend Mary and I had a deeply moving experience that we feel compelled to share with family and friends.

Mary's P.E.O. chapter, like many others across the country, provides scholarships for students from abroad to come to the United States for advanced studies related to international peace. Recent recipients of their International Peace Scholarships have come from Argentina, Turkey, and South Korea. This year's recipient is Amal Jadou from Palestine. She is the first Palestinian to be admitted to the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, where earlier this year she was working on her Ph.D. in international relations. Presently she is a Graduate Research Fellow in the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School.

Amal was born and raised in the Aida refugee camp near Bethlehem, together with one sister and three brothers. Her mother is a teacher. Her father is retired after 35 years with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. Amal graduated from Bethlehem University with a B.A. in English language and literature, and received an M.A. in international studies from Birzeit University in 2000. She is fluent in several languages. She has been active in the Peace Research Institute in the Middle East, doing research to assist Palestinian and Israeli academicians to foster mutual coexistence. She has volunteered for the Palestinian Prisoner Society in Bethlehem, doing research on Palestinian political prisoners, and she compiled and translated information and names for the Wye River Conference in Maryland in 1998. She represented the Palestinian Prisoner Society during the U. N. High Commissioner's visit to Jerusalem during an investigation of human rights abuses. In 1999 she represented Palestinian Muslims at an international conference in Jordan that was hosted by King Abdallah.

Last weekend Mary arranged for Amal to come here for an afternoon and evening meeting with her P.E.O. sisters and friends. Much of the discussion had to do with present conditions in Palestine and Amal's hopes for the future. She stayed here overnight and we drove her back next morning, giving us even more opportunity to visit with her. Quite by chance, at the annual Andover Historical Society used book fair last summer, I happened to pick up *A Concise History of the Middle East*, by Arthur Goldschmidt, 1988. With so much at stake there these days, I thought I should make at least some effort to fill in the huge gaps in my education. The book was anything but concise – 400 pages crammed with 1000 years of turmoil that now seems to be getting worse by the day with no end in

sight. I have since found that the Internet is actually a better source of information than the book, and certainly more up-to-date.

Being not familiar with Birzeit University, before Amal's visit I looked it up on the Internet and found the following: It was started in 1924 by educational visionary Nabiha Nasir. Her object was to provide elementary schooling for girls of Birzeit and nearby villages. By 1930 it had become a secondary school for girls and boys, and by 1975 it had gradually evolved into a full fledged university, the largest and most important in Palestine. There are presently 6000 students, half women. Much more information can be found on the web. I printed out a five-page history of the university that I had intended to read aloud at the meeting. However I found myself so overcome with emotion that I was unable to do so. Here is why:

After the West Bank came under Israeli military occupation in 1967, Palestinian students were often barred from continuing their studies abroad because of imposed restrictions by the Israeli military, hence the need for a university at home. The Board of Trustees was formed in 1973, but it took several years for the Israeli military to approve its registration. The University is guided by the principle of academic freedom, which has made it and its community suffer and become the target of harassment under the military occupation. In the wake of demonstrations calling for the end of occupation, at least 15 students have been shot dead. Scores more have been detained for lengthy periods without trial and some have been deported (in violation of the Geneva Convention). In 1973, just as development to University status was nearing completion, it was closed by the military for two weeks. Between 1979 and 1992 it was closed 15 times, or 60% of the time, the last closure being for over four years. During these prolonged closures it continued to operate underground with small groups in makeshift arrangements outside the campus. Under such conditions, many students needed up to 10 years to complete their four-year degree course. In 1980 the Israeli occupation authorities issued military orders giving them full control over the hiring of faculty, admission of students, and curriculum. This applied to all higher educational institutions in the occupied territories, but was later rescinded because of the international outrage it generated. Violations of human rights continue unabated. Students are arrested and detained for being members of the student council. Students from Gaza are often barred from travel to the West Bank to enroll at Birzeit. The University now faces a severe financial crisis but continues to function in spite of hardships. Amal adds the following footnote: All school textbooks are censored by the Israeli military, with words such as "occupation" and "Palestine" being inked out, but of course the students know what was there so it probably has the opposite of the intended effect.

Amal described to us in graphic detail what life was really like growing up in a refugee camp under military occupation. There may be some books that go into this, but if so I have not been able to find them, and you are certainly not going to learn much by watching the network news or CBS 60 Minutes. To summarize briefly at risk of oversimplification, as a consequence of military conquest by the Israeli army and forced expulsion, her family, along with some one million other Palestinians, fled their homeland and ended up living in refugee camps. Some survived in tents at first, but later the United Nations built cement block structures called "units," usually one per family. They had no electricity or running water. In Amal's, all five children and their grandmother slept in one small room, in conditions that would not even be considered acceptable for a prison cell in most civilized countries. All outside movement is controlled by the Israeli military, when and where they may go, such as to the market for food. During the frequent curfews, they may not leave their quarters, and those who do may be shot. Children have no place to play. The Israeli military may invade their unit and search it at any time, day or night. All their mail is opened and inspected by the Israelis, and if delivered at all may be several months delayed. All of their e-mail is likewise controlled and censored. Attending classes regularly presents special problems for students because of the frequent curfews, which can last up to months at a time. Amal described dodging checkpoints and climbing over fences in order to attend classes, including several narrow escapes from being arrested (or worse!) by the Israeli police. Once when she was caught and stood up to her captors, she was told she would be shot on the spot if she uttered the word "occupation" again.

Amal was asked how anyone could possibly cope with this constant terror. Her answer was that she and others of her generation had grown up surrounded by it constantly and knew no other life, so they just accepted it and learned to live with it. Now that she has been away from it for so long, it will be a difficult adjustment for her going back. Amal hopes to return home for the upcoming holidays. I have not mentioned all the difficulties she must cope with in travel, but they would discourage most travelers. For example, she is not allowed to use the Israeli airport.

Many Palestinians have lost family members or friends. The Israelis have used tanks to smash down housing units with families and children still inside while hunting for enemies, one notorious case being the alleged massacre in Jenin last year. There were conflicting reports of what took place. The Israelis did not allow journalists to enter the area. Even disaster relief workers were barred. Colin Powell was in Palestine at the time but politely obeyed Israeli orders to stay away. Another hazard is mortar or artillery from (American) Apache helicopter gunships at nearby targets. The cement block units are so flimsy that they shake and often collapse, especially when more than one layer high, resulting in yet more civilian casualties. And of course many Israeli

civilians have also been victims of this constant terror, by the latest count about one Israeli for every three Palestinians.

As you can well imagine, it was a very emotional meeting. I still get a lump in my throat just writing about it days later. I have the impression that much of the news we get coming out of the Middle East is pretty well watered down by the time it reaches us. In any case, meeting and talking with someone who has actually lived there, especially someone as intelligent, educated, and articulated as Amal, casts the whole conflict in a different light.

For many of us, a bad day is when the Red Sox lose or we discover a patch of crabgrass on our lawn. For the Palestinians, a bad day is when the Israelis run a tank through their housing unit or one of their friends or relatives is executed simply on suspicion of being an enemy, or else becomes a victim of crossfire. A better day is when none of this happens. It is hard for us to imagine.

The good news is that Amal is optimistic about the future of Palestine. If the ultimate object of the Israelis is, as many perceive, to wear down and eventually break the spirit of the Palestinian people in order to take over the entire region, it is not happening. If anything, quite the contrary. Decades of repression have only made the Palestinians stronger. Good education for both men and women is now a top priority. I am not too surprised. My closest friend in college was a hiking companion named Philip Frankel. In addition to the out-of-doors we shared many other common interests including classical music and philosophy. Phil was an intellectual in the truest sense of the word. I once asked him why it was that a disproportionate number of Jews excelled in intellectual pursuits such as the arts and sciences. His answer was that throughout history one finds examples of peoples who are repressed turning inwardly to education and scholarship as their means of rising above it. Ironic, then, how the roles are now reversed, with the Israelis trying to systematically shut down the Palestinian schools and universities.

An Israeli family now occupies the house and land where Amal's family once lived. As a condition for recognizing the new state of Israel, U.N. Resolution 194 called for Palestinian refugees returning to their homes or receiving compensation for their loss. Fifty-five years later they are still waiting for this to happen. As author Goldschmidt observed, this region has been called the cradle of civilization. Let us hope it is not also the grave.

Added note in 2010: Amal Jadou is now foreign affairs advisor to President Abbas of Palestine and travels with him on foreign visits. You can learn more about this amazing woman by searching her name on the Internet.