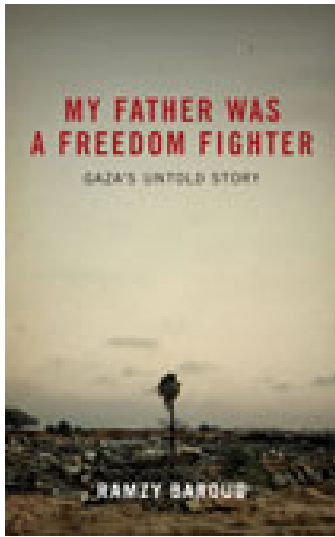


Ramzy Baroud, *My Father was a Freedom Fighter. Gaza's untold Story*, Pluto, London-New York 2010, 210 p., \$ 18.



„Not one refugee will return. The old will die. The young will forget.“ This prediction, uttered by David Ben-Gurion in 1948, did not come true. Not only the keys of the houses, that the Palestinians were forced to leave, passed on from generation to generation, but so did the memoirs and the deep roots and emotional attachment to the Land of Palestine endured over the years. When Israel was declared as established on May 15, 1948, the then Zionist militias had already depopulated 212 Palestinian villages and three major towns before even one Arab soldier had set foot in Palestine. The Arab armies, who did not intervene against the expulsion of thousands of Palestinians before May 15, 1948, declared immediately war against the newly established state, in order to protect the areas allocated to the Palestinian state. The war ended with a ceasefire. At that time 700,000 Arab inhabitants had left their homes in Palestine. Most Palestinians left in order to escape the fighting – with the intent to return to their homes when the fighting would cease - or

because they were expelled by Zionist forces. The Palestinians commemorate this tragic event as the “Nakba” (the Catastrophe).

Ramzy Baroud, a US-American Palestinian, columnist, journalist, gifted writer and Editor-in-Chief of „The Palestine Chronicle“, writes the story of his family, which was expelled from their village Beit Daras, located 46 kilometers to the north-east of Gaza City. The village belonged to those that fell victim to Ben-Gurion’s vision of a Jewish state with hardly any of the indigenous population. The Baroud family ended up as refugees in the Gaza Strip like thousands of others from 247 villages. In the book’s Foreword, Salman Abu Sitta, founder and president of Palestine Land Society, mentions that the population of Gaza equals now the total population of Palestine in 1948, namely 1.4 million. Israeli politicians and their supporters in the West always mention that the Gaza Strip is the most densely populated place on earth without mentioning Israel’s responsibility for this situation. Israeli state institutions, including its armed forces, keep the whole population of Gaza „incarcerated“ in what is sometimes termed the biggest „open-air prison“ in the world. The entire Gaza Strip has been surrounded by barbed wire. And during the 43 long years of occupation, Israel has systematically prevented the economic development of the Gaza Strip. (See Sara Roy’s detailed study „The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-Development“).

The author portrays the life and the struggle for survival of his family and the Gazans people as a whole. He describes six decades of suffering with no end in sight. After having read the book, one gets the impression that the „nakba“ was not limited to 1948, but is still going. When Israeli settlers were still living in the Gaza Strip, the Israeli army made life for the Palestinians „a living hell“, writes Baroud. The story the author tells us is basically about the life of his father Mohammed. His story could only be told after he passed away. „Israeli soldiers can no longer raid, search and ravage his house. They can no longer deny him permission to travel for medical treatment. No more humiliation from a smart-ass teenage Israeli soldier at a checkpoint. No more questioning and no more abuse.“

Focusing mainly on the story of his uprooted family, Baroud’s moving chronicle also sheds light on the lives of the Palestinian population in general and their persisting ordeal caused by Israeli occupation. He locates the life of his family in a wider political, social and economic context. As a ten-year-old boy, Mohammad Baroud, the author’s father, found himself displaced in the middle of nowhere, in the desert of Gaza, light years away from his farm where his family grew its own crops. This „nightmare was to be his true, everlasting reality“. The 200 000 refugees were not wellcomed by the 80 000 Gazans. Tensions

between the groups grew, and the Egyptian occupiers did little for their relief. The opposite was the case; they only created the impression that they took care of the refugees.

Unlike his older brother, Mohammed was not a source of pride to his parents. He was resentful, disobeying orders, and possessed a rebellious spirit, which led to merciless reprimands and beatings. „The more he resented his parents´ unfair treatment, the more punishment he received.“ This early experience marked his life. Having survived the Suez war, the 1967 war and Ariel Sharon´s „shock therapy“ in 1970, he decided to join the newly established „Palestinian Liberation Army“ (PLA) to achieve something besides more than Arabic rhetoric. After Israel occupied the rest of Palestine in June of 1967, the rules of the games changed fundamentally.

When the so-called peace process broke out, Mohammed described the Oslo accords as "the best-timed disaster that had ever befallen Gaza". The PLO acted as Israel´s security agent, shot at demonstrators protesting the accords and put them in jail. In the last elections, Mohammed voted for Hamas because of its „culture of resistance“. His funeral was attended by thousands of people „who shared his plight, hopes and struggles“, writes his son Baroud.

The book´s story is depressing as the history of the Palestinian people is concerned. On the other hand, the life and the inner attitude of Mohammed Baroud gives hope to the „Wretched of the Earth“. He showed that surrender to injustice and repression can never be an option. This should be understood as a hint to Palestinians who seem to prefer, with Abbas, the easier way to „independence“. Ramzy Baroud and his father stand for the alternative: freedom and self-respect.

Ludwig Watzal