

“The Perennial Refugees: Steadfastness in a World of Forgetfulness”

reviewed by Doris Bittar

Book: “In Hope and Despair”

Photographs by Mia Grondahl, forward by Hanan Ashrawi, Introduction by Peter Hansen, United Nations Relief and Works Agency

Mia Grondahl’s photographs in *In Hope and Despair* embody the facets of the Palestinian refugee experience - a refugee experience that now straddles two centuries, is in its fourth generation and its sixth decade. Thoughtful introductions written by Hanan Ashrawi, Peter Hansen from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, and Grondahl herself provide background for the images and remind us of the vast network of Palestinian and UN institutions involved in supporting a people in exile. This book not only shows the resilience of the Palestinians but builds a compelling argument for them to be counted as a nation among other nations.

Throughout the book certain themes show great similarities between one refugee camp and another. The Palestinian elders pose like antiques and are usually surrounded by children. The expressions etched into their faces bear the scars of 1948, 1967 and countless other expulsion dates. They are clearly in a stranger’s land. Conversely, the children are more at home, perhaps because this is the only life they have known – likewise for their parents. They show affection toward their pets and playfulness toward each other. Their energy is expressed through direct gestures such as washing their faces or sprinting in the streets.

Grondahl’s primary theme revolves around the gentle and anchoring domain of the Palestinian mother. It reminded me of my own trip to the Nahr Al Barad Camp in Lebanon in which we were led to our friend’s mother, Nourah. Her kitchen was bright and full of food, cups, saucers and fruit preserves. Nourah’s home was a refuge from the refugee camp. She never stopped working, sweeping, preparing peppers to be pickled, making coffee, playing with the children, etc. The rooftop was an alternate anchoring space with herbs and tomatoes growing in pots, while it offered a dramatic panorama of the camp. I was heartened to see these kinds of spaces included in the book. The mothers’ milieu is a life-affirming force, acting as a place for dreams as well as giving one a sense of perspective regarding the surrounding world.

Mia Grondahl captures the complex circumstances of the refugee camp without falling into the predictable trap of over-emphasizing the hopelessness of its victims. The overriding impression from this book is one of divergent experiences. We see a nation struggling between several forms of brutal intransigencies *and* we notice other realities that allow romantic musings. We can see ancient and contemporary phenomena side by side. Ancient, because there have always been refugees. Contemporary, because their situation is only 50 years old, though the softened and worn concrete of their dwellings resembles the smooth stones of the oldest cities on our planet. We are permitted to indulge, to speculate about a myriad number of ideas and emotions, as these enduring photographs follow the Palestinians during the period of their exile.