

Palestinian
Political Prisoners:

**STRUGGLE
BEHIND IRON BARS**

RIMA TANNUS

**BORN: 1952
ARRESTED: 1972**



I was arrested after my participation in hijacking an airliner from Belgium to Lydda airport in occupied Palestine. The plane had on board some Zionist soldiers who had booked tickets on that airline rather than El al for security reasons.

I am a Jordanian. The motive behind my joining the Palestinian revolution was the human aspect of the Palestinian cause, not the fact that I am an Arab. The issue of humanity is one; its oneness is universal and cannot be divided.

After the June war, I was deeply impressed by the sight of Palestinian refugees crossing the River Jordan, fleeing the death spread by the Zionist war machine in West Bank and Gaza Strip. I saw how those people were concentrated in camps in tents which could neither protect them against the hot summer nor the cold winter. In Shniller camp, I saw how people, my age, were living under the hardest conditions of life, and they had done nothing wrong. I began to wonder if I weren't, one day, be transfor-

med into a refugee by the Zionist expansionist policy and face the same conditions. This gave me more understanding of the dilemma of the 1948 Palestinian refugees. They have been the victims at whose expense the Zionist state was established, while the present ones are the victims of its expansion.

I couldn't help feeling Palestinian anguish and suffering. Everyday I felt compelled to go to Shniller camp. I made some friends there and began to spend most my days with them. My struggle in the Palestinian revolution started then. Later on, I became dissatisfied with the kind of struggle I was carrying on. I began dreaming of executing an operation inside occupied Palestine. My dream was realized on May 8th, 1972, when three militants and I set out in the operation with the hope of liberating some fellow militants in the Zionist jails.

OPERATION

In spite of the strict security measures in the airport, we succeeded in bringing in with us our weapons and explosives. The plane took off and landed in Vienna before taking off again to Lydda airport. As the plane flew off the Austrian air space, Therese and I rushed to the toilet to get our pistols and explosives ready. Rushing back to the other two militants, Abu Nidal and Zakareya, we gave them the pistols and hurried back to our assigned places in the plane. Abu Nidal then rushed to the cockpit and declared our authority on the plane. He then addressed the passengers, telling them our aim to offer to release the Zionist soldiers on board in exchange for some of our militants in the Zionist jails.

"WE ARE IN PALESTINE"

Our happiness and pleasure were unimaginable

when we entered the Palestinian air space and saw Palestine. We kissed each other, shouting "Now we are in Palestine". Abu Nidal ordered the captain to land the plane on the airfield in such a way as to hinder the landing and taking off of any other plane.

As the plane landed, Abu Nidal talked to the airport authorities through the radio and warned them against any attempt to draw near the plane. He asked for International Red Cross representatives to carry our demands to the Zionist authorities. Negotiations lasted 24 hours with the I.R.C. representative coming and going. The plane ran out of oxygen and the air inside became very stuffy. Humanitarian considerations made Abu Nidal agree that sandwiches be brought to the passengers and fuel to the plane so that the engine would work.

ZIONIST SOLDIERS AS I.R.C.

I.R.C. supplied us with lots of sandwiches and Therese took charge of distributing them to the passengers. I stood holding hand grenade with my back towards the inside door of the plane. I was quite sure that the door was closed and there was no way to open it but from the inside. Through the windows of the plane, I could see a fuel truck coming towards the plane, bearing the Red Cross flag.

Suddenly, the door behind me was opened and a man, wearing the Red Cross uniform grabbed my hand holding the grenade and pushed himself on me so both of us fell down. At that moment also, the side doors of the plane were opened and armed men, wearing the I.R.C. uniform began shooting inside the plane. The bullets Zakareya had in his pistol were not enough to answer the automatic rifles of the armed men. He fell down with his face covered with blood;

Therese also fell down receiving some bullets in her arm; Abu Nidal was also killed. I saw one of the armed men leaning on a chair with his head bleeding. A pregnant women was also killed.

BEATING AND TORTURE

When the shooting was over, the grenade was taken from my hand. My hands and legs were tied by a plastic wire. I was dragged by my hair to the stairs of the plane where I was pushed and rolled down to the ground. Many soldiers were there; some were in vehicles and others were on foot. Several soldiers took turns beating me on the stomach and the head and kicking me on the back. I was then dragged a small distance to where a soldier made me stand up. I found myself facing Moshe Dayan, then Minister of Defence. He asked me my name in Arabic. But when I didn't answer him, he told them to take me away. No sooner had he uttered these words than two soldiers carried me by my hands and legs and threw me into a military car.

"BURRIED" ALIVE

As the car took off, a soldier blindfolded me and kept his leg on my head till the car stopped somewhere. The soldiers got out, threw me into a ditch, and began throwing earth and stones on me. "She is not worth a bullet to shoot her. Bury her alive." I heard one of them saying. They went on till I heard a voice saying "Stop doing that. Let her suffer more before we get rid of her. "So I was dragged out of the ditch and thrown back into the car before it drove off to an unknown destination.

HORROR

I was thrown out of the car and two persons

dragged me, then threw me on the floor. The place was very quiet. As I was lying flat with my hands stretched tied above my head, my hands rested on a hard thing. I thought it was the leg of a human being, but they were hard and stone like. I was left this way for about two hours.

INTERROGATION

After that I was taken to another place. The blind-fold was taken off my eyes. I found myself seated on a chair in front of some officers wearing their uniform.

One of them asked me my name, and when I answered, he said, "Liar" and slapped me on the face. The question was repeated several times and each time I answered I was slapped. Another one said to him words I didn't understand. They tried to untie my hands, but the plastic wire was sticking deep into my flesh to the extent that they couldn't avoid cutting it by a knife, cutting my flesh as well.

They asked me about the organization I belonged to, its leader, the people who cooperated with me in Europe.... etc. When they got no answer, they started beating me with sticks on my head and every part of my body. They didn't believe that I hadn't been to a university and participated carrying out "such an operation" as they said.

When they failed to extract any information, they took me to a big room.. They took off all my clothes and tied each of my hands and legs to rings fitted in the opposite walls. The interrogation was resumed as I was laid flat on my back. It was interrupted by fierce beating and extinguishing cirigarettes on my body. Cold and hot water was also poured on me.

ELECTRIC SHOCKS

Once I was blindfolded and taken into a room. I was laid on a table. I felt them putting wires on several places on my body. They took the patch off my eyes and ran out quickly slamming the door behind them. The room became completely dark. I began to hear voices: crying, weeping and sighing. Whenever I tried to move my head this way or that, strong lights flashed on my eyes. I was left as such about an hour. After that my whole body became shaking violently. I couldn't help crying loudly.

CHANGE IN STYLE

Another time, after receiving the usual "meal", as they called it, of beatings, one of them pretended to be kinder than his fellows. He ordered them to leave us alone. He said, "You are a Jordanian; what have you got to do with these Palestinians? I know you have been fooled by them. But you are still young. Tell me who are the people you deal with outside and save yourself. "Realizing that his argument was useless, and failed to make me tell him anything, he slapped me on the face and said, "I know you. You were a prostitute.... etc. "I couldn't bear hearing those words and said, "If you know your sister is a prostitute, this does not mean that all girls are prostitutes. "He got so furious that he started beating me again.

BLACKMAIL

No consideration was taken in the interrogation. It would be at any time, both at late and early hours of the day. Even my menstruation was exploited for blackmail. They prevented me access to water and never gave me any thing to deal with it. This also was made conditional on my confession.

IN RAMLE PRISON

Rather than the beating and torture I had been suffering, I was always worrying about Therese. Thanks to ".....", the militant policewoman, I knew that Therese was still alive and being in hospital. She told me that I was in Ramle Women's Prison. She was very kind to me. She would say, "You have to eat all the food I bring to you; otherwise you will break down." She used to bring me cold water and clean bandages and put them on the black spots left on my body after beating. She was indifferent to the risks she was taking by her good treatment to me.

She relieved me when she told me that there had been other militants in the prison who would hear my crying when I was under torture. She delivered to me their encouragement to keep my morale high and not to break down. However I hadn't been so lucky. A few days after I had met her, I was unable to see her any more.

"RIMA...!" "THERESE...!"



Therese Halsa

Some days before the trial, a prisoner was introduced into my room. She rested her back to the wall and managed to sit down by sliding herself down slowly to the floor. However, I noticed her unable to move one of her arms and eventually fell on that side. I drew near her and helped her sit properly. As I was

doing that, she called me in a faint voice, "Rima...! ". My happiness in hearing her voice was unimaginable. I answered her in the same tone, " Therese...! ", and held her between my arms for a while. For about three hours we didn't speak a word, fearing that we might be bugged.

"AIDA DELIVERS A MESSAGE"

Once, a paper was thrown to us through the window. I took it and went to the toilet to read it. It was sent by our fellow militants in the prison telling us that they were militants like us and encouraged us to be strong and not to give in. I tore the paper, threw it in the toilet and returned to Therese to tell her the contents.

When we met the fellow militants after the trial, they told us the risk Aida Saad, one of them, (see page 60) took in throwing us the message. They said Aida was working in the kitchen at the moment. After she had thrown the letter, Shoshana Vaknin, an Israeli prisoner, saw her standing by the window. Shashana told the matter to the administration of the prison who summoned Aida for investigation. Having no material evidence against her, the administration left Aida unpunished. Yet, Shoshana bore Aida such a grudge that she followed her to the kitchen, took some of the metal plates before her and hit her on the head. Aida fell down losing consciousness for some five minutes. However, such secret contacts between us continued till we came together.

TRIAL

One day in August 1972, we were taken to the court. Our trial lasted about two weeks. We asked that Valencia Langer defend us, but they refused.

They assigned us a lawyer of their own. This guy wanted me to tell him things that I hadn't told to the interrogators. "I am going to defend you; so you have to tell me frankly everything," he said. When I told him I had nothing to add, he pretended to get angry and left.

The charges against me were many: carrying arms, commitment to an "illegal" organization, hijacking a plane, deliberate killing,... etc. I wasn't allowed to speak anything concerning why I carried arms and hijacked the plane. However, the trial was concluded and both of us, Therese and I, received life sentences.

BACK TO RAMLE PRISON

After the trial we were taken back to Ramle prison, and to live with our fellow militants this time. This relieved us a great deal from the suffering we had endured during the detainment and interrogation period.

LIVING CONDITIONS

Living conditions are very bad. Food is insufficient; whether one is speaking of quantity or quality. For breakfast, we had about half a loaf, two olives, a quarter of a tomato and half an egg. For lunch, it is usually potatoes. Every day a different dish, but the components are usually potatoes. For dinner, it is soup. I used to work in the kitchen. The dish is mainly boiled water with few pieces of carrots floating on surface, with no butter or fat to give it some taste. We used to add to it some old dry bread to form a meal. The meat we were usually supplied with was of the worst quality, and only two or three pieces to each. I used to boil it for several hours, but it was uncooked. We even used to throw it out.

Medical care was very bad. Lotfeya Al-Jamal was suffering some fractions on her back caused by beating during the interrogation. Aisha Audi was suffering from an ulcer, rheumatism and other ailments. Maryam Shakhsheer was also in very bad health. The pharmacist in the prison would give them only tranquilizers. We used to go on hunger strikes demanding an improvement in the medical care. Our strikes were brutally suppressed.

We mentioned these conditions to the representatives of the I.R.C. They would say that there were limits to their ability to intervene with the prison authorities.

WORK

We were about 52 political prisoners in the prison. Our work ranged between working in the kitchen, in the garden of the prison, cleaning the rooms and other manual work. We refused to work in the workshops whose products were to benefit the Zionist military establishment.

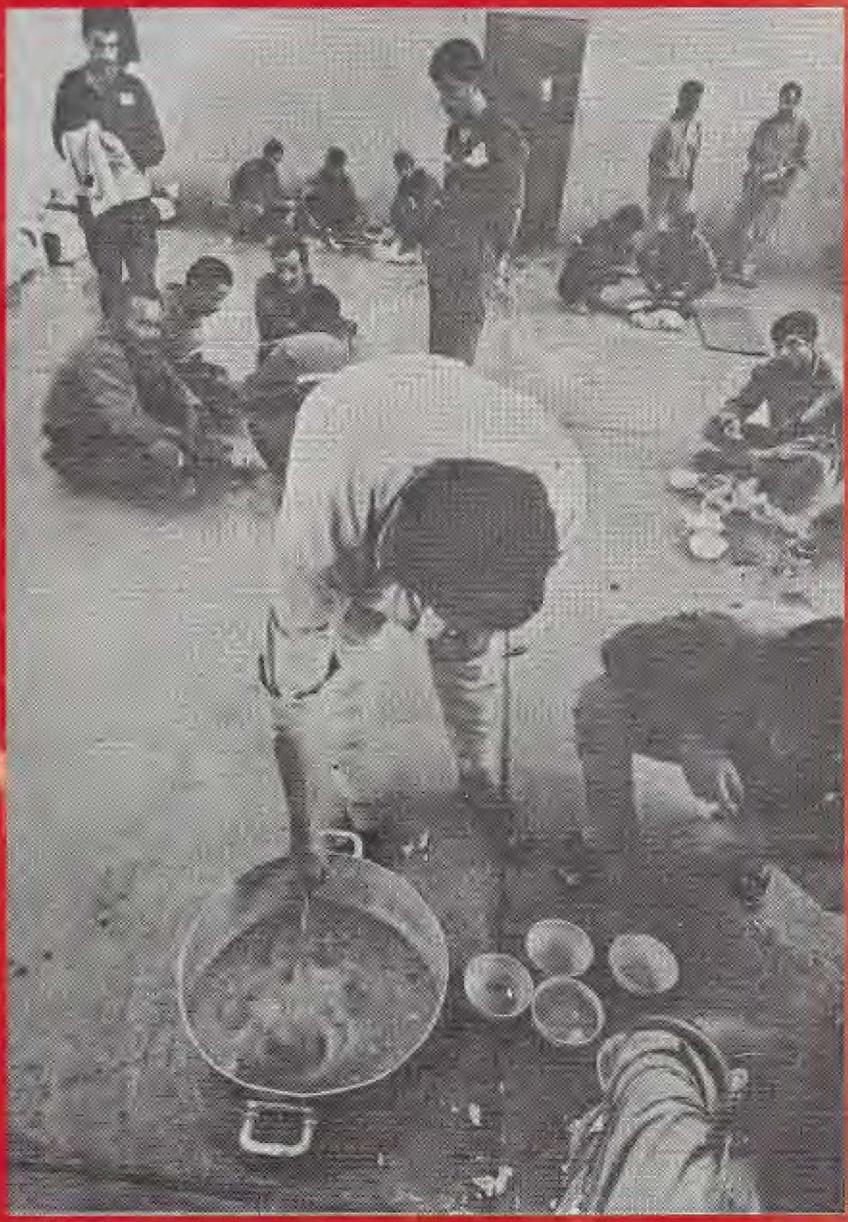
EDUCATION

From 2-5 P.M., our time was free. After lunch we would use some time to educate ourselves. The I.R.C. supplied us with books and stationary for that purpose. Some of us were educated. Others were not. Lotfeya and Aisha were teachers of Arabic, Sa'ida of English, Therese of Hebrew... etc. We were taught Arabic, English, French, and Hebrew. We had some non-Arab political prisoners who helped in the teaching process, including Terre Fleener, an American from Texas, Brigit, a German, and Ludvina, a Dutch.

DIVIDE AND OPPRESS

The prison authorities were not happy to see us benefiting from such self-education. They even tried to divide our ranks by trying to make us suspicious of each other. For instance, from time to time they would inspect our belongings in the cells. They would pick one person and keep her belongings untouched, while the others' belongings were completely turned upside down. This was repeated to make us suspicious of the one who was spared. Or they would call another prisoner from time to time to the directory, merely to sit there and talk nonsense to her. We were aware of these attempts. Each one would talk to the others on everything that happened to her.

They also tried to arouse the Israeli prisoners against us. Though most of them belonged to the underworld and had nothing common with us, we succeeded in winning some of them to our side. Our means were to teach them some knitting or anything else for their benefit. However, we were aware that our problem was not with them and that they were but victims of the Zionist entity, as we were.



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