

Reviewed by Nehad Ismail

A 22 year old American girl's memoirs from Ramallah 1938/1939

In the autumn of 1938 Nancy Parker an American Quaker young woman was sent by the American Friends Service Committee to teach at the "Friends Girls School" in Ramallah for one year. She had met Khalil Totah, headmaster of the Friends Schools in Ramallah, at a Friends World Committee for Consultation conference and she applied for a position at the school.

Her letters and journals were collated, collected and published in a delightful book "Notes from Ramallah 1939" in 2002\*.

Her regular letters to family and friends in Indiana reveal fascinating glimpses of life in Ramallah in 1938/39 during the British Mandate in Palestine.

Nancy wrote on October 8, 1938 "It is unlawful for an Arab to carry arms. When caught they are hanged".

In a report to Homewood Meeting, Baltimore October 9, 1938 she wrote:

"People of the East they have beautiful manners and in the class room, more enthusiasm than America youngsters".

In other letters to her parents Nancy wrote about the collective punishments, administrative detention and house demolitions carried out by the British army. You will be forgiven for thinking she might be writing this in 2011. Nothing has changed except the name of the occupier. For instance, she describes one hundred and seventy houses demolished in one village as reprisal for a British death.

In one letter she observed that "The temperament of both Jews and Arabs is such that they cannot settle their issue peaceably".

This was written 73 years ago; one is tempted to ask has anything changed?

More examples of her observations

"November 1938, Ramallah men can't go to work in their orchards and fields".

"The British are going to search Ramallah. The whole town was in a panic".

"The Arabs have a right to their own land which they have cultivated since human beings came into that region".

"March, 20th 1939 Labeeb Nassir knew we were in Jerusalem. He took us out to dinner and the cinema?" Can you imagine there was a cinema in Jerusalem in 1938, it wasn't all backward and

desert.

She wrote about the Arab men being too attentive to Nancy and Gertrude her colleague and compatriot "I don't know why these Arab men are so nice to us".

Back to politics and other matters

March 17th 1939

Regarding the British Government White Paper, Nancy observed "as a result of the White Paper the Arabs stopped attacking the British, and the Jews started". The White Paper promised Palestine independence after ten years. "Whoever heard of Great Britain's keeping a promise for ten years?" She wondered. An astute remark by a non-political girl, don't you think?

April 23rd 1939

Nancy and her fellow teacher Gertrude travelled east of the River Jordan. This quote sums up what Jordan was like over 70 years ago. "Transjordan is a country of Bedouins. People stared at us because women hardly ever go on the street. Women in this country are not supposed to be intelligent enough to join in men's conversation". I wonder how Nancy would react if she visits cosmopolitan Amman or the resort of Aqaba on the shores of the red sea now.

Nancy wrote fondly of Arab teachers in the Friends Girls School. One was Wadia Shatarra "the most beloved of all teachers at the Friends Girls School. They teach us songs and stories about Joha the wise fool of Arabic folklore". Not forgetting Miss Hannush who was wise, firm and gentle, mothers us all.

Then she describes the funeral of Abu Shahlah, a famous Ramallah resident; a larger than life character loved and respected by all.

"The women walk the ten or more miles to town, carrying baskets of fresh apricots or cucumbers on their heads. The men ride donkeys". Yet, another subtle observation about the inconsiderate male species.

Unrequited Romance

Ken a British soldier who got to know Nancy and Gertrude "Ken squeezed my hand tiresomely". "Englishmen are too obvious, Arabs too subtle and the Americans too clumsy. What is a poor girl to do?"

I found the 116 page book of letters more enjoyable and fun to read than any authoritative book of history about the conflict in Palestine.

Nehad Ismail is a writer/broadcaster based in London

\*Notes from Ramallah 1939 by Nancy Parker McDowell  
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