‘Despite It All We Still Laugh’

By Tamar Fleishman – The West Bank

This March marked the fiftieth anniversary of Algeria’s liberation from the French occupation that lasted one hundred sixty two years. Throughout the years of French rule, tens of thousands of immigrants from France and its neighboring countries settled on Algerian land and were granted a French citizenship, while the original residents of the land were granted no rights under the apartheid rule.

On the 18th of March 1962, after nearly eight straight years of Guerilla warfare (the FLN), the French army retreated and as a result approximately a million European inhibitors/settlers retreated as well.

And on the very week which marks this historic event, in which the rule of one people over another ended, thousands of victims and thousands of oppressive rifles gave witness to the fact that in Palestine the occupation was improving its clutch and invading and destroying everything that had yet to be oppressed and destroyed.

On that very week, men in uniforms under the lead of people from the Civil Administration came busting out of the side gate of Qalandiya checkpoint, they flanked the peddlers by the neighboring squares and along the main road, they confiscated their merchandise, threw the content of carts in to the garbage, spread fear in the hearts of the people and caused financial damage of thousands of Shekels to each one of the victims.

This wasn’t the first time that such a violent action was
implemented against the peddlers, under pretext that they
don’t have peddling permits, and it probably wasn’t the last.
Experience has shown that the silence that falls after such
events is temporal and fragile, and one can’t say from where
and when the representatives of the occupation will bust out
again. But these downtrodden people don’t have the time to
take a break, they hurry to get up from the wreckage, overcome
the desperation, rise up like the Phoenix and start all over
again.

Peddling was not the goal they set for themselves nor was it
the childhood dream of these people. Peddling is the default
of reality and they cling to it with their last strength,
pushing the loaded cart from one place to the other, from dawn
to dusk, presenting their merchandise before tens of thousands
of people who are forced to stand in cramped lines around the
checkpoint, most of them don’t live there but are migrating
workers who rent a room or a bed at some stranger’s house and
return to their families only once a week.

One such person is old Abu- Suliman from Hebron, who sells
candy for a Shekel and a bag of salted Lupines for two
Shekels.

Such is also Fadi whose family originally came from Bisan,
which after the expulsion of its residents during the Nakba
its name had been changed to Beit Shean. Most of his family
members are refugees in Jordan, his wife and children are in
Jenin and he himself lives at Qalandiya refugee camp.

And such is also my friend Abdulla Tamimi- the firstborn son
of a family that originally came from the village Bir Nizam
(near the extended family that came from Nabi-Salah) where
they owned a plot of land, whose father used to work as a
night guard at a factory in Petah-Tikva. "When I was little, I
used to love it when my father took me for a stroll in Petah
Tikva. Today I’m not even allowed to go to Jerusalem, our
Jerusalem", said Abdulla.
When the gates of Israel closed before the residents of the West Bank, Abdulla’s father, whose employers had never once questioned his reliability and honesty over the years, had now turned into a security threat along with the rest of his people as an act of collective punishment, and was fired. To add insult to injury, the family’s plot of land was taken from it by the authorities of the Israeli state: "the settlement Halamish is built all over our land", added Abdulla. In search for a source of income and in hope to provide a proper educational structure, the family uprooted and moved to Ar-Ram, where the educational systems’ good reputation was widely known.

But this glimmer of hope was also shattered. A wall was built around Ar-Ram, the prestigious educational systems were closed, the opportunities for employment were reduced, and Abdulla who had graduated from high school with honors and dreamt of going to university, was forced to help provide for the family. Now he stands in for his father at the square, by the family stand that is loaded with seasonal fruit.

A couple of months ago Abdulla went to the offices of the Civil Administration to try his luck and explained: "I need to make a living. I’m about to get married and I don’t even have a house. Give me a job, any job so that I could make a living, either that or give me a permit for a stand". As a response he heard: "You want a job?- go to Jordan, work there", and then he added and clarified: "You will never get a permit!"

"They simply don’t want us here", that was Abdulla’s conclusion from that day. Then he laughed and added: "and despite it all we still laugh".

Words that the likes of which I had heard from my grandfather when he would talk about life in that far away country, where he was part of a persecuted minority. Because the laughter of the weak can’t be beaten, not even with a thousand rifles.
(Translated by Ruth Fleishman)

– As a member of Machsomwatch, once a week Tamar Fleishman heads out to document the checkpoints between Jerusalem and Ramallah. This documentation (reports, photos and videos) can be found on the organization’s site: www.machsomwatch.org. She is also a member of the Coalition of Women for Peace and volunteer in Breaking the Silence. She contributed this article to PalestineChronicle.com.