

Let's talk about Gaza

A personal account about a first time visit to the occupied West Bank

July 2016

Yasmin Abu Amro was one of students of ASHTAR theatre in the Gaza Strip who contributed with her personal story to the theatre's famous 'Gaza Monologues' in 2010. Although the 'Gaza monologues' traveled the world, the 20-year-old English literature student had until recently not even been able to visit, what she calls 'the other part of her country', the occupied West Bank and Jerusalem. Bessan Shehada, project coordinator of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine (RLS) in the Gaza Strip talked to Yasmin about her first visit to Ramallah last month, her impressions of the trip, and her thoughts on differences between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.



First time in 'the other part of Palestine': Yasmin (second from left) participated in a theatre youth festival in Ramallah this month together with three other students from the Gaza Strip.

Can you tell us your story of going to Ramallah?

A couple of months ago, they told us that there would be a theatre youth festival that ASHTAR was organizing in Ramallah at the beginning of July. They asked our ASHTAR group in Gaza who wanted to go. Everyone was very excited. Finally, they chose seven out of fifteen. Luckily, I was one of the students who were chosen to participate in the festival in Ramallah. During the first couple of months, I didn't think that it would work out because I had already been refused once before for a permission to visit Jerusalem. Although I still wanted to try it again, I couldn't imagine that it was going to work out. Suddenly, I received a call and learnt that me and another four students were accepted and that we would go to Ramallah the next day. Even after they told me this, I still couldn't believe it.

When I woke up on the day of my travel, I didn't actually believe that I would go to Ramallah that same day. At every checkpoint we had to cross, I was afraid that this could be my trip's last station and that they would tell me to go back to Gaza, which actually happened to one person of our group. The driver who took us to Ramallah was so gentle. He knew that we were from Gaza and that it was our first time going to Ramallah. He stopped at many places giving us the opportunity of taking pictures. It was so amazing to see the beauty of our country. I had never imagined that we have such diversity here. I heard and read about it but I didn't expect them to be so beautiful. At the end of the day, we arrived in Ramallah. We finally entered the other part of Palestine that we had heard about ever since without being able to actually go and be there. I was so surprised! I was looking everywhere and at everything. Just seeing the other part of my country with my own eyes, I can't express how this felt. It was just great! Yet, it was also painful. The idea that for going there I have to get a permission and when my permission ends I have to go back to Gaza without knowing when I will come back again. This was the beginning of our trip. Later, the festival we were participating in started.

What were your expectations before going to the West Bank? How have your perceptions changed since you went there?

Honestly, I didn't want to have many expectations for this trip so I wouldn't be disappointed in case my permit gets refused. But what were my expectations for Ramallah? Well, I am sorry to say this but I always heard that the people from Ramallah were not so nice; they didn't love Gaza, they didn't look like Palestinians and that they were not suffering. I thought they were simply from another country. What I saw was the complete opposite, so now I know that there are many misconceptions among the people in Gaza about West Bank Palestinians. During my trip, I didn't meet a single person who was not friendly to me, and who was not feeling as a Palestinian. This is the main issue that I changed my perception about. Besides that, I thought that they have easy and simple lives. Of course, their lives are in many aspects easier compared to the life of people in Gaza. However, they have their own problems so life there is actually not as simple as I thought.

There were many things that I really liked and that I had never expected to see in Ramallah. First of all, I liked the people, the other Palestinians in the other part of the country. It was really good to learn that they know a lot about Gaza. It was so nice for me to feel the connection and love between us. Despite of all these limitations, despite of all what the Israelis are trying to do, we felt that we were from the same country. We never felt that we were from two different countries. It was so cool to experience how much we could be friends. We even did a performance with a group of theatre students from Ramallah. It was so great to see how we could work together as a team.

What were the differences you noticed between the life in Gaza and the life in Ramallah?

I mainly noticed two differences. The first is regarding the borders: They can move more freely. Even though it is hard for them, it is not as hard as for people in Gaza. Here in Gaza, it is not only hard but almost impossible. The second one is that people in the West Bank have more freedom. It was great to see that people can do what they want without being judged. I would really love to see such a lifestyle in Gaza.

Are you saying that people in Gaza are more conservative and often judge others?

Usually, people here are judged according to, what I think are wrong criteria. People in Gaza think these criteria are in line with our traditions and our religion. I will try to give some examples. Let me talk about theatre. Here in Gaza, people will judge us just because we are engaged in theatre. They will say that we are bad people who do something forbidden. They are putting many limitations on our work regarding the plays we perform, the lines we speak, how we perform on stage and how we act between males and females. It is very strict. We face many limitations here whereas in Ramallah, people understand theatre and how it can impact the development of a country better.

Why do you think people here don't appreciate theatre as much as the people in the West Bank?

I guess that during the last years people were given a lot of thoughts and ideas that are supposedly rooted in Islam and our traditions. Year after year, people started to believe more in these ideas without thinking whether it is good or bad. After all these years, people think that many things are forbidden in Islam, for example arts. They don't understand that arts change the world. Look at the most powerful countries such as the US. How come they have such a huge impact on other countries? It is because of their arts, for example their movies or their music.

What did you do in the West Bank?

We stayed for ten days in Ramallah to participate in the ASHTAR Youth Festival. It was all about workshops that were given by four international trainers on acting and theatre. There were many participants. Groups came from all over Palestine and the world. During the evenings, plays were performed and then, we discussed the plays. All participants went to Bethlehem and Hebron together. The students from Gaza also visited Jerusalem for one day.

You mentioned that you went to Jerusalem. How was this experience for you?

After twenty years of only seeing Jerusalem in pictures and movies, I was finally able to go there. The city is extremely beautiful. Wherever you go and wherever you look, the city is so beautiful. It is full of history. Being there really touched me. Yet, I couldn't be completely happy. I also felt sad because I asked myself why do I need to have a permission to be able to come here. It is my country, my capital. All of these mosques are mine. I should have the right to be there whenever I want. That is why it was hard for me as well seeing people from other nationalities that are able to go there whenever they want while I need to get a permission to be allowed to go to my own country. During the time I was there seeing all the beauty and feeling the greatness of the city, it was hard because it might have been the last time that I was there. I needed twenty years to go to Jerusalem so maybe I will need another twenty years or more to go again.



Yasmin (second from right) was one of the four students from Gaza who visited Jerusalem with for the first time: "After twenty years of only seeing the city in pictures and movies, I was finally able to go there."

Did you take many pictures in Jerusalem?

You know what? In Ramallah, I took lots of pictures but in Jerusalem I didn't. I didn't really feel like taking pictures. I just wanted to enjoy the beauty of the city. My friends took all pictures of me in Jerusalem because I couldn't even hold a camera. I felt more like looking at the city and feeling it. I was trying to save these impressions to my memory.

What are your hopes for the future?

I have lots of hopes. First of all, I realized after this trip that I would really like to work for an international association because this would make things easier for me. I would be able to go to Ramallah again. Getting permissions would be much easier so I could go back to visit my friends from the West Bank who I had to leave behind. I will also work hard for my master degree that I aim to do in the field of international relations. Hopefully, I will be accepted at a university in the UK or the US.

If you were able to decide where to live, would you chose Gaza or the West Bank?

I believe I would choose to live in the West Bank, though I like Gaza a lot. My family and friends are here. I like everything about Gaza but the pressure here is too much. I feel that I can't give my best when I am in Gaza. Simply, I can't fight all obstacles at the same time: The wars, the bad economic situation, the social atmosphere, conservative thoughts of the people, misunderstandings, and so on. Life in the West Bank surely wouldn't be perfect but for me I would prefer to stay there.