

From the Introduction to Voices from a 'Promised Land,' by Penny Rosenwasser

(Excerpt):

“Maybe I’ll tell you a little story, a few little stories—no, more than a few. Not so little, either. And not my stories at all.

Here are the voices of Veronika and Qassem, Suha and Tikva, Michel, Nabila, and Rihab. Let them tell you, in a way that newspaper headlines or thirty-second ‘sound bites’ cannot, how it feels to celebrate Shabbat (Jewish Sabbath) in a West Bank town...to survive torture in an Israeli prison and discover a deeper sense of self...to march with 5000 other Palestinian and Israeli women from West to East Jerusalem, singing and chanting together for peace...to lose loved ones...to build trust across differences...to hear air raid sirens and run for the sealed room and gas mask—or perhaps there *is* no gas mask.

...Listen as their stories tell of dreams and realities, tragedies and hopes, frustrations and fears. Stories of roots. Stories of courage, of resilience, of triumph over adversity — and of adversity hurling herself into each new morning.

...These people opened up their homes and their hearts to me, revealing their experiences as well as bits of their souls, over endless cups of thick Arabic coffee over low tables in West Bank villages and Gaza refugee camps. Or perhaps, as in the case of Beit Sahour, there was no table. The Israeli soldiers had taken it away when my hosts refused to pay their taxes to support an Occupation which provides them no services...

I fell in love with the ancient land, the golden afternoon light, the vast expanses of stone and sky. My heart broke at Yad Vashem — the Holocaust Museum. I bobbed in the Dead Sea, hugged a burro’s back in the Judean Desert, prayed for peace at the Western Wall, and days later ran from the clubs and water cannons of teen-aged Israeli soldiers who attacked our exuberant 20,000-strong human chain for peace around Jerusalem’s Old City walls...

But especially, I was moved by the women. The Palestinian women’s unselfconscious vitality, strength, determination, humor, and expansiveness of spirit shone through, from East Jerusalem to Ramallah to Jabalia Camp in Gaza. It shone through whether leading a peace march to Shepherd’s Field on Christmas Eve, drawing blood from patients at a mountain clinic, organizing a press conference or fixing me a huge pot of stuffed grape leaves...

It was with another kind of intensity, a special joy of discovery, that I tapped into the great and earnest hearts of Israeli women peace activists: committed to change, to movement, to visibility, to cooperation with each other and with Palestinian women, to a persistent push for peace. I saw these women, considered the “heart of the Israeli peace movement,” experience the deep pain of being part of an occupying society, with

the increased violence this occupation has brought back into their homes and conflicting emotions which erupt as they take stands against their own tightly-knit Israeli “family.”

...(Israeli) Veronika Cohen smiled sadly when she said, “I’m not optimistic or pessimistic—I’m working.” And I see Palestinian-Israeli Nabila Espanioli’s eyes burning somewhere in Haifa: “I want to live; I love this life. To be able to live in this situation, I have to be active, I have to change things, *try* to change things.”

But I am especially reminded of Alya Shawa, in Gaza, gazing at the tree stumps in her front yard — trees destroyed by tear gas. “The trees will grow back. It’s good that they didn’t burn the roots...”