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# THE RAMALLAH FRIENDS SCHOOL: 150 YEARS OF ENDURANCE, UNDERSTANDING, AND GOOD TEACHING

GORDON DAVIES

The Ramallah Friends School has existed for almost 150 tumultuous years, during which time Palestine has been ruled by the Ottoman Empire, Jordan, Britain, and Israel. Many of the records that have survived reflect the thoughts and impressions of Quakers who helped to found the school, or served it as employees or volunteers. Memoirs, correspondence and school newsletters are most frequently held in the archives of American colleges affiliated with (or rooted in) Quakerism. But relying solely on this material yields a history as Americans saw the school, which is not necessarily how Palestinians saw it or see it today.

To learn how Palestinians regard the school, my colleague (and wife) Betsy Brinson collected oral histories in 2010-11, primarily from women and men in and around Ramallah and El-Bireh. Of course, these recordings cover only the last 70 years—half the school’s history. But most of them are the recollections of Palestinians who were students at the Friends School, worked there, or have relatives who did.

The underlying realities of war and occupation are crucial to how the school has coped and how children’s lives have been shaped. Those involved with the school and whose stories are told have known the pleasures of learning, the excitement of dabka dancing, the satisfaction of pranks, and the wonders of international travel. But they also have known oppression, violence, and constant uncertainty about what will happen next. From horses that chewed on the woodwork of the dining room in the new Boys School building early in World War I to the construction of the massive Israeli “security wall” and the rampant establishment of illegal settlements, there have been few easy times.

In 1867, Eli and Sybil Jones, Quaker residents of Maine, traveled to England and from there went on to Athens, Syria, Egypt, and Palestine. One night, after a meeting in Ramallah, the Jones’ were approached by Miriam Karam, a 15-year-old, who asked them to start

a school for girls. There was no school for girls in Ramallah, then a small village approximately 10 miles north of Jerusalem. When Eli asked who would teach in this school, Miriam replied, "I will." Her father was a teacher and she had attended the German Deaconess School in Jerusalem. She was anxious to share the knowledge she had received with the girls of her village. Eli and Sybil Jones carried this request back to their home meeting in Maine. It was there that the seed planted by Miriam took root.

In 1869, in a house at the edge of Ramallah, they opened a day school for girls. Miriam began teaching 20 girls and the number quickly grew to 50. Four or five girls' day schools in other villages soon followed, with teachers traveling from village to village. After several years, Miriam left teaching to marry.

In 1889, it seemed best to enlarge the Ramallah school into a boarding school and to close the various village schools. A British boarding school in Brumanna, Lebanon, had proven successful and the British Friends recommended it as a model. Still, the village schools did not totally cease to function until 1936, when the British government in Palestine began to provide equal public schooling to girls.

Early in the 1880s, Timothy Hussey, a native of Maine, was asked by Eli Jones to help raise money for the schools. In accepting the call, he became greatly interested in the project. Over the next 20 years, Timothy and his wife, Anna, made five trips to Ramallah, helping to start the Girls Training Home and build an addition to it, purchasing land for the Boys Training Home and planning its construction, and building the Ramallah Friends Meetinghouse.

In 1889, the Husseys needed teachers for the girls' school and a building suitable for boarding the girls. Timothy traveled about looking for teachers. In Beirut, he found Miss Katie Gabriel, who subsequently served the Friends schools for 40 years. In the meantime, Anna and her sister-in-law, Sarah, furnished and equipped the boarding school with everything from kitchenware to bedding. It opened in October 1889, serving 15 girls from as far away as Jaffa. Girls mostly came from Ramallah and several nearby villages, however, which helped to build a sense of community in the region.

The Girls School originally occupied a stone mission house built in 1883. By 1889, enough money had been raised to expand the mission house into a school building. It was called the Girls Training

Home, one of the two earliest schools for women in Palestine. As the school's enrollment grew, an addition was built in 1910 and a third story in 1925.

At first, some parents were reluctant to send their daughters to school. But gradually one father and then another agreed to allow his daughter to attend. In one village, 21 men gathered to meet with the foreigners. In the course of the conversation, one of the men is reported to have said, "Talk about educating women, you might as well as talk about educating those cows out there on the hillside." While there is no sign that in this strongly patriarchal culture the girls' mothers were consulted, some among them probably argued for educating their girls even though it meant a loss of additional hands at home.

School leaders thought it best to enroll girls from a number of different villages so that when they were educated they could return home as teachers for the children there. But another benefit of this policy was that the villages, which otherwise tended to remain isolated from one another, now had a common interest in the school.

The Boys Training Home was founded in 1901. One story of its origins is that many of the girls who had attended the Girls School in its earliest days had become mothers, and they wanted their sons to have the same advantages of a Friends School education.

The Boys School graduated its first class of seven students in 1906. Its founders quickly saw that, if it had its own building and better facilities, they could educate more students. In 1905, Timothy and Anna Hussey again came to Ramallah, this time with funds from the American Friends Board of Missions to buy land for a permanent school site. Hussey purchased land in El-Bireh, a village bordering Ramallah, to construct a larger and better school. Four years later, in 1909, they returned to help with an addition to the girls' school and to begin planning the construction of the new boys' school. Within weeks of their arrival, Anna died of pneumonia. She is buried in a cemetery plot in Ramallah.

Permission to build the Boys Training Home was granted in 1913, and the building was completed in 1914. (Presumably a good deal of preparatory work had been done before permission to build was received.) But the completion of the school in 1914 was untimely. Students did not occupy the new building until 1919, because all schools were closed during World War I and the American workers were compelled to return to the U.S. (most did, but at least three

women did not). During the war years, the building was occupied, first by the Turkish and then by the British army. Legend has it that the Turkish troops quartered there stabled their horses in the ground floor dining room where they chewed on the window and door frames. When the schools re-opened in 1919, they were named the Friends Girls School and Friends Boys School.

Many Muslim parents began to enroll their children in the Quaker schools. They were impressed that there was no attempt made to convert them to Christianity. Although Muslim students were taught Islam as required by the government, Muslim families saw that the values and truths of Islam were very similar to the values and truths of Quakers.

Quakers historically have been committed to pacifism and non-violent resistance. American Quaker teachers introduced these principles early on as part of the Friends School curriculum.

## WORLD WAR II

By the beginning of the 1930s, it was impossible to miss the signs of growing nationalism on both sides. Various organizations promoted Arabic as the region's language and Arab as its culture; others promoted the Hebrew language and Jewish culture. Acts of violence became more widespread, especially in Jerusalem.

World War II devastated portions of Europe, Africa, and Asia, but the Middle East saw little actual combat. The German initiative to come through northern Africa and into the oil-producing nations was thwarted by British and then by American troops. Nonetheless, residents of the region kept watch for invasion, possibly by troops parachuting into their countries.

The Friends School remained open, but there were shortages of food and basic supplies like clothing, fuel, and medicines. Life was not comfortable for anyone in the region.

## AFTER 1948: TURMOIL AND DISPLACEMENT

Almost immediately after World War II came the turmoil of the Nakba ("Catastrophe"). More than 700,000 Palestinians fled in fear or were expelled from territory that was occupied by the new state of Israel.

There were steady streams of refugees driven eastward from the lands on which they had lived. The Ramallah Friends Meetinghouse became an emergency shelter for families, and then a temporary school for children whose families were settling in refugee camps.

A 1953 school report says that:

More than half of our students in the Ramallah Friends School now are from refugee homes. There is also two days per week of literacy training for adults on the property of the Girls School. These refugees generally cannot pay the fees for the children and must have some help. Often they can pay nothing. If it had not been for special grants at this time from individuals or foundations, the school could not have been kept open. The Ford and the Grant Foundations have helped to save our work. Some money was also earned during the past summer by boarding a United Nations Conference.

The Girls School accommodated more than 500 refugees who lived in and around the buildings. M. Sylvia Clarke reported that the days at the end of summer school “are unforgettable; there was a full moon and we were still apprehensive of air raids; the days were oppressively hot and the people had no large receptacles for water...We wondered how we could protect the 500 or so [refugees] on our campus.”

When a truce was signed, many refugees “moved away or to Jericho...and we settled down to a routine for some nine weeks caring for the bread, the water, the cleanliness and the health of our... remaining refugees.” Just before classes were about to begin, the school obtained tents for about 120 who remained. Again, the school remained a school.

The Friends School commencement of 1948 must have been deeply moving. Even as the exercises were going on in the auditorium, hundreds of refugees were fleeing into Ramallah. Students and families assembled for a happy occasion could hear explosions in nearby Jerusalem.

After several years of threats and turmoil, the brief but infamous War of 1967 occurred. Again, everything changed, as Israel replaced Jordan in a seemingly endless process of occupation.

Ramallah was part of the occupied Palestinian territory ruled by an Israeli military governor. Freedom of movement was restricted. Banks were closed and school funds became inaccessible. During the actual fighting, dozens of artillery shells fell into the Boys School

area. Fortunately, none of the major buildings were damaged badly, but numerous windows were shattered and one small building took a direct hit. The school car was damaged, as were many trees. As one person reported, “There is a feeling of uncertainty, depression, and a deep longing for peace and security and justice.”

A story is told about Annice Carter, then the principal of the Friends Girls School. She heard considerable noise one night and looked out to see soldiers in a jeep. They had come onto the Girls School campus and were firing their guns. Annice came out on the veranda clutching her red nightgown to her neck, and yelled out, “What are you doing out here?” A soldier replied, “We’re shooting our guns into the trees just to let people know who’s in charge here.” Annice yelled back down, “I know that. Now stop it. You’re scaring my girls. Turn that jeep around, go through that gate and close the gate behind you.” They did and did not come back. Later when asked if the story was true, Annice said, “I was not in my nightgown.”

## PROTEST AND NON-VIOLENCE

There have been tensions among students, teachers and families over student participation in off-campus protest activities. This became especially true during Israeli occupation, which started in 1967 and continues today. Some graduates recall being told that becoming educated was the best form of protest. In addition, the school offered art and drama events as ways to protest against occupation. Students were ordered not to participate in off-campus protest events. But it is clear from interviews that some students broke the rules and left school to attend protests. At least some threw stones.

Razan Anabtawi (Class of 2011) elegantly stated her conviction that education can be critical to non-violent resolution of serious conflicts:

... when I attended Penn Charter School in Philadelphia as a sophomore, I met people who were Jewish and completely disagreed with Israeli policy, completely disagreed with Zionism. Why should we be so unjust to those people who support us?... It’s through spreading awareness. Some people don’t see how important that can be or how powerful, or how it can help improve things. But I see it. I see how when you spread awareness, education leads to empowerment. Education

is so crucial. Through spreading awareness among people in the world about what's happening, you're letting them decide. So you're not really telling them how to think. You're telling them what's happening and then they get to decide. I can't tell a person how to think; it's not right. So I just tell him what's happening.

Along with all the political changes to which the Ramallah Friends School adapted in the 20th century, there were two major changes in its own organization. First, of course, was the decision to cease being a boarding school. Next was the decision to cease being separate schools for girls and boys. The first decision resulted in large part from the political and military turmoil of the times; the second was primarily a result of the recognition that the world was changing.

Until 1967, there were separate boarding schools for boys and girls. This was difficult, especially for girls. Many families did not like the idea of sending their girls away from home; others were skeptical of the value of doing so. In general, women (and sometimes girls) were expected to marry, become mothers, and manage households within extended families.

The schools ceased to be boarding schools after the 1967 War. Families feared for the safety of their children and school officials did not want to be responsible for boarders during such a dangerous time. Children who had come to Ramallah from far away (one student is reported to have come from Ethiopia!) no longer could cross borders that had been closed by Israeli troops. Even commuting from towns and villages outside Ramallah was difficult and unpredictable because of military checkpoints.

School enrollment plummeted. But the school persisted in its mission. With virtually no boarding students, enrollment of local students, especially boys, increased. Then, in 1990, in recognition of changing social patterns and in order to operate more efficiently, the school became co-educational. The Boys School and the Girls School became the Upper School and the Lower School.

From the basic education offered in the early days to the more advanced International Baccalaureate programs offered today to all students, the Friends School has adapted its curriculum to meet changing social needs and government requirements. But it has remained committed to the personal development of all students. Good character and self-growth have always provided the background to mastering academic subjects and practical skills.



In the earliest days, the curriculum for girls covered reading and writing, geography, grammar, history, arithmetic, and also practical homemaking skills. Virtually everyone assumed that most girls would marry at young ages and raise families. Boys studied reading and writing, science, geography, history, and arithmetic. Boys learned about agriculture, using tools, and mechanical drawing. Lessons in Turkish and French were offered at one point.

The school experimented with changes in teaching methods. For example, the first experiments in mixed classes began in 1902 when the Boys and Girls Schools had classes together for an hour and a half each day. It was hailed as a great success. In later years, boys and girls attended class together through the 2nd grade and then were separated until high school. Then for the last two years of high school, girl students who were interested in mathematics and science attended classes at the Boys School. Boys interested in the humanities attended classes at the Girls School. In 1990, all school grades and programs became completely co-educational.

English has been an important subject of study at the Friends School. The English language appears to have been taught through all of the 20th century. By the middle part of the century families enrolled their children at the school in part to learn English. This gave young people an important language and greater access to the western world.

Of course, Arabic language has been taught since the school's beginning, and remains the primary language in some courses. Students use both languages in the classroom and in extracurricular activities. Today, children at the school begin English instruction in kindergarten. While students practice English in the classroom and in some extracurricular activities, Arabic is widely used in instruction. Needless to say, Arabic usually prevails on the playground.

### **THE FIRST *INTIFADA***

With the first Intifada came the frequent closing of schools for extended periods. During a two-year period, from February 1988 until January 1990, schools were allowed to be open for a total of only six weeks. Children had to learn “undercover” — off the school campus. Teachers and some parents directed “illegal” classrooms in neighborhood homes, using home-study packets created by the

Educational Network. Established in 1989, the Educational Network office was located at the Friends Boys School. It was a coalition of educators from public and private schools, the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA), and other organizations.

The International Baccalaureate Program was created in 1968 by a group of teachers at the International School of Geneva. It is designed as a challenging and balanced program of education that prepared students for success in higher education and life beyond. The program has gained recognition and respect from the world's leading universities. The IB program includes a community service component designed to teach students about the importance of volunteerism. The Friends School began to offer the IB program in 1999. It was originally only for 11th and 12th graders. Now it has been extended to middle and elementary school levels.

Since the 1990s, Ramallah Friends School has received ten USAID awards for about \$6 million to build new buildings, renovate old ones, and provide landscaping. In 2001, funding was received for an environmental garden located across the street from the Upper School. This became the site of educational field trips from other schools whose students also learned about environmental principles and techniques. The garden, which is open to the public, is called Kaykab Garden. "In the midst of despair of occupation, the garden has taken on new life," wrote Colin Smith, school director at the time, "and for many people it has become one of the symbols of hope and vision that we were missing." In 2011, in partnership with Birzeit University, Kaybab Garden began to sell organic plants and vegetables to the public during the summer.

At the Lower School, a new kindergarten building opened in 2012. A grant from the Arab Fund for Social and Economic Development and donations from alumni have been used to complete the building. Jean Mikhail Zaru, a noted Palestinian Quaker and author of *Occupied with Nonviolence* (2008), has written with great insight about how Palestinians have faced these hardships.

The word *sumoud* in Arabic might best be translated as "steadfastness." It plays an incredibly important part in Palestinian culture and self-identity. To practice *sumoud* means to remain steadfast on one's land and, more generally, to remain steadfast in service to one's homeland and to the struggle for

freedom. Just waking up every morning with the determination to carry on with one's daily routine and to hold fast to one's humanity in spite of the challenges and dangers is to practice sumoud.

In 1989, the Girls School celebrated its 100th year as a full-fledged school. The unrest and political turmoil led school officials to keep the celebration modest and to attract as little attention as possible. But even as the school looked back over a century of achievement, more changes were coming. In 1990, the Boys School and the Girls School merged and the institution became completely co-educational.

In the 1990s, the Friends School began to plan to adopt the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. In 1999, high school students sat for the first official IB examination. Today, the IB program has been expanded to cover both the middle year and the elementary programs.

Ironically, becoming the first school in Palestine to offer the IB diploma program came just months before the onset of the second Intifada. Once again, strong commitment to the school's work was challenged by political turmoil and violence.

A B'Tselem report issued in the summer of 2006 briefly summarizes two major Israeli "security" projects dating to the second Intifada.

In 2001, a temporary military checkpoint was erected on the main road connecting Ramallah to Jerusalem. The Kalandia checkpoint has since become permanent, and has created a whole new restriction of movement, in blatant disregard of international law...In 2002, the Israeli government decided to construct a Separation Barrier [The Wall]...In urban areas, it is a row of 25-foot-high concrete slabs; other sections are comprised of an electronic fence, with electronic surveillance devices, a trench, barbed wire and a patrol road. The Barrier cuts East Jerusalem off from the rest of the West Bank, obstructing access to the city's hospital and other services, separating families and disrupting normal social life. In addition, because of the geographic centrality of Jerusalem, the Barrier also makes travel between different parts of the West Bank extremely difficult.... With the construction of the Barrier, the Kalandia checkpoint changed again. Since April 2005, a massive system of cement walls, gates and lanes marks the northern entrance to Jerusalem.

While there had been other kinds of barriers and checkpoints for decades, Ramallah, like Bethlehem, Hebron, and the rest of the West Bank, now was sealed off from Jerusalem.

Through it all, the Ramallah Friends School persists in its mission: quality education for children from kindergarten through high school, opportunities for higher education either in Palestine or abroad, and respect for Palestinian culture. The school has introduced formal instruction based on Quaker ethics, not to proselytize, but to help its students learn the value of non-violence and mutual respect. These are ethical principles that people of all faiths often have embraced over centuries and even over millennia.

Amidst war and occupation, the School has practiced *sumoud*, remaining steadfast in its commitments.