

Strangers in the House: Coming of Age in Occupied Palestine

Raja Shehadeh , Anthony Lewis (Foreword by)

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"This is not a political book," Anthony Lewis asserts in his foreword to this revealing memoir of a father-son relationship set against the backdrop of more than thirty years of life under military occupation. "Yet in a hundred different ways it is political. . . . Shehadeh shatters the stereotype many Americans have of Palestinians." Three years after his family was driven from the city of Jaffa in 1948, Raja Shehadeh was born in Ramallah. His early childhood was marked by his family's sense of loss and impermanence, vividly evoked by the glittering lights "on the other side of the hill." He witnessed the numerous arrests of his father, Aziz, who, in 1967, was the first Palestinian to advocate a peaceful, two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He predicted that if peace were not achieved, what remained of the Palestinian homeland would be taken away bit by bit. Ostracized by his fellow Arabs and disillusioned by the failure of either side to recognize his prophetic vision, Aziz retreated from politics. He was murdered in 1985.

The first memoir of its kind by a Palestinian living in the occupied territories, **Strangers in the House** offers a moving description of daily life for those who have chosen to remain on their land. It is also the family drama of a difficult relationship between an idealistic son and his politically active father, complicated by the arbitrary humiliation of the "occupier's law."

Strangers in the House: Coming of Age in Occupied Palestine Details

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From Reader Review Strangers in the House: Coming of Age in Occupied Palestine for online ebook

Greta says

A fascinating memoir of an idealistic Palestinian lawyer and human rights activist Raja Shehadeh.

His family lived in Jaffa, and to escape the fighting and attacks in 1948, the family moved to their summerhouse in Ramallah. They could never return.

His father, Aziz, was also a prominent lawyer, and the first Palestinian to advocate a peaceful, two-state solution.

The main focus of this book is on the personal relationship between Raja and his father Aziz, which wasn't a very good one. Raja's never-ending struggle to live up to his father's expectations was a bit boring but the book became more interesting once the author finally got his act together.

7/10

Susan says

This is the book that made me understand that "the West Bank" was the West Bank of the Jordan that Israel took from Jordan in the Six Day War and that Jaffa was the Palestinian city the so many exiles came from (and is now subsumed into or surrounded by Tel Aviv).

Phoenix says

My interest in Shahadeh stems from his involvement in the Palestinian movement called "The Third Way", which is the political party of serving Palestinian Prime Minister Salaam Fayyed and is associated neither with Fatah or Hamas; .and through the recommendation of another reviewer, Matthew Smith. I finished the book in April and its one of 4 Palestinian biographies that I've recently read.

Raja Shehadeh is a West Bank lawyer, as was his father Aziz. The family lived in both Ramallah and Jaffa; his parents were cousins. In 1948 they estimated that the worst case was Partition. "I realized that in my father's calculations the worse that could happen was the implementation of the UN plan for the partition of Palestine into a Jewish and Arab state; if this happened Jaffa was slated to be on the Arab side." If this was the worst case, a peaceful implementation of the UN plan, what was his best case - annihilation of the Jews?

Raja relates an interesting personal life. Goes to London, has a girlfriend, flirts with homosexuality (not explicit but implied), tries a couple of weeks in an ashram in India, returns home and winds up practicing law with a social justice bent, eschews violence however the narrative gets a little dodgy around the time of the second intifadeh.

However its a good book and an honest approach, but I feel that the other reviewers would like to see Shehadeh as a saint beleaguered solely by the Israelis - and this is not what he is portraying. He treats Israelis and Palestinians as human beings, some good, some not so good - he humanizes rather than demonizes and in that there is hope. His descriptions of defending a client (all lawyers present their clients as innocent, some may even be innocent) and the various personages he meets could be said of any Western court system as well. Courts and prisons are not friendly places in any society.

What is frustrating is that he bridges on the edge of insight but doesn't seem to get it. In Ch 19 - he relates that his offices were visited by inspectors from the Customs office. They did not have a search warrant. The investigators broke into a drawer and a few days later he recieves a bill for 5 million shekels. for 6 years of unpaid Value added tax. (Note: Shehadah claims they did not have a warrant, however 6 years without filing a return would give ample reason for issuing one.) Shehada agrees that the tax wasn't paid and notes that he was active in urging people not to pay it. I'll get back to this point in a moment.

Chapter 20 deals with the subsequent investigation of the knifing and death of his father by Palestinian clan members on the opposite side of a case he (the father) had taken on. "An ambulance was sent for... " and I'm waiting for the penny to drop, but it just doesn't happen. He father bleeds to death and nobody comes out to help him and no ambulance arrives. Further, when he decides to pursue the investigation though the Israeli police and courts instead of the "traditional" method of using family members to beat confessions out of suspects (Raja notes that this was an option he considered) he feels stymied by the Israeli legal system. Some of its members try to be helpful but the investigation goes nowhere.

Let me state the obvious here. Aziz Shehadeh is killed by Palestinian thugs who are playing both sides of the fence. They are enforcers for their extended families but are also apparently informants with the Israelis which may have given them some form of immunity.. That stinks but we don't know this for sure or what the trade off was. However back to the ambulance. I really feel sorry for the guy and his son but its not the fault of the Israelis that the ambulance didn't come. Ambulances are a municipal responsibility paid for through taxes. No taxes, no service. It really doesn't matter whether to me whether he paid those taxes to an Israeli authority or a Palestinian Benevolent Society, if you are in a position to pay for municipal services and fail to do so then you can't complain when they aren't there when you need them. .

Arafat absconded with at least a billion in aid that was meant to help the Palestinian people. Some of it went to buy Mercedes and villas for high ranking PLO officials, or guns or bombs or went to bribes or women. Perhaps his wife Suha knows where that money went, but it didn't go to the people, it didn't go for infrastructure and it didn't pay for Palestinian policemen, detectives, hospitals and ambulances.

An interesting book that I would recommend to others, but not one to be read uncritically

Barbc says

14

Amal says

Refreshing.

Sophia says

'The detainee can say what none of us can. He has more dignity in his prison uniform than I do in a suit. The prisoner has made a decision to fight for his beliefs. He is not afraid of declaring them and taking the consequences. His life has become simpler and more honest. The rest of us hold our beliefs back. We are experts at exercising restraint. And most of us feel guilty. We are guilty.'

•

Raja Shehadeh's focus on human rights and the (il)legal aspects of the Israeli occupation is what makes his work both important and, I think, accessible for readers who don't know that much about the conflict. He narrates the violations of human rights and the legal loopholes used to expropriate Palestinian land and compromise lives so clearly and with such precision that it's hard for me to imagine how anyone could refute the conclusions he draws about the dire and unfair situation Palestinians continue to find themselves in. He is also exacting about his own society and its failures, detailing the infighting among Palestinian political factions, his father's murder by one of them, and his own sorrow over how his relationship with his father was completely overshadowed by Israeli rule and their different approaches to dealing with it, which placed father and son at permanent loggerheads.

While the narration of his father's death is of course very moving, what I mainly took away from the memoir was Shehadeh's exploration of what it means to be political and the feelings of guilt he can't shake for not risking his life in the ways in which the political prisoners he represents do.

I think this is a rather profound quandary which extends to so many contexts: when do we speak out? When do we take action? Do we do enough? Do we take risks? I ask myself these sorts of questions all the time these days, knowing deep down that I should do a lot more (in relation to so many issues) given the miserable status quo we are living with. So, here's to being less apathetic!

M says

When the U.N. created the State of Israel many Palestinians were displaced. Amazing book of what the Palestinians went through to adapt, and the hardships they have incurred.

Jess says

In my pathetic quest to learn more about the middle east (I zoned out way too much in school) I grabbed this book at the Bookateria near the Univ of Delaware. I'm only into chapter 4 and already I'm sickened, saddened and amazed at the depth of cruelty, inhumanity and apathy that can exist in this "civilized" world. I'm anxious to see if anything improves, but, as in the real-time world, I have little hope.

Brian says

If you have already decided on "the truth" of the Israel-Palestine conflict, then this book will probably not be

for you. For me, it helped temper my pro-Israel stance, to bring me to a deeper understanding of what it must be like to live in the "Occupied Territories" (and to understand the limits and requirements for a just and peaceful solution to the conflict). One passage that struck me: the author is describing a gathering he is attending at the home of Palestinian expats in the U.S.: "I knew what was expected of me: an inflamed passionate denunciation of the Zionist enemy as the source of all our troubles... They had to realize that I was like them; my society had an integrity of its own that was not derived from the negation of the existence of the Zionist enemy. It was a living viable society, always changing and developing with a multiplicity of needs; a society that had to survive under difficult and trying conditions. If they really cared they could learn about these conditions and would try to put themselves in our shoes. Only then would they be able to understand our needs and contribute to our struggle." At the heart of this book is a rich portrayal of the history of those conditions, embedded in a loving, if difficult, father-and-son relationship.

Eliza says

Interesting book on life for a Palestinian growing up in the West Bank, gets to drone on after awhile, but a good story on the author's life and what he went through. Gets more interesting towards the end when it starts going into human rights issues and the author's struggling fighting for them.

Penina Eilberg-Schwartz says

"My sense of place was not mine"

"We didn't allow the new generation to make a new life for themselves because we continued to impress them with the glory of what was, a magic that could never be replicated."

Best (written) part: When his grandmother and aunt engage in a border dispute over an unwieldy passionflower plant that grew along their shared fence, and he writes, "their disputes over the two-meter area of land mirrored the other, real war with the Israelis. Through it the two women expressed the depth of emotions that could not be vented on their common enemy."

Stacie says

I was really excited to read this book because I thought it would provide insight into a conflict I don't wholly understand. Unfortunately, it didn't do that (OK there was so e insight provided), instead it reminded me how much I really don't enjoy memoirs.

Izabela says

3,5

Laura says

This book describes the life of a Palestinian family from its initial exodus from Jaffa in 1948 to the late Nineties. Its focal point is the relationship between the author and his father - two different generations of lawyers living and surviving in the occupied territories. It is also interestingly a book on the development of the author's independence from his father's thoughts and political actions right up until the death of the latter. It is absolutely crucial in the understanding of the events during the formation of the Israeli state and the beginning of the Israeli/Palestinian question seen from the eyes of the average person. Yet, it is not a political book. It is a highly personalised account of a human experience, an evolution of personal consciousness from youth to adulthood.

Eve says

Well worth reading. A thoughtful, sensitive, intelligent man's search for his identity under the shadow of a compelling, charismatic, beloved father. The setting is the occupied territories under the control of the Israeli military authorities. The father is Palestinian Attorney from Jaffa, who found himself and his family in their summer home Ramallah when the fighting began in 1948 and were never allowed to return to their home. The son is a human rights attorney who is torn between his father's wish that he focus strictly on the legal business he built working in both Israel and the Palestine jurisdictions. A business he has built since his stand to forge 2 separate states in 1967 was unheeded by all parties involved. The age old struggle to become your own man is wonderfully depicted in Raj Shehadeh's beautifully written memoir.
