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My Silk Road: A Memoir

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From the sitting room in our family home in Birzeit, I sit to write this personal memoir - something of my experience with Palestinian embroidery, my own “silk road” so to speak. Exquisite carpets, colourful embroidered cushions, and family portraits and mementos surround me. It is a square room, the high vaulted ceiling, the tall arched windows from which I can see the rolling terraced hills beyond remind one of a church, and indeed there is a sense of a sacred warmth that envelopes the place, and I am touched by it. I am always touched by it, and now it has become my muse, helping me to reflect upon a certain passion that I have developed along the years; the passion and love of crafts and embroidery, especially Palestinian embroidery. How do I trace this love? Where did it all begin? How did it come to enrich and beautify my life to a point where it has become part and parcel of ME, my character and my identity?

I close my eyes to better remember, to better concentrate. I am flooded by memories, anecdotes, events. One thing leads me to another, but the order is confused. Closing my eyes is not proving helpful. Frustrated I open them again and the glorious spring light filtering through the windows seems to come to the rescue and, like in the fantasy stories of long ago, a magic carpet, a flying carpet now of woven rays suddenly metamorphosed. It picks me up and effortlessly, breathlessly carries me with the speed of its light to another place, another room, not far away, there to Jaffa by the sea, and I know I have arrived to where it had all begun close to sixty years ago.

Here I was, a little girl in my grandparents' home, in a room - my grandmother's room. The light is quite different from the sharpness of the mountain light that I have just left. It is a damp light, touched by the salty sweetness of the sea breeze of the Mediterranean and open horizons. A large wooden cupboard takes centre place in my vision. It is ivory white with a mirrored door, and right in front of it is a little girl of about five years old - me - squatting and looking into a wide open drawer at its bottom. My hands are buried deep inside the contents, and I remember, I recognize, almost feel the moment of the beginnings of my "silk road" unravelling right there from my grandmother's drawer. This was the place, the Aladdin cave, where she kept all the paraphernalia and knickknacks of sewing: threads, pins and needles, buttons and hooks, lace and beads, sequins and ribbon, and most of all swatches, patches, leftover material that remained and was kept after sewing clothes, lingerie, and household accessories. Materials of various textures and colours; silk, velvets, and lace, floral linen and geometric-patterned cotton, remnants of everything that a woman would wear, everything that a woman would use in her home. It was the mid-forties then, and sewing and dressmaking were part and parcel of one's life, especially of every woman's life. Unlike today, there were few ready-made things to be bought: dresses, coats, pillowcases, sheets, curtains, sofa covers - almost everything had to be custom-made, which provided a certain charming uniqueness to things, far from the boring sameness of factory and mass productions. In every household, a sewing machine was a must; a sewing machine was part of a bride's trousseau and whenever possible, a sewing room was provided. It was in such a room, my grandmother's sewing room, that my passion for colour and design, for texture and embroidery began. The details came

later, but the seeds were sewn as my little hands delved into that drawer of my grandmother's cupboard, in Jaffa by the sea.

My visits to Jaffa were brutally severed by the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. We could no longer go to Jaffa from Ramallah, the mountain summer resort where my family lived and from where we would go to Jaffa to spend the winter months, in the warmth of the city by the sea. My grandparents fled the horrors of war as refugees to Egypt, and my family remained in Ramallah - never to go back to our treasured sojourns in Jaffa, never to see my grandmother's cupboard again, never to be embraced by the magic of her sewing room.

My life settled in the Ramallah-Bireh area, and it is to that town that my luminous magic carpet flew me now, and I land under a plum tree in the garden of our home in Bireh, the twin town of Ramallah where our neighbour, Dama el Izz, a young bride, is sitting in the shade of the lush green leaves. Dama is embroidering, and I am sitting next to her on a small wood-and-straw stool, watching, observing the movement of her hands, her fingers, nimble and elegant holding the needle, threading it with silk threads. She was embroidering, choreographing elegant patterns and motifs in cross-stitch on the cloth in her lap. It dawns on me now that what I was so engrossed in watching was my face-to-face, on-the-job introduction, initiation you might call it, to the actual art of Palestinian embroidery.

Dama el Izz is embroidering a "thobe" - a traditional Palestinian dress. Since she is a village woman, this is what she wears, what her mother wears, and what her grandmother wore. The patterns and motifs she is now embroidering have come to her from them, from generations back, designs that carry within them the specific mark of her village, the black and red patterns dotted with coloured silk on black or white linen, hand-woven material called "roumi," which refers to the ancient linen of Byzantium, which remained popular in the region and was good for cross-stitch. One day, she will pass this skilful craft to her daughters and in time to her granddaughters. Such dresses as Dama was embroidering were very familiar to me. I would see them at weddings and celebrations where Dama would often take me for outings. Dama herself had quite a few of these special-occasion costumes, all embroidered by her. Sometimes she allowed me to help her in "sunning" them, a once-a-year spring ritual, which meant that she

would take out her embroidered dresses from the dark shelter of her cupboard to hang them out in the sun. She would shake them then to release the creases, as if shaking away the evil spirits of the winter dampness, then would hang them on the still-naked branches of the huge walnut tree in the yard. It was a glorious sight to behold. I can see them still, gently dancing in the spring breeze. I wonder now if this ritual was not mysteriously evoked by the memory of an ancient Dionysian celebration of spring, of revival and renewal.

The embroidery of Dama el Izz was not part of my “city” household, although Western-style embroidery was prevalent all around me as a reminder of the foreign presence and its influence over the years in Palestine. It was what city women, like my grandmother and my mother, learnt in the missionary schools and from foreign craft magazines that they could buy in city bookstores. They knew Western-style cross-stitch, but what Dama was embroidering was a folk art named “fallahi” cross-stitch, in reference to the “fallah” which in Arabic means farmer and was not commonly known by the city folk. The difference really was in the various patterns and colours of each style. I was drawn to this new embroidery - its artistry - as something different, different but beautiful. Sensing my intrigued looks as I sat next to her, I remember Dama smiling and gently encouraging me to try my hand at what she was doing. I hesitate but I take the needle and the thread she offers, and unknowingly I start my journey, my own silk road with the embroidery of Palestine.

I am in Ramallah still. The years have passed, and I am in my teens now. From my childhood embroidery lesson under the plum tree, my flying carpet continues its journey and transports me to the next stop - to the Friends Girls’ School in Ramallah, to a once-a-week embroidery class where we were formally instructed in the art of cross-stitch, learning how to embroider the typical black and red Ramallah motifs, like the Cyprus tree, the palm, and the moon of Ramallah.

It was during this time in Ramallah, that I became aware of the development of a business aspect of the craft. Those were the post-1948 Arab-Israeli war days. Thousands of Palestinian refugees settled in Ramallah and neighbouring towns and villages. Families were destitute and jobs scarce. Pioneer women with ingenuity and entrepreneurship had the vision to help Palestinian refugee women to use their skill in

embroidery to earn a living. To do this in an efficient and productive manner, embroidery centres, cooperatives, and charitable organizations were established to supervise and market these items. Two such centres, considered pioneering establishments, were started and run by two women who happened to be friends of the family, Assia Halaby from Jerusalem and Mariam Zarour from Ramallah.

Mariam Zarour inspired and initiated a cooperative in Ramallah, her home town: The Ramallah Handicraft Cooperative. She worked closely with several dedicated Ramallah women. The pioneering idea of a cooperative was exciting and promising. Most of the production of this centre was purchased by Ramallah people who had immigrated to the United States and who, during their return visits to Ramallah, would buy and take back large quantities of the modern handiworks as gifts or to use in decorating their homes in America and to remind them of the homeland.

Assia Halaby, on the other hand, was from Jerusalem, where she started “The Arab Refugee Handiworks Centre.” She is well-known in Palestinian embroidery circles for her innovative and experimental pastel colour combinations while still using the traditional designs.

By the late fifties, I had graduated from high school and went to College in Lebanon. Another world opened up, and I became engrossed in studies, music, theatre, and literature. Embroidery remained a hobby that I would indulge in during holidays when I would spend time at tapestry embroidery, something I really enjoyed. On the whole, my embroidery involvement during this period was marginal and continued to be so until after the second Arab-Israeli war in 1967 - the time when I joined the ranks of volunteers at the In’ash al Usra Society embroidery centre in el Bireh. This was an important and pivotal time in my life.

My flying carpet is waiting, and I turn to it now to take me to the small, humble office of Samiha Khalil, “Imm Khalil,” the legendary and visionary Palestinian woman, founder of In’ash al Usra Society. It is the time soon after the tragic outcome of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Palestine is totally under occupation. I am a young mother now living in Birzeit after having gotten married and lived in the U.S. for the previous several years. I had just returned home with my family to

settle. Like all around me, I am stunned by the war, helpless and lost, not knowing how to react or how to continue. I learned about the work of In'ash al Usra and its mission to inject Palestinian society with courage, steadfastness, and hope in the face of the fear, despair, and disillusionment that the perils of occupation had brought upon the society. I go to visit Imm Khalil and offer my services. Many were the venues that the society was involved in. Downright charity was not its goal. The work of the Society concentrated on the positive - creating jobs and teaching vocational skills to women. One specific area of work was the traditional cross-stitch embroidery, and I signed up as a volunteer to help in this field close to my heart. For the first time in my life, my love for embroidery and the aesthetics related to it were going to be put to the service of others. Palestinian embroidery was evolving more and more to become an economic tool to raise the standard of living for the destitute refugee family, and at the same time, it carried within it the symbol of an identity and sense of pride in a cultural heritage.

Working with In'ash al Usra's embroidery project gave me free reign to design and experiment. Threads and materials of various textures were available for me to choose from and reminded me at times of my grandmother's cupboard, my initial point of departure, where it all began. There was a lot of work to be done. I joined forces with a few other women who were equally in love with embroidery and knowledgeable in the craft, and we began our project: offering the women from refugee camps and other women from low-income areas of cities and villages the chance to earn a living by using their embroidery skills. We gave them kits that included various objects such as cushions and tablecloths and even whole costumes to embroider at home in their free time while tending their households and families. We sold these items year-round and at an annual bazaar. The embroideries - beautiful, elegant, and perfectly crafted - were sought by locals and visitors alike. I was happy and fulfilled.

One of the many projects that took place with the aim of safeguarding the cultural heritage and to raise awareness about the need to preserve it was an exhibition of crafts and Palestinian traditional costumes that I suggested to the YWCA in Jerusalem and which I curated in the early seventies. The YWCA itself ran projects to teach crafts at its centres in the refugee camps in Jalazone near Ramallah and in Aqabat Jaber in

Jericho. They produced innovative dolls dressed in native costumes that they sold individually or in a group as nativity scenes. All became very popular items with foreign visitors and tourists as well as members of the local community.

The exhibition was a huge success. We displayed some of the oldest costumes and representative objects of the crafts that I could find in homes, workshops, and private collections. The week-long exhibit culminated in a fashion show of Palestinian costumes where several old embroidered dresses representing various villages from all over Palestine were displayed. It was a moving event, and everyone came out convinced that we should be proud of our cultural heritage and should work diligently to preserve it, especially from an enemy who was keen to totally obliterate it.

These were exciting and challenging times for me, and I felt useful and at the same time uplifted, working in fields that I love and being involved in the promotion of the social and economic status of the women around me, all within the framework of safeguarding a threatened identity and cultural heritage. I was happy and energized by working with wonderful, dedicated women - until November 22, 1974, when everything dramatically came to an end. On that date, my husband Hanna Nasir, then president of Birzeit University, was brutally deported from Palestine to the Lebanese borders, together with four other community leaders. Our lives were turned upside down. The children and I eventually joined him in exile, and in 1975, I left Birzeit to live in Amman, Jordan.

It is there, to Amman, that my magic carpet transports me now. The memories are vivid, painful. Leaving one's family and friends, one's country and home in this unjust, inhuman manner was shattering. Adjustment to a new place was hard, yet friends old and new went out of their way to make us feel at home, away from home. Slowly I started to feel my way around. My interests, always a positive impetus to cheer me up and prod me on, guided me to explore, until I met Widad Kawar, the well-known Palestinian collector of Palestinian traditional costumes and crafts. She was the owner of the world's most inclusive and exclusive collections of these dresses. We became fast friends, and our shared passion for Palestinian embroidery became the source of

enjoyment and hope. A people with such a rich cultural heritage should not despair.

Widad and I spoke of the need to document the beautiful motifs of Palestinian embroidery, a thought that I had often dwelt upon while working with In'ash Al Usra. We were both aware, like many of us involved in the field, that the old, authentic patterns and embroidery designs were in danger of being forgotten. Time and the dispersion of the Palestinians from their homes and villages to all four corners of the globe, as a result of several Arab-Israeli wars, have torn traditions apart. Embroidered patterns handed down from one generation to another were being forgotten. So it was important that we attempt to save these designs and others not only for the future generations of Palestinian women but also for embroidery lovers and for all those interested in Palestinian culture. This concern resulted in the book, "Palestinian Embroidery - Traditional 'Fallahi' Cross-stitch," published in Arabic, English, and German in separate editions by the State Museum of Ethnography in Munich, Germany (1990). It consisted of approximately 140 pages of cross-stitch patterns and has become a basic catalogue for embroiderers throughout Palestine and wherever Palestinian embroidery is found. We were keen to have this book subsidized, and most copies of the first Arabic edition were distributed for free or at a low price to Palestinian embroidery centres in the towns, villages, and refugee camps, as well as in UNRWA refugee schools in Palestine and all over the Arab world. What gives me special warmth and satisfaction is to see this book, now in its third printing, used enthusiastically and extensively not only as a catalogue but as a beautiful, symbolic manifestation of our cultural heritage - a book to be bought and proudly kept.

I should not forget to mention that while in Amman, I also became involved in several Palestinian embroidery centres that were mushrooming in the city. Palestinian embroidery was an economic venue for good business, both for those running the centres and for the Palestinian refugee-women embroiderers who worked for them. More and more, the relationship of embroidery with the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian identity was taking prominence. Women from all walks of life were keen on decorating their homes with elegant, richly embroidered accessories, including cushions, wall-hangings, and tablecloths. They were proud to wear modernized, fashionable styles of

the Palestinian traditional dress for various occasions - lunches and dinners, weddings and family celebrations. The seventies and eighties witnessed the peak of this interest. Palestinian embroidery was “a la mode.” An Intifada dress, a tribute to the 1987 Palestinian uprising against occupation, was even designed with motifs of the olive branch, the Palestinian flag, and the Dome of the Rock. Embroidery was making its own statement against the horrors and injustices of occupation in Palestine. Embroidery was speaking “Truth to Power.”

My involvement with Palestinian embroidery while in exile in Amman helped me to keep in touch with all that was going on in the field in Palestine itself. It was a connection, both physical and moral, that I needed in order to reduce the pain of separation from my family and the landscape that I loved so much.

Close to nineteen years of exile and living outside Palestine had passed. The year 1993 brought with it political changes and new realities that gave us hope of a near-return to the homeland and the end of my husband's years of deportation. Soon enough, we did return - on April 30 of that year. It is this period in my life that I come to now. It is another milestone, and memories and recollections are now vivid and clear. Without realizing it, I am once again back in my sitting room, in Birzeit. The port of departure for this memoir has become the scene of return, the magical flying carpet of light has brought me back to memories that are not from far away, realities that are still fresh and clear. For they are part and parcel of this place, this sitting room, my home to which I had returned from exile. And so sadly, I bid my carpet farewell. It has served me well; without it I would not have been able to remember and to write. Somehow it was remembering for me, taking me to wonderful destinations and landmarks of my life. It was made of light, and it brought light into my heart. Now in its own fashion of magical fantasy, and sensing that the end of its journey has come, it suddenly vanishes just as suddenly as it had appeared, fusing back into the light filtering from the arched windows of my sitting room and out into the great beyond. I sigh with gratitude and love.

Now without the aid of the flying carpet, I am face to face with recent memories, memories of our return, the welcome, the end of homesickness and yearnings, the end of exile, the warmth of being back among family and friends. There were also the memories of a different

nature, of what it took of emotions and willpower to connect again with one's own life, with the life of a place and a people that one had left for close to two decades. It was not easy, and in order to heal and adjust I found myself turning to the comfort of familiar haunts and places, old friends, and things that made me feel at ease and in touch with my society. I found myself turning to embroidery, my faithful companion throughout the years. And so I went back to Ina'sh al Usra's embroidery centre and found solace once again as I became involved. It was still a flourishing centre that provided work for thousands of women. The need to help is just as real as it was when I left. The camaraderie with the women who share my passion brings warmth to my heart and meaning to my days, and the lure of textiles and thread, of colour and design still prod me to create. Recently I designed a thobe for my five-year-old granddaughter, Nadia. It is in the Ramallah style: red and black embroidered on white. While in exile, I had designed one for her mother, my daughter Randa. She has it still. I would like to think that a traditional Palestinian dress buttresses a Palestinian family's cultural identity and sense of belonging to its roots. My daughter's family is in the U.S. now. Maybe Nadia's thobe will help bring them back one day.

But this is not all; there is one last project that I would like to write about and that I was involved in during this period, a project that I had dreamt about for almost thirty years. And now it has been realized. This project was a book in which the petit-point tapestries of the Palestinian spring flowers, designed years ago by my aunt, Marie Jabaji Tamari, would be printed. These were original designs, and they meant a great deal to me. My aunt had created them after being inspired by our family outings and picnics in the Palestinian countryside around Ramallah when we were children. In a way, these flowers - like Palestinian embroidery - represented a symbol of my Palestinian identity. A book, "Spring Is Here," finally came out in an artful, bilingual (Arabic/English) publication in 1992, published by Turbo Design in Ramallah. "Spring Is Here" is in its second edition now and is often sought by embroidery- and flower-lovers as well as tourists and, most of all, by Palestinians who find in it a real evocation of what our beloved landscape was like before the criminal onslaught of Israeli settlements and the premeditated destruction of its nature.

Today, still writing in my vaulted sitting-room, I wonder where my passion for embroidery will take me. One thing I know for sure is that I have a project to realize soon. My friend, Widad Kavar, and I are now working on a sequel to our book “Palestinian Embroidery, ‘Fallahi’ Cross-stitch.” It is something that we had planned for years and will feature a documentation of the couching and crewel embroidery of Bethlehem as well as the patchwork and binding stitches featured on various styles of the Palestinian traditional dress. Will this be the final project, the final destination, of my silk road?

The light from the windows is now fading. It is the end of a long day. Memories and recollections have warmed my heart. In the space of a day and on a luminous magic flying carpet of light, I have travelled far and wide, visiting important milestones along my silk road. I feel a bit tired, vulnerable, and sentimental; remembering has a way of doing this to one, yet I strangely feel wholesome and strong too. I lean on the Palestinian embroidered cushions on the sofa where I am sitting. They hold me tenderly and comfort me in what seems to be an eternal embrace of dazzling colours and designs.

Palestinian embroidery remains ME, my passion, my identity, my “silk road.

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