Mennonites, Exile and the Palestinian Right of Return

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In 1943 the German Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt published a short essay in *Menorah Journal* entitled "We Refugees." In the essay Arendt claimed that we "live in a world in which human beings as such have ceased to exist for quite a while; since society has discovered discrimination as the great social weapon by which one may kill men without any bloodshed; since passports or birth certificates, and sometimes even income tax receipts, are no longer formal papers, but matters of social distinction."[1] The human being, Arendt argued, had been dissolved into the figure of the citizen. Human rights belonged to citizens, and nation-states stood as the guarantors of those rights. Europe's refugees – foremost among them Jewish refugees – exposed the limits of human rights discourse: being stripped of citizenship they were stripped of their rights as well. As Arendt explained in a later essay, "The concept of the Rights of Man based on the supposed existence of a human being as such collapsed in ruins as soon as those who professed it found themselves for the first time before men who had truly lost every other specific quality and connection except for the mere fact of being humans."[2]

Only five years after Arendt penned "We Refugees," the world witnessed another exodus of refugees, this time the exile of upwards

of 900,000 Palestinians from their homes in what became the State of Israel. For most Israeli Jews, the fighting of 1948 is known as the War of Independence, a fulfillment of the Zionist vision of landed security and rights for Jews in a Jewish state – security and rights that Jews had tragically been denied by European nation-states. For Palestinians, in contrast, the events of 1948 are referred to as *an-nakba*, or the catastrophe –and little wonder, with two-thirds of the Palestinian population becoming either refugees outside of the newly formed State of Israel or internally displaced persons within it, and with over 530 Palestinian towns and villages destroyed.[3] The Zionist vision of landed security and rights in a "land without a people for a people without a land" brought with it a devastating human cost for Palestinians, because of course the land was not a land without a people, but instead populated. Thus the new Zionist nation-state, established to secure Jewish rights of citizenship that have proven to be all-too-tenuous within the nation-states of Europe, brought with it its own exclusions and uprootings.

In this essay I shall trace in broad outlines the story of how the Mennonites have engaged and interacted with Palestinian refugees – and by telling that story I hope to offer some thoughts about refugees and human rights. Mennonites of European descent in Canada and the United States have sometimes conceived of themselves as an exilic people, construing themselves as a people on the move (often involuntarily on the move) – from, say, the Netherlands to Prussia to Russia and then to the United States, Canada, Paraguay, Mexico, and beyond – a people whose only true homeland is to be found in God. What might this theological embrace of exile have to say to the countless refugee crises, including the Palestinian refugee crisis, our contemporary world faces? And what, following Arendt, might the figure of the refugee have to suggest for the future of human rights that are supposedly guaranteed by the order of nation-states? These are questions that can linger in the background as I narrate an abbreviated account of Mennonite engagement with Palestinians – and later with Israelis. I will then return to these questions at the close of this paper.

The Arab-Israeli war of 1948 had not yet ended before Mennonite leaders in the United States and Canada were exploring how Mennonite relief and mission agencies might get involved. Orie Miller, the Executive Secretary for Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), the agency through with Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches in North America conducted most of their relief efforts, took the lead in urging MCC to explore relief efforts among Palestinian refugees; at the same time, in his role with the Mennonite Board of Missions (MBM), Miller was instrumental in the decision to send MBM missionaries to work alongside Messianic Jewish congregations in the new Israeli state. My focus will be on the MCC side of this story as it has played

out in the refugee camps around Jericho and beyond. In a nutshell, this story charts a rough shift from an encounter with Palestinian refugees as tragic figures who were objects of Mennonite compassion and relief efforts to partnership with Palestinian organizations who began mobilizing to press for justice and in so doing began deploying the language of human rights.

This story begins in 1949 with MCC sending Titus Lehman, a nurse from Pennsylvania, to work in the clinics operated by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), in the AFSC-run camps in the Gaza Strip. Lehman served in the camps around Khan Younis and Deir el-Balah for several months before then traveling to Tyre in southern Lebanon, where he joined two other MCC workers to distribute emergency assistance to the Palestinian refugees from the upper Galilee who had fled northwards. Then in November 1950 Lehman moved to Jericho, where he inaugurated MCC's first independent unit in historic Palestine, opening a shoemaking school that served young refugee men from the camps of 'Aqabat Jabr and 'Ayn es-Sultan that had sprung up around the small oasis town of Jericho.[4]

Over the ensuing 15 years the MCC unit in the Jordanian-controlled West Bank would be a temporary home for scores of Canadian and American Mennonite volunteers, including many PAXmen who were performing alternative service. These volunteers staffed vocational training centers and operated feeding programs. They also ran a newborn center in which new mothers were given layette packages for their infants. The PAXmen also organized Palestinian refugee women into cooperatives that produced Palestinian needlework that would become a foundational element of SELFHELP Crafts, subsequently the Ten Thousand Villages network of fair trade stores. And they distributed clothing and Christmas bundles as well as hundreds of thousands of tons of flour through the United States government's Title III program.

International private voluntary organizations (PVOs) like MCC and AFSC that were among the first responders to the Palestinian refugee crisis, and who were then later joined by the United Nations Relief Works Agency, initially talked optimistically about various "repatriation" and "resettlement" plans for the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees. However, this optimism quickly ran up against Israel's determined resistance to the return of any of the refugees to the refugees' homes in what had become the State of Israel, as well as the opposition of Palestinian refugees themselves to any proposal which would normalize their status within their new host countries. To accept resettlement within Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt or Syria would mean relinquishing any claim to a right of return to the villages and cities from which they had fled and had been expelled.

MCC's annual Workbook Reports and the correspondence of the Jericho unit and Akron, Pennsylvania-based administrators during the 1950s reveal two, sometimes complementary and sometimes conflicting, perspectives within MCC on Palestinian refugees. On the one hand, MCC workers, referring to the "pitiful refugee problem," viewed Palestinian refugees as tragic victims to whom MCC should bring relief and care, much as the Good Samaritan had done to the man waylaid by robbers on the road to Jericho. On the other hand, MCCers also recognized that the relief response was palliative at best, and did not address refugees' needs for what international humanitarian law and practice around refugees would later call "durable solutions."

MCC worker Waldemar Schroeder, writing in 1950, recognized that the Palestinian refugee case represented a profound "injustice," but the church's response to such injustice, as envisioned by Schroeder, remained at the level of relief. "The Christian Church and the world," he wrote, "should know about the injustice of the situation so that immediate relief could be brought in food and clothing." To motivate this relief impulse, Schroeder highlighted what he viewed as the pitiable situation of the refugees: "Each successive living place [in the refugee camps] reveals the same bareness, no comforts, poor and ragged people." MCC's Acting Director of Relief, Glen Esh concurred with this grim assessment, noting that Palestinian refugees were the product of "the tragedies of war and man's inhumanity to man." Meanwhile Orie Miller described the situation of the Palestinian refugees as "the worst case of pure unrelieved suffering" he had witnessed. [5] Mennonites, these MCC workers and leaders insisted, were called to reach out in the name of Christ to offer Christian love through material actions to these victims of war and inhumanity.

Even as MCC leaders articulated a responsibility to respond to the Palestinian refugee crisis with relief assistance, MCC workers also reflected on the limits and limitations of relief work. Orie Miller conceded that the Palestinian refugee problem was one "with no solution in sight."[6] Meanwhile, the author of the 1954 MCC Workbook stated that while MCC's relief efforts had been helpful, "the causes for the refugees' need have not been removed, so the future for them is still dark."[7] MCC relief coordinator Irvin Kennel expressed this caution about the limits of relief aid more caustically already in 1951, observing that "Just feeding and clothing these people is like giving aspirin to someone who has appendicitis."[8] Many MCC workers were sympathetic with the plight faced by Palestinian refugees, and joined those refugees in the fervent "hope that there may be some steps taken toward a solution of the basic refugee problem."[9] The author of the 1957 Workbook report, in contrast, was more pessimistic about the ability of MCC to provide a lasting answer to the problem facing the refugees.

"The refugee situation in Jordan has been called a chronic emergency because the need is urgent and yet no one can see a solution to the problem," wrote Ernest Lehman. "These refugees in Jordan are filled with bitterness and hate. They do not want words, they want action. We cannot solve their problem, but our workers are trying to show them God's love and concern through deeds of love."[10]

By the early 1960s, MCC administrators were beginning to question whether or not MCC's ongoing relief efforts among Palestinian refugees made programmatic sense, and began expanding MCC's efforts at Christian education in the West Bank, efforts that had begun with the twins Ada and Ida Stolzfus in the southern West Bank city of Hebron in the early 1950s and which were then expanded with the establishment of the Mennonite Secondary School in Beit Jala, next to Bethlehem, in 1962. "There is a need in Jordan," acknowledged administrative assistant Ken Barkman in 1962, but Barkman doubted that relief activities were truly beneficial. Barkman wondered if "maybe we've been in Jordan too long and the time has come for us to move out and help others."[11] Following a trip to the West Bank in 1963, MCC administrator C.N. Hostetter recommended "phasing out relief activity as rapidly as the situation warrants."[12] That same year Herbert Swartz arrived in Jerusalem as director with the assignment of terminating the relief program. MCC was not the only international organization moving out of refugee relief: other Christian PVOs, like the Lutheran World Federation and Catholic Relief Services, made similar shifts. A promotional slide show of 1965 noted that MCC was "systematically reducing the amount of food and clothing going into Jordan while emphasizing alternative programs that will help people in the reconstruction of life."[13] On March 18, 1967, MCC confirmed its withdrawal from the Jordanian American Coordinating Committee, the body which had overseen the refugee relief efforts of the various international PVOs. MCC's involvement in relief work among Palestinian refugees thus officially came to a close only months before the war of 1967 which would witness the evacuation of almost all the refugees from the Jericho area camps. Those refugees were homeless once more, driven by the Israeli military across the Jordan River out of the West Bank and onto the Jordanian East Bank.

The war of 1967 and the attendant Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank including East Jerusalem spurred extensive reflection within MCC and broader Mennonite circles about what the shape of Mennonite work in the Middle East should be. Relief work with Palestinian refugees continued for several years after 1967, specifically among the once-more-displaced Palestinian refugee population now on the Jordanian East Bank. But on the now Israeli-occupied West Bank, MCC's mission was up in the air. The 1967 MCC Workbook reported that:

> Clearly the need for food, clothing, and blanket distribution is more urgent on the East Bank than on the West Bank. A ministry of reconciliation is needed throughout the Middle East. Hopefully in the coming months there may be opportunity for this if the right personnel can be found. MCC workers on the West Bank and Mennonite missionaries in Israel have taken advantage of the opportunity to meet more frequently for sharing and information.[14]

The language of peacemaking soon began to enter into MCC discourse in its West Bank, even as the focus on Palestinian refugees faded into the background. In 1969 the MCC country director Ivan Friesen described what he called a "new direction" for the MCC program, one of elevating "direct peacemaking efforts and a peace movement apologetic to an equal level with the education and self-help projects already in existence."[15] Peacemaking came to be viewed as an equally valid dimension to MCC's work in the Middle East alongside the more traditional activities of relief distribution. MCC's establishment of a "peace library" in its Jerusalem office and tentative connections with Israeli Jewish peace activists like Joseph Abileah represented MCC's first forays into this "new direction." The bare language of peace and peacemaking, however, was soon supplemented by the vocabulary of justice, as MCC workers began to insist on "justice as a prerequisite to reconciliation and peace." MCC workers began to claim that to take the call for justice seriously, meant being accountable to Palestinians in support of their aspirations. Accordingly, argued MCC country director LeRoy Friesen in 1976, "MCC is required to work in ways which remain sensitive to the region's political complexion and contribute to the indigenous development of the Palestinian people and their land."[16]

MCC's new-found emphasis on justice as an integral part of peacemaking coincided, meanwhile, with the rise of an active Palestinian civil society in the mid- to late-1970s and attendant calls for international organizations like MCC to work in more equitable partnership with Palestinian organizations.[17] As a result, during the second half of the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, MCC transferred ownership and control of the Mennonite Preparatory School and the MCC Palestinian needlework project to the Arab Charitable Society of Beit Jala and the Surief Women's Cooperative, respectively. The latter part of the 1970s also saw the inauguration of MCC's agricultural development program, an initiative through which Ibrahim Matar and Ya'oub 'Amer worked in scores of Palestinian villages throughout the West Bank to introduce drip irrigation and to support grape trellising, tree planting, and land reclamation. These agricultural development initiatives not only aimed to support the Palestinian agricultural sector

but also reflected the MCC West Bank's new emphasis on justice: tree planting and land reclamation were practical ways to support the efforts of Palestinian farmers to hold onto their land as the Israeli military government began appealing to Ottoman-era laws that allowed the state to expropriate private uncultivated land for public use as the pretext for confiscating Palestinian land for the construction of Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territories.

As it became clear that the Israeli occupation would not be temporary and as Israeli settlement construction got underway in earnest, the MCC West Bank program also began to speak the language of human rights. In an initial reflection of this human rights interest, MCC hosted three human rights summer interns from Bethel College in Kansas, who worked alongside Matar and 'Amer in documenting Israeli land confiscations. One of these interns, Curt Goering, went on to become the program director for Amnesty International's United States section. In 1977, MCC worker Paul Quiring built upon this field research, testifying before two U.S. congressional subcommittees on Israeli settlement construction in the Occupied Territories. This testimony would later be cited as grounds by the Israeli military government for objecting to MCC's appointment of Quiring as MCC Representative and led to threats by the Israeli military government to close down MCC's operations.

Throughout the late 1970s MCC had a role in a series of pivotal cases which appeared before the Israeli High Court of Justice. Jim Fine of Quaker Legal Services had budget for trying cases on behalf of the Palestinians, but lacked authorization to solicit cases. He therefore asked MCC agricultural development and MCC Reps LeRoy Friesen and then Paul Quiring for assistance in contacting farmers whose land was threatened with confiscation. In a series of court rulings, the High Court ruled that settlers could not seize private Palestinian land and also limited the extent to which the Israeli military government in the Occupied Territories could appeal to security as a rationale for land confiscation.

MCC's focus on human rights continued into the 1980s, with MCC supporting the work of newly-formed Palestinian human rights organizations through volunteer placements. In the early 1980s Palestinian Christian lawyers Raja Shehadeh and Jonathan Kuttab established the first Palestinian human rights organization in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Al-Haq (Law in the Service of Man), which focused on such human rights violations as administrative detentions with charge, house demolitions, and deportations. MCC was quietly supportive of Al-Haq during this time, with MCC worker Judith Dueck serving for two years as the organization's administrative director. Later in the 1980s MCC workers Kathy Bergen, Loren Lybarger, and Erlis Miller

all volunteered for the Palestinian Human Rights Information Center. Bergen also devoted significant time and energy to human rights campaigns in the mid-1980s such as the Campaign to Free Jabril Rajoub and the Campaign against the Iron Fist, both of which sought to call global attention to the Israeli practice of placing Palestinians under "administrative detention" for months, even years, without charge. MCC workers also developed broad networks of contacts with Israeli peace activists who eventually established Israeli human rights organizations such as B'tselem which sought from the Israeli side to call attention to Israeli human rights abuses and Israeli contraventions of international treaties and conventions, such as the Fourth Geneva Convention's prohibition on occupying powers establishing civilian settlements in occupied territory.

As the above examples suggest, when MCC workers began talking about justice and human rights in the late 1970s and the 1980s, the focus was on the injustices and the human rights abuses of the occupation. Discussion of the rights of Palestinian refugees to return, restitution, and compensation took a backseat – both for MCC and for Palestinian human rights organizations. This dynamic began to shift somewhat, however, with the signing of the so-called Oslo Accords between the State of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Internally displaced Palestinians inside Israel and Palestinian refugees outside of Israel tended to interpret the Oslo Accords as reflective of a willingness on the part of the PLO to relinquish its longstanding emphasis on the right of Palestinian refugees to return to the sites of their former towns and villages in exchange for Israeli recognition of a Palestinian state consisting of the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank. Palestinian refugee communities began to mobilize against this perceived political direction; one strategy they adopted was to try to establish that the Palestinian refugee right of return was grounded in international humanitarian law, United Nations resolutions, and in precedents set by durable peace agreements that included refugee dynamics.[18] MCC partnered with one such Palestinian refugee initiative, the Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, helping to underwrite the costs of publications arguing that Palestinian refugees had individual, not only collective rights of return and that the Palestinian right of return did not conflict with legitimate Israeli Jewish rights.

Yet even as MCC has partnered with Palestinian human rights organizations Al Haq or Badil – be it to protest indefinite detention, the confiscation of Palestinian land and the construction of illegal Israeli settlements, or the denial of Palestinian refugee rights – doubts and pessimism hang over the appeal to human rights. For the nearly four decades that human rights advocacy has been carried out by Pales-

tinian and then also Israeli human rights organizations, the practical impact of that advocacy has been extremely limited. These human rights appeals have not checked land confiscation. These appeals have had minimal effect on other forms of Israeli human rights abuses in the Occupied Territories, such as administrative detention. And one can be skeptical that human rights advocacy will secure the return of Palestinian refugees.[19]

Other steps will be required. My point here near the end of my story of how Mennonites through MCC have worked with Palestinian refugees is not to be cynical about human rights appeals or to dismiss their importance. But I would suggest that other forms of political action besides human rights advocacy will be necessary to support the cause of Palestinian refugee return. For an example, we can consider the activities carried out by Zochrot, an Israeli organization – and an MCC partner – dedicated to, in its words, "remembering the *nakba* in Hebrew." Zochrot engages less in an appeal to human rights law and statutes, and focuses instead on imaginative performances of what Palestinian refugee return might mean. Zochrot activists gather at the sites of destroyed Palestinian villages and post signs in Hebrew and Arabic marking the ruins of the towns that once stood there. They erect life-size cut-outs on those locations of Palestinian refugees currently living in camps in Lebanon and Jordan, returning them, if only figuratively, to their land. They stage participatory mapping projects in Israeli public spaces such as Tel Aviv's Rabin Square that symbolically return destroyed Palestinian villages back to the map. Through such actions Zochrot provokes conversations within the Israeli Jewish public about what Palestinian refugee return would mean in practical terms.

Zochrot's performative mappings of Palestinian refugee return, I would suggest in conclusion, carries out in an embodied fashion Hannah Arendt's claim that refugees are the "vanguard" of their people, a claim that the contemporary Italian philosopher Giorigo Agamben has echoed with his insistence that "the refugee is perhaps the only imaginable figure of the people in our day." Agamben suggests that it "is only in a land where the spaces of states will have been perforated and topologically deformed, and the citizen will have learned to acknowledge the refugee that he himself is, that man's political survival today is imaginable."[20] Such performative mappings of refugee return do not, to be sure, stand in opposition to human rights advocacy for refugee return. However, in light of the relative powerlessness of human rights advocacy to secure Palestinian refugee rights of return, that advocacy must be supplemented by political action that embodies in the present the coming community envisioned by human rights advocates.

Notes

1 Hannah Arendet, "We Refugees," in *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 273.

2 Hannah Arendt as quoted in Howard Adelman and Elazar Barkan, *No Refuge, No Return: Rites and Rights in Minority Repatriation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 226.

3 Estimates of the number of Palestinians uprooted from their homes from 1948 to 1949 and who became refugees range from between 750,000 to 900,000. For an examination of the number of Palestinian refugees, see *Survey of Palestinian Refugees and IDPs (2008-2009)*, ed. Ingrid Gassner-Jaradat (Bethlehem: Badil, 2009), especially chapter 2. Counts of the number of Palestinian villages depopulated and destroyed during the *nakba* range from 413 to over 530. The lower figure comes from *All that Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948*, ed. Walid Khalidi, et al. (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2006), while the higher figure emerges from research conducted by, among others, Salman Abu-Sitta. See, for example, Abu-Sitta, *The Palestinian Nakba 1948: The Register of Depopulated Locations in Palestine* (London: Palestinian Return Centre, 2000). The differences between the higher and lower figures can be primarily attributed to two factors: Abu-Sitta counts as separate locations settlements that Khalidi and his co-compilers count together, and Abu-Sitta includes semi-nomadic Bedouin settlements in the Naqab/Negev desert that are not included in *All that Remains*.

4 Alain Epp Weaver and Sonia Weaver, *Salt and Sign: Mennonite Central Committee in Palestine, 1949-1999* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 1999), 16-19. My whirlwind overview of MCC's history in Palestine-Israel draws from the fiftieth anniversary history of MCC's work in the region that I co-wrote and on my eleven years of work with MCC in Palestine-Israel.

5 Ibid., 19-20.

6 Ibid.

7 *MCC Workbook Report, 1954* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1955).

8 Epp Weaver and Weaver, *Salt and Sign*, 22.

9 *MCC Workbook Report 1959* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1960).

10 *MCC Workbook Report 1957* (Akron, PA: MCC 1958).

11 Epp Weaver and Weaver, *Salt and Sign*, 27.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 *MCC Workbook Report 1967* (Akron, PA; MCC, 1968).

15 Epp Weaver and Weaver, *Salt and Sign*, 83.

16 *MCC Workbook Report 1976* (Akron, PA: MCC 1977).

17 For more details about this history, see chapter three of Epp Weaver and Weaver, *Salt and Sign*.

18 For arguments that international law guarantees Palestinian refugee rights of return, restitution, and compensation, see Terry Rempel, ed., *Rights in Principle – Rights in Practice: Revisiting the Role of International Law in Crafting Durable Solutions for Palestinian Refugees* (Bethlehem: Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, 2009); Lukas H. Meyer, "Historical Injustice and the Right of Return," in *Israel and the Palestinian Refugees*, eds. Eyal Benvenisti, Chaim Gans, and Sari Hanafi (Berlin: Springer, 2007), 295-306; Gail Boling, *The 1948 Palestinian Refugees and the Individual Right of Return: An International Law Analysis* (Bethlehem: Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, 2007); Susan Akram, "Myths and Realities of the Palestinian Refugee Problem: Reframing the Right of Return,"

The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies (Spring 2008): 183-199; Susan Akram, *Reinterpreting Palestinian Refugee Rights Under International Law, and a Framework for Durable Solutions* (Bethlehem: Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, 2007); Lex Takkenberg, *The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Lynn Welchman, *The Role of International Law and Human Rights in Peacemaking and Crafting Durable Solutions for Refugees: Comparative Comment* (Bethlehem: Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, 2003); Michael Dumper, *The Future for Palestinian Refugees: Toward Equity and Peace* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 2007); Susan Akram, Michael Dumper, Michael Lynk, and Iain Scobbie, eds., *International Law and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A Rights-Based Approach to Middle East Peace* (London: Routledge, 2010); and Scott Leckie, *Housing, Land, and Property Restitution Rights of Refugees and Displaced Persons* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[19] For a discussion about popular Palestinian skepticism about the "human rights industry" in the Occupied Territories, see Lori Allen, *The Rise and Fall of Human Rights: Cynicism and Politics in Occupied Palestine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

[20] Giorgio Agamben, "Beyond Human Rights" in Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics,* trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 16-17.