

The Lemon Tree by Sandy Tolan



Review by: Brian Doe

For anyone wanting to understand the complex dynamics of Whole Planet's support in Israel and the West Bank/Gaza - **The Lemon Tree by Sandy Tolan** is a valuable read. Our funds touch the lives of Arab businesswomen in Israel, West Bank and the Gaza Strip thanks to the bold work of KIEDF, a Jewish NGO in Israel that works across all cultural lines in Israel to help the marginalized, and of ASALA, an Arab NGO, based in Ramallah that against all likelihood of failure manages to provide business training and loans to women across the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip.

The Lemon Tree pretty much touches on the origins and histories of all these parties through its telling of the true story of a Jewish family and an Arab family that at different times lived in the same house on land which changed hands from Arab Palestinian to Jewish Israeli control.

The starting point is the town of Al-Ramla, now a part of modern-day Israel, where the ancestry of the Khairi family was rooted until the 1947 Israeli defeat of the town and expulsion of all Muslim Arabs to the then Jordanian "west bank" province or what is today the Palestinian West Bank. What the Khairis left behind was all of their belongings and most importantly their family home, built by Ahmad Khairi himself, as Ahmad, his wife Zakia and 7 children were turned into refugees in Ramallah.

Simultaneously, the Eshkenazi family in Bulgaria fights deportation to the Nazi death camps and, after the war, Moshe and Solia Eshkenazi accept calls by Zionist activists to emigrate to the newly forming Jewish state of Israel with their small daughter Dalia. Upon arrival in Israel they are trucked (literally) along with thousands of new post-war immigrants to the recently conquered towns of Al-Ramla and Lydda- the immigrants used to lay physical claim to the towns so Arabs could not return. The Eshkenazis are told that their Arab predecessors had abandoned their houses and fled voluntarily, and are then told to select a house and begin making a life for themselves- the house they choose is that of the Khairis.

The plotline revolves around two children from these families- Dalia Eshkenazi and Bashir Khairi- who would grow up and find their lives deeply entwined with the violent history between Jews and Palestinians from 1947 to the present. Dalia finds herself fighting for Israel's right to exist but also learning and struggling with the truth behind the origins of her family home and realities of Jewish fighting to maintain the state. Bashir becomes a leader in the Palestinian struggle to return to their homeland (a particularly gruesome event in his childhood cements his determination to fight Israeli occupation), spends about a quarter of his life in Israeli prisons and the rest fighting a non-negotiable struggle for a "Right of Return" to Al-Ramla and historic Palestine.

It is incredible that the story is true at all, and what is overwhelmingly powerful is that Dalia and Bashir actually make contact with each other and several times over their lives sneak to the other side to visit each other and their respective families. First Bashir visits the Al-Ramla home, where Dalia permits him to enter and see the house again. Then Dalia drives into Ramallah to visit Bashir and meet his family. They speak about their own perspectives during these visits and though they often disagree maintain a sort of dialogue between them.

Against the context of the story of these two families, which the author says came over the course of hundreds of interviews with both families and others relevant to the story, Tolan does a fascinating job retelling the history of the region in a way that is clear and fairly easy to understand by the reader. Recounting the history of Arabs in Palestine, growth of the Zionist movement and settlement in Israel, events leading up to the emigration of Jews from Europe, Israeli wars with their Arab neighbors, the many peace accords and passing negotiations over the decades, motivations behind the waves of political movements on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides of the conflict- it is quite incredible.

The story doesn't have the answer for ending the struggle in the region, at a micro-level the house is turned into a preschool for Arab Israeli children and Arab-Jewish meeting space, but the larger context of peace in the region remains realistically open. Any reader who has been overwhelmed trying to understand the course of events in the region over the past 70+ years does finish the book with a better understanding and human perspective of the motivations on both sides.

Anyways, definitely a must read!