

# Ingrid Jaradat Gassner

## An Austrian Media Activist in Palestine

*This is an interview conducted via email with Ingrid Jaradat Gassner, director of BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights. Jaradat, who is of Austrian origin, recounts what it is like to be a foreigner living in the Arab world.*

### **1. Background information about your self and previous political and personal interest in the Middle East before moving to Palestine.**

My name is Ingrid Jaradat Gassner. I was born and raised in Austria and am an Austrian citizen. Since I grew up in an environment without any personal relations to the Middle East - no Palestinian relatives, no Jewish relatives - I grew up knowing very little about the region and the Zionist-Palestinian conflict. I was also too young to understand events during the so called "high-times" of Austrian (Bruno Kreisky's) involvement in the Middle East, and later on there was no longer any Austrian involvement. I did, however, always have a lot of curiosity and a strong sense of doubt in the validity of Austrian public opinion, including in what was said and reported by the media about the Palestinian people, starting from the days of the June 1967 war, when Austrians admired a strong and victorious Israel. My first trip to the Middle East was to an Israeli kibbutz - by pure coincidence and

not by choice. Simply because there was nobody to help me and my friends travel after high school and work anywhere else, Latin America, for example, would have been our first choice.

My political education therefore began in Palestine: it was easy to understand that the kibbutz had nothing to do with socialism and that Israelis' missed the major root causes when trying to explain the conflict with the Palestinian people. Later on, I finished my B.A. degree at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. At that time, I already was active with a small group of anti-Zionist Israelis and Palestinians (Matzpen). I have remained a political activist since then, was involved in socialist organizations in Austria, the solidarity movement with the anti-colonial struggle in Latin America, until I returned to Palestine at the time of the first Intifada. For 12 years now, I have been married in Palestine. My husband and I have one son (Nadim). We live in Beit Jala, West Bank and are both founding members of BADIL Resource Center, an organization working to promote Palestinian refugee rights, foremost their right to return, as well as to restitution.

### **2. Why did you decide to move to Palestine?**

Although I did return to Austria for a period of time (1983

- 1988), I did not really feel at home there anymore. I graduated (M.A.) from Salzburg University with a thesis on educational policies and the Palestinian minority. When I was asked to come to work at the Alternative Information Center in Jerusalem, an organization operated by anti-Zionist Israelis and Palestinians from Jerusalem, it seemed the natural thing to do. I was not planning an academic career for myself, and there were very limited perspectives for political activism in Austria. In addition, I had the experience and knowledge required for this type of work in Palestine. So it was mainly for reasons of political activism that I came here.

### **3. How did you manage to fit into the Palestinian society? Which factors facilitated and hindered your integration?**

The major factor that facilitated my integration was the fact that I have shared political activism with the people here in Palestine. The fact that there were organizational frameworks in which I could work and live with the people here very much helped me to feel part of this society. I thus rapidly began to feel that the people here, and their society, were not so different from what I had been used to. In fact, I am convinced that much of what appears to be so different, culturally and socially, are customs and habits that can be negotiated if understood and taken into consideration.

Of course, I will always remain a "foreigner" for Palestinians who do not know me. This is sometimes disturbing. However, there is an advantage to the small size of Palestine - which in fact has become Bethlehem district in my case due to the military closures - and closed character of Palestinian society: People can always know who is who, and I can move freely within my network of social support.

### **4. How is your relationship with your Palestinian relatives?**

My Palestinian relatives, i.e. my husband's mother, broth-

ers and sisters live in Sa'ir, one of the large Palestinian villages (in the meantime declared towns) in the Hebron district. My husband's mother, Um Hamdi, is a very tolerant and smart woman, although she never had any formal schooling. She has always loved me, because she is so happy that her son found the woman he wanted to marry - after years that she and the whole family thought that he will never get married. She, as well as his brothers and sisters accept the fact that I live differently from the way they do. It is enough for them that they feel that I respect them and they respect me. The fact that we do not share a household, and even live in a different town, has certainly helped to avoid all kinds of tensions that would have appeared if we lived next to each other. So - no problems on the family front.

### **5. Please describe your work at Info Badil?**

I am the director of BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency & Refugee Rights. We are an organization with a General Assembly of some 50 veteran community activists in the West Bank refugee camps, a Board of seven, and a staff of nine. It is my job to draft overall institutional strategies, raise funds, write institutional reports - in addition to taking part in the advocacy and information work implemented as part of our program.

### **6. How would you describe your identity today, as a woman of Austrian origin having lived in the Arab world for an extended period of time?**

I would describe myself as a woman with Austrian citizenship, familiar with central European culture and thinking, but feeling like a Palestinian. I have very little tolerance for Western ignorance regarding Arab history, culture and religions, Zionism and the Palestinian struggle - and even less tolerance for Western arrogance and the perceived Western monopoly on democracy and civilization.

**BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights is a Palestinian community-based organization that aims to provide a resource pool of alternative, critical and progressive information and analysis on the question of Palestinian refugees in the quest to achieve a just and lasting solution for exiled Palestinians based on the right of return.**

**BADIL was established in January 1998 and is registered with the Palestinian Authority and legally owned by the refugee community represented by a General Assembly composed of activists in Palestinian national institutions and refugee community organizations.**

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