



Handing on the Key – Palestinians in Australia 20 August – 22 November 2009

Community Exhibition Program
at the Immigration Museum,
Melbourne, Australia

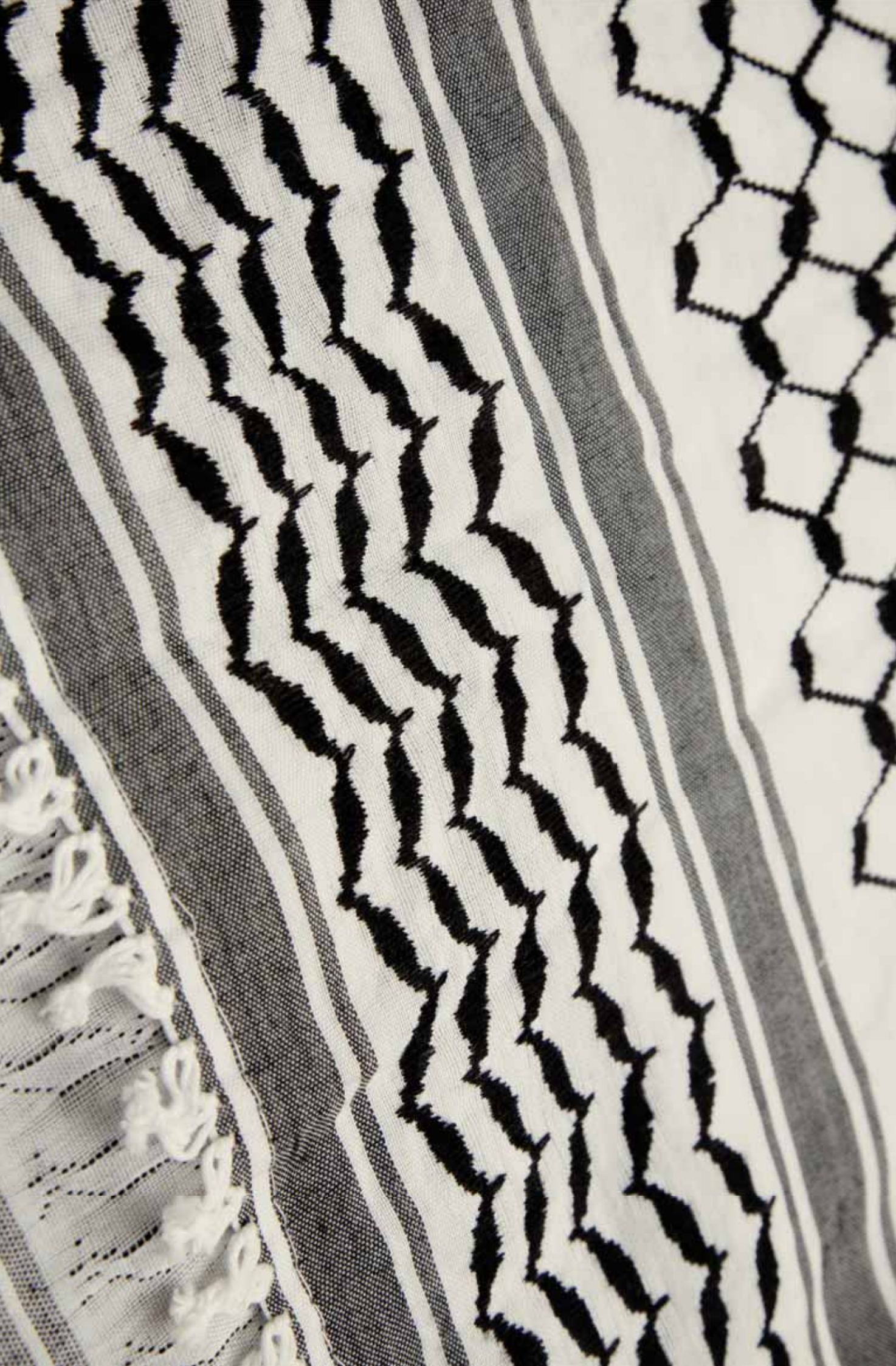
The Community Gallery presents exhibitions created by Victoria's culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse communities. By working in collaboration with the Immigration Museum, these communities share their culture and heritage through their immigration stories.

The histories and experiences of many groups have contributed to the making of modern Australia. The museum has collaborated with many of Victoria's communities to develop and present exhibitions.

For further information please visit our website
museumvictoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum/
or the Immigration Discovery Centre on the ground floor.

Handing on THE KEY

Palestinians in Australia



KEYS TO THE PAST

Many Palestinians left their homeland carrying keys in their pockets. Once, they unlocked the doors of homes in Palestine where generations of families had lived. Through years of upheaval and displacement, locks were changed and houses destroyed, but the keys remained. They became a symbol of the hope that Palestinians would one day return to the land of their people.

Today, keys represent memories of grief and happiness, and the determination to be recognised. They also symbolise the right of future generations to open their own doors.

Young Palestinians in Australia are negotiating their own identity whilst sharing the grievances of their forebears. Living in a tolerant and multicultural society gives Palestinians the freedom to express their heritage, and the generations that follow to choose how their heritage will be preserved.



[1] The Masri family in Amman, Jordan, shortly after their displacement from Jerusalem in 1948. Aida Al-Masri is second from the left.



[2] The Mughrabi family in Jerusalem, c. 1930.

[3] Aida's family in Melbourne, 2003. Aida Al-Masri, pictured as a young girl in the 1948 photograph, is standing in the back row, second from right.

[4] The Mashni family in Melbourne, 2006.

Source: Museum Victoria Palestinian Community Photographic Collection.



A CONTESTED LAND

The area known as Palestine is an ancient land which has been for thousands of years a crossroads and a home to many peoples.

The Muslim conquests of the 7th century brought the Islamic faith and entrenched Arabic culture and language in the region. Muslim Arabs became the majority population, but Christian Arabs and Jews also lived there.

The modern boundaries were drawn by the British, who occupied this part of the Ottoman Empire in 1917. The British permitted large-scale Jewish migration to the area. Many of the immigrants were Zionists whose aim was the establishment of a Jewish state.

In 1947, the United Nations proposed dividing Palestine into an Arab state and a Jewish state. The member states approved partition but the people of Palestine were not allowed to vote on the question. The country's Arabs and Jews went to war, and in May 1948 the state of Israel was declared. More than 700,000 Palestinian Arabs fled or were forced from their homes. In the 1967 war, Israel occupied the rest of Palestine.

For many Palestinians, dispossession resulted in migration, first to neighbouring countries and then beyond.



[1] Abu Nasser in his family's olive grove in Palestine, 1946.

Source: Museum Victoria Palestinian Community Photographic Collection.

[2–5] Palestine c. 1870, from an album of architectural photographs. The views are: the Hebron Gate in Jerusalem [2], Yafa (Jaffa) [3], Jerusalem from the northeast [4] and Bethlehem [5].

Photographs: Bonfils & Cie

[6] The home of the Sarraj family in Yafa (Jaffa), from which they were displaced in 1948. A few years after this photo was taken in the 1960s the house was demolished.

[7] Abbas family members on a school excursion in Jenin on the West Bank in 1950, shortly after the partition of Palestine.

Source: Museum Victoria Palestinian Community Photographic Collection.





COMING TO AUSTRALIA

The number of Palestinians who have migrated to Australia has been difficult to assess through official records. The majority of Palestinians arrived on passports issued by the countries to which they were displaced. Many families divided by war held passports from different countries.

The consequences of the 1967 war led many Palestinians to migrate beyond the Arab world. Significant numbers of Palestinians arrived in Australia, propelled by their experiences of discrimination and economic hardship as a stateless people.

Further waves of immigration occurred at the beginning of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 and after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. The last major wave came in the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991.

It is difficult to estimate the number of Palestinian migrants before 2001, when the Australian census for the first time collected information on ancestry. It revealed that about 7000 people listed their ancestry as Palestinian. Speaking Arabic and born in many lands, Palestinians in Australia sometimes feel they are an 'invisible' national group.



[1] Abu Nasser with his prized Holden in 1968.

[2] Eid Al-Fitr (end of Ramadan) celebration at the community's Arabic school in Melbourne, c. 2001.

[3] The Buheissi family in 1999, seven years after their arrival in Melbourne.

[4] Some activities, like playing backgammon and enjoying a civilised cup of tea, translated easily to Australia.

[5] After 1948, no Palestinian passports were issued. Some people travelled on special documents issued specifically for Palestinian refugees, which limited where they could go. No Arab countries issued full passports to Palestinian residents, with the exception of Jordan.

Source: Museum Victoria Palestinian Community Photographic Collection.



1



4



2

3

[1] The *keffiyeh*, or headscarf, is part of traditional Arab dress for men and is often fixed with a circlet of black rope called an *iqal*. The distinctive black-and-white check *keffiyah* is an internationally recognised badge of Palestinian identity.

Photograph: David Loram.

[2–4] The distinctive clothing of Palestinian women has been closely linked to the struggle for the recognition of Palestine. These antique *thoubs* (women's robes) are prized family possessions that reinforce the connections between clothing, land and identity. The fabric, shape and embroidery tell us they come from the region around Jerusalem and Bethlehem and they are believed to be about 100 years old.

Photographs: David Loram.

PALESTINIAN IDENTITY

For the majority of Palestinians in Australia, there is no lived experience of Palestine. The link to homeland is passed from one generation to the next through acts of memory.

“Once, for school, I asked my dad for his earliest memory,” says Sofia, 15. “He told me about sheltering with his mother, brother and sister from falling bombs. That surprised me.”

One of the tensions between the older and younger generations is what defines Palestinian identity.

“The young are Aussies,” says one elder. “They can find it difficult to relate to our loud, emotional arguments. For those parents who came from the Arab world, being Palestinian is a fragile thing, and some have fed a fear of activism to their kids.”

“The uncles want to preserve,” says Sara, 20. “Our identity is more fluid – sometimes they see it as disrespectful.”

For people who have been powerless and dispossessed, education takes on added importance; it is something that can be taken anywhere and used to build a new life. An annual awards ceremony for young people recognises academic excellence and reinforces its place in Palestinian identity. One student from Year 12 and one from university are selected to speak, and the community brings traditional sweets to honour them all.



[1] Abdul Aziz Samour accepts an academic achievement award from Mr Maroof Nasser at the community's annual academic awards ceremony, 2007.



[2] Sharing food customs strengthens the community and also allows members to connect with other Australians. Palestinian women hold cooking classes to show how to prepare traditional dishes, like this demonstration in 2004.

[3] Arts and crafts, especially costume, are one way in which Palestinians express themselves, and festivals like this one in Manningham in March 2007 are an opportunity to show their heritage to a wider public.



[4] Like many communities, Palestinians maintain their identity by preserving customs, but also adapting them. Painting hands with henna was originally a religious ritual but for many women today, like this young girl in 2007, it is an expression of female beauty and cultural identity.

[5] Graduation celebrations bring out the whole community to share the sense of achievement. Manningham Community Centre, April 2007.

Source: Museum Victoria Palestinian Community Photographic Collection.



YOUNG VOICES

The sons and daughters of Palestinian immigrants are reminded daily of the issues that drove their parents to leave their homeland, and the international debate over land and belonging bestowed on them by their birth.

"You're brought up with people who had everything ripped off them," says 21-year-old Jamil. "You get angry, but there's also a sense that you have to do something."

Mai, who came to Australia as a baby from the occupied West Bank during the *intifada* (uprising) of the late 1980s, explains. "People ask you, 'Where is Palestine?' You have to try to put people in your shoes, and you have to put yourself in the shoes of those still oppressed. You feel more worldly."

In recent times young and old have rallied to raise awareness of the Palestinians' situation. Groups such as the Palestinian Community Association of Victoria, Beit Jala Association, Australians for Palestine and Women for Palestine raise funds, screen films, hold peace vigils and organise cultural events aimed at showing Palestinian life in all its variety.

"Palestinian families are scattered across the world," says Bushra, 23. "So the other kids in the community become our cousins, our family."



[1] *Dabkeh* is a traditional dance that encompasses public performances and informal celebrations, like this community gathering in 2008.

[2] The dancers from El Rozana take time out from a festival in Canberra to visit the Federal Parliament.

[3] At graduation celebrations in 2006, young men and women were recognised by the community for their high school and university achievements.

[4] 'Olive for Life' is a non-political environmental organisation that works to re-establish olive groves in the West Bank and Gaza.

Source: Museum Victoria Palestinian Community Photographic Collection.





KEYS TO THE FUTURE

Palestinians are a people defined by what they have lost. Their lives have been shaped by a sense of injustice reinforced by continuing dispossession and conflict. But at the same time they have lived, worked and contributed to Australian society, bringing their culture and creating a new life for themselves here.

Many Palestinian Australians still look to a future that gives them the right to return to the home of their ancestors. Children of the next generation, like all young people, are choosing for themselves what elements of their heritage will form a part of who they are.

“Just as our people carried their keys from Palestine into other lands, we carry the complexity of our past and our own hopes for peace with justice. This is our *muftah*, our key.”



شي يوم مدري كيف
حطوا حجار فوق حجار
صاروا دار

One bright morning
(No one remembers when and why)
Adding stone upon stone
People started building a home

MARZUK HALABI



[1] Young Australian Palestinians, 2006.

[2] The Palestinian community in the Australia Day Parade is led by young women wearing traditional dress. One side of each sign indicates the towns where their parents and grandparents were born, the other side says 'Australians'. Melbourne, 2004.

Source: Museum Victoria Palestinian Community Photographic Collection.

[3] *The Age*, 18 May 2009.



For many Palestinians in Australia, the only concrete evidence that Palestine existed is in a handful of government documents. Passports, identity cards and travel documents that bear the word 'Palestine' are precious reminders and are often handed down through generations.



These banknotes, issued by the British Mandate government between 1927 and 1944, are extremely rare examples of Palestinian currency and are prized evidence of the existence of Palestine. Each denomination depicts a landmark: Rachel's Tomb (500 mils), the Dome of the Rock (£1) and the Tower of Ramleh (£10). The banknotes were printed in English, Arabic and Hebrew.

Photographs: David Loram.



Abu Al-Waleed

I could have been a London University graduate but for the events of 1947–1948.

I completed the Palestinian Matriculation Certificate in July 1947, hoping to gain a scholarship to the University of London. I was the first pupil from the village of Sawafir al-Sharqiya, in southern Palestine, to pass the test. My father was so proud that he gave me an expensive fountain pen.

My school in Jerusalem was hit by grenades in the early stages of the 1948 war and the students were forced to return to their homes.

My life would continue to be marked by wars. After 1948 my family fled to Gaza, until the Suez Crisis in 1956 forced us to the Gulf states. In 1991, another war drove us out of Kuwait, where I had worked as an English teacher for 35 years. It was in 1992 that I came to Australia with my family. Now I am 80 years old and enjoy my time cultivating my garden and being with my grandchildren. I still wonder where I would be now if there had been no war in 1948?

ABOVE: Abu Al-Waleed kept his identity card from Rashidiya College which used his formal name, Abdul Hadi Zeidan. Jerusalem, 1945.

Source: Museum Victoria Palestinian Community Photographic Collection.

Tony

I was among the first Palestinian immigrants to arrive by plane in Australia in 1964. I arrived alone from my hometown, Beit Jala, a village between Bethlehem and Jerusalem where most of the people are Christian like me.

Beit Jalans have been coming here ever since, and in 1988 we formed an association of about 100 families for social and cultural activities. In the 1970s and 1980s, I used to write articles on the Palestinian cause and send them to Australian newspapers – they would publish one or two. In my opinion the media was biased and Palestinians were not given a fair go. This is a beautiful country full of beautiful people, but the politicians just follow the Americans wherever they go.

One of my best memories in Australia is when I helped construct the oil and gas platforms in the Bass Strait. I was a welder on the pipeline that ran to Sale, working on a barge called *Choctaw*. Our work had to pass the toughest checks, like the magnetic particle test. I worked 12 hours a day, five days a week, and my work passed those tests.

I did my part in building this country. But in retirement, I still call Palestine home.



ABOVE: Tony at work on the oil rig *Cobia*, destined for Bass Strait drilling, in 1982.

Source: Museum Victoria Palestinian Community Photographic Collection.

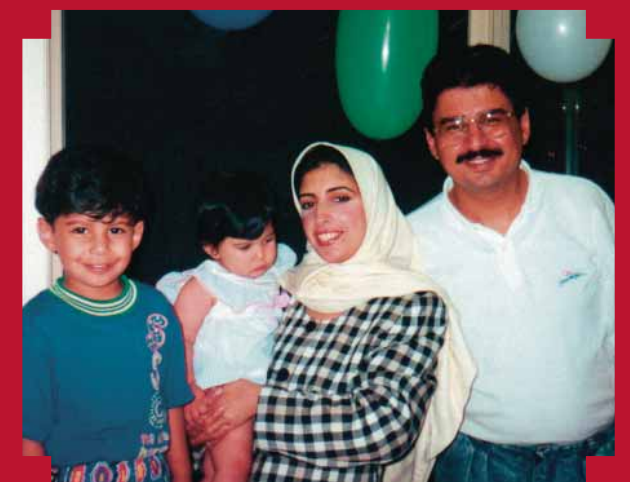
Imad

I obtained my visa to migrate to Australia through the Australian embassy in Jordan, where I had lived for three years after fleeing Kuwait with my wife and infant son when Iraq invaded. The plan was to stay for a couple of years until I received Australian citizenship and then return to the Arab world, but 16 years later and blessed with two daughters, I'm still here.

Having the passport and being an equal citizen makes a big difference. It means freedom of movement and respect, that you're not a nobody. It's a legacy for your kids.

At the beginning, things were not easy, even though I had lived in a Western culture before. The feeling of not belonging has haunted me. I think of the red earth of my homeland, of eating *msakhan* (a Palestinian dish of chicken and onion on flat bread), of being with those you love. Any happiness you have here is limited by it.

Working and living in Australia has had an impact on my thinking – things are easier, there isn't that bureaucracy you have to fight all the time – but the dream of a free Palestine will always stay in my mind.



ABOVE: Imad with his family in 1994, shortly after their arrival in Australia.

Source: Museum Victoria Palestinian Community Photographic Collection.

Bushra

I was born in Kuwait in 1986 but my family migrated to Melbourne in early 1992, after the chaos of the Gulf War.

Though my parents had only spent their earliest childhood in Palestine, they would recall their homeland with great passion. Because of this, my visit there at the age of ten was especially memorable. I remember wandering the streets of Ramallah and visiting the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. I remember visiting my aunt in Nablus and eating the best *kunafa* (a pastry dessert with cheese, syrup and rosewater) I had ever tasted. A highlight was meeting my great-grandparents, the flesh and bones of my ancestry. Looking back, it was here I felt a sense of belonging, a sense of home.

In Australia, your loyalties aren't always as predictable. I am a Carlton supporter, another cause that requires a lot of faith and commitment, but somehow my brother ended up barracking for Essendon and he took our parents with him. Four years ago we went to the MCG as a family for the first time, and although Carlton lost by quite a margin, sitting with thousands of other fans was exhilarating.



ABOVE: Bushra after her graduation ceremony on 26 April 2007, where she was awarded a Bachelor of Biomedical Science from Monash University. She is currently completing her studies in medicine.

Source: Museum Victoria Palestinian Community Photographic Collection.

The Dancers of El Rozana

Twelve young Australian-born Palestinians make up the dance group El Rozana, established in Melbourne in 2003. *Rozana* is the Arabic term for the decorated window found over the main entry in a traditional home, which allows light to enter.

TEEMA, 12: I knew about the troupe because my dad is the instructor. When we started, some of the children were getting a five dollar bribe from their parents to take part. Then everyone started to enjoy it and told their parents they didn't want the money.



KAFA, 16: We practise every Monday night – sometimes you think you're too tired but you get into it. When we started doing dance in PE at school, I found it easier to keep track of the steps because of El Rozana.

MONA, 16: The songs we dance to are songs my mum used to sing in the kitchen. Sometimes we dance in jeans but when we danced at the multicultural festival in Canberra we had the traditional dress, the black-and-red *thoub*. Even at big events, when you step out for a solo you can hear your parents going crazy.

HANA, 17: What I enjoyed most was the dressing up and the friendship.

LEFT: The dancers often perform in community venues around Melbourne. Here they have just danced at the Spanish Club in North Fitzroy in March, 2006.

BELOW: The *ghazallah* (gazelle) dance during a multicultural festival in Canberra, 2008.

Source: Museum Victoria Palestinian Community Photographic Collection.



Moammar

Growing up an Aussie but not looking like one is what my two brothers and I remember most about our childhood. We were born to Palestinian and Lebanese migrants and grew up in Melbourne's southeastern suburbs.

Once a girl from our primary school invited my younger brother and I to play cricket at the sports ground across the road from our father's milk bar. When her father saw us playing, he said: "What are you darkies doing here?" "Playing cricket," I replied, to which he abruptly responded, "**** off, this is not your game."

My parents shielded us from that sort of hate but ensured that we understood that we should be proud of our heritage and that we were in fact Aussies too.

Our late father loved the land and often spoke of the days spent nurturing the fields of his ancestors near Ramallah. In 2003 we planted some 4000 olive trees on our farm just outside Shepparton to help rekindle this love that was taken from him. The olive tree is synonymous with Palestine and the resilience of its people. The grove is still young, but our father did live to see the first pressing of its oil in 2005.

ABOVE: Moammar with his wife Georgia and their daughter Leila Philasteen in March 2007.

Source: Museum Victoria Palestinian Community Photographic Collection.





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Handing on the Key – Palestinians in Australia was launched at the Immigration Museum, Melbourne, Australia. The museum explores the stories and experiences of people from all over the world who have migrated to Victoria.

The Immigration Museum is part of Museum Victoria, which is Australia's largest museum organisation. It is the state museum for Victoria. Museum Victoria aims to take visitors on a journey of discovery to a new world of knowledge and perspective. Scienceworks, the Immigration Museum and Melbourne Museum aspire to bring to life Australia's social and natural history and showcase Australia's cultural, scientific and natural wealth.

Through its Community Exhibition program, the Immigration Museum explores the different communities that have contributed to the making of modern Australia. *Handing on the Key – Palestinians in Australia* was developed by the Immigration Museum in collaboration with the Palestinian Community Association of Victoria.

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Muftah Al-Awda – The Key to Return
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THANK YOU

We gratefully acknowledge those who have provided support for this exhibition, the individuals and families who have contributed their personal stories, artefacts and memorabilia. This exhibition is an achievement that will record the valuable contribution of the Palestinian community to making Australia a rich and diverse society.

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