

# YUSIF SAYIGH

Arab Economist,  
Palestinian Patriot

A Fractured Life Story

Edited by  
Rosemary Sayigh

AUC  
PRESS

***A rare firsthand account by a prominent Palestinian economist of his youth and childhood in the mandate-era Levant and his life's devotion to the cause of Palestine***

**About the book**

**A**n acclaimed economist and lifelong Palestinian nationalist Yusif Sayigh (1916-2004) came of age at a time of immense political change in the Middle East. Born in al-Bassa, near Acre in northern Palestine, he was witness to the events that led to the loss of Palestine and his memoir therefore constitutes a vivid social history of the region, as well as a revealing firsthand account of the Palestinian national movement almost from its earliest inception. Family and everyday life, co-villagers, landscapes, pleasures, outings, schooling, and political figures recreate the vanished world of Sayigh's formative years in the Levant. An activist in Palestine, he was taken prisoner of war by the Israelis in 1948. Later, as an economist, he wrote extensively on Arab oil, economic development, and manpower, teaching for many years at the American University of Beirut and taking early retirement in 1974 to work as a consultant for a number of pan-Arab and international organizations. A single chapter on Palestinian politics provides insights into his later activist work and experiences of working as a consultant with the Palestine Liberation Organization to produce an economic plan for an eventual Palestinian state.

**About the Author:**



**Rosemary Sayigh** is an oral historian and anthropologist and the author of *Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries*, *Too Many Enemies: The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon*, and *Voices: Palestinian Women Narrate Displacement*. She is a currently visiting professor at the Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies at the American University of Beirut.

## Table of Contents

Map of Mandate Palestine

Introduction *Rosemary Sayigh*

1. Earliest Memories, Kharaba, 1918–25

2. Al-Bassa, 1925–30

3. Boarding School, Sidon, 1929–34

4. Tiberias, as a Boy, 1930–38

5. At the American University in Beirut, 1934–38

6. Ain Qabu; First Job; Work for the PPS, 1938–39

7. Teacher in Iraq, 1939–40

8. Life in Tiberias as an Adult, 1940–44

9. Jerusalem, 1944–48

10. Prisoner of War, May 1948–Spring 1949

11. “Life Will Never Be the Same without Her”: Umm Yusuf’s Death (December 1950)

12. Palestinian Politics

13. “Bread with Dignity”: Yusuf Sayigh as an Arab Economist

Notes

Glossary

List of Yusuf Sayigh’s Publications

Index

## Excerpt:

### Introduction

#### The Man and the Family

Yusif was a great storyteller. The first of his stories to rivet my attention was the one about his capture by the Israelis in Jerusalem in 1948, and transfer to a prisoner-of-war camp where he spent almost a year. He told me this story in Beirut, when I stopped off on my way home from Baghdad to London, before we decided to marry. I also loved his stories of childhood, particularly those about al-Bassa, his mother's village in northern Palestine. His memories of his childhood in Syria and Palestine were like scenes from a film, separated from the time and place of narration, yet hyper-real. Characters from the past—Andraos the al-Bassa transvestite; Umm Rakkad who put the bishop of Haifa to flight when he attempted to shame her for adultery; Butros the blind Egyptian convert who took up interminable residence on the ground floor of the Sayigh family home; Abu Dakhllallah, the traveling seller of religious tracts whose itinerary always included a stay at the Sayigh home—were preserved in the memory of this curious and sensitive child. Yusif's descriptions of al-Bassa, spread between sea and mountain, endowed with rich water sources and luxuriant vegetation, formed a lost-Eden setting for these arresting figures.

Presiding over these picaresque scenes was the loving presence of Umm Yusif, whom I only knew from a framed family photograph. She was mysterious to me because of her premature death two years after the Nakba, and three years before our marriage, yet she was part of my life through Yusif's exceptional attachment to her. He had been her favorite son, but she was special not just in his recollection but also in that of everyone who had known her. 'Saintly' was a description often used of her. After her death, Yusif's brother Fayez said, "Life will never be the same without her." Abu Yusif never changed his black tie though he outlived her by more than twenty years. That the essential scenes from Yusif's recollections should begin and end with his mother is entirely fitting.

Umm Yusif was highly educated for a woman of village background, having been sent as a boarder to the Gerard Institute in Sidon. She had worked as a schoolteacher before marriage and had looked after seven children, cooking, cleaning, and sewing for them. The first four children were raised in Kharaba, the village in Jabal al-Druze where Abu Yusif had property, and where he had built the Protestant church with support from an American missionary, Mary Ford. When the Druze uprising against the French began in 1925 Abu Yusif was in Damascus. Alone, Umm Yusif escaped with her four young children before the church was burnt. The family moved to Umm Yusif's home village, al-Bassa, in northern Palestine. After five years there, Abu Yusif's vocation as pastor took the family to Tiberias, still under the patronage of Miss Ford, to a rambling old house near the lake, close to the Scots Mission. There they remained until the expulsions of 1948.

Though Yusif also admired and loved his father, and describes his many unpastor-like qualities, such as skill in carpentry and love of modern gadgets, he did not enjoy the stern Protestant discipline of their family life, focused around prayers and Bible readings. It is evident from the memoirs—and others who remember her confirm this—that the family revolved around Umm Yusif. A severe hemorrhage in 1931 at the time of the birth of Anis, her last child, brought on a heart attack nine years later, leaving her a semi-invalid. War and expulsion from Tiberias in 1948, the move to Beirut, and anxiety over Yusif's fate as prisoner of war surely hastened her death in 1950.

The memoir or autobiography as the genre developed in the West was a record of the achievements of important men as movers of history, and has moreover always tended to focus on the individual. Family background would typically form the first chapter of the Great Man's memoirs but would be left behind as the subject proceeds toward his celebrated place in History. In Yusif's case, however, his parents and siblings are inextricably part of his memories. As eldest son he had 'fathered' his siblings, helping to eke out his father's meager salary as pastor to put them through college. His narrative, as a result, is full of stories about his family, including frequent references to the achievements of his brothers. This is as much a family story as it is the story of Yusif Sayigh.

Theirs is indeed a remarkable story, containing several elements that typify Palestinian and Arab families but others that are singular. Arab readers will recognize the struggle of the parents (particularly Umm Yusif) to get the children educated. Singular is the way Abdallah Sayigh and Afifi Batrouni met by accident in 1914, and fell in love and married; how Umm Yusif persisted in trying to persuade Abu Yusif to move somewhere where there were better schools than Kharaba; how he resisted because of his dedication to the church and ties to the village; and how Umm Yusif acted alone to save her children during the 1925 uprising. It was Umm Yusif who took Yusif across the border from al-Bassa to school in Sidon, and it was she who persuaded the school director to lower the fees.

Education marks Yusif's memories as theme, personal ambition, moral value, and source of family pride. Obtaining schooling was a constant struggle for the Sayigh family, given the extreme poverty of public education in Mandate Palestine and Abu Yusif's modest salary as a pastor. Kharaba had only one elementary school; al-Bassa had more schools but none at the secondary level; even in Tiberias the Sayigh children had to go elsewhere for secondary schooling. This meant that all seven children had to be sent away to private boarding schools to get high-school diplomas and qualify for college. Paying the fees wasn't easy. Scholarships, the generosity of friends, Yusif's contribution, and loans here and there enabled all six Sayigh boys to go through university. Four of them chose intellectual professions, one engineering, and one medicine. Four obtained PhDs. Yusif himself left university with only a BA in business administration. He didn't gain his doctorate in economics until 1957, at the age of 41.

Umm Yusif's weak heart seems to have been inherited by all her sons; all died from some form of heart failure, two of them while still in their fifties, all but the youngest, Anis, before Yusif himself. Combined with mourning for Palestine, these family tragedies cast a shadow over our family gatherings. Even so, Yusif's natural optimism and love of life color his recollections with joy rather than sadness. I had long wanted to record Yusif's memories, partly because his background was so different from mine, partly also because we both came from middle-class families on the edge of poverty who valued education highly. But it wasn't just the difference in the landscape of our childhoods that made me want to record him; it was also that he had taken part in or lived through so many momentous events, and actively participated in many of them. I felt that his recollections must have value as part of the history of a region characterized by rapid political, social, and cultural change. People today can hardly remember how life was in villages in Jabal al-Druze and Galilee—what people wore and ate, what homes were like, how children were brought up, how they played, what were treats and punishments, what a missionary boarding school was like. Today there are few people left who lived through the Nakba.

Yusif did not share my enthusiasm for recording his memories. He would say that he wasn't important enough, it would be a sign of conceit, a trait he disliked. There were figures such as Abdel Nasser, al-Assad, Arafat, who created movements and made things happen; these were the proper subjects of memoirs. He did not accept the idea that ordinary people can contribute to a richer understanding of history through their memory and witness. Moreover, his work after leaving the American University in Beirut (AUB) in 1974 kept him continually on the move. It was impossible to pin him down to recording sessions.

### **Producing the Recordings**

My chance came in April 1989, when he was forced to spend several weeks at home in bed recovering from an operation. He was my prisoner, and finally yielded to the tape recorder. Making the recording a joint project, something that we were doing together for our children and grandchildren, softened his opposition. Once started, he even began to enjoy the sessions. We didn't follow a strict chronology. His story of capture by the Israelis in May 1948 became the beginning for sentimental reasons. Then, since his presence in Qatamoun in mid-May 1948 needed explanation, we returned to his time in Jerusalem between October 1944 and his capture. From there we went back to his earliest memory, his mother weeping because her second baby had died. Each evening we would plan what episodes to record the next day.

Between April 6 and 26, 1989, we filled twenty one-hour cassettes, covering his life up to the death of his mother in 1950. These twenty tapes form the bulk of the memoirs as they are presented in this book. But as soon as he was able to leave bed, Yusif was off on another professional trip, and became even harder to capture than before. It was during 1989 that his work began as advisor to Ahmad Qurei, director of the Palestine Liberation organization's (PLO's) Economic Department, to construct an economic development plan for a future Palestinian state. From then until late 1993 he spent most of his time in Tunis, and although we continued to record from time to time in snatches between travel, these sessions were too far apart and too informal to achieve the focus of the first set.

It was only much later, after Yusif's death, when I came to edit the tapes, that I realized how much the quality of the recordings had declined between the first long, bedridden sessions and the later recordings snatched over a lunch or a weekend. From being mainly a monologue with occasional questions from me, they turned into reminiscences about our children, the homes we lived in, holidays, friends, domestic helpers . . . . This meant a marked decline in general interest after 1952, the moment when Yusif's professional career was just beginning to take off. Thus about two-thirds of the memoirs are about his formative years rather than the years of productivity. This is one of the senses in which this life story is incomplete: it doesn't cover what most readers would want to know about Yusif Sayigh the economist, teacher, writer, and conference speaker. However, we did manage to record a long set on Yusif's involvement in Palestinian politics, now the final chapter of this book. In any case, politics and the personal are woven together in this account. We, his family, were always aware of the implications of Yusif's work: late-night meetings; having to poke a broom handle down the exhaust pipe of the car to make sure that there wasn't a bomb in it; an iron bar to place across the outer door at night; a Klashin under the TV set; his bouts of stress and illness.

A more serious shortfall was our failure to record a full chapter on Yusif's career as an economist. In our early recording sessions we reached the crucial year 1952 when he completed an MA in economics and began working in AUB's Economic Research Institute, but we never fully covered the development of his career. Thus the final chapter of this book: "Bread with Dignity: Yusif Sayigh as an Arab Economist," is put together from fragments of the recorded memoirs, his writings, my recollections, and the tributes of colleagues.

Because I knew his stories so well, I played a more interventionist role in the recordings than a professional oral historian would have done, reminding him of anecdotes, or probing his account to get more details about points that interested me. In retrospect, I think this was a mistake because it deprived his recollections of full autonomy. It meant that my interest in social history directed him to topics that were not important to him, and away from others that were. A final listening and revising process would have corrected these mistakes.

### **Tunis: Challenge and Disappointment**

The years 1989 to 1993 formed the peak of Yusif's career. His assignment to produce an economic plan for an independent Palestinian state fully mobilized his professional abilities as well as his Palestinian patriotism. In addition, he was working with the full support of Qurei, and with a large office staff. The inevitable delays, lapses in quality of the contributions, and the pressure he put upon himself to finish the plan on time, meant that he worked seven days a week, often until late at night. The strain was so severe that Qurei sent him to Paris for medical examinations after a bout of bad headaches. He had little contact with other PLO figures. His relations with Chairman Arafat had always been strained, and remained so in Tunis.

He completed the plan during the summer of 1993, as the Oslo Accords were being negotiated. In spite of his close association with Qurei, who was chief negotiator, Yusif had no inkling of the Oslo negotiations. Like many Palestinians he was unhappy that the Palestinians had gone to Oslo without legal advisors or map-makers. But he stayed on in Tunis for a few more months to negotiate with the World Bank about funding. His old dislike of Arafat's methods reached a peak in the aftermath of Oslo, as the president finagled the structure of the newly established Palestine Economic and Development Agency for Reconstruction (PECDAR) to ensure his own total control of development aid.

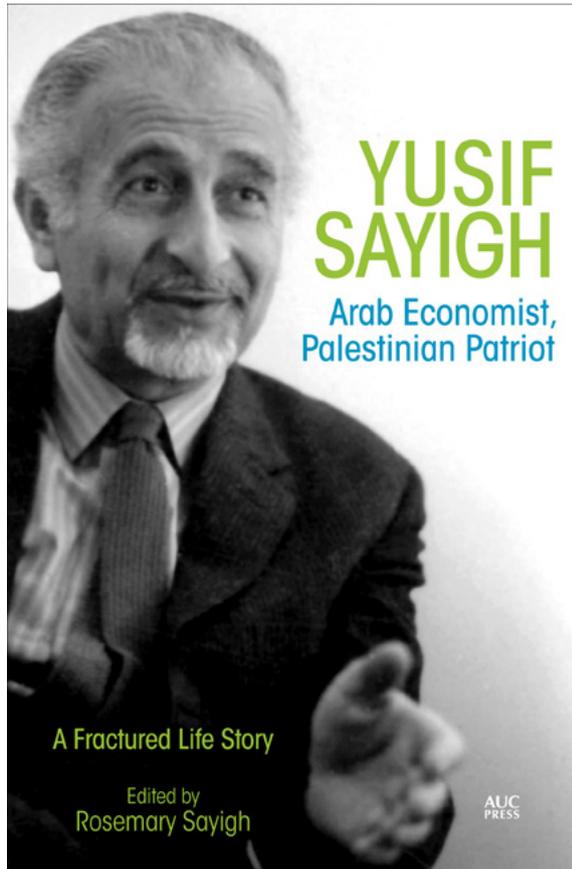
Less than two months after Oslo, Yusif resigned from PECNDAR's board and left Tunis. He returned to Beirut deeply disappointed by Arafat's ability to manipulate even the World Bank and international leaders simply because, at that point, the United States wanted the chairman 'on board.'

### **The Final Years**

Back in Beirut, Yusif had to face the cold-shouldering of other Palestinians who wrongly associated him with Oslo. Now the stress of the Tunis years—symptoms that Yusif had suppressed in his eagerness to develop the plan—began to emerge. After Oslo all the health problems that had plagued him throughout his life—heart, ulcer, slipped discs—returned with a vengeance. At first a project with the Center for Arab Unity Studies kept him afloat. The idea was an interesting one: to carry out interviews with leaders of the European Economic Union to analyze what features could be applied to the Arab region. But open-heart surgery put this project out of the question, and with the loss of work, life lost much of its zest for him. The only times I saw him regain his old spirit was when giving interviews to journalists, especially about the Tunis debacle.

It was always our intention to go back over the tapes and review them. The memoirs are rich in what they give but I regret the loss of deeper reflections on his life and times that a second time around would have given. He might have taken the opportunity to analyze the reasons for failure—at least in our time—of secular Arab nationalism, and to reflect on the Arab governments in whose capacity to reform he kept faith almost to the end. A question he might have wanted to explore was the tension between the part played by American education in the formation of his character and intellect and U.S. policies in the region, especially the alliance with Israel. Time to revise would have encouraged him to reflect on these topics more deeply, but the last eight years of his life were so plagued by hospitalization and growing immobility that it would have been impossible to ask him to listen to the tapes.

In spite of their provisional quality I think the memoirs effectively convey an aspect of Yusif's character that I especially loved: his outspokenness. He was unusually courageous in speech and action, especially for a man who was far from being physically strong. The words he spoke to a Palestinian National Authority (PNA) official in 1994—"I argue things out with Abu Ammar himself, or with people even more important than Abu Ammar. I will never relinquish my right to argue"—could well stand as his epitaph. An Arab nationalist and Palestinian activist, a secularist and modernizer, he put his formidable brain, wit, and energy into the service of his people.



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**Distribution and Sales Contacts**

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