

## Chapter One

### New Perspectives

Vivian phoned me a few weeks before we were to leave Amman and said I could accompany her and Leila to the Souf Refugee Camp the next morning. I was instructed to dress conservatively, to wear a scarf over my hair, and once inside the camp, to do exactly as I was instructed. I was waiting outside on the curb when they drove up, and both women got out to greet me. As we shook hands after Vivian's introduction, I looked into Leila's smoky brown eyes, wise and lovely, and was immediately drawn to her. Although Vivian was wearing Western dress like me, Leila wore a traditional long black dress, heavily cross-stitched at the bodice and hem. I asked Leila if I, as a first-time visitor, had dressed appropriately.

"Oh, yes. Everyone will know you are a foreigner. This is my dress for every occasion. I wear it to identify with my people." I smiled in relief and climbed into the back seat of her little car.

"Vivian has told me about you, Pat," Leila continued as we pulled away. "When the meanings of the designs are explained to you, you will have a great appreciation for our art."

Then she and Vivian talked about an upcoming bazaar at the American School, where Vivian is the librarian. Her contacts through the school and the foreign community in Amman assist her in her avocation of promoting the sale of the refugee women's cross-stitched articles; hence her initial connection to Leila.

I sat back expecting to enjoy the ride, but soon learned that when Leila drove, relaxation was not to be part of the trip. A narrow two-lane highway winds to Souf Camp, outside the city of Jerash, about fifty kilometers north of Amman. To get there, a driver simply goes as fast as traffic will allow, passes on curves and hills, and uses the horn as a warning signal. I gazed determinedly out the side window, praying that Leila would concentrate more on driving than talking.

The March air was crisp, and the skies a bright, clear blue. From time to time, I spotted the gray goat-hair tents used by the Bedouin. Shepherds guarded large flocks of sheep on the stark and rocky hillsides. Goats seemed to herd themselves until children scampered from behind boulders, their switches moving the flocks along as they grazed. We passed a young girl standing in a stream. She held the bridle of her burro with one hand, and filled the large leather water bags it carried with the other. The full bags appeared to weigh as much as the tiny animal.

The car slowed to a crawl to avoid hitting pedestrians. We passed a high chain-link fence on our right and cement block structures on our left. Boys were hanging by their fingertips from the fence or racing toward it, and from somewhere in the vicinity I heard a sound new to my ears, a shrill high-pitched *lalalala*. It was the camp's communications network sounding the alert, Vivian explained. "Umm Zaki's here!" Other voices shouted, "Umm Zaki! Umm Zaki!"

By the time we stopped, women were coming from doorways all around us. Leila signaled a sharp right turn with her horn, moved onto a narrow, muddy pathway, then slowed to stop. I had my first glimpse of refugee living.

The cement block attached houses were the size of one small room, perhaps 3x4 meters, with cement floors and corrugated tin roofs. All were without doors, facing tiny enclosed courtyards where the cooking was done. Most had no windows. After we passed the schoolyard

fence, there were no more roadsides. The courtyard gates abutted the edge of the roadway. Pedestrian traffic was so dense that Leila drove very slowly, with one hand on the horn. When people turned to see who was honking, their faces lit up and smiles flashed from every direction.

“Everyone knows you, Leila,” I exclaimed.

“I spend much time here. We must help these poor people.”

We stopped then. “Come, you will meet one of the ladies who makes the pillow covers.”

Vivian got out of the car.

“Pat, they are leery of foreigners here. Your red hair is very noticeable. Cover all of it, and take off your shoes when you are invited to enter.”

Had the network reached this far? A small, worn, barefoot woman, wearing a long dress and a scarf over her hair, came from her doorway, arms outstretched, smiling and welcoming, “Marhaba, Umm Zaki.” She also recognized Vivian and took her hand. When Leila spoke with her, she gestured to me to follow into her house. We all removed our shoes.

The house was pathetically bare. There were no cupboards or furniture. Several thin mattresses were stacked on one side of the room. On the other side were shelves made from cardboard boxes which contained dishes and clothing. The lower portion of the walls had been painted a vivid aqua, with a splattering of white polka dots. Spread out on the bare floor before us were a dozen or so completed pillow fronts, containing thousands of tiny stitches. Every hole in the canvases had been filled with brilliant colors and glorious designs. We sat on one of the mattresses pulled down for us so Leila could inspect the work closely. The woman asked for approval of her work by handing each one to Leila expectantly, waiting to hear *kwayyis*, meaning “good.”

We didn't want to distract Leila, so Vivian leaned close to me so we could talk quietly. "Umm Ruz has been working to complete these covers since Leila's last visit when she brought the threads and canvases. Leila will take these fronts to another woman in Amman who will finish them. After the bazaar, Leila will deduct the cost of material and thread and will use the rest to buy food, fuel, and medicine for Umm Ruz and the finisher."

"When is the bazaar?" I asked.

"Oh, in a few months," she answered offhandedly.

"But there's no light in here. It's freezing cold, and this woman is barefoot! We can see our breath, for God's sake! How can she sew under these conditions?" Leila's glance indicated my whispers had escalated. When she continued her conversation with Umm Ruz, Vivian resumed the story.

"She sits in the doorway during the daylight hours and works as long as she can. She has to support her children."

"Children? You mean children live here, too?"

"She has six children. They attend UNRWA<sup>1</sup> schools here in the camp. We passed one when we entered. None of her children is old enough to support the family. Her husband is dead. She is raising them from the sewing that Leila obtains for her."

"Vivian, I have some money with me. Please take it. She needs fuel oil now, not in July." I reached for my purse.

"I can't take it. Money never changes hands. Leila knows what each family needs. She has kerosene and rice and bread for this woman in the trunk of her car, but she will not give money. It is against her principles."

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Relief and Works Agency for the Near East

Leila rose, her business concluded. She took most of the covers with her, leaving only two to be improved. The woman accompanied us to the car to help remove bags of groceries and more thread and canvases. She hugged Leila, smiling, and shook our hands good-bye.

As soon as the car doors closed, my questions started. “Leila, why do they call you Umm Zaki? Why not Leila?”

“A Muslim woman becomes *Umm* or ‘mother of’, followed by the name of her first child, and a man becomes *Abu* or ‘father of’, followed by the name of the first child. So each parent has two names. I am Leila and Umm Zaki. My husband is Yahya and Abu Zaki. If the first child is a girl, you are Umm and her name until a boy is born. Then you take his name. It is the name of the oldest son that is important.”

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I changed the subject. “How old is Umm Ruz?”

“She is thirty-two,” Leila answered, after calculating a little.

“She looks closer to fifty!”

“This is a hard life. There have been many sorrows for these women. And no end seems to be coming.”

*Thirty-two*, I thought. That was only a little older than my eldest daughter, soon to graduate with a degree in veterinary medicine, with her whole life before her. Umm Ruz had looked so tired. So old. Yet her face had shone with pride when Leila complimented her. What a brave soul she was, to create art of infinite beauty and variety in the midst of this gray and stultifying misery.

I asked one last question. “Leila, is there some meaning in the way Umm Ruz used the paint in her house?”

“Yes, Pat.” There was the slightest edge to Leila’s voice. “Umm Ruz sits on the floor to do her work. She was trying to brighten the lower part of the room, what she sees and where she props up the pillows to rest her back during the day. She used white to add a little interest, but she ran out of paint before she could finish.”

Her answer silenced me. There was so much to learn about the plight and the pride of the refugees.

We pulled up at another gate. A rickety fence surrounded two small buildings. As we entered, I observed that one was used as a kitchen/storeroom, and the other, where we sat, was the living room/bedroom. The cooking was done outdoors over an open fire. Seven women had assembled, their several children with them. Shoes were again removed, scarves donned, mattresses put down. We sat with our backs against the wall, our legs tucked under us. (It is an insult to show the bottoms of your feet to anyone). Leila began talking with the women, while I tried to follow the conversation. A project was obviously under way: boxes of embroidery floss were brought out and threads selected; material was examined for flaws and measured from nose-to-arm length.

In the midst of this busy camaraderie, one woman left the group and returned with a tray of food which she placed on the floor in the center of the group. I watched the women dip thin Arab bread in oil and then into a green powder before eating it. There were also hot hard-boiled, eggs, sliced tomatoes, sweet coffee, and tea. The women urged me to help myself with their eyes and gestures. I hesitated, knowing how desperately they needed the food themselves, but when Vivian and Leila told me the women would be highly insulted if I did not partake, I helped myself to an egg—something I recognized. There was more urging.

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Then she said, “We are stopping at Baqa’a so I can show you the school library I am building.”

“You’re building a library? For how many students?”

“Twenty-five hundred girls. There are so many, they must go in two shifts.”

Imagine being able to say, offhandedly, that you were building a library for twenty-five hundred children. I pictured it in my mind’s eye. Rows and rows of books to teach the children about the world outside the camp, inviting them to become a part of that world, inspiring them to leave this squalor.

We turned into Baqa’a Camp. All I’d seen that morning was repeated. The narrow, rutted streets, the sewage flowing down shallow trenches in the middle of every roadway, the teeming humanity. Disaster films flashed through my mind—houses falling to pieces, and endless streams of half-clothed people running through the streets, with expressions of bewilderment. It couldn’t be happening, their expressions said. Yet here they were, and it was.

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When we reached the school, hundreds of girls surrounded the car shouting for Umm Zaki. The principal, buttoned up in a drab floor-length coat, with a scarf over her hair, met us in the doorway. Vivian whispered, “Strict Muslim women allow only members of their family to see them with their hair uncovered or their arms and legs bare.”

The principal returned to her desk, a poorly made table covered with oilcloth. Several sagging shelves next to the door contained papers which appeared to be homework or loose sheets belonging to the teachers. Otherwise, the room was bare. There was no telephone, no carpet, no file cabinet, nothing to indicate her status. After greeting us warmly in English, she gave Leila the key to the library. The building stood next to her office. Again, the cement blocks,

the cement floor, the holes waiting for windows. The room was rectangular and about the size of three of the rooms we had just visited. Four bare light bulbs hung from the ceiling. Against the back wall were shelves constructed of poor quality plywood. A counter of the same material limited access to the shelves, which contained twenty-six books for twenty-five hundred students. Twenty-six books. Leila saw my dismay.

“It is a beginning. We have donations of English books. The children need Arabic books. They are not easy to get. We have no paper. The government has started a tree-growing project. Someday we will have forests. Now, it isn’t easy. When the children finish their lesson books, they must erase all the marks and reuse the paper. There is no money for more. Paper is very expensive.” The principal then joined us for a while. After a few words with her, we said good-bye.

I could see that Leila wasted no time, a woman after my own heart. I asked her what her visit had accomplished.

“Today was to see the progress. The windows must be donated and delivered. We want to plant trees outside. The people will use this room as a social center as well. We must get tables and chairs. So I see what they need and get it.”

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