

# NO Longer a Refugee

On September 6, 1970, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine hijacked four planes over Western Europe. The attempt to hijack the El-Al flight was unsuccessful. Leila Khaled has since told her part in the hijacking to George Hajjar, a Palestinian who has edited her story. It was published in The Sunday Telegraph, May 20, 1973 (London).

Leila's family had fled from Haifa to Lebanon during the war of 1948. We chose to include a condensation of this article in respect of a woman whose human compassion and political commitment have moved her to be, as she says, "No longer a refugee, but a revolutionary," fighting for the liberation of the Palestinian people.

In my capacity as soldier, I was selected to carry out foreign operations. Unfortunately however, my identity had been revealed by the Syrian authorities in 1969 when comrade Salim Issawi and I landed the TWA 840 in Damascus. My name and photograph have probably appeared in every paper in the west.

In March 1970, I underwent plastic surgery so that I could continue our planned military operations. Three painful operations were performed, the last a few days before the hijacking.

I met my partner in the operation, Patrick Arguello, for the first time in early September in front of the air terminal in Stuttgart. The following day we flew to Frankfurt. The next stop was Amsterdam. On September 6, Patrick and I met in front of El-Al's counter at 10 a.m. As we waited for the office to open, Pan Am Flight 840 arrived and I happily remembered TWA Flight 840 of August 29, 1969. I was not aware at that moment that two of our comrades, having been barred in an earlier attempt by the Israelis, were on their own to seize Pan Am Flight 840. They took the 747 to Cairo where they blew it up as a declaration of Palestinian independence.

Suddenly an armed police officer in Israeli uniform emerged. He demanded, "Your passport, please." I did not pretend to be other than calm Maria Sanchez from Honduras. Routine questions went on for several minutes. Suddenly I heard loud voices. I saw three Arabs walking in my direction. My heart sank. I knew and recognized one of them. What if he greeted me?



Fortunately the Israeli officer had his back to them. Since we were already holding hands for his benefit, I quickly threw my arms around Patrick. He seemed a little surprised, but what man will rebuff a woman under such conditions? The embrace lasted until my Arab friend passed by unnoticed by the El-Al officer.

As we re-entered the hall, I saw some 30 or 40 youngsters waiting to board El-Al Flight 219. I was shocked and once again I had to face the agonizing problem of what to do to avoid hurting children.\* I love children and I know they are free from guilt. I vowed to do my utmost not to jeopardize the lives of the passengers needlessly. I sat paralyzed for a few seconds, wrestling with the moral issues of our action.

I realized that the enemy's fortress was not impregnable as I ascended the plane with twelve guards of honour bearing sub-machine guns guaranteeing my "security."

\*Leila Khaled related in an article about the 1969 hijacking: "While these qualms pricked my conscience, the whole history of Palestine and her children came before my eyes. I saw everything from the first day of my exile. I saw my people homeless, hungry, barefoot. The twice "refugee" children of Bagan camp near Amman seemed to stand a humiliated multitude in front of me saying, 'we too are children and we are a part of the human race.' The scene strengthened me enormously. 'What crime did I and my people perpetrate against anyone to deserve the fate we have suffered?' The answer was 'None.' The operation must be carried out.



Patrick and I were finally seated together. About half an hour after take off Patrick prepared his hand grenade and pistol, and I pulled the safety pins off my two hand grenades and rushed forward through the first-class section and towards the cockpit. We shouted "Don't move," as some of the passengers tried to take cover. Three stewards were in front of us wielding hand guns. In a couple of seconds I could count six guns. Shots were fired. The plane went into a spin. The firing continued and suddenly I found myself besieged by a pack of wolves, El-Al staff as well as passengers. Someone succeeded in prying one of the grenades from me without exploding himself and the plane. I held tightly to the other until I was knocked unconscious for a second and was overpowered. I fought until I was exhausted.

Patrick was lying bleeding profusely and breathing heavily, too weak to resist. An Israeli guard started tying Patrick up with wires and a necktie. The man stepped on Patrick's hips and Patrick looked at me in agony, his hands tied behind his back. Then the Zionist guard fired four shots into Patrick's back.

Then came my turn. I was tied up in the same fashion. As they finished tying me up the pilot announced, "We are going to Tel Aviv." Yet within minutes I felt the plane descend and then touch down.

The passengers disembarked. I could hear the sound of an ambulance outside. British officers stepped into the fray, identifying themselves as members of Scotland Yard. The captain told them, "To hell with you and your government. She is my prisoner. Get out of this plane." The British officers tried to seize me. Three Israelis pulled me in one direction by my trussed up legs; the British pulled my hands in the other in a tug of war which the British won. A great husky English officer carried me over his shoulders and

13 threw me down to the waiting arms of two British officers below. I was in British hands. I knew it would be safer here for me than in Tel Aviv.

The British placed Patrick and me in some kind of police ambulance. I was hoping against hope that Patrick would live. Within minutes, however, I knew he was dead. I held his hands. I kissed his lips in a spirit of camaraderie and love, I wept unashamedly.

I was taken to a hospital and given a general check up. A journalist there recognized me. An officer asked if Leila was my name. I absolutely refused to utter a single word beyond "I am a commando from the Popular Front," unless they agreed to recognize me as a commando and treat me as a war prisoner.

The first night was a nightmare. I felt terrible because I had failed to seize and retain El-Al Flight 219 and I felt shattered over the death of comrade Arguello. I couldn't sleep for an hour without waking up.

I was moved to Ealing Police Station on September 7. Here I was placed in a cell by myself. Two women officers guarded me. We exchanged few words. I asked to see newspapers. They said I could read a women's magazine. I said, "No thanks."

On September 8, some inspectors wanted to interrogate me. Among other questions they asked me, "Why would an Arab Palestinian woman try to blow up a plane on which there were Palestinian Arabs?" "Look," I replied, "I had orders to seize the plane, not to blow it up. I am no Kamikaze pilot. I care about people. If I'd wanted to blow up the plane no one could have prevented me."

In this relaxed atmosphere, I told the officers that I had committed no crime against the British and I could see no reason why I was being kept in a British gaol. I asked if any Israelis were also held in gaol. "None," they said. I exploded: "Why not? Don't you know they executed my comrade in cold blood." Your colleague was killed in battle. The coroner's verdict says his death was 'lawful homicide'." "Shame on the British courts," I cried.

On September 9, a BOAC VC-10 was hijacked. I knew my release was imminent. Mr. Frew, a British inspector, told me I must have known what was going on. I said, "The Front knows what it is doing. I need not wait for a recommendation of clemency from a British jury."

On September 10, the ghost of Patrick haunted me. I couldn't stay my tears. The matron tried to calm me, she was a kindly woman and gave me helpful advice, but feelings of sadness and anguish aren't something that can be erased by a few motherly words. I was cheered up a little, however, when I learned that the P.F. was demanding my return in exchange for BOAC passengers.

September 11 was a day for banter. It started with a visit from the envoy of Honduras, a corpulent, moustached feudal lord. He was introduced as His Excellency, the Consul of Honduras. He asked, "How did you obtain this Honduran passport?" I answered contemptuously: "Did the PF disguise you and send you here as a fictitious banana republic ambassador?" His Excellency was



The fence of dispossession in Rafiah  
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infuriated. He departed like a vanquished Napoleon.

Mr. Frew visited me once again. He asked me if the Front would explode the plane with the passengers as was reported by the "objective" British press that day. "Yes," I said unhesitatingly. "What," he asked, "have you no humanity?" "Humanity my foot!" I shouted. "You should be ashamed to utter such a word in the West. If you have any integrity you'd remove that word from your dictionaries and declare it a non-English word."

The next two weeks I settled into an established routine. I tried to maintain my composure and act naturally, but it was a difficult job. The turmoil in Jordan disturbed me deeply.\*\* Mr. Frew was a daily visitor. He wondered why Moslems fought each other instead of the enemy camp. Frew listened intently, but like most of his Western compatriots, he was unable to grasp the idea of social class and its historical implications. He only accused me of being bitter.

On September 28, it was reported that President Nasser had died. I was stunned, emotionally paralyzed. The feelings I had when Che Guevara and Ho Chi-Minh died returned. This time perhaps more poignantly, for I was, as every Arab was at one time or other, an admirer of Nasser. As a giant among dwarfs, he symbolised everything noble, great and weak among the Arabs.

On September 29, Frew intimated that I might soon be released. I checked the newspapers closely for clues as to when the last six hostages were going to be surrendered to the International Red Cross Committee. They finally were on September 30. The moment the hostages reached Cyprus, I was instructed to prepare for departure.

The matrons told me that people were lining up in the streets to see me, but they were going to be sadly disappointed as I would be taken out covered up, in a van. I was surprised to be accompanied by a whole convoy of police cars and motorcycles. I was allowed one quick look at the crowd and I flashed a victory sign to the photographers.

We travelled by helicopter for about an hour and then landed at another nameless airport. I noted to the captain that helicopters are more difficult to hijack than regular planes. He didn't appreciate my sense of humor.

Suddenly we descended in Munich. The airport was a garrison. I boarded a plane. Three brothers from the Action Organization were brought aboard. Next stop was Zurich where my inspiration, Amina Dahbour, and comrades Ibrahim Tewfig and Mohammad Abu Al-Haija came aboard. I wanted to hug Amina, but it was not permitted.

We arrived in Cairo on October at 8 a.m. The city was in mourning for the death of President Nasser. We were taken to an Egyptian "guesthouse" and held there for 11 days -- we were told for "security reasons."

On October 12 we were flown to Damascus. For the next few weeks I spent most of my time giving press interviews and preparing to marry a fellow fighter, Bassim, an Iraqi Arab revolutionary. We got married on November 26, spent a week together and then returned to our separate tasks.



\*\*In Jordan's capital, Amman, there was fighting between Hussein's Army and the Palestinians.