

# The Suffering during Civil War through the People's History

Rosette Fadel\*

On April 13 and 14, 2019 at the American University of Beirut, tenth grade students in eight public schools, in a closing exhibition for the oral history program titled «From Local History Toward Better Understanding of the Past», shed light on social stories based on real life events, personal experiences and impressions, and various aspects of the daily lives of people from different parts of Mount Lebanon, a region that has witnessed violent conflicts over the course of Lebanon's modern history.

This trailblazing and exemplary step, launched by the Lebanese Association for History (LAH) in partnership with forumZFD, includes more than 200 students who have carried out projects to collect oral history through interviews conducted with figures chosen from their communities to talk to them about daily life in their areas during the violent conflicts, and help them form a picture of the social, cultural and economic changes that have affected the day-to-day life of the Lebanese. Some groups chose to highlight the effects on education, such as the conditions in which students attended school, while others chose to examine changes in modes and means of mobility, or displacement, and other topics such as women's role during these difficult circumstances.

## A People's History

«This approach is new in Lebanon with regard to teaching history, as we have focused on the people's history,» said Nayla Khodr Hamadeh, LAH president. According to Hamadeh, what is more important about this two-year project is that «it has contributed to introducing new approaches for curriculum makers so that they focus on social human history when dealing with critical stages, and enhance students' critical thinking skill so that they draw lessons from the past and better understand the present.» She added, «What students gain through this experience, through collecting oral stories and histories, from basic learning skills, such as formulating questions, and analyzing historical narratives and transmitting them. The most interesting component of this project is that it gives students the ability and self-confidence to make a unique contribution to the historical record on a subject that is of great significance to their present and future. It also shapes a clearer view of the past. And helps them build their own understanding of the past with a greater ability to accept difference, diversity and respect for others.»

«We thought it would be better to review the recent period of Lebanon's history by delving into the experiences of ordinary people,» said Jenny Monroe, project leader at the Forum Civil Peace Service. «The project seeks to engage many groups in a discussion about violent conflicts in a way that is unifying and respectful of diversity and difference, by launching a cross-generational conversation between students and people who have witnessed conflicts with their own eyes, and working with teachers and students, based on our conviction that this course will encourage an approach to many stories that steer clear of political analysis and description of battles,» Monroe added.

«In fact, oral history allows us to shed light on various narratives and perspectives about the past, making it



Visitors sharing their experience during the Civil War © Joelle El Dib - LAH

a particularly useful and effective approach to dealing with the past, especially when this past is contentious,» Monroe said.

«We have worked with the students to prepare the narrator's questions, with a possibility for students to interact with any question during the narrator's recounting of his story,» said one of the teachers involved in the project. «Students found that the suffering of people is the same during violent conflicts. No one wins when violence is used, everyone loses and people's pain is the same in all the stories.»

## A Bottom-Up Approach

What is oral history, and what is its significance? «Oral history is an academic discipline that includes the recording of the verbal inventory of people who lived at a certain stage, and the storing of their memories and interpretations,» said Dr. Maria Abunnasr, an expert in this discipline and the consultant for this program. «As an academic discipline, it requires many approaches and perspectives, allowing history to be told bottom-up, and not vice versa, that is, the story of people in the face of the story derived from those in power,» said Abunnasr. «It focuses on recording what is on the lips of people who are often not included in the 'official' narrative of history.»

Abunnasr also talked about project logistics, noting that teachers have learned «over the course of four workshops about oral history in theory and in

practice so that they can work with their students on collecting oral histories in their communities.»

One of the participating teachers in the workshops assessed the project as being «based on the personal experiences of the people of the region, having nothing to do with politics or political intervention in recounting the incidents, transmitted by the people themselves.» She expressed that she was looking forward to the opening of the closing exhibition with the participation of students, administrative and educational families, people of the areas covered by the studies, and civil society so that we can all learn about our social history. «We have learned in the workshops the methods of teaching the subject in interactive ways, and we contributed through a full class every week to making students not just mere recipients of the information, but rather active participants,» she said.

Thus, oral history is practically an ideal approach to bridging the distance between the emerging generation, and it is a smooth and exciting educational method through which students learn that the suffering and pain is the same in times of distress, fear, and war. Oral history can serve as a lesson for deterring war among people, and for commemorating April 13 so that it is «remembered but not repeated».

\* Journalist for the An-Nahar daily specialized in educational, social and cultural affairs and media advisor to local and international organizations, and to private universities