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# Ada, Ida, and Sadi

## Decades of Work for Peace

David Lapp-Jost

As Mennonites reflect on many decades of engagement in Israel-Palestine in light of the current war in the region, their memories will likely include stories about the work of Ada and Ida Stoltzfus—Mennonite twin sisters from Pennsylvania who dedicated nearly thirty-eight years of their lives to running an orphanage/school in Hebron from the 1950s to the 1990s. Fewer know the story of one of their students, Sadi Othman, who became a lifelong friend of theirs—a peacemaker who worked through the US military to help soldiers and Iraqis understand each other and bring stability in a complex and violent context. Seen together, these stories paint a hopeful picture of fruitful work, despite decades of tragedies and difficult working conditions. We long for peace and justice in Israel-Palestine. As we currently face bleak and generally worsening conditions for people in the land, it is helpful to think multigenerationally and see how values and vision can be passed on and yield results that might never have been imagined.

### North American Mennonites in Israel-Palestine

North American Mennonite engagement in the region today called Israel-Palestine began in 1919 and continued until 1921 as a part of a broader response to the turmoil in the Near East that accompanied the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>1</sup> Hundreds of years of relative stability dissolved in that period into political uncertainty and intervals of widespread violence that continues to this day in former Ottoman domains in the Caucuses, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt.<sup>2</sup> Through a partnership with a broader Christian aid soci-

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1 Guy F. Hershberger and Atlee Beechy, “Relief Work,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1956/1989, [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Relief\\_Work&oldid=177254](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Relief_Work&oldid=177254).

2 A former MCCer in Iraq refers to MCC regional meetings—which in that time included workers from the Middle East, Balkans, and Ukraine—as “MCC-Former Ottoman Empire,” an appropriate designation.

ety and with support from several Mennonite charities, Orrie O. Miller—who would become an integral founder of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in the coming years—and other Mennonite aid organizers dedicated thirty-one workers to this endeavor.<sup>3</sup> The cost of the material aid and labor was \$339,000—comparable to about \$6 million in 2024 dollars—for projects in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine.<sup>4</sup> In scale, this was probably about a sixth as much investment as the funds dedicated to the far-better-known Mennonite efforts in Ukraine in the next few years through MCC—a very significant commitment.

During World War II, the Middle East was a minor area of work for MCC, but MCC maintained a presence in Egypt supporting Greek and Yugoslav refugees. MCC also maintained a presence in the region that would become Jordan, supporting Palestinian refugees.<sup>5</sup> From 1936 to 1939—quite independent of the timeline of war in Europe—Palestinians had launched an uprising against nearly two decades of British occupation, and many had been displaced as a joint force of British soldiers and Jewish militia killed, injured, jailed, or exiled as many as 10 percent of Palestinian males.<sup>6</sup>

The Shoah/Holocaust and the urgency of Jewish security needs in the wake of genocide in Christian Europe led, over several years, to further Jewish migration to Palestine and Jewish armed groups creating the state of Israel and expelling about 750,000 Palestinians. This was one of many and ongoing waves of ethnic cleansing of Palestinians since the 1930s. The newly created state of Israel left chaos in its wake as the entire country of Jordan, the future Palestinian enclave of Gaza, and Nazareth and significant parts of the Israeli Arab north became majority-refugee communities. The city of Hebron also became a severely afflicted community, with a huge intake of refugees from the rest of Israel-Palestine.

## Ada and Ida Stoltzfus

Into this context came Ada and Ida Stoltzfus in 1952 on a mission of coordinating relief support from the US and listening and learning to identify how best to engage. Their work stretched longer and longer, becoming years and then decades. By 1953 their work took on institutional form—an orphanage and school, supported in its early years by MCC, where Ada and Ida dedicated the

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3 One of these workers, Menno Shellenberger (Kansas), died during his term abroad (Hershberger and Beechy, “Relief Work”).

4 Hershberger and Beechy, “Relief Work.”

5 Hershberger and Beechy, “Relief Work.”

6 Rashid Khalidi, “The Palestinians and 1948: The Underlying Causes of Failure,” in *The War for Palestine*, eds. Eugene Rogan and Avi Shlaim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 12–36.

bulk of their career.<sup>7</sup> Over the following three and a half decades, twelve hundred children lived with the Stoltzfus sisters, largely due to impoverished conditions and separated families.

Ada and Ida's life in the orphanage was complex. They worked in a fractured, traumatized, and traditional context, and it is doubtless no simple matter to assess their work. Certainly they were unique. Hebron is and was almost 100 percent Muslim with no Christian congregations, and within Palestinian Islam it is considered a bastion of conservatism. Ada and Ida and many others remarked that only as women were they able to do their work; men would have been considered too threatening and too likely to establish a truly competing religious community. The sisters balanced their own Christian perspective with the local regulatory requirement to have Muslim teachers instructing about Islam, and they always had to balance sharing their faith with the religious commitments and expectations of their host community.

Ada and Ida understood themselves as evangelicals, although this is not a prominent theme in their autobiography and accounts differ regarding the extent of their evangelicalism. Some who volunteered with them or came from the Hebron community highlight their openness and the good relationship they cultivated with conservative Muslims. Others remember their partnering with evangelism-focused, soul-winning US partners in receiving volunteers and partners with that orientation. Ada and Ida certainly required chapel attendance in which they taught, to some extent, a straightforward mid-twentieth-century Lancaster Mennonite theology that emphasized salvation through faith, evangelism, and strict day-to-day practices. Mennonite and other Christian volunteers and supporters helped sustain the school/orphanage after MCC and the school parted ways, and Palestinian Christians in the region had more influence at the school than they could have attained in Hebron otherwise.

Present-day community perception of the school seems to be positive, at least according to my interactions with a former student and the child of a former teacher. And one story from a former principal tells of a new imam coming to a mosque in the neighborhood. During Friday prayers one week, the imam said that parents should not send their children to a Christian school. But so many parents vouched for the school and spoke up about their good experiences that the next week the imam said it was ok to send children to the Christian school and that they are well-treated there. The street the school is on was officially renamed "Mennonite Street."

In a similar vein, a great many Arabs are not uncomfortable in openly Christian spaces, with a religion that explicitly tolerates fellow peoples of the book

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<sup>7</sup> Alain Epp Weaver and Sonia Weaver, *Salt and Sign: Mennonite Central Committee in Palestine, 1949–1999* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 1999). I am drawing on family discussions with and about Ada and Ida in this paper.

and with a long history of coexistence. Sometimes in highly religious cultures a religiously ambivalent attitude is more disconcerting than clear difference. To secular people in the West, evangelicalism can be a very uncomfortable tradition, but sometimes for Muslims in highly religious Muslim spaces, secular people are almost less comfortable conversation partners than Christians.

Through the decades, the Stoltzfus sisters offered a window into Palestine for many in their home community in the United States. They saw multiple waves of massive ethnic cleansing and shared what they saw with others while home in the US. And many who visited Israel-Palestine saw for themselves. In Hebron, Ada and Ida knew people displaced by early Zionists and the British-Jewish suppression of the 1936 to 1939 revolt. They also knew some of the roughly 750,000 people displaced in the Nakba and directly saw many more out of the 250,000 to 350,000 Palestinians displaced in 1967.<sup>8</sup> They knew generations of Palestinians in the city of Hebron—current population 200,000—that were continuously abused and occupied by a few hundred Jewish settlers who were part of a fanatical colony founded in 1967.

Hebron is still a city experiencing intense abuse at the hands of soldiers and settlers who occupy its core, block off many of its streets, continually harass its inhabitants, and have devastated its economy.<sup>9</sup> It is also a city with deep traumas for Muslims and Jews: An Arab pogrom against the Jewish community in 1928 and then Baruch Goldstein's Al Ibrahimi Mosque Massacre in 1994 each injured or killed over one hundred people. Hebron is a place where both the fierce violence and day-to-day banal cruelty of occupation and colonization are visible. Part of the legacy of the Stoltzfus sisters was the Mennonite world seeing earlier and more clearly what is far more obscure to most US Americans—that the creation and continuous expansion of Israeli settlement has significant and terrible consequences for the people of Palestine and the world's billions of Muslims and hundreds of millions of Arabs who bear witness.

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8 Dalia Karpel, "The Palestinians Who Didn't Flee During the Nakba," *Haaretz*, September 22, 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2017-09-22/ty-article-magazine/.premium/the-palestinians-who-didnt-flee-during-the-nakba/0000017f-e0bc-d75c-a7ff-fcbdbc840000>. See also Nathan Citino, Ana Martín Gil, and Kelsey P. Norman, "Generations of Palestinian Refugees Face Protracted Displacement and Dispossession," *Migration Policy Institute*, May 3, 2023, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/palestinian-refugees-dispossession>.

9 For a detailed perspective of life in Hebron, see the recent film "Light," written and directed by Ahmad Abu Monshar and Community Peacemaker Teams Palestine, <https://cpt.org/programs/palestine/light-documentary>.

## Sadi Othman

One person to come out of this context and do powerful work for good was a student of Ada and Ida's—Sadi Othman.<sup>10</sup> As a six-year-old, Sadi came to the orphanage along with his mother, who was hired as a worker caring for children when she could not take care of him and his siblings after his father died in an accident in Brazil, where the family had emigrated. Sadi lived with the Stoltzfus sisters for his entire childhood, and, with their recommendation and connection, he continued with his secondary education at the Beit Jala Mennonite school, now the Hope School. Later, again through Mennonite connections, Sadi found his way to Hesston College in Kansas, where he forged further lifelong Mennonite relationships.

After his studies, Sadi worked for a time in New York as a taxi driver; he was there on 9/11. In later interviews and conversations, Sadi expressed anger and deep shame that the perpetrators of this attack were Muslim like him. When the US invaded Iraq, Sadi thought the decision to attack was wrong, foolish, and reckless, but he enlisted as a translator with the US military. He would later say that he wanted to help Iraqis and American soldiers understand each other, to mitigate conflict.

Sadi's service as a translator brought him to Mosul, Iraq, in 2004, and one day when he came out of a restroom on the base, he ran into a middle-aged officer in jogging shorts. Standing six-foot-seven-inches tall, Sadi was quite noticeable, and the officer was struck by this very imposing Arab. He asked Sadi about his work and who he was. Sadi answered. Then the officer asked how Sadi thought the US was doing. Sadi responded honestly that the war was going poorly and that US Americans lacked cultural and linguistic comprehension and perspective. The officer said, "Well, my name is General Petraeus," and quickly invited Sadi to be his advisor.

Sadi is recognized by Iraqis and the US army and diplomatic services to have played an integral role in the US war effort, but from a perspective of negotiation, diplomacy, and peacebuilding. The military awarded him its highest honor for civilians—the Civilian Award for Humanitarian Service. Sadi fit naturally in the Iraqi tea tradition, visiting over tea with numerous stakeholders in Iraq's development and conflicts and talking long into the night. He was also a sensitive and

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10 This and following paragraphs are based on conversations with Sadi Othman. Othman has reviewed this paper for accuracy. See also Maranatha Prothro and Dave Osborne, "Communication for a Global Impact," Hesston College, December 5, 2014, <https://www.hesston.edu/hesstoncollegetoday/article/communication-global-impact/>; and David Lapp Jost, "Mennonite-Trained Pacifist Helped U.S. Army Defuse Conflict in the Middle East," *Mennonite Mission Network*, September 16, 2020, <https://www.mennonitemission.net/resources/peace/4291/Mennonite-trained-pacifist-helped-U-S-Army-defuse-conflict-in-the-Middle-East>.

thoughtful interpreter, mediating cultural differences while translating for top figures, including Iraq's prime minister and other national leaders, and for such American figures as President Obama, State Secretary Hillary Clinton, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, former Secretary of State Colin Powell, and former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Sadi was involved in numerous significant developments in US relationships in the region. He mediated after the US accidentally struck Turkish soldiers in the north. He played a vital role in a diplomatic-civil society movement called the "Sunni Awakening," in which Iraqi leaders in central and western Iraq gradually severed ties with many Al Qaeda elements connected to their communities. This movement corresponded with huge reductions in the number of suicide attacks and significant improvement in the security situation in central and western Iraq. Iraqi and US politicians honored Sadi specifically for his work in this communication with Sunni leaders.

In these matters, Sadi was serving American interests, but interests that also mostly corresponded with the security needs of Iraqis. Many Mennonites may struggle to see how serving those interests could be compatible with a commitment to peacemaking. Although a larger discussion about this topic is beyond the scope of this article, my hope is that the ambiguities in Sadi's story will not lead us to overlook the important contributions he made to helping Arab communities choose against worsening internal violence. As an Arab and severe critic of the invasion and occupation, Sadi was well-positioned to communicate from a position of concern for Iraqi people while working in ways that fit the US-American security agenda of pacifying Iraq.

Sadi Othman was awarded the highest civilian honor of the US military for this diplomatic and peace work and his contributions were significant, but the background scenario and work was morally fraught. Inevitably in his field he was involved in violent and questionable work. Many US commanders and soldiers were complicit in war crimes, and, indeed, Sadi is quoted in a negative light in many online articles that focus on US efforts to cover up or minimize accountability for committing torture. Many of Sadi's high-up colleagues were complicit in the invasion of Iraq, locally and globally unpopular occupations in Iraq or Afghanistan, and numerous other interventions and violent operations of US forces. No doubt Sadi's work reflected the interests and values of many Iraqis, and he has visited Iraq and many top Iraqi politicians since his years of service there. But he was also serving US interests.

During and after his work in Iraq, Sadi identified as a pacifist and identified with the Stoltzfus sisters. This author first learned about his story from an interview in a news magazine concerning the Iraq war.<sup>11</sup> The last question in the inter-

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11 I read this interview in a magazine in the Gift & Thrift Store in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and have been unable to locate it since.

view—the gist of which was “Sadi, how do you think of yourself?”—focused on how Sadi personally understood himself in view of having come from Palestine, lived in many different places, become a US American, and worked with different employers in various continents. He said, essentially, “I had two teachers who made such an impression on me growing up that I think of myself as Mennonite.”

Sadi has repeated this sense of affinity with cultural Mennonitism in many spaces, which for him largely means a commitment to peacemaking and Mennonite relationships. This feeling of connection is very meaningful to him and continues to take shape in meetings and exchanges—relating with former teachers from his schooling in Palestine, connecting at Hesston College, and fundraising with Conestoga Mennonite Church (Morgantown, Pennsylvania) to support the school in Hebron.

## Lessons from the Field

There is much we can learn about peace work from these stories. A first lesson could be to draw on the full wealth of one’s community, navigating around apparent political and theological barriers to open to the gifts of all, including those with approaches that may differ from our own. Ada and Ida, for example, were very traditional Mennonites. They wore coverings their whole adult lives, were evangelical, and, by the standards and norms of today’s church, were fairly coercive in their theological teaching, compelling student attendance in evangelistic chapels. They certainly did not have many years of background on Israel-Palestine or graduate education or the Arabic language, or a current-day sense of social justice issues. Nonetheless Ada and Ida clearly had much to offer, and their work bore a lot of fruit.

Still today we can look at various individuals, congregations, communities, and institutions and consider: What contributions can this community make to working for peace, justice, and the kingdom of God? Not everyone is equally well suited for all kinds of work, and, in fact, the different functions of the different parts of the body are written into our scripture (1 Cor 12). In peace and justice work, or looking at a region like Israel-Palestine, there are already-engaged, frequently politically progressive constituencies, but advocates for justice for Israel-Palestine ought to broaden the scope of people and projects in which we engage to draw on. We must value that people within and beyond Anabaptist communities, with a wide range of theological and political convictions can—like my great-aunts Ada and Ida, and Sadi Othman—learn from concrete experience of seeing the violence and injustice of the situation and respond in ways appropriate for them. Many of the dynamics of Israel-Palestine become clear to anyone who comes into the context with an open mind and recognizes the humanity of Palestinians. It is good to expose people with many different prior assumptions to the conflict and see what they see and observe how they respond.

Another lesson from the stories of the Stoltzfus sisters and Sadi Othman, as well as many other Christian and biblical stories, is that there can be a missional background thread holding together a story composed of many so-called missteps, or at least uncertain and contentious steps. Ada and Ida's professional path was complicated and bold, sometimes uncertain, and definitely unconventional in terms of career choice. And when MCC was no longer interested in supporting the school after a few years, the sisters navigated many resulting challenges. The process of separation from MCC after ten years with the institution, first in India and then in Palestine, was painful. Ada and Ida also embraced a degree of Christian evangelicalism that was a bridge and a novel direction for them the whole time in their ministry. After the end of their relationship with MCC, this bridge became an important connection to secure funding.

Sadi Othman's life path also included periods of uncertainty (taxi driving) and approaches that don't fit a progressive Mennonite path (going into the army). Nonetheless, I believe we see God at work along the way in his journey.

A final and hopeful lesson in this moment of despair in Israel-Palestine is this: We don't see the full fruit of our work during our lifetime. Ada and Ida died in the 1990s, long before Sadi did transformative peace work in Iraq, particularly with the Sunni Awakening. And Sadi was just one of many students at the orphanage/school in Hebron. Ada and Ida's work continues to resonate in the lives of their other students and generations after.

## God's Love for All People

We need stories like Ada and Ida and Sadi's. This is a moment of horrific loss and trauma in Israel-Palestine; Palestinian peacemakers and the small but brave Israeli community of solidarity are marginalized. Tens of thousands of children and babies have been killed or maimed for life, condemned to live with brain damage or missing limbs, missing parents and siblings who love them.<sup>12</sup> We do not even know what revenge will come for these atrocities. We cannot conceive of the evil our politicians and global community have unleashed.

But there is also good news that we cannot yet envision or even perhaps imagine—the legacies of acts of love undertaken today that will resonate through the years. In the lives of Palestinian and Jewish people who have survived and thrived during and after attempted genocide, we see that goodness also carries on and takes new forms, the fruits of positive action passing on from person to person and community to community. In these stories we see glimpses of a deeper Good News—the ongoing story of God's love for all people, especially those suffering in places like Palestine and Israel.

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12 Rasha Khatib, Martin McKee, and Salim Yusif, "Counting the Dead in Gaza: Difficult but Essential," *The Lancet* 404, no. 10449 (July 20, 2024): 237–38.