



Sedek

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Towards return
of Palestinian refugees

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TEN DAYS OF RETURN:

A SEGMENT OF THE DIARY OF REBIRTH OF A DIASPORA PALESTINIAN

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From the Arabic: Zahra Khalidi



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It all began with an email – “The Goethe Institute in Ramallah is pleased to invite you to read from your book” I suddenly regressed into a 10 year old child surprised at seeing his mother after a two year lapse. I shouted, clapped and ran to the kitchen to tell my girlfriend, who was preparing tea there ... I made her read the invitation out loud in order to make sure that my eyes were still functioning properly. Suddenly the smell of blood from the immense holy altar of human sacrifice that had been invading my nostrils for over half a century disappeared to be replaced by the fragrance of wild thyme and sage.

My eyes read Ramallah and my heart read: al-Qabba'a. This invitation put an end to a long term hesitancy that began on the day I had pocketed my German passport, when the idea of visiting Palestine had started to inhabit my mind and I had started to “resist” it.

10.12

My Inbox once again – An email from Wafa', the program coordinator at the Goethe Institute in Ramallah, in itself erased all other emails. It read: “I am surfing the internet for an appropriate airline ticket. Please don't book one before you send me a number of choices. You know we're running on a tight budget, so we have to save as much as we can.”

In order to rid myself of the numbness that had beset my brain, I actually began to search for trips over the internet, thus allowing the numbness to be replaced by a strange feeling of spiritual peace. A little later my brain began to chatter again:

“Do you want to return by Swiss Air, Turkish Airlines, or?”

Then I stopped this onset of self-ridicule and historical sarcasm.

Why not? You say to yourself – We used to say the “Train of Return” when airplanes were only used by the

aristocracy and the droves of returnees only expected to ride trains – or hang on to them. We used to say the Train of Return will pass through compulsory stations such as Amman, and for a very short time it became Damascus. Then it almost settled in Beirut, and after that we were unable to follow the tracks as it wound about in numerous directions – to Tunis and Khartoum, and in the opposite direction to the east and Baghdad, and then to the south, like Sana'a for example ... So we decided to throw away the train tickets in the first waste basket we could find ... and we also decided that the “Return” had undoubtedly noted the difficulties we were facing in reaching it. So in effect it had to come to us, and that was exactly what happened.

Yes, here was the Return, coming to me on its own two feet! I had waited and waited, and after it had lost patience it decided to take a personal initiative, and because it knew well enough how burnt up I had been with longing for it over the past fifty lean years, it decided to hide behind an innocent invitation from the Goethe Institute in Ramallah.

14.12

A new mobile without any contact numbers and a new passport without any stamps from the Arab capitals, that is, a passport especially issued for this trip. This was the advice I received from a number of people that I had consulted, whilst others added details that worsened the satanic image of the Zionist with a tail, a long pointed beard and a nose almost the same length, holding a whip in his hand.

The same story of impossible “Return” came back – Amman then Ramallah, then al-Qabba'a, of course. Just like a clown hoping to evade the Israeli checkpoint by not looking at it, I asked someone who had already made an attempt, and he said, “Don't try any of that stupidity, one interrogation is better than two or three, who knows?!” Thus, I decided with the force of my full mental faculties to land in Tel Aviv.

15.12

A new morning - There I was, striking each day off the calendar hanging on my wall, while getting rid of part of the “hangover” that was being replaced by a “thought” in my head. My alert brain was not sufficient to contain this thought, so it began to invade my sleep; and what an invasion?! It was one persistent and stubborn theme, even though it was interpreted each night in the form of a different story. It was the story of the last five years of my father’s life, which he spent crying over the loss of “al-Qabba’a” after realizing that he was going to die without seeing it again, until people thought that he had gone senile and started lamenting this prudent man’s surmise. This news arrived from Yarmouk refugee camp through my brothers, who lived there in the same home ... as I have not been allowed to visit Syria to this day. It was not novel for my father to remember al-Qabba’a, and I can hardly remember one day of my childhood when al-Qabba’a was not in his dreams or my mother’s dreams during the previous night ... until we the children imagined that we had experienced swimming in “al Maqlad Spring” or eating our fill of the figs and pomegranates in “Khillet al-Ein”, or the almond valley, until our grandfather “Hamada” would chastise us – as he was feared by both old and young – We saw all this through their eyes, which still resisted with every morning coffee to say goodbye to al-Qabba’a and return to the reality of the al-Yarmouk refugee camp. It was obvious that they would not succeed in achieving this “goodbye” ceremony before their death ... It was obvious that they would die before successfully saying that “goodbye” to al-Qabba’a. But before they died, they had already bequeathed me this set of characteristics for which they had suffered so much as they struggled to adapt to them and resist them at the same time:

Never feeling settled wherever you make a home for yourself

Never forgetting that al-Qabba’a, which is located

in the Safad district, is your original home.

They also instilled the use of whatever acrobatic balancing skills we could muster to reach a “middle” point between a feeling of hopelessness and a lethal longing for our return to al-Qabba’a. I could add to these inherited characteristics one more that I had gained through my own efforts – critical episodes of hatred for this “Qabba’a” that I had to carry like a burden on my shoulders wherever I went, without having once swum in one of its many springs or eaten even one of the figs or pomegranates considered communal property by every passerby along its roads or fences.

I asked myself whether one’s heart could sufficiently act as a compass, but the answer was “No”. So I decided to ask “Abdullah al-Rifa’i”, who was one of the longest living “willows”, who was still alive and remembered the “old times”. I did not interview him solely for that reason, but also asked him about the history of Qabba’a before the Nakba and during its occurrence. The interview can be accessed on the “Oral history of the Nakba” website on the internet. I later listened to it three times and drew up a map of the village with its valleys, springs and fig trees ... and despite the fact that I learnt it by heart, I hid it in my inside pocket as if it were a treasure sought after by all the world’s mafias.

I referred to the Internet once again to ask about the various airlines that pass through Tel Aviv. All airlines except El Al of course, and because of my enthusiasm for Erdogan, I chose Turkish airlines. I booked my flight over the internet and emailed a copy of the reservation confirmation for the winter season to the Goethe Institute in Ramallah. I requested the same electronic genie to carry me to Palestine. The first map came up, then the second ... My heart read in Arabic - Haifa, Gaza, Jerusalem, but my eyes complained each time they saw the prickly twisted nail-like figurations that were undoubtedly letters with which Tomer’s group wrote their magazine. I said to the genie – “Get me someone who can get rid of these nails”, so a young

woman and then an older man and others came along, all from the genie family of “Youtube” and that was the way I learnt to read Palestine in Hebrew.

18.12

- What are you doing this evening?
- Nothing
- Let's have dinner together ... one of Muna's friends from the Occupied Territories is coming to dinner, she wants to see us ... an Israeli ... But Muna says she is closer to our tribe. The dinner at the “Chief Comrade's” house in Berlin, my lifelong friend Zakariyya – always means the renewal of new revolutions or their burial. He was hosting “Tel”- her name was suitable for the geography of her city, composed of hills overlooking a desert, which made people think that God lived nearby, no doubt, so they filled it with temples and altars and called it Jerusalem ... that gentle, pleasant lady objected heatedly when she heard me saying, “Did the Zionist enemy arrive?” as I was greeting Zakariyya. Of course, I had not expected that she knew Arabic. Two hours later I knew that her husband was Palestinian and that there was a small organization that helps every Palestinian refugee who wants to find his/her village in “1948 Palestine”. One of Tel's pieces of advice to me was - “Try to meditate like a diligent Yogi when you sit in front of the interrogators at the airport”. Who would have the gumption after today to claim that the world was not full of happy co-incidences and that one of them was called “Tel” and the other “Zochrot”, naturally without forgetting the Goethe Institute.

20.12

At twelve o'clock I received a reply to the email I had sent at nine, which included my name and my desire to visit the village where my ancestors had been born. I wrote back in English, because everything implied that I was corresponding with Jews. However, I received two replies, one was in Arabic and the other

was in German!! It was understood that “Raneen”, who worked at Zochrot, would write to me in our national tongue, but where had the German come from? It was “Tomer's” German, which gave the impression that he only had a recent relationship with the language. He wrote “I am from Zochrot, I read your message, and since I will be in Berlin at the beginning of next January with my German wife, I thought we could see each other there, if you don't mind, of course. No doubt you have a thousand questions.”

22.12

I'll send you a copy of the invitation with the signature of the Institute Director; I advise you to make a colored print out. We will book a room for you at the “Ankars Suites Hotel”, where our guests usually stay. It's very reasonable and comfortable. Please tell me how long you are staying in Ramallah. We'll need you for one day, as for the rest of your stay it's up to you ... By the way, “Abu el ‘Abed” will wait for you in the taxi at the airport and take you to Ramallah.

This was the content of one of “Wafa's” last emails, and she had insisted on writing in German. I still don't know whether it was due to force of habit, since she had grown up in Germany, or to job requirements at the Institute, which was named after the prince of German poets and had a duty to disseminate German culture worldwide, or simply because she was not a confident writer of Arabic. On my part, I considered the issue of making a colored print out a youthful gimmick I didn't care for, and was satisfied to stay with my old “black and white”.

5.1.2010

Berlin – Hannibal Coffee Shop, smoker's section (which is almost a side corridor yawning behind the back end of the main hall). Tomer is a young man of 35, married to a German woman called “Mika”, thus I understood the secret behind his “Germanness”. As

for his “Zochrotness”, the reason was his enthusiasm for the Palestinian cause, in addition, perhaps to his feeling of guilt towards them, as in reality, he was living on their historical homeland.

Had the Carthaginian symbol been chosen by chance? Or was it because of its central position, or the fact that it was on the Turkish side of Kreutzberg – the neighborhood where the Germans have almost become an oppressed minority?

We met, and he had brought with him not only a map of northern Palestine, but also their organization’s magazine, which contained surveys of the Arab villages whose lands had been confiscated. I gazed at the pictures for a while. On two opposite pages, photos of the same village at different stages of time were depicted showing how its landmarks had been destroyed. The simple non-glossy printing paper, which was probably used because of the poverty of the organization, was an additional reason for my enthusiasm for the magazine. It was all in Hebrew. The only Arabic word used was “Sidik”, which was the name of the magazine, and it was printed under the Hebrew and English titles. While I was turning over the pages, I could almost hear the Hebrew language declaring its innocence throughout the long history ... as though it was saying to me “I, too, can be gentle.”

13.1

A fleeting occasion led me a day before I travelled to a photo-copying shop in town. I remembered the invitation and that it was better to have a colored print out. I said to myself: Who knows? So I reprinted the invitation in color this time ... I liked the green handwriting with which the Director of the Institute had signed, so I decided to laminate this copy in order to preserve it; no more and no less. After it was laminated, it could not be distinguished from an original. The invitation included, in addition to the main subject, i.e. reading from my book and participating in the ensuing

discussions, a detail that I had not requested, but which proved to be extremely useful as will become evident; it stated that I would be traveling around the Palestinian territories including Jerusalem. It was a sort of correct sixth sense that only women usually possess, exactly like the idea of a color print out.

14.1

The little plane on the screen in front of my seat indicated that we were now flying over Cyprus and I was truly flying. It was the very first time that I felt I was actually flying and not the airplane. Its route was known and clear and could be drawn on paper; in effect it was drawn on the map I could see on the small screen. As for me, I was still running away from solving my mother and father’s problem. I had not yet said goodbye to Palestine in order to enter Israel. My ears heard Jaffa instead of Tel Aviv, and when they said the plane was going to land in Ben Gurion Airport, my imagination could only conceive Lod Airport, and soon I remembered the Japanese Red Army. In the seats not very far away, I heard a Palestinian accent, and in a neighboring seat, I heard Hebrew. My heart insisted that I was going to Palestine, where part of it temporarily spoke Hebrew.

I tried to distract my heart’s attention by remembering what I had seen in transit in Istanbul, but the ploy failed. I tried to rid myself of the pangs of conscience embedded in the idea that I should not deal with anything Israeli apart from negotiating for their eviction from Palestine. These negotiations were not mentioned in the text of the invitation I carried. “So what should I do?” said my heart to my mind, the answer was “Each one of us should let the other alone”. Thus, I was able to give my whole attention to greeting the first stones of Jaffa “of the heart” through the window of the Turkish airline.

Our descent began.

I was the last one to leave the plane. The struggle

between my heart and my mind had paralyzed me, as well as the fear of the interrogation that was going to take place in a few seconds. I was also paralyzed by the feeling that this was my final exit from an ordinary life, that I was free falling into the unexpected ... so why the hurry?

Where were you born, Hussein?

I told him.

In my further contemplations I asked myself the same question, as if there was no answer in the German passport. And what answers came up!! Who knows how many times a spirit is reborn and in which part of the earth it happens?! I know my spirit particularly well, it is almost reborn every time I get to know a new woman. But the Ben Gurion employee proved to me beyond a doubt that the place mentioned in my passport was the best place to be born.

“Where is this “Sahm al-Joulán” located?”

I told him.

Afterwards my friends convinced me that the fool had thought I was a “Durzi” who had immigrated from the Golan.

What have you come to Israel for?

I took out the laminated invitation with the green signature with immense pride and explained its contents.

He didn’t ask further and I didn’t say anything. He just said, “Wait here”, so I waited.

Ten minutes later I told him that a taxi-driver was waiting for me outside and I emphasized “driver”. He said, “They’ll come soon”. They came – “they” were a woman in her forties. I felt a little more comfortable as women absorb aggressiveness from an environment like a ventilation shaft that sucks the smoke out of a crowded coffee shop. She spoke to me in English, exactly like her colleague, who it seemed did not know anything of the world other than that anywhere called Golan had to be in the Golan Heights. And exactly like her previous colleague her English gave you enough reason to be

confident in your own knowledge of languages. After waiting again in a small section with two rooms, where you can see everything going on inside while you are waiting outside, another one called me, and I sat at a table with her other colleague.

The “word games” continued for a little more than half an hour, but most of the time was spent in silence, according to the agreement I had contracted with myself in the plane.

Outside this background of silence:

What is your profession?

I’m a physician and a psychologist.

What does physician mean? she asked her colleague, so I said, It means doctor.

She phoned and spoke in Hebrew, but I understood the next two words which were in Latin - Doctor of Physics.

Later, my friends told me my advanced age and the “sophistication” of the green signature were behind my being saved from six to seven hours of “normal” interrogation. During those forty minutes my heart beat hard in my chest as I suppressed the urge to speak in Arabic. However, once I had passed through to pick up my luggage and saw my name written in Arabic on a small cardboard sign carried by “Abu el ‘Abed” no doubt, my heart tore free from its cage and began to shout ...

You are in Palestine!

You are in Palestine!

I walked towards the man aggressively, greeting him and chatting; someone had to celebrate with me and to talk to me out loud in Arabic. Perhaps that would convince these walls to shed the wrong language, but Palestine kept writing in Hebrew until we reached Ramallah.

We drove along roads whose secrets were known only to this kind of driver, who knew his way around not by reading the names of the streets like his colleagues all over the world, but by picking up news about the latest permanent or “mobile” checkpoints.

While I was preoccupied with my surprise, which was beginning to turn into fear, he talked incessantly. I almost shouted at him, "Where is Palestine?" Everything around us was surrounded with barbed wire, around the small hills that had been turned into strongholds, whose names prickled my heart more than the wire on their fences ... Two metallic monsters passed by and I saw the tips of shotguns peeping out of their many "eyes". The driver told me in a very normal tone, "special patrols that guard the settlements" ... Would Ramallah be able to cure all these wounds?

15.1.2010

I couldn't fall asleep despite the comfortable bedding till after the call for morning prayers. I tossed and turned and the scenes of the whole day turned over and over with me. During my last toss, I was a red Indian who had left his motherland a little after the war to discover when he finally returned that the "pale faces" had cut up his mother's body into fifty pieces leaving only a finger for his people to live on. I woke up feeling that Palestine was calling me to go out for a walk. The hotel was on the side of a hill overlooking a valley ... I went out into the fresh air and saw hills, hills and yet more hills. I looked at all four horizons and said good morning to the first old man I saw and quickly objected when he asked me where I came from – didn't each and every hair on my body say I was Palestinian? I said to him, "I have returned to the homeland after a long absence." My heart also objected, but to me this time it said, "You were absent, but I never was, not even for one moment."

The man told me about his small plot of land adjacent to the hotel, and how he was offered millions to sell it, but he refused despite the fact that almost all the "children" were in Canada ... he said it was because of the long relationship with the lemon and peach trees that he had planted himself, so I understood that they were his children too.

The way he pronounced the letter "Qaf" was enough to wash away all of yesterday's pain. I felt the "pale faces" had failed at least in this aspect – they were unable to prevent us from pronouncing the "Qaf", whichever way we wanted. I strolled towards the top of the hill and loitered in the city center, drinking about ten cups of tea or coffee from the street vendors, and with each cup I would also drink the stories of the young men who were waiting to get married or for a job opportunity that never came. They also waited for "Uncle Future" to reconsider his greed, and declared – "What should we do? Become thieves?" Or they waited for the disappearance of the Wall that had "darkened our lives."

Another wall crept into my heart. I remembered a demonstration in which I had participated in Berlin against this electrified cement snake. Then the Wall was just in my head ... something similar to an abstract concept despite the thousand pictures that we gathered to show the Germans. It was a mixture of concepts, including racial discrimination, separation and land confiscation But I didn't realize that it was marriage or work deprivation or the right to go to school ... Before this adventure I used to think that the "pale faces" wanted to reduce Palestine to an area behind the Wall like the Americans had reduced the motherland of our Sioux and Apache brothers to mass reservations ... Marwan, Tareq and Ahmad, who loitered with me in Ramallah, convinced me that "they" wanted to bury it beneath the Wall ... as Palestine to those young men meant work, a bride, and school. But who could convince the heart?

I left Marwan after promising to meet him again and drink coffee with his father, exactly the same way I promised "Abu Mahmoud", the hotel's neighbor, and I believed I would be able to keep all those impossible promises ... but Tahseen finally came and was able to make me forget them. The method he used was very convincing. He came to me with Palestine in the form

of a child – his three children actually in a car driven by Palestine in its feminine form, his wife. We drove around Ramallah in the car and I was able to see through the eyes of those five the scene of an impossible siege. Settlers had come borne on the wind to the neighboring hills, keeping the city under siege. Palestine, however, teaches its children that a mountain cannot be swayed by the wind ... Tahseen still speaks in his village's dialect (he also insists on living in Beit-Duqko and on picking the fruit of its vineyards and groves) and is highly sensitive to the beauty of our country. He observes its changes on both narrative and written levels. Tahseen Yaqeen reminded me of Rasool Hamzatov and his relationship with Daghistan. He was not satisfied with making me feel that we both belonged to the same mother, but insisted that we both sense what was left of her decimated body. Ranya, his wife, was the only reason for giving credibility to the hope of breathing life back into that dead body. Tahseen informed me that the occupation soldiers had arrested his brother Sa'eed the night before; they had taken him from his village. The reason they had given was his activism and participation in the grassroots campaign against the Wall. The fact that he was from Fateh did not vouch for him, of course. Tahseen could not forget the scene with the tanks in Ramallah, as it reminded the people of the limitations of the PNA's authority.

Today, Richard the intern at the Goethe Institute visited me. His visit was part of his work as an intern, i.e. it was a task given to him by Wafa', who was responsible for him at the Institute. The task, in short, was to accompany me around Ramallah and show me the sites, since he had been living there for months. I told him what I had already seen in the city. He answered that that was exactly all he knew of the city ... so we were satisfied with drinking coffee at my place while he told me about the cultural services the Goethe Institute offered, and then about its three offices in Ramallah, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and about the most important

things he had learnt about the Germans, Palestine and Israel, and that nothing united them, not their identity, aim or plan of action, not even their German accent.

16.1

I quickly left the hotel in order to steal as much of Palestine as time would permit before the evening, to fill the pockets of my insatiable memory. I walked around with my five senses open exploiting every opportunity to talk to people, and this helped me make sure that I really was in Palestine. For that reason, I insisted on infusing my conversations with sentences that seemed superfluous to my listeners such as "Here in Palestine" or "there outside Palestine".

But the first meeting at the Institute made me return to the international caricature that I had been assuming for 40 years: the first conversation was in German with Wafa' and her Director, the second in English with both of them, as well as with Tahseen Yaseen and Mohammad Abu Zeid, and sometimes in Arabic with the latter ... it seemed as though I had passed on my enthusiasm like a contagious disease to everyone, but reaching an understanding even over small details became a problem. My heart asked, "Why are they so emotional? They live in Palestine ... what more do they want?"

Both worlds sat in front of me: five or six from Germany and about fifteen from Palestine, and the issue to be discussed in this international session was a book called "Travel between Worlds", but my heart cried out, "But now I am back from that travel!"

Jihan al-Hilu, one of the participants, later insisted on showing me the best ice cream shop in Ramallah. I looked at the picture of Yasser Arafat hanging on the Wall and lamented his days with a combination of sarcasm and pain. It was a lamentation over the dreams of our youth as well as for the man in the photograph, who had constituted the bulwark of those dreams and who had eventually come to an end.

18.1

Believe it or not, I was on Palestine T.V., which does not broadcast from Damascus, or from Amman, but from Palestine itself. When I saw the building, which resembled the one abandoned by its inhabitants in the civil war, I asked myself if we were in Fakhani or Burj al-Barajneh. My confusion immediately wiped away all the accumulated stress over my first ever T.V. interview.

In an office next to the studio, I returned to a time 30 years earlier, when we were in Fakhani in a Palestinian revolution office where young men were coming in and out without formalities. The bitter coffee thermos was the first thing I saw after shaking hands with three men in their forties, with whom I shared my first impression. Their reaction was disappointing. Instead of participating in my pleasure at the simplicity of an office that implied revolutionary austerity, they told me that a new building was being prepared to house the television station.

Wafa' came a little later. She was the one who had told the T.V. that there was a guest in Ramallah for a few days, and if they wanted to chat with him and her concerning the occasion, they could. However, we waited for a long time for our turn, so we drank coffee for the tenth time and chatted together and with the others stuck in their "Fakhani office"... I was happy to hear this woman finally speak in Arabic. It was as though she had also "returned" like me. One of those present talked about the problems that made the boycott of Israeli products and the promotion of Palestinian goods almost impossible. Finally we entered the studio.

After speaking about everything and nothing, I said in the interview that a Palestinian in Chicago and another in Tokyo immediately feel unified by issues related to the occupation and the liberation of Palestine despite the immense distance that separates them. Why do Fateh and Hamas fight, however, despite

the far shorter distance between Ramallah and Gaza? But they changed the subject.

The austerity of the building and its furniture implied a certain concept that I would have liked to introduce had the timeframe allowed. What if the Palestinian Authority had refused external aid and insisted on being satisfied with what the Palestinian economy produced? Wouldn't the ensuing austerity constitute a shield against corruption? But neither the time-frame nor the general attitude of the interviewers, who did not appear interested in the subject, allowed me to do so even though the subject of aid was a major issue in the Ramallah papers during the whole period of my stay. Thus it seemed to me that the aid was a life-line for the perpetuation of a sick authority.

At twelve o'clock we began our trip to Bethlehem. Tahseen sat next to me in the microbus, attempting to solve the puzzles of geography, history and politics that we saw out the window. The biggest puzzle for me was the one that I did not present to him for a solution, but kept to myself: How can you reunify a dismembered body after it has been cut up? Bethlehem used to be a neighbor to Ramallah. The cement snake that gobbled up land and people was able to make it a far away city that in the best case scenario needed a one hour, twenty minute trip in the car to reach. The same snake dismembered another organ from the body that was even much closer to Bethlehem than Ramallah – Jerusalem.

Much like that snake, my mind took apart and analyzed the landscape, searching for laws and reasons that would reveal the true nature of this reality. One day Palestine would be able to transform itself like an amoeba cell: it would stretch itself out, developing a hundred slender waists that would curl around themselves ... and this transformative amoeba would never cut off a piece of itself and throw it away. Palestine would never do that, but the cement Wall operated according to a different "logic".

Bethlehem, Jabal Abu Ghneim, Jerusalem and the “snake logic” that, if unable to devour its victim, would curl around it to strangle it or sever its network of arteries to disconnect it from its other parts ... advancing on hills in the middle of cities, or separating Palestinian villages to build settlements, turned Palestine’s most beautiful characteristic – its mountainous nature – into a curse.

When I first knocked on the door and entered the “Badil” organization offices in Bethlehem, the employees made me feel as if I were in the middle of a beehive. After a few sips of bitter coffee, I felt that Mohammad Jaradat’s heart still contained the same Palestine I knew.

I discovered that there was a place in the heart that does not measure time by glass and metal clocks but runs rather on its own rhythm, and Palestine of the heart is a place that cannot be cut and pasted. I was amazed by their archiving and research work. I wished that I could carry a copy of this Centre to Berlin ... It was evening when we began our journey of discovery in Bethlehem. I imagined it would be an immense block of stone indented in places to form houses and curved in others to form streets ... a forest of talkative stones each one telling a story from history. And the stone of stones in Bethlehem was, no doubt “Usama al ‘Iseh”.

Usama was convinced, for a reason I could not deduce, that his was the task of making me familiar with each stone of Bethlehem that still carried the impact of an ancient Palestinian artist’s chisel. Tahseen was not less interested, but he was, like me, very tired. Usama, noticing this, bribed us with a meal of falafel, presented in exactly the same fashion as the stones. We were contemplating a stone holding up a goat hair tent, which had been transformed into the doorstep of an abandoned house, when the rain began. The rain didn’t stop for hours, it poured down as though participating in Usama’s misery at the fate of archaeological stones and the history of Bethlehem. I wanted my sadness

to be associated only with its logical cause, which was erected there in front of us – that cement snake and Israel. But the sky insisted on “shouldering some of the colonial burden”, so I looked up at it in protest and challenge, and we continued, despite the fact that we were drenched, to the Church of the Nativity.

Our visit coincided with the Armenian Christmas ceremony, though there were few in attendance. Was it only the pouring rain, or the difficulty of reaching the Church because of Israeli occupation constrictions and checkpoints? – or was it due to the immigration of Christians from the Holy Land, of whom only a quarter or a third were left, to an extent that you would not be surprised to see women covered with the “Hijab” coming out of old houses in Bethlehem with a cross chiseled onto their stones?

I had been introduced to Tahseen two days earlier and to Usama a few hours before, but my heart knew them since their mothers had given birth to them....

From which favored material does Palestine create a special space of time in our hearts?

From which silken threads does Palestine weave a special place in our hearts?

19.1

What I saw during my trip to Jerusalem and what my fellow travelers in the microbus told me reactivated the concept of Apartheid in my mind. I had three hours before I had to meet “Tel”, so I decided to get lost in Jerusalem’s Old City during that span of time. I entered Damascus gate and continued towards the stony valley called al-Wad street – a straight roadway that leads you along by itself. I felt as though I was in Old Aleppo’s markets, which are also canopied, except for the fact that I saw a man in his forties with long curled sideburns and a black “kippa”. So I suddenly felt an urge to stop walking. I leant against a wall to observe the man and it turned out that he wanted to buy something. He conversed with a young Palestinian shop owner in

Hebrew. I treated my anticipation with a “ka’ake” (East Jerusalem Bagel) that I bought from a roaming vendor, with whom I had a long conversation that I extended on purpose in order to enjoy hearing the Jerusalem accent for a little longer. He was happy when he heard that I had never seen this kind of “ka’ak” except in Palestine. Then, I went back to walking around aimlessly, letting Jerusalem lead me to wherever it wanted. No doubt, it came to know me, as how can we possibly explain my spontaneous turn into the “Cotton Sellers’ Market” – “Suq al Qattanin” after which I ended up in the plaza of al-Aqsa Mosque, despite the fact that it was my first visit and I did not have a map?! How can we also explain the fact that the “ka’ak” vendor was standing in the exact position where I needed him and that my arrival at the café with the benches that invited me to sit down happened exactly when I was in need of three glasses of tea all in a row?!

It felt as if I was climbing up the hill to al-Aqsa despite the stone stairs that led me up to it. The occupation policemen stood at the top of these stairs. My name enabled me to enter, as non-Muslims are not allowed in most of the time during the day. One of the policemen was an Arab, and he immediately started to translate when I revealed my Arab identity ...They were searching bags and asking about the reason for my visit, but I was trying my utmost to understand the situation. It was obvious that what they were doing was not in itself wicked. However, I did not concentrate on what they were doing but on their actual presence. The pragmatic mind was not dictating my emotions, but the crazy fervor of the heart; and even when the policeman spoke in Arabic, I felt as if it came out of his mouth like a plea for help from a woman being raped.

In the Dome of the Rock, it felt as though I knew each piece of the mosaic, but I asked about the things I did not know. I wanted to see the rock, so one of the young men there volunteered to guide me to the door of its cave, and as he began to explain the story of the

Prophet Mohammad a man in his forties sitting against a pillar suddenly challenged him. He presented himself as a resident of Um el-Fahem and asked the young men to stop telling their stories, which in his opinion were unauthorized, as there was no reference to them in the authentic ”Hadith”.

I immediately sensed that the young man was offended, and there was no reason for it. He merely wanted to inform the “foreign” visitor of the wonders of this “Masjed”, no more and no less. I said something hurriedly and walked quickly down the stairs to the cave to discover the only place where a human being could worship free of historical terrorization.

Jerusalem led me after that directly to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. I was happy for some reason I could not understand. It was something like the return of a woman you had once loved and left, only to discover that you still loved her despite her intercourse with all who approached her. I was tired of walking with a bag on my back and another in my hand. Perhaps the greater burden though was the fierce attack of this forest of religions from all sides, which was offensive to the senses. It was religion of stone and weapon. I reflected wearily near the olive trees that had stood there for thousands of years and asked them how they had allowed all this intolerance to pass into the city and its stones, petrifying both the roads and the humans along their way. I looked for the place where I had promised to meet “Tel”, when I noticed three young men dressed like policemen, so I asked them about the place and what followed appeared to be the rule of the place. The man asked me for my ID. I said I was a Palestinian, so he referred me to a colleague who spoke Arabic. This time the speaker was a Palestinian Christian, as he told me. Then he proudly informed me that he was not with the police, but with Security. This time his Arabic language did not petition me to save it from rape.

I seemed to have aroused his curiosity, so he began

to gossip with me and correct my Hebrew pronunciation of the words written on his colleague's jacket, the one with the brown skin. They meant police. This colleague said something that was translated to me. He said that the Ethiopian colleague accused us of intentionally speaking in Arabic so that he wouldn't understand. I said goodbye to him, when I saw "Tel" coming from afar. Shortly afterwards we sat in a restaurant for Palestinian Armenians, and she tried to convince me for the thousandth time that either Ismail the first forefather was Armenian or that "the first Armenian" had an Arab grandfather.

"Tel is not a pale face", my heart said. I wondered at the wisdom of this statement. But I decided to believe in it, so I did. Shortly after seven in the evening I had to start my journey to Tel Aviv. Tel accompanied me to the minibus station. After she said goodbye Jerusalem sent me another companion, and the color of his face did not ask my heart to guess or question his origin. The person sitting next to me was from one of the villages of Nablus. The way to Tel Aviv was not Palestinian. Therefore my heart became busy with the stories of workers from Nablus who were looking for a person who knew a way through and who knew well known places where the living concrete snake slept, so people could jump over it. And I also learned from my Nabulsi neighbor that the snake had thorns of metal that were worse than glass and that those thorns never slept. He showed me a deep wound in the palm of his hand and told me about that cursed night, when he accompanied a smuggler to the low-and non-observed point of the wall to scale it and search for work in the more inhabited part of the country. It is true that the snake was asleep but its thorns had embedded themselves in his hand. Instead of working, the man ended up in hospital and then in prison.

The minibus station in Tel Aviv greeted me in a strange way. It brought together representatives of all peoples of the world, white and black and everything in

between. This mixture of colors and languages did not fit the gray board on which they were displayed. The concrete scene clenched the soul. I turned to Tomer and said: "I am in Is..." Then I quickly corrected myself and said: "I mean I am in Tel Aviv". I didn't stay in Israel for long.

Tomer arrived quickly and pulled me away from it in his car. His house was like a small island that had been uprooted from the neighborhoods of Berlin and transplanted in the middle of "Is. .." I mean, Tel Aviv. By chance the island was inhabited by an amusing woman from Berlin called Mika. Thus, she moved with it also. I felt that this house was trying to take me in the opposite direction. The temptation was as great as the strange feeling in my heart. Tomer told me the story of his parents, two people to whom Zionism meant a spiritual and physical leap, or a kind of schizophrenia between the conscious and desirable, which Tomer remembered allowed them to visit their home in Eastern Europe only once. "It was a visit without nostalgia," he said to me. This is the Ben-Gurion generation. Tomer liked Hebrew, as it was the language he had suckled with his mother's milk, and he spoke it better than the English he spoke with Mika, his wife from Berlin, and more than the German, which he had spoken to me, and of course more than the Arabic he learned in the army and in which we talked a bit in his car because he wanted to practice it with me.

I felt some warmth come back into my heart, so I was encouraged and went out to the balcony, that is, I returned to Israel. Israel was concrete. The neighborhood would have reminded me of the Musaytbeh district of Beirut had it not been for the interference of the Hebrew I heard. I went back to the chaotic room to hear the biography of Tomer, who was digging around in the huge State archives these days to discover the history of the Palestinian stones, which were extracted from our villages and from which the Israel Museum was built.

20.1

It was five in the morning and sleep had shunned me. I had expected nothing more from it. I went out to the kitchen and made coffee for myself. Tomer and Mika were asleep in an adjacent room. And outside the whole of Israel was asleep.

But Israel was vigilant in my head.

I tried to put together the meaning of all this. In the next room a Hebrew-speaking Israeli Jewish atheist was sleeping. He spoke English with his wife and was thinking of finding stability in Germany, if the work here was no longer meaningful. Sleeping next to him was his woman, a German atheist who worked in the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, a German left-wing Institution trying to help the Palestinians in Israel. She learned Hebrew here, but preferred to speak in English and mixed all the languages when necessary and without knowing. In this bed a man is drinking Israeli coffee, and his heart is trying to cleanse him of any language other than Arabic, but his tongue is committing language prostitution. Outside most of the street signs have names related to Zionist history, written in two types of characters: at the top in Hebrew and below in Arabic. As for the market, it is free of Arabic letters. I asked Tomer about the synagogues, as I had not seen any in Tel Aviv and he told me that one cannot distinguish them from the regular homes. But these houses were almost the same as houses in Beirut or Hungary.

Had all countries come to Tel Aviv together and abandoned all of their identities together ... so that no one would be angry?

Is this the very reason why no Israeli can endure his neighbor? Is it the cause of this neurological phenomenon or hidden fact that I have felt throughout these six days, which reminded me of the Arabs, my fellow nationals?

Or was it because they had buried their nostalgia, as Tomer's father and all his generation, the first Zionists, had done?

I agreed with myself on the following wording: "These curious types of people sat down with themselves one day and decided to delete from memory all that was known before their entry into Tel Aviv, including the language. They began to learn Hebrew and speak it at the same time. And because they denied themselves their original language, they fell into confusion with regard to expressing emotions associated with it, so they deleted these emotions as well. They had to reinvent everything from scratch. So I understood the secret behind their expulsion of the indigenous population, including my father and mother. It was part of a write-off plan because they reminded them of the history that they thought "should not exist anymore".

So I was also deleted.

So I understood the secret behind my heart's insistence on speaking Arabic.

But Tomer told me that he spoke Hebrew and could only write about intimacy in it. So I understood the secret behind his problem with his family. Tomer had returned emotionality to Hebrew. Mika startled me out of my reflections when I saw her enter the kitchen, her nose leading her towards the aroma of coffee. She sat on the opposite couch with her cup and told me what awaited her – a day of work, and asked me about our plans, Tomer and mine. I told her, "al-Qabba'a". Al-Qabba'a had to wait for Tomer to wake up and a phone call from Raneen, his Palestinian colleague, whom I was hoping would accompany me not only to the birthplace of my father and mother, but also to Kufur Yassif to see how some of my father's generation stood up to the conditions there, so I could fasten a thread and bring the other end with me to Berlin.

I was reviewing the map that I had drawn of the village when Tomer mumbled, "Good morning." During the brief breakfast Raneen called to apologize for a morning appointment she had forgotten about and proposed to embark at two in the afternoon. I heard him answering her in Hebrew, and I was waiting for her

to request to talk to me directly. This was my intuitive heart, as only she and I were Palestinians. But she did not. I looked through the window and the mood of the sky was also bad. Even the sun was not keen to visit the earth these days as it would be absent at four or shortly afterwards, and the car needed to be more than an hour and a half on the road. I said to myself, "Et tu Raneen?" And to Tomer, "We'll go alone and now, after drinking our coffee".

Was al-Qabba'a laughing or crying when it saw me coming from afar in a car driven by an Israeli?

On the long road from Tel Aviv to the Safad area in the far north, I saw everything and did not see anything. Tomer and I talked about everything and did not say anything. In my moments of long silence, I was contemplating the "car of return", trying to squeeze the image into the archives of a brain that harshly rejected it after failing to find any basis for it in its "archives". Dealing with the "plane of return" was easier for the distraught brain, although the route, Berlin-Istanbul-Tel Aviv, was not easy to digest. Therefore the brain had been forced to read Lod Airport, instead of "Ben-Gurion Airport", and so conspired with the game of the heart, although it certainly revealed its childishness. Here it reads Herzliya, Netanya, Or Akiva, Ramat Hashovit ... So it closes its doors in disappointment at my failure: these names are not in the Archive, and the forms of vehicles archived as means of return do not match at all with this car.

I decided to open a new archive, which this time should be multilingual. The YouTube in Berlin began teaching me the language that I was hearing here and that I saw everywhere. It was Tomer's mother tongue, although it was not the language of his mother. Tomer's mother chose her split personality consciously and executed her childhood. As for me I would walk in the opposite direction.

Am I actually walking in the opposite direction? Is Tomer leading me in this car towards my childhood?

I was born in the Sahm of the Syrian Golan and my childish ears had heard the Qabba'a, Hourani and then the Damascus dialect. I learned to swim in the river "Yazid", which is one of the branches of the Barada River, where I almost drowned several times because of the current had I not held onto the branches of an enormous fig tree guarding the place of one of the saints. Al-Qabba'a entered my childhood two years later.

From the time my ears began to distinguish words, I heard two words that I considered synonymous – "refugee" and "al-Qabba'a." During my school age, the first of them became a reason for fighting with stones and slingshots against the peasant children of Qaboun, the village through which the river Yazid passed. As for the second word, it was mandatory in all the morning conversations between my mother and my father, in those early hours when he would prepare the coffee and they would drink it each friend telling the other what they saw in their dream about al-Qabba'a.

Al-Qabba'a did not then belong to my childhood's visual impressions. The impressions imprinted in my memory of al-Maqlad spring and the arches of our stone house is the work of the brain that cannot imagine what it hears without embodying it in images. Is it part of my audio childhood only? What do we do with our childhood skin? The skin had to bear the stones thrown at us by the Qaboun village children and the whips lashed by the Syrian intelligence torturers. Finally, where should we categorize this sentence: "Hussein ... from al-Qabba'a in Safad district," which described "the place of permanent residence" as distinguished from the "place of temporary residence," which was changed at every stage of life ... This was not printed in my personal identity documents, but in the heart as well. Should we categorize it under lingual childhood, childhood papers or childhood of the heart? Why not set myself at ease and choose a childhood of dust and water like all other people and kiss the hands of those

who took the decision to allow me to visit the Sahm al-Golan and Qaboun? Why did these two villages fail to leave an impression on my heart while al-Qabba'a succeeded even though I have never seen one of its stones?

The car had reached the end of the stage at which we were sure of the area after comparing the ultra-modern Israeli map with a five year old one. We had taken recourse to this map, developed by the Palestinian named Salman Abu Sittah, which was necessary because the Israeli maps do not mention anything called al-Qabba'a.

Starting from this hill any stone could be from Qabba'a. I replaced the car with my heart, and the paper map with the map from my oral childhood memories. My eyes aged two minutes. I felt their colossal hunger. They felt like two caterpillars that had to eat voraciously for hours in order to enable their young bodies to become butterflies and take flight. They greedily devoured the olive leaves and immediately sent them to the archives of memory. There was no doubt that this road was new, as the only way that connected the village with Safad passed from behind the valley. On a hill nearby stood a settlement and no doubt the inhabitants sent their cow herds to graze in the fields of al-Qabba'a. But they had the audacity to build a low wall around the village, so we had to open a gap in the barbed wire to enter. Old olive trees, cattle feeding everywhere and herbs, weeds and rocks ... Yes, these were the four valleys that Abdullah Rifai talked about, and these were the cactus plants. But where was my grandfather's house, Haj Hamada's house, the one with the arches? Yes, I remember hearing that the Zionist gangs blew up the village in '48, and then the thieves completed their work ransacking everything, and the village was completely destroyed from the effects of looting. But where were the stones?

I imagined that the ruins of the Refaiya and the Shawahin's houses and Abdul Ghani, Mahahi and my

own family's houses and those of the Masarwah and Hujjaj clans would beckon me from afar, saying "Pass by and greet your neighbors" and that the people of the village would fight over the honor of being generous to the visitor, who had gone missing for a long time and had come back. They would shower him with questions about the state of his children and why he did not bring them with him to learn about the land of their parents and grandparents.

No one cried out as even the stones themselves had been stolen.

Tomer kept himself busy searching for the foundations of the blown up houses while my nose and hands were busy with wild thyme ... I introduced Tomer to Marianum and Alt and how they were eaten. Finally we found a well partially covered by a slab of cement that seemed to have slid over it from the force of an earthquake. There we could undoubtedly see the foundations of a stone house.

A huge fig tree bent over the well. I handed the camera to Tomer. I leant against the tree and burst into tears.

I do not know why the sky suddenly went crazy. It had started to rain before we entered al-Qabba'a, but now it was no longer rain, it was pouring, and the only enemies these water cannons found were me and poor Tomer. I was determined to search for the arches of Haj Hamada's house, the olive presses, the spot where the water of al-Maqlad spring embraced the earth and so many other places in my memory. But by now the sky was pouring water and hatred. I almost said to Tomer, do you want to see what the sky wants because today it is speaking Hebrew? ... We went back to the car through a thick fog that almost obscured my Qabba'a from me ... Tomer said something to me, but the suppressed tears suffocating me prevented me from responding. I knew that the eyes crying were not mine. They belonged to my father, who saw his dead Qabba'a and mourned. Once it was houses, arches and olive presses. What

would he do if he saw his poor Qabba'a and what they had done to it?

The first thing Tomer said in the car was "Do you forgive me? I am also one of those who deprived you of your Qabba'a."

21.1

- How do I get to Jaffa? I asked Tomer.

- Just go along this main street to the north. Ten minutes maximum.

I went north. I imagined that a sign welcoming newcomers to Jaffa would greet me, as is the case when you enter any new city. But Jaffa sent me something better than the painted boards found in other cities - A brown skinned child running behind another brown boy and a slightly older girl shouting, "Wait for me!" I asked the boy why he did not wait for his brother, when the girl asked me if I was an Arab. So I paid attention to the same error committed in Ramallah, a backpack that nearly made me look like a tourist. I learned from these young people that I now was in Arab Jaffa, and they showed me the route to the sea, which was not far away. I was trying to read the Hebrew characters and to invent meanings for them. Suddenly the need for that disappeared. They were simply the names of Arabs. I entered into one of those stores, and asked in Arabic for a plate of "fool" (a broad bean dip), emphasizing that I also wanted a big onion and chili. Shortly after I entered, the restaurant owner came to my table. I asked him, as I pointed to the menu, about the sin committed by the Arabic language that had required it to be executed this way. Everything on the list was in Hebrew followed by English, not a word in Arabic even though all the meals were Arab meals ... The man laughed as if I had told him a joke. I raised the same question in a small supermarket where a veiled woman was selling the goods and tanned workers with Palestinian features were working. The response was that people here write only in Hebrew.

I decided to keep walking until I could find one place with a name written in Arabic. The name was a surprise: "Bab al-Harah Cafe", and it was written in Arabic only.

22.1

I woke up with the rooster in Jerusalem, but I was not as active as it was. The scenes of the past two days returned flashing through my mind, if they had left at all ... I tossed and turned in bed along with the two Qabba'as, as I no longer knew to which I belonged ...

Tel, whom I had met yesterday after arriving in the hotel in Jerusalem, took me that night around the city cursed by its sacredness. From one of the terraces overlooking the city, I saw a young man and woman who reminded me of the days of my adolescence. I almost turned away when I noticed something in the dark that amazed me. I asked Tel whether the young man was carrying a gun or whether it was really the dark that made me see what does not exist. She told me simply that they were young Jewish settlers and that it was normal for them to be moving around here with their weapons, even if they were having a romantic outing ... I asked her about a young woman's feelings in such a position ... Tel shrugged her shoulders and said, "Who knows, she may find that sexy"... The two settlers disappeared and five Arab teenagers entered the scene ... They were quarreling. I watched with curiosity. Four of them were attacking the fifth. I asked the youths if they were not ashamed of this terrible behavior, and when they persisted I asked them to simply "forget the problem for the sake of an old man" ... They left, maybe just to continue right around the next corner. When the victim was left alone, I asked him about the secret behind their arguments and discovered that it was cannabis ...

We had an appointment today in Sheikh Jarrah. It was a Friday and every Friday about one hundred of

the remaining Israeli peace groups met up with another group of Arabs to declare their solidarity with the victims of the settlers in the small Jerusalemite valley, which had become famous all over the world. Prior to joining the demonstration, we roamed around a little in the valley. The Israeli flags that had been erected on some of the houses were the largest flags I had ever seen in my life, several meters in length and breadth ... I asked the person accompanying me, and she explained, "Settlers in occupied houses" ...

The demonstration was an opportunity to see a lot of personalities whose names I had read in the newspapers like ... Uri Avnery and Mohammed Barakah. Two children with Palestinian features were carrying a banner on which was written a slogan against the settlements. Each was sitting on a high barrel, which made me ask them about this intelligent technique and about whether they could read what the sign said. "No, but it says that Jerusalem is Arab", was their response. Tel introduced me to her son, who stood in one corner of the demonstration. Her husband was in Nazareth. "Amir" was studying Greek and Latin and had a dreamy personality that was very close to the heart. I saw his father in his eyes but his mother was in all his other cells ... This mother soon pulled me away a quarter of an hour before the end of the demonstration ... It was a motherly act, no doubt, as I learned from the newspapers that they had arrested fifteen demonstrators after our escape ...

23.1

The hotel was in Wadi al-Joz. My map led me to the Sheikh Jarrah quarter once again, so I asked myself about the magic practiced by this small valley upon me, which had made me abandon the rest of Jerusalem. Did I see a new Qabba'a living its own "48" at this particular moment? Did I want to say to every Arab there, one Qabba'a is enough?

On the shoulder of the valley, I encountered a

young man who, I guessed, had not yet completed twenty years. I shook his hand and asked him about the conditions of the neighborhood. He looked at me suspiciously and asked me about my identity and the reason for my interest in the case. I said without thinking, "I'm a journalist." My regret for this hasty answer was not long in coming because the young man asked me for my press identity card. It did not suffice to say I was not a professional journalist! Regaining the young man's trust required a great deal of effort as well as showing him my personal identity card, which had a positive impact though I do not know why. Finally "Imad" agreed to accompany me to the tent of the family that had been expelled by the settlers. The scene of the tent and the family eating their breakfast "in the arms of nature" at the side of the road immediately opposite their house on the other side of the road, which was by now almost completely covered with Israeli flags, was a picture more eloquent than words. I shook Nasser Ghawi's hand, a huge bearded man, and introduced myself and my friend. The man invited me to eat from a huge bowl of fava beans around which at least six people scrambled for a dip. I apologized and said I had just eaten, so we entered straight into the issue ...

Nasser Ghawi is the last episode of a series of Human Rights violations against the inhabitants of this home. He told me his story between one mouthful of beans and the other. The story began in 1948 when his family had had to resort to leaving Sarafand and "settling" in a tent camp in what was then known as the Sheikh Jarrah refugee camp, where his father served in the al-Husseini house.

Eight years later this man gave up his "ration card" for the housing unit in front of us, which was now covered with Israeli flags. The condition of purchase was that the property would shift to the man after he paid a symbolic rent of a shilling a year for three years. This is what actually happened and the property changed hands

in the Jordanian Land Registry of 1959. After the Israeli occupation nothing changed much until a person called Suleiman Hijazi came in 1990 and revealed authentic registration documents (Tabou) for eighteen dunums - in other words, the entire small valley - claiming that he was the real owner, but acknowledging that the dwellers should stay in their homes. This property was further researched by lawyers, who searched through the records of the Land Registry in Turkey. However, the real problem began with the waves of new settlers, who came after the annexation of East Jerusalem to the West. Parallel to legal battles before the court, the settlers began attempts to effectively occupy the houses in Sheikh Jarrah. The latest battle went through three stages: in 2002, 2006 and finally 2008. The settlers presented forged ownership papers showing a property date predating the Arab Land Registry. They were, of course, accepted by the Court, and the eviction order that had been issued earlier was re-instated and then suspended, and that was how the Ghawi family and seven other families lost their homes. During this long period, a lot happened as the first settler group "sold" the houses to a second assembly and finally to "Nahalat Shimon". Then the "Committee for Sheikh Jarrah" was formed, and they raised the issue with the embassies of European countries and America.

The Palestinian Authority's standpoint can be summarized as follows: "There's no money and the situation is difficult". After that I heard other views on the role of the Authority. One of them pointed with his hand to a building on which I saw the Red Crescent's emblem and told me that the Crescent had bought it to save it from the settlers, who had offered three times its worth. Another did not only doubt the integrity of the Authority and its fairness in the distribution of aid, but also accused it of collaboration with Israeli security.

I asked the man if there was any direct contact with the families of settlers who occupied the house. He told me they do not regard themselves as occupiers, they

had rented a home from "the Society" like any other tenant, but they avoided any friction or connection ... Finally, all the families evicted from their homes were waiting for only one to win the case before the court. This in itself would become a precedent that could change the course of each case. But the Arabs usually lose 95% of the land ownership issues before the Israeli courts, the man said ruefully.

During this time two German journalists came and I translated for them what I heard. I was getting ready to bid farewell to the family when angry shouts came from the top of the street. "A flock of settlers," said one youth, and soon he became involved with two others who were responding to them ... I asked them to translate the response, but the fact that Nasser Ghawi's wife was standing amongst us kept them silent, and they apologized to us ... So I understood the nature of the "dialogue" ..!

Not far from the al-Ghawi tent, a group of religious Jews was visiting the sanctified Cave they call "the Cave of Shimon." Curiosity prompted me to move a little closer to them. I realized that one of the religious settlers was peering suspiciously at me and soon asked me coarsely what I was doing there. I almost asked him what he was doing there, too, but I just said I was a journalist. He said in an unequivocal tone that he did not like to talk to the press, but that the world should know one thing - everything here is Jewish and will remain so. When I asked him about the Palestinians, he said simply, "They must go to the sea."

We were beyond the cave, ascending the shoulder of the valley to a point where a huge Israeli flag stood, a sign of their "Spite". I was attracted by a beautiful collection of roses in front of a small house carrying an Arabic name. I read, "Khalil al-Farhan," so I decided to enter. I found myself in front of a new Palestinian tragedy. In a two-room house lived eighteen people, two of the daughters were disabled and their father suffered from infarction as well as other heart and

kidney diseases, and here too they were threatened with eviction.

I felt that my Qabba'a's new name had become "Sheikh Jarrah."

In the evening I returned from Jerusalem to Jaffa to bid farewell to the Palestinian sea. There I called Tomer, so he invited me to the coffee shop where he was spending the evening with Mika. I went.

It was a café house for youth and had a chaotic streak. Here the occupation disappeared, Israel disappeared and along with it Palestine. I almost thought so, especially after the three of us started planning for a new era similar to Bakunin's dreams, no States, no police or tanks ... until a woman sitting in a neighboring seat expressed her irritation at our "alarmingly loud" laughter, and it was no use discussing anything with her. She was typing on her laptop. We did not change the level of our voices. My pent up emotions needed to let off steam ... An hour later the angry woman shut down the laptop, gave us her back and started dancing alone with the window ...

It was a truly emotional farewell at home. Tomer said that he had recently found that his work with Zochrot might be his mission in life, or part of it. He said to me, "Now that you have seen al-Qabba'a, will you return?" I answered him, as if the return was waiting for my opinion, "Of course." Mika gave me a book in Arabic entitled "The Palestinian left, Where to?" as a present. I could not find words to express my thanks, so I gave them the one copy of my book that had remained in my bag. I wrote the following sentence as a form of acknowledgement: "To Tomer, a first step on the way to return".

24.1.2010

At seven in the morning, I stuffed my things in my bag with great fatigue from lack of sleep and feeling as if I was at a funeral, till I found the small bag next to the books in which there was the small stone and wild

thyme that I had brought with me from al-Qabba'a. At that moment time stopped for a little while. Or perhaps it went back fifty-six years exactly, which is my age. Whoever said I had ever departed?

Hussein Chawich

Berlin

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P r o d u c t i o n: Zochrot

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