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WHERE THE LINE IS DRAWN

Crossing Boundaries in Occupied Palestine

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1

The Stamp Collector

Ramallah, 1959

He looked too large for the cramped house. He always left his slippers under the bed, brought up his short stocky legs and folded them underneath him. It was only there on the bed, with its gleaming white sheet stretched over a large mattress, that he seemed to have enough room for his corpulent body.

This was the first house my parents and sister came to live in after they were forced out of Jaffa. How crowded it must have been.

I am eight years old and sprawled on the bed with my uncle. I occupy only a small space at one corner of the bed. His stamp collection is spread over the mattress – stamps of all sizes, large and small, squares and rectangles, with differently coloured serrated edges. Among them I see one with strange angular lettering. It looks ancient, pharaonic. I read the small Arabic script: Israel. When I point to it, my uncle puts his stubby finger to his mouth and whispers, 'Hush.' He turns his head to look around him, as if to see whether anyone

has overheard us. Silently, I scrutinise the stamp more carefully. I am curious about the image on it. It is of an extended arm with strong fingers gripping an orange and white flower. What sort of body produces such a grip? I imagine broad shoulders and thick rippling muscles. Could that unreachable land be peopled by giants? There is writing on the side in Roman script, which I can't read. I ask my uncle to translate and he tells me it is French for 'the conquest of the desert'. I ask what conquest means and he explains.

I had of course heard of Israel, but I knew nothing about it other than what I had heard from my cousin Amal, who lived there, in Acre. Pointing to the hills next to our house – the only home I knew – she had once said, 'You see these hills that are brown? In Israel they would be all green.'

She and my aunt Mary, who spoke fast and was constantly puffing on a cigarette, were permitted to visit us, but just for a few days at a time. I never saw my male cousins because only women were allowed to cross the Green Line, the border until 1967 between Israel and Jordan – Jordan had annexed East Jerusalem and the West Bank in 1950. They seemed so wretched, their hair uncombed, their demeanour tense, demanding. Their visits were fleeting. They would come through the Mandelbaum Gate in Jerusalem to celebrate Christmas with us – not every year, only when they succeeded in getting a permit from the Israeli authorities. They never knew until the last minute whether or not they would be allowed to cross, and when they did, their visit would be so rushed

they could hardly catch their breath. They were only allowed to stay for forty-eight hours. Then they would gather their things and whatever they had managed to buy – Turkish coffee cups were especially desirable – and they would leave as quickly as they had come. The house would then return to calm, and there would be lengthy discussions about them and their visit. Life in Israel seemed so difficult. We couldn't possibly envy them for living among hills that were greener than ours.

My uncle worked in Kuwait. I did not appreciate then what it meant to work in the desert without air conditioning. He said they had to sit in a barrel of cold water because it was so hot. To amuse himself in the desert he collected stamps.

He would rub his red eyes and then slowly pull the beautifully preserved stamps from between the transparent pages of his album. When he reached his most prized stamp, his eyes would open wide. He would hum and exhale slowly through pursed lips, taking his time as he slowly raised the stamp and held it up in front of my eyes. 'Now this one, this one is very precious,' he would say, and holding it carefully between the tips of his chubby fingers he would turn it round and gaze at it with admiration. 'But this one,' he would say, picking up the stamp from Israel, 'we must hide.'

Now, half a century later, having made countless crossings into the once forbidden land, I realise how unaware I had been at the time of what Israel would come to mean to me over the years. For nineteen years after the Catastrophe in 1948, or the Nakba, when

around 750,000 Palestinians were forced out of their homes and Arab villages were razed to the ground with the end of the British Mandate and the establishment of Israel, we lived in the part of historic Palestine under Jordanian rule. How could we have known then that in a few years Israel would occupy our land, that over the years we would cross its borders so frequently and that our entire life would come to be dominated by the country with the unmentionable name?

2

Henry

Tel Aviv, 1977

He was short and stocky, with warm, intelligent eyes, thick hair and a fleshy nose. His face was round and his eyes sparkled above a bushy beard that seemed to mock the young face above it. He looked neither sinister, as people with beards sometimes do, nor like a sage. At first I didn't notice the beard, because his eyes captivated me with their freshness and purity. But it was hard to ignore. It looked as though he hadn't shaved for years – not even given it a trim. It was straggly, reaching almost to his waist. Maybe he was religious; perhaps he had made a vow.

His name was Henry Abramovitch.

It was 20 November 1977, a few months after my return from studying law in London, and I had accompanied my father to Tel Aviv, travelling through the olive groves of the West Bank, their silver leaves shimmering in the sun, down narrow, winding roads all the way to the coastal plain. We had driven along the old

roads lined with eucalyptus trees to my father's city, Jaffa, and from there to Tel Aviv.

We had come to hear Anwar Sadat, the president of Egypt, address the Knesset. This was the first visit by an Arab leader to Israel. By then Israel and Egypt had fought four wars in under twenty years and Sadat was now boldly trying the path of peace.

We were there at the invitation of *New Outlook* magazine, a leftist Israeli publication to which my father contributed, and they had set up a large screen in the foyer of a hotel. It was the first time I had seen a TV projection on such a wide screen. As Sadat spoke, in Arabic, enunciating the words in his deep voice and thick Egyptian accent, I drank in everything he said – even his talk of religion, which for a cynical young man like me was unexpected:

> I come to you today on solid ground to shape a new life and to establish peace. We all love this land, the land of God. We all, Muslims, Christians and Jews, worship God …
>
> Ladies and gentlemen, there are moments in the lives of nations and peoples when it is incumbent upon those known for their wisdom and clarity of vision to survey the problem, with all its complexities and vain memories, in a bold drive towards new horizons … No one can build his happiness at the expense of the misery of others …
>
> I have not come here for a separate agreement between Egypt and Israel … There is no peace

> that could be built on the occupation of the land of others, otherwise it would not be a serious peace … In all sincerity, I tell you that there can be no peace without the Palestinians. It is a grave error with unpredictable consequences to overlook or brush aside this cause …
>
> Here I tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that it is no use to refrain from recognising the Palestinian people – their right to statehood and their right of return. We, the Arabs, have faced this experience before with you, and with the reality of Israeli existence, the struggle that took us from war to war, from victims to more victims, until you and we have today reached the edge of a horrifying abyss and a terrifying disaster unless, together, we seize this opportunity today of a durable peace based on justice.

After over a decade of occupation by the Israelis, who in 1967 had taken the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, from Jordan in the June War, listening to Sadat's speech gave me hope that perhaps we would enter a new period of peace, that a new world was beginning, that it was only a matter of time before the occupation would end. I was exuberant. As soon as Sadat had finished, I lost my father to his admirers and the journalists who circled around him, wanting to know what he thought. I remember his euphoric smile as he moved from one group of men and women to another while I sat alone and watched him. He was an articulate, thoughtful man who had begun his career as

a lawyer in Jaffa in 1935 under the British Mandate. In 1948, during the Nakba, he lost his practice, his home and all his properties, and he had to start all over again in Ramallah. And yet he was a true believer in peace between the Palestinians and Israelis and thought that the peaceful coexistence of a Palestinian state side by side with an Israeli state would end years of enmity.

One of the consequences of the 1967 war was that very few of the friends I had grown up with were around. Either they had left with their families or they had gone to study abroad and never returned. I had to make new friends, and it was at this point in my life that the young, bearded man, Henry, sat down next to me and asked me what I thought of the speech. From his accent I could tell that he was Canadian.

I must have said something trite like: 'This will usher in huge political change.' At the time I was still under the impression that Israel needed our recognition and that it was we, the Palestinians, who were withholding it. I believed we held the power to resolve the conflict. Israel, which said it was ready to negotiate, supported that impression. They popularised it. And here was the head of the strongest Arab state offering Israel recognition.

Nevertheless, politics was not paramount in my mind – nor, as I discovered, was it in his. Henry, like me, was not political. I don't remember talking any more about Sadat's speech. Instead, we discussed identity, how Israel had succeeded in forging a national identity and Palestine had not. The Nakba had effectively dismantled Palestinian society.

At the time I was searching for an identity. Jordan, since assuming control of the West Bank in 1948, had tried to suppress Palestinian culture and identity and turn us Palestinians into loyal subjects of Jordan's Hashemite king. Whatever history we were taught glorified the role of the Hashemites, who originated from Arabia and had led the revolt against the Ottoman Empire. I knew from my home education that I was not Jordanian. I had also heard of Jordan's shameful failure in 1948 to help Palestinians defend themselves and return to Palestine. When my father tried to return to Jaffa, he was arrested. For many years he was suspected of not supporting the government and was harassed and imprisoned. I also knew that the regime obstructed any development projects that might have benefited Palestinians on the West Bank. It concentrated on the East Bank and favoured the Jordanians at the expense of Palestinian citizens. I grew up feeling only hostility towards the Jordanian regime. I remember an argument I had as a ten-year-old with friends. I was considering joining the Boy Scouts and was told I would have to pledge allegiance to the Jordanian monarch. I couldn't do this. Even when I didn't know what it meant to be Palestinian, I knew I was not Jordanian.

Meanwhile, the Israeli army was forging a national identity for its youth. I wished we had an army that could take the burden of having to create my own identity off my hands. How comforting it would be to have an institution like the military to mould our self-image and national identity.

I had no notion that similar feelings had driven many of my compatriots to leave the Occupied Territories and join the fedayeen, or freedom fighters, of Fatah and other Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) factions, transforming themselves into 'new Palestinians' in order to fight Israel with their keffiyehs and Kalashnikovs.

These new Palestinians were responding to years of deprivation. In UN refugee camps in neighbouring Arab countries they had been turned into passive human beings dependent on charity, living under the surveillance of their Arab 'hosts' while they waited for their interminable suffering to end. The image of the new Palestinian was liberating, energising. People like my father also felt they were waking from a deep-seated lethargy as they worked on establishing a Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem. But he didn't believe in armed resistance. He was convinced that peace lay in recognising Israel with a Palestinian state beside it.

Perhaps what enabled him to think in these nonconformist ways was that he had enough confidence in himself as a Palestinian. He didn't need to prove anything. He didn't want to be trapped in the past, or draw a line and wipe it clean. He wanted Israel to recognise the Nakba and the Palestinians' historic rights, but he knew there was no return to an earlier way of life. That was over. He was more interested in shaping the future – not through violent means, but through diplomacy. He knew that Jordan would do everything it could to stop him and others who supported

Palestinian statehood, and he paid the price for his politics. His Jordanian passport was withdrawn and he was disbarred. But none of this would deter him and he forged ahead regardless, using every opportunity to advocate his vision.

My father seemed miles ahead of everyone else. He was a brilliant, daring lawyer who never hesitated to do what he believed in. In 1949 he travelled with others to Lausanne to negotiate with Israel for the return of the refugees. In 1953 he won a case against Barclays Bank that allowed Palestinian refugees access to the accounts Israel had seized from them, resulting in the return of substantial sums of money to the holders of these accounts. He always thought of novel ways to do what he felt was possible. And despite the fact that Israel's rise had caused him so much suffering, somehow he could not hate those who had occasioned all this pain. He didn't know how to be vengeful. He genuinely believed in the good that could come to the Middle East from the cooperation between these two peoples.

But Israel, which was now behaving with imperial arrogance, was not interested in peace with the Palestinians. This might have been why Israel's foreign minister, Moshe Dayan, wanted to invite figures known for their opposition to Sadat's initiative, such as the mayors of Nablus, Ramallah and Hebron, to Sadat's welcome reception at Tel Aviv airport. All of them refused. Dayan also instructed Menahem Milson, Sadat's aide-de-camp during his visit to Jerusalem, not to include my father on the invitation list.

This would free Israel from having to negotiate with the Palestinians.

I was more inclined to follow my father's vision than the PLO's. Those images of Palestinians with guns, all the iconic posters, songs, poetry and romanticism, left me cold.

Like my father, I was impressed with what I saw of Israel. Unlike the provincialism of Jordan, Israelis seemed open to the world. The spirit of philanthropy was alive and well there, with so many initiatives funded by rich Jews from all over the world. It looked as though people's worth was not measured by their material possessions. Most people rode well-maintained buses and only a few people had fancy cars. They lived in simple flats and did not see the need to build palaces as our well-to-do people did. High officials and politicians were addressed by their first name – so different from Jordan, with its elaborate titles. In correspondence they did not address their officials with 'your highness' or 'your excellency'; they just wrote the initials 'a' and 'd', Hebrew for 'respected sir'. They did not wear ties or jackets. Even in their parliament, they wore open collars. They had a good welfare system, free education all the way through university, free health care and a pension system that meant that the family's well-being did not rely on their children. All this enabled more social mobility. It reduced children's dependence on their parents and allowed them to pursue their own lives. There was even the possibility, which appealed to me, of choosing a new name, a new place to live, a new community. It would be like

being reborn, recreating yourself anew, being master of your own fate.

I had tried to minimise my expenses during my studies in London so I would not be beholden to my father. Yet regardless of all my attempts to break free from my family, my life could never be completely independent of them. I yearned to have a life of my own, which for young Israeli men of my age seemed entirely possible. They also had democracy and freedom of expression. I could not read their Hebrew newspapers but was impressed by how freely the English-language *Jerusalem Post* published opinions critical of the government. I contributed poems and articles to the youth page. For that I was taken aside by the president of Birzeit College, where I was studying, and told in no uncertain terms that it was wrong to contribute to a Zionist newspaper.

In Israel it appeared possible to criticise the highest officials. They could be tried in court if they committed an offence. The courts seemed to be independent and to provide a safeguard against corruption. They also had a law that every letter written to an official must be answered. If the sender did not like the answer, there was always an appeal process, so you never felt like you were at the mercy of lazy or corrupt officials who could simply disregard you. It was all so unlike the way officialdom and politics operated in Jordan. Unlike the staid, oppressed people around us, Israelis came across as active, adventurous and confident. Nothing seemed to stand in their way. They had a deep appreciation of Western classical music and an excellent music radio

station, which I listened to, as well as superb live concerts and a music academy that produced world-class musicians. They were creative and organised. Why not learn from them? Why not put the nineteen years of backward Jordanian rule behind us – nineteen years of stagnation while Israel moved ahead and built a new society? And for a young man like me, nineteen years was a long time.

I was also highly impressed by the socialist kibbutz experiment. Later on I wondered whether my interest in living in an ashram in Pondicherry, India, in the early 1970s might have been my way of experiencing what the early Zionists had tried to do – experimenting in new ways of living and getting away from the shackles of family and traditional society.

Perhaps, I thought, the Israelis would be more likely to understand me and my search for an alternative society than traditional Palestinians, who seemed intolerant of change and difference, and could not begin to accept that I had chosen to leave London for India to try my hand at a spiritual life.

This matter of national character was on my mind. It was what I discussed with Henry during that first encounter. When I spoke of my admiration for how I thought Israel was forging a national personality, Henry looked sceptical. He said he did not see it like that. Being a pacifist, he did not like the emphasis on the military. He was influenced by the views of people like Ahad Ha'am, the founder of cultural Zionism, who favoured a secular vision of Israel as a Jewish spiritual centre, not necessarily a state for Jews.