

GHADA KARMI

Return

A Palestinian Memoir

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A Palestinian Memoir

Ghada Karmi



VERSO
London • New York

First published by Verso 2015

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Verso

UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG

US: 20 Jay Street, Suite 1010, Brooklyn, NY 11201

www.versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN-13: 978-1-78168-842-7 (HC)

eISBN-13: 978-1-78168-844-1 (US)

eISBN-13: 978-1-78168-843-4 (UK)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Karmi, Ghada.

Return : a Palestinian memoir / Ghada Karmi.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-78168-842-7 (hardback)

1. Karmi, Ghada. 2. Women, Palestinian Arab – Great Britain – Biography. 3. Women, Palestinian Arab – West Bank–Biography. I. Title.

HQ1728.5.Z75K37 2015

305.48'89274 – dc23

2014045651

Typeset in Sabon by MJ & N Gavan, Truro, Cornwall

Printed in the UK by CPI Mackays

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Acknowledgements

My thanks are principally due to Leo Hollis at Verso for his enthusiasm and support from the beginning, his unfailing encouragement while I was writing the book and his careful editing of the manuscript. I am grateful in equal measure to Adel Kamal who was invaluable in further editing the text with his usual thoroughness, insight and precision for linguistic and factual errors. His suggestions for how to resolve difficult passages in the narrative and move it on were essential to the completion of the book.

I wish also to thank the members of my writer's group, Zina Rohan, Martin Plaut, Christina Pribichevic, Roger von Zwanenburg and Sanjay Dasgupta who read various chapters and offered enormously helpful amendments, corrections and suggestions. I am likewise indebted to Tim Llewellyn who helped with information and suggestions for some sections of the book. I would also like to thank everyone at Verso who took *Return* through to its final stages.

My sister, Siham, provided important family details that I had not known or been mistaken about. My daughter and most exacting critic, Salma, was not slow to point out insensitivities and lapses in memory on my part in the personal sections of the book.

But the person I would most have wanted to acknowledge for having inspired and taught me ways of thinking that have informed this book, my late father, was not there for me to thank him.

Author's Note

All the characters in this book are real or based on real people, but a number of names have been changed to avoid embarrassment. That excludes well-known individuals whose original names have been preserved.

Amman, April 2007

As I sat at my father's bedside, listening to his irregular breathing and the sound of the pulse monitor attached to his finger, I thought how frightening it was to be brought up sharp against the awareness of one's own mortality. I feared death equally as much as I knew my father did. He was a very old man but age had not dimmed his ardour for life and I imagined I would be the same. Like most people, I did not like to contemplate my dying and avoided thinking about it, but it was always there, waiting in the background to be attended to. An elderly doctor I knew once told me, 'I believe that people must prepare for death. Avoidance and denial are foolish. If we face up fair and square to the inevitability of death it will lose its terrors.'

I stroked my father's hand but his eyes remained closed and he made no motion to indicate he was aware of my presence. The male nurses checked him over and then left us alone. I stood and went to open the window of his room, not seeing out but thinking about his approaching death. It was not the time for reckonings and resentments, but I had a memory of how affectionate and indulgent he had been when I was very young and of how he changed later. I was never sure if that memory had been idealised by hindsight and wishful thinking. But that early childhood experience was never repeated for when we went to England he changed into a stranger who never showed any emotion towards me except a keen interest in my academic progress. His view of me as a studious, clever daughter, whose sole ambition in life was to gain professional success coloured my view of myself. I grew up uncertain of my femininity and wondering if I should model myself on him, to the detriment of many a later emotional encounter I had subsequently. I never forgave him for that, nor for many other things, although I never said so.

Looking at his skeletal state now, pyjama jacket unbuttoned to show his bony ribcage, his sagging hollow stomach with its overlying empty folds of skin, I put away those bitter thoughts. Whatever my disappointments about his personal relationship with me, I passionately did not want him to die, not just for *who* he was but for *what*. His final days would be drawn-out, overshadowed by family squabbles, as happens at such times. But hanging over that period was the haunting knowledge that an era, not just for his family, but for Palestinian history, was drawing to a close. My father was born in Palestine at the time of the Ottoman Empire, lived through its demise and its replacement by the British Mandate that ruled Palestine, endured the establishment of the State of Israel thereafter and was forced into exile. His life encompassed a century of conflict, a period of Palestinian history that demolished everything he knew and overturned the old order forever.

He had fallen ill a month before with what was diagnosed as pneumonia, malnutrition and severe anaemia and taken to the Palestine Hospital nearby. My sister Siham, who was living with him at the time, phoned me in London to say she thought he was dying. In the 1960s, when I was a medical student in England, we were taught to think of pneumonia as 'the old man's friend', a painless exit from this life which no one officiously strove to prevent. But in the late twentieth century and by the time my father fell ill, medical practice had changed. No one was allowed to die without energetic intervention, antibiotics, ventilators, intravenous fluids, even surgery. When I arrived I found my father in the hospital's intensive care unit, on antibiotics, a drip in his arm, being closely monitored. He was conscious and frightened. What rest he was afforded was constantly interrupted by a ceaseless flow of visitors inquiring after his health. The nurses' feeble efforts to stem the tide of people entering

a supposedly sterile and quiet area collapsed completely after the first day. He felt constrained to respond when anyone came, and was exhausted and querulous.

When I arrived to see this situation, unheard of in such units in Britain, I did my best to stop visitors coming in. But this was Jordan, an Arab country, where relatives, however distant, and friends who might also be accompanied by people unknown to the patient, were expected to show their concern and respect for the sick. In my father's case, there was the additional factor of his public status as a scholar and foremost Arab savant, which drew admirers of his work to visit as well. My efforts to keep them out appeared ungracious, even offensive, and were in any case unsuccessful. In the while, the café area outside the wards became a meeting place for his visitors where they ran into acquaintances they had not seen for some time or met new people. The place became a focus for such gatherings, often chatty, social and light-hearted. Meanwhile, my father somehow improved enough to be returned to an ordinary hospital bed.

He was alert, but so weak that he needed help with every bodily function. He ate little because he could not swallow properly, and his weight kept going down. Many of our relatives, devout Muslims, prayed for his recovery. I would visit him with my brother's son, Omar, who had lived with my parents as a teenager and remained close to him. One afternoon, when I was alone with him, and thinking him asleep, he sat up and gripped my arm urgently. He looked at me almost desperately and whispered in a conspiratorial voice, 'What do you say to Omar, you and me going home now? We could just leave now, this afternoon. What do you say?' I could feel his urgency and desperate desire to go home. If only I could say yes, and we could all go together just as he wanted. 'No, father,' I shook my head gently. 'Not yet. But soon, soon.' He sank back and closed his eyes. This memory returns to me even now, because I know that passionate longing for normality, for life to resume as it has always been, and yet be powerless to make it happen. It took me back to an April morning long ago and to the child I was then, standing helplessly at the closed garden gates of our house in Jerusalem that my heart feared I would never see again.

Two weeks later, my father returned home as he had wished, but much altered and weaker. To make this return possible my sister and I had arranged twenty-four-hour nursing for him, and a hospital bed suitably modified for home use, was set up in his bedroom. This had been no easy task, as the quality of nursing was not generally good, and there was little training in care of the dying at home. The situation was typical of many Arab and other underdeveloped countries. Nursing, indeed all medical services other than doctoring, was regarded as second-class. It had a low status, was poorly paid, and in general, most Arab parents would not wish for their daughters to join that profession, since it would involve immodest activities like nursing men, washing, dressing and undressing them. The result of this attitude was that it was hard for us to find a good nurse for my father. After trying and rejecting several candidates, we settled on two young men who seemed reasonably competent. Even so, they would take time off away from my father's bedside to perform their prayers at the prescribed times, a devotion well beyond the call of duty, since Islam allows for a postponement of prayer in special circumstances.

I went back to London where I was based, to cancel appointments and make arrangements for my absence, returning to Amman about a week later. The sight of my father in hospital, more shrunken and even thinner than before shocked me. His doctor, an amiable, efficient, youngish man, had pressed for a gastrostomy: an opening to be made directly into his stomach to enable the entry of adequate amounts of food. Up until then he had been maintained on a nasal tube, which did not allow sufficient nutrients to pass through and frequently got blocked. It also irritated his nose and the back of his throat. Removing it and feeding him in another way seemed to me the obvious course.

But not to the rest of the family, with whom there were heated discussions over the merits of the

gastrostomy. They ignored the doctor's opinion and mine and consulted friends and relatives including an elderly surgeon long out of practice, who was against it, and decided it would be cruel to subject an old man to an operation. He had lived a long life, they said, and his time had come. Muslims believe that to each of us there is a term of life appointed by God. When the end of that term arrives, none can advance or delay it even by one hour. There is a comforting fatalism in this belief which I had often noted and envied. I remember when a cousin of mine lost her young daughter-in-law and two small grandchildren in a fatal car crash, leaving my cousin's eldest son suddenly widowed and alone, I went to give her my condolences. She met me with a calm, resigned face. 'It is as God wanted,' she said with a sigh, neither indifferent nor overly sorrowful.

As to my father, further argument with the family was useless, and he was in effect condemned to worse starvation. I urged the doctor to ignore the dissenting members of the family and proceed with the gastrostomy, but he declined, afraid to become embroiled in a family feud. It angered me that he could not overrule the family decision, despite its basic wrong-headedness. Though it was but one event, that disagreement underlined for me the difficulties in our relationships with each other, our common mistrust, disrespect and shifting affections. There were reasons not of our making for this but it did not change the outcome. And in the end it was all for nothing. After two more futile weeks spent trying to feed my father through his nasal tube, he was readmitted to hospital and had his gastrostomy after all. Only now he was even more skeletal and starved, and it is doubtful that whatever happened at that point would make much difference.

I looked at him, lying in his bed, his eyes closed, and his breathing bubbling through the fluid in his lungs. The sound of the pulse monitor, clamped over his forefinger like a clothes peg, was sometimes the only evidence that he was alive. But yet at times he was aware of those around him though he could not speak, and a slight nod indicated that he heard and understood what was said to him. When Salma, my daughter, whom he had asked about before he was so ill, came from London to see him, he smiled and seemed to know she was there. But most of the time, he half-slept, and I wondered what went through his mind as he lay attached to tubes, hardly able to breathe and with no hope of release.

It was as if he refused to let go of even this poor existence that he had. His hold on life had always been tenacious, and as death approached it grew even more so. My mother, then deceased for sixteen years, used to say to us, 'Mind my words, your father does not intend to die. Ever!'

Journey to Ramallah

‘What the hell was I thinking of?’

I had sworn never to return to this torn-up, unhappy land after that first trip in 1991 when I broke a long-standing family taboo against ever visiting the place that had been Palestine and then became Israel. It had always been too painful to contemplate, too traumatic an acknowledgement of our loss and the triumph of those who had taken our place. In the two weeks I spent there on that first visit, I travelled up and down the country of my birth, looking at the remnants of the old Palestine and at what its new occupants had wrought in the years since our flight in 1948. I was barely able to comprehend the changed landscape of what had been an Arab place, its new inhabitants speaking an alien language and their looks a motley assortment of European, Asian, African, and any mixture of these.

It was a momentous journey that had filled me with bitterness and grief. I remember looking down on a night-time Tel Aviv from the windows of the plane taking me back to London and thinking hopelessly, ‘Flotsam and jetsam, that’s what we’ve become, scattered and divided. There’s no room for us or our memories here. And it won’t ever be reversed.’

As it transpired, I broke my resolve and returned to the same land several times after 1991, and here I was again. The white walls and white-tiled floor of the huge apartment I would be living in stared back at me silently. The man from the United Nations Development Programme office in Jerusalem, who had driven me to Ramallah, had left – it felt more like abandoned – me with affable expressions of welcome and reassurance that I would be very happy staying there. My footsteps echoed through the wide, tiled hall, the three large bedrooms, and spacious double reception room with its separate seating areas for men and women in the conventional Arab style. I wondered when on earth I would ever be inviting the hordes of people needed to fill them.

It was an early afternoon during the hot summer of 2005. I sank down on one of the armchairs, my briefcase and computer still packed beside me, ready to leave at any minute. I was in one of the ‘Gemzo Suites’, an imposing white stone apartment hotel on a high point in al-Bireh, a large village just outside Ramallah that had been a separate place until 1994, when its administration was merged with Ramallah’s. ‘Gemzo’ in fact stood for Jimzu, a village to the east of the town of al-Ramleh in pre-1948 Palestine, where the owner of the Suites’ family had presumably originated. It must have been a pretty little place, built on a hillside and surrounded by cactus plants and olive trees, before it was demolished in September 1948 by Palestine’s new owners. Commemorating place names in that now vanished Palestine was a common practice amongst Palestinians in exile, as if to defy history and recreate those lost towns and villages. Even when such people were not old enough to remember the places for themselves, their parents or other older relatives passed on their nostalgic memories. In the same way most Palestinian homes displayed pictures of Jerusalem in its Arab days, as if there had been no 1967 and no Israel.

I should have been grateful to be housed in such style, but all I felt that first day was a desire to cross the Allenby Bridge that separated Jordan from the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories, and go back to my father’s flat in Amman where I had been staying. Sitting in that large and echoing Gemzo suite, I tried to will myself back into the mood that had impelled me to leave England where I had lived for most of my life to come to a place which I knew more in theory than in practice, more as an abstract cause than a living reality. I thought back to the hurdles I had had to overcome in getting

this point: my own scruples, the difficulties of entering Palestine – even the visa application, a matter of banal routine when going anywhere but to the country I was headed for.

‘Why is it so difficult for you to just give me the visa?’ I asked the expressionless official behind the glass counter at the Israeli consulate in London. Visiting the consulate had been a novel experience. Up until then I had been nowhere near any Israeli official building except as part of a demonstration against Israel. I never even saw these places on such occasions, since a phalanx of policemen and a closed iron gate usually blocked the view. ‘It’s already been agreed by your people in Jerusalem. All I was supposed to do was collect it.’

‘It’s not so simple,’ he answered wearily. He had fair hair and blue eyes; I could have taken him for a Swedish bank clerk. At my sceptical look, he threw up his hands. ‘What can I tell you?’ he exclaimed, ‘computers down since two days, and we got no technician from Israel to repair them.’ It seemed that for ‘security’ reasons, no computer expert from London would have been allowed to do the job. ‘Anyway,’ he said, trying to make light of it. ‘What’s the fuss already? You’re a UK citizen. No problem. You get your visa when you arrive.’

In the event, no Israeli technician ever arrived, and I ended up travelling without the visa. ‘Well, that’s a good one!’ snorted my Arab friends afterwards. ‘Couldn’t they think of anything better? You must know they’ve got a file on you for sure. You’ll never get in! The Israelis know *everything!*’ they added darkly. There was a widespread conviction amongst many Arabs that the Israeli secret services were fiendishly clever. Innocuous incidents involving Israelis became sinister until proved otherwise. But after my experience at the consulate, I remember wondering if Israelis were such super-efficient Machiavellian geniuses after all. Perhaps they’re just as bumbling and incompetent as we are, I thought. Had the same incident occurred at an Arab consulate, none of us would even have questioned it. ‘Bloody useless Arabs,’ we’d have said. ‘Why don’t they ever learn?’

The thought recurred on the next hurdle in my journey, as I stood before the Israeli immigration control at the Jordan–West Bank border. I had just arrived from Amman where I spent a few days with my father. The immigration officer, a young woman sitting behind the glass window of her booth, looked fed up and ready for her lunch break. She was dark and pimply with crinkly black hair and could have been Afro-Caribbean. She asked me a few questions in a listless sort of way, as if following a drill which she had learned by heart and which bored her stiff.

‘Where are you going to in Israel? What is the purpose of your visit?’ she intoned in a sing-song voice.

‘I’m going to Jerusalem, where I’ll be working for UNDP,’ I answered, as I had been told to do. I doubted that she knew or cared to know what the UNDP was. Most Israelis regarded the UN as the enemy because of what they believed to be its inbuilt pro-Arab majority. They routinely dismissed any censure against them by the world body, usually voiced through its General Assembly, as plain and simple bias. But she did not question it any further.

‘Do you intend to visit anyone in the West Bank?’

‘I don’t think so,’ I answered untruthfully, but again as instructed, and added: ‘Maybe.’

‘Who do you know in Israel?’

I reeled off a list of Jewish Israeli friends, as it had been suggested I should. She eased herself off her stool and disappeared behind the booth. I could see her talking to another female immigration officer, this one blond and clearly Ashkenazi (of European extraction) and likely to be her superior on those grounds alone. There was a well-known but little publicised prejudice among Ashkenazi Jews in Israel against Arab or oriental Jews, which led to a variety of attitudes and practices that discriminated against them. The girl came back at a leisurely pace, taking her time studying my passport. ‘It says here you were born in Israel.’ She was looking at the page where my place of birth was recorded.

Jerusalem.

‘Not Israel,’ I corrected, ‘Palestine.’ As indeed it was before 1948, but a grave error to mention in an interview which had been going well until then. ‘OK,’ she said, suddenly alert. ‘Go there. You have to wait there,’ pointing to a bench against the wall. The queue of people behind me pressed up to the window, glad of the space I had vacated.

It used to be routine for someone with a record of pro-Palestinian political activism like myself to be stopped for questioning each time I tried to enter Israel. But as I had grown older, and presumably less of a threat, it happened less often. A left-wing Israeli activist friend, Akiva Orr, who was regularly subjected to interrogation in the same way, used to say to me, ‘Listen, Ghada, don’t complain! If the day comes, God forbid, they don’t stop me at the border any more, I’ll know I’m finished!’

After an hour of waiting without an explanation from anyone, a man came over holding my passport. ‘OK,’ he said not without courtesy, ‘you can go.’ ‘What was the problem?’ I asked. He did not answer, and just waved me back to the same immigration officer. She looked at me without interest, and only mildly questioned my request to have the Israeli visa stamped on a paper separate from my passport. ‘Why you don’t want me to stamp the passport?’ I explained that Arab countries like Saudi Arabia or Lebanon, having no diplomatic relations with Israel, would not allow me to enter if an Israeli visa were stamped on my passport. She shrugged and let me through. The relative ease with which I crossed the border, even given this incident, was probably due to my Western passport although it was still no guarantee. British or European visitors whom Israel suspected of being Palestinian supporters could often be detained for hours, or even expelled.

However many times I made the bridge crossing in later years, I never got used to this exercise of Israeli control over what was not Israel’s to police at all. Strictly speaking, only Jordanian and Palestinian immigration officers should have manned the border between Jordan and the West Bank since Israel ‘proper’, as it was known within its pre-1967 borders, did not extend that far. Inside the Israeli terminal building a huge colour photograph of a smiling King Hussein of Jordan, lighting Yitzhak Rabin’s cigarette in a show of friendship, paid lip service to the peace treaty signed between the two countries in 1994. In reality the only power in the vicinity was Israel, and the Israeli blue and white flag fluttering possessively at the Allenby Bridge emphasised the point.

Had I been a Palestinian West Bank ‘resident’, the scene at the bridge would have been very different: crowds, long queues, hold-ups, searches, interrogations and hours of waiting, with the ever present possibility of rejection or arrest. In subsequent years, with Israel’s increasing self-confidence in its occupation of Palestinian land, this distinction became less marked and crossing the bridge was easier. But whether it was a Western or a Palestinian traveller, the essence of all these measures was the unpredictability of Israeli behaviour. No one could be sure of entering the country, let alone getting anywhere inside it, and planning a journey in advance was something of a futile exercise.

I was not one of those people who found it exciting to live in other countries. Even when I was younger and supposedly more adventurous, I had never gone to summer camps or joined student groups on jaunts to foreign places. Aside from two years spent in the Arab countries at the end of the 1970s, when I had forced myself to go with much trepidation, I had never strayed far from England. That visit, first to Syria and then to Jordan, had been all about my quest for belonging, to find my roots and a credible identity. Perhaps I was too eager at the time, too intense in my search, but my journeys ended in failure on both counts. I felt no more a part of them than they did of me. I was not ‘Arab’ enough there, and too ‘Arab’ in England, despite being thoroughly anglicised and immersed in English culture.

I supposed my trip in 2005 was a search of the same kind, but it was more inchoate, not properly thought through, as if I were groping to find my way through a fog. My decision had been spurred on by a mixture of frustration and unhappiness, no basis for rational choices. I regarded my situation as a deeply unsatisfactory one. I had no settled personal life, something it seemed I was doomed to endure, and I felt that my professional life – the activism, the writing, the organisational work – was at a dead end too. In the past, when such feelings assailed me, I would find solace in a new political project or initiative. But this time I found none which I could pursue with any conviction. I felt stale and wrung out.

Like many Palestinians, my greatest pursuit, indeed obsession, for most of my adult life had been Palestine. There was no room in it for much else. I lived and breathed it, worried about its adversities which felt as urgent and immediate as if they were happening beside me. I kept abreast of all its news, read constantly, combed through the internet for more information, monitored the media, talked to other activists, attended and also organised meetings and conferences, and wrote endlessly about it to such an extent that when anyone asked what I did for a living, I would answer, 'I'm a full-time Palestinian!' It was not really true, of course, since I had worked as a doctor of medicine, been a medical historian and later become an academic. But being a Palestinian was the only thing that felt real.

However, after years of activism I had begun to feel disconnected and irrelevant. The gap between what seemed like shadow-fencing with Israel in the security of London and the real fight taking place on the ground in Palestine was too great to ignore. After the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinians were drawn up in 1993,¹ Yasser Arafat and the rest of the leadership returned to Palestinian soil from forty years of exile. And with them, the centre of gravity of the Palestinian cause and the real political action shifted inside. This made the rest of us still promoting the cause outside Palestine feel left behind, like people trying to catch a train that has long departed.

Until that happened, the cause had been with us in exile. Since the late 1960s when the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) was at its zenith, internationally known and a magnet for idealists from all over the world who flocked to join its ranks, our ideas and decisions were the ones that mattered. For the first time since the Nakba – the cataclysmic event of 1948, when most of us were dispersed out of Palestine – we felt ourselves connected to one another in an unprecedented national project that promised liberation from the Israeli grip on our homeland. It was the PLO, formed in exile, its fighters drawn from the refugee camps of exile, that gave us those feelings of relevance and value, even importance. It brought our case, previously forgotten or scornfully dismissed, before the world's attention. Our compatriots inside Palestine, living under either Jordanian or Israeli rule, were often sidelined in this national awakening. As its power grew, the PLO acquired, however unconsciously, the status of a substitute homeland for the refugees in their camps and most of us in exile, even signifying Palestine itself.

This was not universally acknowledged at the time, and it was only when the PLO departed our midst that we realised how central its existence had been for a scattered people like us. It had given us an identity and a focus. That last act of return from exile, trumpeted as a triumph, was for us outside an abandonment. 1994, the year in which Arafat and his men moved to Gaza, deprived the diaspora, especially the refugees in the camps, of their backbone support and signalled the end of our relevance as political actors. This was not as drastic as it seemed when it first happened, for there was still a PLO representative office in London which to some degree maintained our connection with each other.

In its heyday, the PLO had functioned as a virtual government-in-exile, with a parliament in the shape of the Palestine National Council (PNC), the PLO's highest legislative body. The PNC aimed to

represent the whole Palestinian people and brought together delegates from all the Palestinian communities inside and outside Palestine. Various PLO unions of workers, writers, students and women were established, and a host of welfare services was set up for Palestinian refugees, chiefly those in Jordan and Lebanon. These refugees had hitherto subsisted on international aid from the UN and other charitable sources. But after 1971, the PLO developed its own welfare, medical and social programmes for them, created work opportunities, and adopted the children of fighters killed during operations against Israel.

Most crucially, the organisation provided armed protection for the refugee camps. Supposedly safe places under international law, these had been a target for Israeli military operations from the 1950s onwards. They were also subject to in-fighting among groups with different political affiliations. The loss of PLO protection in 1982, when the fighters were withdrawn from the camps and forced into exile in the wake of the Israeli siege of Beirut, leaving them defenceless, had tragic consequences. A short while later, in September 1982, two Beirut refugee camps, Sabra and Shatila, were overrun by fiercely anti-Palestinian Lebanese Phalangist forces, their entry facilitated by Israel's army, which had surrounded the camps. Up to 2,000 people, mostly old men, women and children, were massacred in a killing spree lasting two days.

After 1974, when Yasser Arafat, the PLO chairman, gave his famous address to the UN General Assembly signalling the organisation's international acceptance, PLO representatives, acting as quasi-ambassadors, were appointed to most world capitals. The first PLO representative in London, Sami Hammami, arrived in 1975. We were soon drawn to his office, which became a centre for meetings, engagement and activism. Many of us aspired to visit the PLO's headquarters in West Beirut and meet Arafat in person. I remember making such a trip in 1976, and the sense of wonderment I felt on seeing the huge map of Palestine on the wall outside his office, and the young men in kufiyyas (the black and-white check headdress that has become Palestine's national symbol), chatting in Palestinian Arabic. I felt connected with my origins as never before, and thrilled to be at the centre of the cause.

Looking back years later, the PLO had been far from perfect. Its guerrilla factions were frequently disunited, disagreed on strategy, and as a result made serious mistakes. Many Palestinians were quick to condemn and criticise. But for all that, it was undeniable that the PLO achieved a seismic shift in their political fortunes. Forgotten for two decades as 'Arab refugees' living on handouts, their cause returned to the world stage with the PLO. In the exceptional circumstances of exile, with a displaced people, most of whom lived outside the homeland, the PLO managed to bring Palestinians together under its umbrella and restore their sense of themselves as a community fighting for a common cause. The institutions it established had never existed before and, had things gone differently, they could have been adapted to form the basis of a new Palestinian state.

But now all that was over, part of another world, and Arafat and his men had gone. In the vacuum of leadership left behind, everyone was looking for a role, uncertain how to go forward or what to do. I remember writing comments and articles about these events until it dawned on me that in this changed world I was likely to end up a kind of second-hand Palestinian, an armchair windbag, whom no one listened to because of my distance from the real thing.

The thought was galling, especially when I found myself with people who had gone to work or lived in my homeland. Although most of them were not Palestinian, when they came back they often regarded themselves as authorities on the country. I had noticed that Palestine frequently brought on such feelings in people because they saw it as a friendless orphan, and no one seemed to be in overall charge. I would listen to their experiences with something like envy that it was they and not I who were recounting those stories. They created in me a sense of distance and irrelevance that became intolerable, until I realised there was only one way to end it. I would have to go there myself and r

establish my connection with the people who lived there, my people, whose lives I would share, even if only for a while.

Although I had sworn in 1991 never to return, I had gone back on my oath within two years of the visit, and several times afterwards. But those trips were often brief and work-related. Living there would be different, and as the thought became more insistent, I found myself eager to try. It was a daring decision for someone so averse to foreign travel as I was, but the moment it was taken I discovered a longing in myself, not just to reverse my sense of irrelevance by going there, but to draw from the experience the sense of purpose I had so lost. Whether those wishes would be fulfilled I had no idea, but I was determined to go.

In 2005, 'Palestine' was usually taken to mean the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza. If I decided to go I would be living in Ramallah, the West Bank city that functioned as the capital of this small Palestine. Ramallah was a landlocked place six miles north of Jerusalem with a population of some 300,000 people. Before 1948, its main attraction was the cool climate that made it a popular summer resort for well-to-do Palestinians. But by the time I went there it was the seat of the Palestinian Authority (PA), which enjoyed a quasi-official status as the headquarters of 'Palestine', and had become a destination for visitors from all over the world. It also provided an address for those, like me, who wanted to come and help out in some way.

My decision was not just motivated by fears of political irrelevance, but also by the old unresolved conflicts that still haunted me and which my abortive trips to Syria and Jordan had done nothing to resolve: the desire to belong, to be part of the community, to fit into my skin. By 2005 I had lived in England for more than fifty years, and was fairly integrated and at ease in my adopted country. It was my home as much as anywhere could be. But I was of that generation of Palestinians who still retained a memory of the homeland, however fragmented and shadowy, and still knew it as their real country. Nowhere else could take its place, and by definition could only be a temporary stopover standing in for the real thing. And living in such a stopover place, was I not also temporary, a stand-in no more than a good actress so long as I did not find my real self, placed in its real setting?

I suspected that these feelings were in part a reflection of my mother's. She never got over the loss of Palestine in 1948, and after our arrival in England eighteen months later, she did her best to instil in us her own sense of impermanence. It was for that reason that she was against making any improvements to the house we lived in; she did not want central heating, for example, or a washing machine or a new fridge, and would tell us not to think of settling down, as we were 'not staying for long'. I remember growing up with a sense that life in England was temporary, and there would come a time when we would all be going 'home'.

I did not fool myself into believing that I would find this 'home' in modern-day Ramallah as anomalous and artificial as it was, distorted by four decades of Israeli military occupation; nor that it could re-create the lost childhood of long ago. But it was still a Palestinian place, and the towns and villages nearby still retained the old ways, the food, the customs and traditions that defined them as Arab. Israel had taken much of their lands and livelihoods, but could not stamp out their deep-rooted underlying culture, instead appropriating some of it, like hummus and falafel, traditional Arab dishes that were subsequently called 'Israeli'. Whether what I found in this denuded Palestine would be enough to restore my sense of self and heal the other rifts in my life, I did not know, but would soon discover.

My journey to this Promised Land began in London, from where I had applied for a job at the Palestinian Authority. This was no accident; I was determined not to join the host of marginal 'researchers', foreign 'experts' and hangers-on who cluttered the numerous non-governmental organisations in the West Bank. By contrast, at the Palestinian Authority I reasoned that I would be

the heart of things, and would learn the inner workings of the institution that organised life in the Occupied Territories, although they were under Israeli rule. What an anomaly, I remember thinking. Where else in the world would such a government-within-a-government exist, operating as if it were sovereign over its own lands, while in reality subservient to someone else in every sense? How the contradiction played out in practice was something I was fascinated to explore.

At the time, in 2005, the PA was in charge of both the West Bank and Gaza, a unique moment in its short history. I could not know that I would be witnessing the dying days of an arrangement that had lasted, in all its complexities and contradictions, since the PA's beginnings in 1994. It was a period when the fruits of the 1993 Oslo Accords had fully ripened, indeed were overripe, as was evident in every so-called peace-building institution and organisation that international aid had set up since then. Despite these efforts, no peace had ever been built, and soon afterwards a Hamas-dominated government would be elected. The break-up of the PA, with Gaza split off under Hamas and the West Bank under Fateh, would follow. But at the time of my arrival in Ramallah that summer, none of this was even envisaged.

I remember the delight I felt when my application for work there was successful. I would be attached as a consultant to the PA's Ministry of Media and Communications, to work with its minister, whom I had known for many years and liked. My real employer was of course not the PA but the United Nations. The PA had no independent means, and survived on donated funds from a variety of sources. Its entire attached staff was paid for by international organisations. The UNDP had devised a special initiative to attract diaspora Palestinians like myself to return and work as consultants in various specialties. Once appointed we were expected to relate to the department or ministry we worked at, and resort to the UNDP only in emergencies.

Before Mounir Kleibo, the UNDP man, left, he took me to the Ministry of Media and Communications building, the place of my coming employment. There was little time to investigate this in detail, but my first view of it filled me with gloom. It had something about it that, oddly enough, reminded me of those miserable old London buildings belonging to the British National Health Service, the NHS, where I had worked for many years. The minister whom I knew and thought would be there to welcome me was not around, and, to my dismay, they said he hardly ever was. The first glimpse gave me a sense of foreboding about the time that lay ahead.

Alone in my flat and having finally unpacked my cases with resignation, I decided to walk where I was told the nearest shops were. The general look of that part of Ramallah was close to Amman which was also hilly, with white stone buildings and builders' rubble here and there, investing the occasional tree that survived with a coating of fine dust. The houses were mostly whitewashed, with flat roofs and front balconies or verandas. But unlike Amman's equivalent so-called better areas, this looked like more of a third-world place: its shabbiness showed in every large rubbish dump and cracked pavement.

I soon reached the shopping centre, a square with an assortment of dry-cleaners, hair salons and fabric shops, dominated on one side by a large supermarket. This had been built by a Palestinian entrepreneur in the heady early Oslo years, when wealthy Palestinian businessmen were keen to invest in what was shaping up to be the capital city of the Palestinian Authority. I discovered that people were proud of this supermarket, which was remarkable for its size and range of products. In Ramallah as in other Arab cities, small convenience stores which called themselves supermarkets were a common feature, dotted about everywhere but usually containing limited stock. They were a popular form of private enterprise, an easy source of livelihood for small businessmen, especially in the Palestinian territories, whose economic situation did not allow for many other forms of work.

Inside it was spacious and structured on the lines of supermarkets I was familiar with in the West

– large counters of fresh produce, fruit and vegetables, and roomy refrigerators for perishables. I took a basket and wandered round, looking for basic foods I would need. The profusion of Israeli goods on the shelves, almost all labelled in Hebrew and usually in no other language, immediately struck me. I often had to guess at their contents from the pictures on the packaging. Only in the dairy section could one find local, Palestinian produce like cream cheese, *labaneh* or salty Nablus white cheese. The young people who served in the shop all looked at ease with their surroundings, unaware of my discomfiture. But of course the Israeli occupation had been there for all their lives, and they had no experience of anything different.

Back at the Gemzo Suites I ran into a small dark-haired Danish woman called Annetta, who was also living there. She was genial and self-confident, knowledgeable about Ramallah and the PA. Inviting me to her flat which, unlike mine, was nicely furnished with rugs, pictures and indoor plants, she made us coffee. To my surprise, this was Arabic coffee (variously claimed as Turkish or Greek but essentially the same strong brew, traditionally sweet, and served in small cups). ‘I learned how to make this here,’ she explained.

‘I heard from Mounir that you were coming,’ she said. ‘Sorry I wasn’t here to help you shop. I’ve just got a car.’ I could see she was comfortably at home here. ‘Who’re you working for? The Media and Communications Ministry?’ She laughed. ‘Good luck!’

She told me that she had been in Ramallah for two years and was now working on a cultural project, funded by a Japanese government grant.

‘I started off working for the PA,’ she said, ‘but after a year I couldn’t take it any more.’ She saw the alarm on my face. ‘They may treat you better, you’re one of them. I mean, you’re Palestinian, at least. But with me, they constantly ignored what I said, ordered me about, and generally behaved as if I wasn’t there.’ She shook her head at the memory. ‘The desk they gave me was in an office shared with a load of men who ignored me as well. They spent their time on the phone or talking to each other in Arabic, which of course excluded me more. It was dark and unheated and really cold in winter. I was glad to get out of there, and quite frankly, I don’t think they even noticed I’d gone.’

‘How awful,’ I said. ‘I don’t understand, Palestinians are normally courteous people, and especially to Western foreigners. I’m surprised.’

‘Well, maybe, but not in my case. Probably because I’m a woman. They don’t think much of women around here. At the beginning I used to complain to Mounir all the time. But there was really nothing he could do. You know, once they’ve assigned you to a ministry they don’t like to interfere.’

‘Terrific!’ I said. ‘So if I do as badly with them as you did, it means I’ve got no one to turn to?’

‘Oh, but I mustn’t put you off.’ She leaned forward and touched my arm. ‘Not when you’ve just arrived. Try it out. You never know, you may well get on far better than I did.’

Seeing me so crestfallen, she said, ‘Come on! I’ll take you out to dinner with a few friends. We’ll go to Darna, Ramallah’s best restaurant. It’s very lively and you’ll see there’s more to this place than the PA!’

¹ This agreement between the Israeli government and the Palestine Liberation Organisation under the auspices of the US gave the Palestinians under Israeli occupation a degree of autonomy and held out an implicit promise of future statehood for them.

The Ministry of Media and Communications

The next day dawned as sunny and warm as the last. I got up and made tea in the unfamiliar kitchen with its massive fridge, in which the few items of food I had bought the day before huddled pathetically in a corner. It was quiet: the sounds of those Arab mornings I had become so familiar with in Amman and found comforting, a medley of car horns, street vendors calling out, neighbours chatting and children shouting, could not be heard here. It emphasised the sense of isolation I already felt. But I hurried on, dressed and had my breakfast watching Al Jazeera's morning news. When I walked out it felt fresh and pleasant in the morning air, and the gardener working on the front flower beds greeted me. Atallah was an odd-job man as well, and did repairs for people in the flats. Later when I got to know him better, it turned out he had a sad story. Still single at the age of thirty-seven in a society where people were almost uniformly married much sooner, he longed to be married too. But he could not afford a wife, and accepted sorrowfully that he probably never would.

I said goodbye to Ahmad, the gatekeeper, who had also befriended me, and set out on my walk to what would be my first day at the office. This took about twenty minutes, until I learned to take the shorter cut through the back of the Gemzo Suites via the car park. At the top of the road was a busy highway, where cars and yellow minibuses called *servisses*, a sort of public people-carrier that could take about a dozen passengers, went by at frequent intervals. I crossed at what I learned were called the 'ramzone', the Hebrew name for traffic lights and one of the few in Ramallah at the time, and turned into quieter roads. Here most street lamps were festooned with stickers proclaiming various religious messages: 'Fear God!', 'Remember God!', 'There is no God but God and Muhammad is his Prophet!', or just simply 'Muhammad' or 'Allah'. These irritated me every time I passed them after that. Who looked at such things, I wondered, and what purpose did they serve?

The houses I walked by were occasionally interspersed with strips of wild, open patches seemingly unclaimed by anyone. One such that I would pass every day must have once been part of someone's farmland. It had been planted with fig and olive trees, which were now growing amid rubble and tufts of yellowing grass littered with discarded black plastic bags and cans. A herd of goats often grazed there freely, and once or twice I saw a few men sitting on low stools under the trees smoking and chatting. In this, too, Ramallah resembled Amman, where such open spaces were also to be found. Usually those in Amman did not stay that way for long, as a developer was soon found to invest in building on them. In the case of Ramallah, this same drive to use every available space for housing was not so much the result of entrepreneurship as of Israeli settlement-building. The settlements were set up on Ramallah's agricultural land and hemmed in the town on all sides, making its expansion impossible. So what land was left in the city was at a premium.

One could see these giant settlements high up on the hills, their houses cascading down toward the town's outskirts and almost merging with them. There were even houses stuck virtually on top of each other, one Palestinian, the other Israeli. 'Do they become friends?' I asked someone when I first saw this strange sight. 'No, not friends,' he said, shaking his head vigorously, 'but they're sort of neighbours. What else can they do?'

Further along, I passed by at least three ministries, each in new-looking white buildings and grandly named: Ministry of Transport, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Sports. All in all

there were some twenty ministries in Ramallah, excluding the presidential and prime-ministerial offices, cabinet and associated buildings and the Palestinian Legislative Council, which stood close together in the Masyoun area of town. All the ministries bore the imposing insignia of the 'Palestinian National Authority' above their entrances.

As I walked, I found the road had opened into a large triangle bordered by shops. Here were parked one or two police jeeps full of cheerful-looking lads in uniform, lounging in the seats, drinking coffee and passing the time of day with the shopkeepers. Everyone looked relaxed, and I could not imagine what circumstance might end this bonhomie which had obviously become a way of life. A few days later Israeli soldiers, presumably following what was their way of life, raided several Ramallah homes in search of 'terrorists' and left, unimpeded by anyone.

The Ministry of Media and Communications was not a new building, unlike the others I had seen. It stood on several floors and was shabby and dark inside. I wondered what it had been before it was appropriated by the PA. The walls needed a coat of paint and what furniture I could see was old and much used. The doorman, who also doubled up as telephonist and porter when required, did not know who I was and directed me towards an office on the ground floor. I passed a small kitchen and some young women in headscarves chatting to a boy making coffee. There were several other rooms on the floor, one of which was the deputy minister's office.

The chief administrator was a middle-aged woman called Esperance, an old-fashioned French name which, like Violette, Clemence and Marie, was still used amongst Catholic Palestinians. She had an ample figure and dyed red hair.

'Are you expecting me?' I asked.

'Of course. Welcome, Doctora,' she said without warmth, 'how are you? I hope all is well. Please come this way.' She took me to a room at the back of the building which, apart from a few chairs stacked against the window, was empty. 'Oh!' she tutted. 'I told them to sort this out, and to move your desk in for you. Mahmoud!' she called out sharply, and the doorman I had just seen at the entrance came hurriedly over. 'What happened about the Doctora's office? Where's the furniture I asked to be moved?'

He looked mystified, and shrugged his shoulders. 'Sort this out at once!' she ordered. 'I apologise,' she said unapologetically. 'Please come to my office while yours is being prepared.'

Before long I was invited back to the same room, which was now furnished with a faded and stained wooden desk, a desk lamp, and a bin, but looked just as dingy as before. From its window could be seen a small square of scrubland and a wall. Later I would find that this 'garden' was where some of the office workers hung out, chatting and laughing. After another wait, a desktop computer was found, and the phone was connected to the ministry's operator.

'If you need anything else,' said Esperance, surveying the room with satisfaction, 'please let me know. Hanan here know.' This was one of the young women in headscarves, who I presumed was her assistant. She looked friendly and smiled at me. 'But for now, when you're ready, I've arranged for the staff to meet you.'

It did not take me long to 'settle in'; I had brought nothing with me but my handbag, since I had little idea of what to expect. I found Hanan hovering outside the office door and followed her to a large meeting room on a lower level. About six people sat round a large table, with Esperance, who had preceded us, at its head. She rose to introduce me.

'This is Doctora Ghada, who has joined us as a media consultant to Dr Farid' (the minister who had as yet not appeared). 'She's actually a medical doctor and has come all the way from England to tell us what to do here.' She attempted a smile in my direction. The others, two men and four women, murmured a welcome. It turned out that one of the men was an English-Arabic translator, the other

was in charge of online work, and the women had various functions as press reviewer, meeting organiser and secretary. I took a chair and smiled at them uncertainly. I was unsure of what they expected of me and felt I had been thrown into something I did not understand.

‘Hello, *marhaba*,’ I said. ‘It’s nice to meet you all, and really I haven’t come here to tell you what to do. If anything it’s the other way around. I mean, I need to know from you what the situation is like here and what issues you identify as being problems, to see how I can help.’ I went on to say something about myself and my activist work in London, all the time aware of Esperance’s cold eye on me. The women looked from her to me, but we managed to have a discussion about the problems of presenting the Palestine case to the outside world. I said that this was an area I could help with, and asked if they already had a strategy and what were their ideas about how to put out the message.

A ten-page document in Arabic was produced, entitled ‘The Plan for Communication to the Media on the Palestine Cause’. It looked well-thumbed and some of the text was faded. I scanned it rapidly and, seeing them waiting expectantly, I decided that the only way was to ignore Esperance and behave as if she were not there. I could not divine the reason for her hostility, but that would have to wait till later. I thought, what would I do now if I were at a National Health Service planning meeting back in England? In my latter years as a medical practitioner I had taken up the specialty of public health, which by the 1990s had little in common with the pioneering field of a previous age. Those public health champions had fought for clean water, child vaccination and public hygiene. The excitement of their early discoveries that the environment caused infectious and other diseases had, by my day, given way to something quite different. Public health medicine, as it was known, was little more than a bureaucratic branch of the NHS, mostly taken up with committee meetings, wrangling over health budgets, and chiefly concerned with planning and strategy-making for health service provision. As a specialist in this field I had gained some experience of organisational work, and the task at hand seemed a familiar one.

‘Look, I think we’re going to have to start all over again with this,’ I said, pointing to the document. ‘I’m sure this paper is fine, but it looks old to me, and almost certainly needs updating. So I would like to suggest that we work on a new media strategy that deals with the way we present the facts to the Western media, and also the Israeli media.’ Warming to my theme, and oblivious of the effect on Esperance, I asked if each of them could come to my office afterwards so that I could get to know them better. All assented readily, and I had the impression that no one had ever talked to them individually before. I said that we could start that very morning, and agreed times for each one, half an hour apart.

Esperance cleared her throat loudly. ‘They have other duties, Doctora,’ she objected. ‘They will not be able to talk to you for long.’ She shot them each a look, and I could see that she disliked the whole plan. ‘Never mind,’ I responded firmly, ‘however much time they can afford would be good.’

The men were intrigued but guarded at first. The women were more forthcoming, but it was clear that they all feared Esperance. I wondered how much of what they said was already censored. Not that it seemed to matter a great deal, for I could see that any interest in or commitment to the content of their work was secondary to the need to remain in work, no matter what it was. Their lives were governed by the overriding imperative to go on drawing their salaries, whatever the quality of the work they produced. This reflected a general situation for all PA employees, since there was no system of national insurance or social benefits of any kind in the Palestinian territories. As a result of Israel’s seizure of much of their agricultural land for its settlements, and the restrictions on trade imposed by the occupation, working for the PA was often the only available source of livelihood. The monthly salary became a means of daily survival for thousands of people and their dependants.

They told me something of their personal stories, and described how long it took for those who

lived outside Ramallah to get to work. The journey from Nablus, which before the occupation would have meant no more than a forty-minute drive along the Nablus–Ramallah road, now took two hours or more. The old direct route had been closed in order to divert Palestinian traffic away from the huge Beit El settlement near Ramallah, with the result that cars had to use various circuitous roads instead, skirting other settlements. The hold-ups at the Israeli army checkpoints on these roads could be short or take up several hours. A few of the girls came in from outlying villages and could also face unexpected delays, when the army might suddenly and inexplicably put up so-called flying checkpoints on the road and as suddenly and inexplicably remove them.

When I subsequently passed a few of these checkpoints outside Ramallah I would marvel at the disruption that they caused, even though they often consisted of no more than a couple of soldiers and an army jeep, and looked as if they had been put up on a whim because the soldiers felt like it. People waited obediently in long queues to have their papers checked by these soldiers, who were often more than youths. When I asked why people allowed such a puny army presence to so obstruct their journey, they told me that the soldiers, few as they were, could summon massive military back-ups from the nearest army depot at a moment's notice.

After my meetings with the staff, I felt I had established a distinct rapport with the six workers, which pleased me. And to my surprise they all seemed to be under the impression that I had come to be the new manager, which pleased me too. Later I decided to walk around the ministry and get to know the other members of staff. On the upper floors were more offices, all presumably carrying out some function, though I never discovered what it was exactly. An air of relaxed camaraderie reigned here: some men on the telephone, others reading the papers. Offices in the Arab world had an important social dimension. Friends and relatives often dropped in to exchange news and gossip over coffee, frequently joined by other office workers, and a large part of the working day could pass by in this way. In that respect Ramallah was no different. I even heard a rumour that one man came into the ministry every morning, scanned the internet for press articles he was interested in, and after a coffee and a chat, went home again. No one took any notice.

Office hours were eight in the morning to two in the afternoon, but in practice all work ceased by half-past one as the workers prepared to leave for the day. By two o'clock sharp, Mahmoud, the doorman, stood in the front hall with his keys, waiting to lock up. Outside, the sun was at its hottest. I walked back to the Gemzo Suites, regretting that I had decided to go on foot while the ministry employees sped past in cars and taxis. I arrived back thirsty and tired. Eating my simple lunch in the sitting room with the TV on, I wondered how long I would be able to survive like this.

The next day, Dr Sabah, the deputy minister, appeared at the ministry. He had been away on a visit to Abu Dhabi on PA business, we were told, and was back in his office. Towards mid-morning his secretary, a pretty girl without a headscarf, came to invite me to meet him. I noticed that she looked at me with curiosity and, as she reached her desk outside the deputy minister's office, I heard her whispering to another girl sitting nearby.

'Ah, Doctora!' cried the deputy minister affably as I entered, standing up and coming forward to greet me. He was a dapper, shortish man with a smooth face and thick-lensed glasses. 'Please sit down. Let me get you some coffee.' Another man, who had been lolling on a chair behind the door, got up and left, presumably to order the coffee. Two others were sitting in the office. 'Let me introduce our brother, Tayseer, and the other brother, Abdullah,' Dr Sabah said, pointing to the two men, both bearded and playing with their worry beads. 'This is Doctora Ghada, who has come here from England – which we appreciate very much, of course – to advise us on our work.' Turning to me, he went on: 'The brothers are visitors from Gaza, and I'm sure you won't mind if they listen in on our conversation.'

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