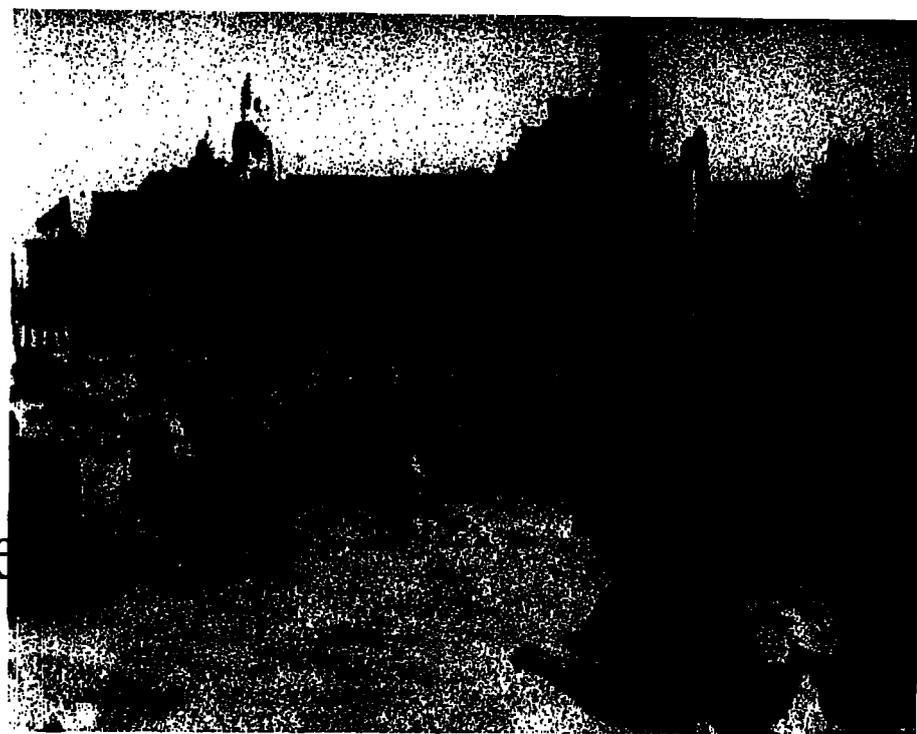


The "Arab-Israeli generation"

## Those Who Re

Butress Dalah



In 1947, as I wandered the streets of my village after a day of school, what excitement the next day promised. I wore a *k'fah* and, on my head, in a very grown-up way, the traditional Arab *agahl*. I shouldered a rifle of wood and rubber and became one of the fighters for a free and independent Palestine, my birthplace and national home. From among the boys of the neighborhood I raised a regiment of brave fighting children, and we took upon ourselves the burden of protecting and defending our village against the Jews, our enemies.

In the end we fought neither with wood-and-rubber weapons nor with the weapons of our parents because our local council decided there was no sense in fighting. So the Jews, the Jewish army, took the village with peace talks, without firing a shot. The village surrendered and became part of the Jewish state, the State of Israel.

Since that time a lot of water has flowed up the Nile. Worlds have changed, regimes have fallen, and new regimes have blossomed in the area. We, the children of yesterday, have become the adults of today. Some of our parents are living in Lebanon and have been made refugees; others—a national minority—have remained in Israel. In our lifetime there have been two more wars similar to the one of 1948, yet different from it. As for that boy of 1947, all this has seemed a dark, gray dream, but one that has made a deep and powerful mark on his soul.

Of my people in the land of Israel, almost none remains of those who once occupied the highest rung of our social ladder. Men of property, merchants, religious leaders, judges and lawyers, doctors, engineers, writers, artists and other intellectuals all left the land after the 1948 war, hoping the day was not far off when they could return to their liberated homeland.

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Who would liberate it? Not they. Like the feudal aristocracy and the upper class who fled France at the time of the Revolution of 1789, leaving the armies of Austria, Russia and other countries to fight on their behalf, they dream that the armies of the Arab countries will fight for them, and it is this that has sustained the Palestinian upper class in its diaspora. The dream has lasted for twenty-five years, and there is a chance that it may go on forever—as long as the Israeli and Arab governments stubbornly refuse to make mutual concessions.

We, the children of 1948 who have remained in the land, are without political, economic or cultural leadership, without minimal, basic services. Most of us are the children of farmers in backward villages. In contrast to the modern technology the Jews brought to the land, primitive villagers worked the land with the help of animals and by dint of rigorous manual labor—intensive, certainly, but without profit.

The Palestinian Arabs, who before 1948 had a reputation among other Arabs of the Middle East for being progressive, sober and highly developed, seemed slow, boorish, backward traditionalists in comparison with the Jews, who at that time were coming chiefly from the advanced countries of Europe and America and brought with them modern civilization and quasi-utopian impulses to build the land flowing with milk and honey.

My mother could, with difficulty, read and write; her friends could not read at all. The illiteracy rate for women, and even of men, was very high. In the year 1948-49 only 19 per cent of the girls were enrolled in grammar school! Women worked in the house and never in the fields. Fathers made decisions, and mothers did what they said without much argument. A woman's contacts with her surroundings were at the discretion of the man, the man chosen for her by her mother or father or brother or even by a matchmaker. She was expected to adapt herself to the new family life without any

preparation, sometimes before she had even reached womanhood. True, the village woman did not cover her face with a black veil, the *hijab*, as the city women did. But the city women had more freedom and better prospects than those in the villages.

The clan—members of the father's family and those close to it—ruled. My village had a local council whose representatives were appointed for life from the large clans. Once a member received an appointment, only his death could make way for another, chosen according to the spirit of the clan and the will of the Mandate government. When, in 1948, the heads of the clans fled the land, the smaller clans benefited. They were able to organize themselves and to strengthen the new Israeli legal system.

Our village was made up of low houses, narrow alleys, crowded buildings. In a number of villages there were cobblestones to prevent the formation of mudholes in the middle of the streets. Ten years ago, when they were filming *Exodus*, they came to our village and photographed our streets. And when a noted film-maker wanted to photograph scenes from the Middle Ages, he found rich material in the village. Indeed, these were the conditions of the Middle Ages, lacking only the walls and towers of the Crusades. Utilities were practically nonexistent. No electricity, no telephone, inaccessible by road, there were no effective health services in the village, no aid, no work projects, and only inferior education.

To all this must be added the great and terrible psychological tension that preyed, still preys, upon the Arabs of the land of Israel. In just the blink of an eye, those who had been the majority became a minority. From illusions of victory to government by victor and feelings of inferiority. From a Palestinian pan-Arab loyalty to a dual loyalty—Arab nationality on the one hand and Israeli citizenship on the other. And in the absence of the spiritual and political leadership of the clan, one remained like a confused child who has lost his parents: He knows they are not far away, yet he cannot get to them. So he must be independent, must adapt himself to the new situation in which he suddenly finds himself, must build himself, his village, his society, anew. Or perhaps he takes the time to do something for himself in the hope of improving his own status. That frightened, powerless child may turn into a self-sufficient man . . . as the organs of Arab propaganda give him no rest, heap blame upon him for treason, for Zionism, for collaboration with the Jews against pan-Arab national interests, against his brothers and parents and ancestors who have emigrated but still hope to return—if not today, then tomorrow, and tomorrow is not too distant as long as his actions do not postpone it further.

Those Palestinian Arabs who remained after the establishment of the State of Israel experienced the surprising leap that accelerated the wave of modern-

ization. And if it brought confusion in the early days of the State, it also brought great social and economic blessings to the inhabitants of all classes and of all national-communal affiliations, although, to be sure, not everyone benefited to the same degree.

Until 1948 primitive agriculture was the backbone of the Arab economy in Palestine. Farming and grazing were done on small plots of unirrigated land, using a simple planting cycle without rotation, scanty fertilization, traditional nonmechanized farming tools. The laborers were mostly tenants who kept only 50 per cent of the yield. Many others had no land at all, were seasonal laborers who earned even less than the tenants.

Today Israeli Arabs find themselves in a time of abundance and economic prosperity the like of which they have never seen before. But they have known this prosperity only since the 1967 war! Until that time the suffering of the Arab peasant was great. Land expropriation did not cease until 1967, nor did the military rule which seriously limited our right to travel and unfairly discriminated against us, supposedly for security reasons. During the first years of the State there were additional difficulties in adjusting to the new forms of taxation and new production and marketing techniques. The unrestrained competition from the Jewish cooperative settlements presented great problems to the Arab peasant. In the past five years, with new training, machines and the formation of Arab cooperative organizations, agriculture has again become profitable.

Participation in commerce has not seen as many drastic changes. Arab trade in Israel has been centered for the most part, if not completely, around the products of the Arab sector, since Jewish merchants have not had easy access to Arab products. A few Arab merchants have become intermediary channels between the Arab producers and distributors and the Jewish buyers. Major Arab products have been olives, olive oil, tobacco, fruits and vegetables and, only in the last five years, a little handicraft. Local retail trade did exist and continues to exist, now based mainly on imports from the warehouses of Jewish merchants in Haifa and Tel Aviv.

Since 1967, with the rise in exports, the government has begun to implement a five-year plan for the industrial development of the Arab village. With the spread of education and the loosening of tradition's hold, a cheap labor force made up especially of women was found in abundance in the villages. The emerging Arab middle class and industrial élite—millionaires and demi-millionaires such as the Kadmani brothers in Jarcha, the Sh'hada Corporation in K'far Jassif, Paris Hamdan in Baqah al-Jerbiah—along with government and private capital from Ata, Gabor and other corporations, began building textile

firms, clothing industries and other workshops in the Arab villages.

The Jewish worker, organized in the Histadrut even before the establishment of the State, found it easier to earn a living by more pleasant work. Not so for the Arab worker. He joined the building trades, for example, which do not require a great deal of professional skill or know-how; a few days of apprenticeship to a construction worker is enough to turn the Arab laborer into a skilled worker. And today a considerable percentage of construction work is concentrated in the hands of Arab workers. The Jewish workers, who have by now become the supervisors, are not prepared to give up their Arab laborers for those Jews who may wish to do the same work. The former are already more skillful, are in better physical condition—and are more docile.

The building trades have thus come to be considered a skilled field among the Arabs of Israel. There are now a number of Arab contractors, men who have learned from their Jewish colleagues how to supervise, how to exploit and how to accumulate capital. Some marble, flooring, brick and plastering industries have located in the villages. Builders, plasterers, floorers, painters, molders, ironworkers, men who run bulldozers, hole-digging equipment and the like are found in abundance in the Arab villages.

There can be no doubt these developments have brought in their wake economic prosperity and a steep climb in the standard of living of the Arab worker and have narrowed the social gap between himself and his Jewish counterpart. At the same time, these changes have contributed greatly to the changes in traditional family life in the Arab villages. The net benefit of these changes remains to be seen.

This socioeconomic transformation has been accompanied by important changes in attitudes and values among many Arabs. Today, thinking of the stories we hear every day from our parents, who lived during the Mandate, I feel simultaneously pity and pride. Pity for the many years our parents spent in helplessness, pride over the attainments of our generation.

Arab time"—that was the expression commonly used by the mass of Jews when they wanted to speak mockingly. And indeed there was, for the older generation, a different attitude toward time. My grandfather had plenty of time to sit along the side of one of the back streets, to smoke a cigarette or a pipe filled with tobacco he himself had grown, to listen to stories of dreams and impossible adventures. And why not? He was never oppressed by lack of time. He couldn't read books. His wisdom was acquired in these sessions by the alleyways. In the winter, when we could not go out into the fields, the family would sit around the fireplace and listen to stories from grandfather's own

rich imagination. By eight o'clock in the evening, as the embers were going out, the fortunate family would look forward to a new and blessed day.

Chasing after money was not the top priority of our parents. The demands they made on life were modest. Is there bread? Warm clothes for the winter? Are there children? That is all.

We of the Arab-Israeli generation (if we may be permitted to call ourselves that) have learned different values both as regards work and time. "Work is our life!" This is our common wisdom of today. Especially physical labor. Now there is limited time for visiting. I can remember from years past that even at six in the morning neighbors might knock on the door and arrange a date. Today, visiting is limited to Sabbaths. Yes, to Sabbaths: for only on the Sabbath do we rest from work, and not on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath, or on Friday, the Muslim and Druse Sabbath. The Jewish majority has stamped its mark on both work and leisure.

The Arab peasant is learning to live according to the new notions of time. He knows how to spend time with his children and family during the few available hours—which are sacred—how to help the children do their homework, how to answer their questions on all kinds of subjects, even how to help his wife with the housework! Significant change has also taken place in the family and in communal life. No longer does the authority of the father and the village elders go unchallenged. The rise in the general level of education and the participation of women and the young in the labor market have given them a greater degree of independence.

To illustrate the impact of these changes in Israeli Arab society, let me bring examples from two families of whose progress I have firsthand knowledge. The first is a family of nine, which was living by primitive agriculture. The father had two cows and very little land; he and his children and wife worked the land and managed a living only with difficulty. He taught his children strict obedience. Until the mid-fifties the oldest son (now thirty-nine) and the youngest (twenty-five) worked the land with animals. Then the eldest rebelled; he did not want to walk behind cows. He asked his father to buy a tractor, but his father did not have enough money. Still, the father was willing to borrow money from neighbors and relatives to buy a used tractor. In the first two months they made back the full price of the tractor and, since 1957, their financial situation has continued to improve.

Today the man has two combines, three tractors and other heavy equipment; electric welding machines for on-site repairs; a two-storey house with four separate apartments; more than 60 dunams of privately owned land. This year he has leased almost 1,200 dunams and works them according to the best modern technology available. Three of his sons have finished high school and work together. His daugh-

ters are married, and so are all but the two youngest sons, who do not want to marry until they build two additional apartments. The father is already sixty-eight, the mother is sixty-five. All still work together, although the younger ones are trying to break away from the family framework and to go out on their own. Last year each began controlling his own finances. They have divided the land among themselves while their father is still living—something that never used to be done at all—but they are continuing to work the land cooperatively. Each has his own special expertise.

The second example is an uncle of mine who was a railroad clerk during the Mandate period. He tells me that in this period of his life, when he would go to the market to buy provisions, he would be too embarrassed to carry them in his hand or in a basket. He would give a shilling to the “store boy” and have him carry them for him. He smiles and says: “They called me ‘the groom’ because I was embarrassed to work or do any kind of physical labor. My necktie was never removed from my neck, even in the heat of the burning summer sun. Today,” he says, “you of this generation are the unfortunate ones. You run to do physical labor, get up early every morning but get no pleasure from the world.”

After 1948 he ran a small retail store in the village. He was a very honest man, taking a profit of only 10 per cent on his merchandise. After twenty years he went into debt for six hundred pounds over his total capital. Not working now, his children provide him with enough to cover his personal expenses—a great insult to the Arab mind.

The outcome of the lives of these two fathers is interesting. The first belonged to the poorest farming class during the Mandate period. The second, who was a clerk in the Mandate government, belonged to the enlightened class of *effendis* who scorned physical labor. Those who worked, who made good use of time, attained a high standard of living.

Considerably less dramatic have been the improvements in the relations between the Arab and his fellow Israeli citizens. With the faithfulness that Israeli Arabs demonstrated during the Six-Day War, the postwar boom and the abolition of the military rule, there were new possibilities for rapprochement. Some small groups of Arabs and Jews were formed to demonstrate the need for candor and peace between these people. But the success of these groups was not great. Jewish society is a closed society.

I actually lived for eight years in one room with a

Jewish friend—two years in Haifa and six in Jerusalem. We talked, exchanged ideas; he visited me in my home a number of times, but he never invited me to visit in his. Perhaps this is uncommon, but it has happened repeatedly with other young men. At a more mature age such a barrier does seem not to exist between Jews and Arabs. Today I maintain contact and close relations with many Jewish friends and comrades. We visit each other at frequent intervals.

With regard to the Israeli Arabs’ sense of “Israeli-ness”—greater now than before the June, 1967, war—we live today still in a state of confusion over diverse ideas, ideals, inclinations, values, concerns. Most youths live empty lives, imitating the external trappings of Western civilization—long hair, jeans and the desire for luxuries. They live in a false world of nonexistent theories and ideas, a world of non-action, of powerlessness—from the political point of view.

There had been a time when they listened to all the radio stations, ever ready to tune in to newscasts and political commentary. But now they do not even want to hear the news. And they still have no real leadership. There is a danger that there may be no qualified leaders among our peers for our generation.

Our youth, who were born and have grown up in Israel, are indecisive and full of doubts. Declarations of Jewish extremists who advocate programs to convince Arabs to emigrate sow bitterness in the heart of Arab youth, undermine his security and the stability of his spirit, for he is totally unsure of what the future holds for him in his land and the land of his forefathers. If one Arab is caught spying, all Arabs are spies. If a bomb explodes, all Arabs in the area are rounded up. He is always guilty until he proves his innocence.

There is no doubt that Israel must maintain its military strength in order to assure its continued existence. But the Israeli government has a human and moral obligation to move as quickly as possible in the direction of peace. The '48 war did not bring peace. Nor did the '56 war. The June '67 war not only did not bring peace, it pushed it farther away. Feelings of superiority and victory blind the eyes of those who live on feeling alone. The Jewish people, because of its unique security situation—each war that it fights being a fight for survival, a matter of life and death—is obliged to back the government. The State of Israel, the representative of liberal thought, of democracy and of progress, bears a very great responsibility to the world as a whole. It must declare its willingness to make radical concessions as a fair price for peace.

(Translated from the Hebrew by Larry Edwards)