A personal rift

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VIEW #3
A PERSONAL RIFT [1]

Nicola Abé

In the morning, Rothschild Boulevard is a quiet place. The boulevard is lined with gnarled, old Ficus trees. On the left are the pedestrians and on the right the cyclists. People are strolling with their dogs in the rising sun. On the surface, only a few details reveal that the West is just an illusion here: the plaster of the Bauhaus buildings is crumbling as it does on the houses in Cairo; gas cylinders are openly stored in the front yards; flyers advertising the services of half-naked prostitutes are scattered on the street.

Walking through Tel Aviv, the hedonistic metropolis of the Middle East, I feel as though I were treading on a floor which might suddenly give way, as though the blanket covering civilization were unbearably thin; as though the realm of violence and sheer survival were terribly close. The next moment, these thoughts have gone. The apparent lightness and ease of the surroundings contradicts this feeling. Perhaps it is precisely this contrast that makes it so palpable, I think as I approach the coffee shop.

I order a latte to go and enter one of those pretty little shops in which everything is pastel-colored. My photographer is waiting outside my apartment. We get into my Mazda SUV and drive toward the West Bank, a parallel reality. It takes us less than an hour. We have no difficulty passing through the Israeli checkpoint. A couple of young soldiers with machine guns wave us through. We have an Israeli number plate. As we drive through the city of Nablus, we lower the windows and lift our sunglasses so as to be recognized as foreigners; we smile. We park in a driveway close to the camp.

A decorative archway made of tin spans the entrance. Emblazoned on it is a portrait of Yasser Arafat[2] wearing a black and white Palestinian scarf, his right hand raised signaling the victory sign; he is laughing. “With our blood we will gain our victory, our freedom, our own country,” it reads [author’s translation]. The portrait has

1 This story is a personal reflection of my experience in the field as a reporter for *Der Spiegel*. Some of the material has thus previously appeared in the form of a journalistic report: “Die Nacht muss enden,” *Der Spiegel*, Geschichte 2 (2015), published online 31/03/2015: http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/spiegelgeschichte/d-132910043.html.

2 An Arab nationalist, Yasser Arafat was a founding member of the Fatah political party, serving as its leader from 1959 until his death in 2004. As a Palestinian political leader he was also Chairman of the PLO and President of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA).

faded over time, now hardly recognizable. It is a relic from a time when the name of this place, Balata, still rang with proud resistance, courage, and hope. Once inside the camp, we slip into one of the houses. The room is dark and cold.

Mohammed is startled. "Israeli drones," he says quietly, looking past us to the window through which a buzzing noise can be heard. His small body sinks back into the sofa's heavy cushion. "What is your dream, Mohammed? What do you like to do?" his grandmother asks. The boy stares at the wall. He says nothing.

Mohammed was born here seventeen years ago. He is a third-generation Palestinian refugee and one of 23,000 people living in this one-fourth of a square kilometer. The camp was founded on the outskirts of Nablus by the United Nations refugee agency sixty-five years ago. It is the biggest camp in the West Bank and one of the most densely populated places in the world. "Five thousand people were living here at that time. Since then the population has quadrupled. Two-thirds of the residents are under the age of twenty-nine; sixty-six percent are unemployed," explains the social worker Mahmoud Subuh. Every last piece of land has been taken; no vacant space remains: five-story buildings loom in the sky; illegal extensions are popping up on most of the rooftops. The alleyways are so narrow that neighbors can see into each other's windows, while, at the same time, hardly any sunlight enters the apartments anymore.

The First Intifada was sparked here in the camps of the West Bank, and many of the leaders of the second one came from Balata. The camp served as a refuge for the Palestinian resistance. Cells of Fatah's militant al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades were formed here—Arafat was a hero.[3]

Today, residents not only engage in street fights with Israeli security forces but also with those belonging to the Palestinian National Authority who enter the camp at night to search homes and arrest suspects. Trust in President Mahmoud Abbas has declined

3 Fatah, formerly known as the Palestinian National Liberation Movement, is the political party with the most representation in the confederated Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades is a secular coalition of armed Palestinian forces operating in the West Bank, which has been labeled a terrorist organization by the EU, Israel, the United States, and other countries.

dramatically. Back in 2005, when the former Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei visited the camp, shots were fired at the building in which he was speaking. He had to flee because of the gunfire.

Here, shots can also be heard during the daytime. Balata often proves inaccessible to outsiders. “The mafia, the arms trade, and drugs are the major problems,” says Mahmoud Subuh. Divorce and suicide rates have risen drastically. “Balata is burning.”

Situated only fifty kilometers from the beaches and bars of Tel Aviv, as the crow flies, this is a place where tightness and suffering are compressed to the bearable limits. Walking through the streets is unpleasant, curious eyes always following. Time seems to move slower here, with more difficulty than elsewhere. An hour in, I am already exhausted. I have the impulse to run away.

Mohammed sinks into his grandmother’s purple sofa and tries to remember something good in his life while all the adults are sitting around looking at him with expectant eyes: his grandmother, a large woman wearing a scarf and bangles in the colors of the Palestinian flag; his mother, a gentle beauty, pale, and with bright eyes; Mahmoud, the social worker to whom Mohammed went for counseling, but that was a while back.

The teenager looks distraught. His eyes reflect shame. What would he like to do in his life one day? How is he supposed to respond to this question? Usually he isn’t even awake at this time. Ever since he stopped going to school two years ago, he sleeps during the day and throws stones at night. So he remains silent.

His grandmother takes a sip of tea. “He was always good at math,” she says. “He likes to fix computers.” Mohammed nods. For a moment, he smiles. “Yes” his mother calls, “Mohammed is Mr. Fix-it!”

And then he suddenly does think of something he likes. “Facebook,” he announces as he leads the way into the next room. There, Mohammed shows me pictures of his friends on a laptop: lots of young men—some of them just barely of age, others maybe ten years old—are posing with assault rifles and hand grenades. Mohammed is holding an M16.

Israel built walls to protect itself from this world, the world of the camps, the world of thirteen-year-olds with rifles and not much to lose—perhaps also not to

see it. As a reporter, I have set up a wall of my own, an inner one, which allows me to move through impoverished districts, war zones, and refugee camps feeling nothing. It is an empathy wall, but it isn't foolproof. Sometimes, when a person or story touches me, it doesn't work. Tears just gather in my eyes or run freely down my cheeks.

Zuhdya Ekdiesh, the seventy-six-year-old grandmother, did not sleep well last night. She dreamt of the land again, her family's land, and the house near Haifa. She remembered how as a child she and her sister would go to the beach together, collect seawater in buckets and place them in the sun until only the salt remained. She thought of the fig trees in the garden and of the oven in which they baked bread.

Her father had worked as a gardener for the British while Palestine was still under its direct administration. But then war came to the country, which was soon to be divided. In the fight against the armies that invaded from several neighboring Arab states in May 1948, Israel bombed the area surrounding Haifa with tanks and fighter jets. While the men fought, women and children were transported in buses to a stretch of land close to Jenin, beyond the line that would later be declared as the 1949 Armistice border. "We fled with nothing apart from the clothes we were wearing." They slept in caves and under trees. For months it went on like this. Some died. Later on the men joined them. Eventually, the family split up: some went to Syria, others to Iraq or Jordan.

Zuhdya Ekdiesh married at a young age and moved to Balata with her husband. "We lived in a tent; there was no electricity and no running water," she explains. The couple opened the first shop in the camp; they sold chickens and eggs. In time, the tent was replaced by a small stone house, three by three meters. Later they expanded. Zuhdya gave birth to seven daughters and seven sons. "We didn't have much," she tells me, but they were happier than they are now. "Back then, people still shared their bread with each other."

In Balata, my wall hasn't failed. It is as if the heaviness of the history reflected in the face of the woman opposite me, in her sunken cheeks and the deep furrows of her rough skin, were in fact hardening my shell. I am finding it difficult to pay

her such close attention because I don't want to succumb to her hopelessness, her displayed existence as a victim.

A pale boy steps into the room: another grandson. "This one is still doing alright," Zuhdya says. But she is deeply concerned about the future of the Palestinian youth, especially Mohammed who likes throwing stones more than he likes girls.

As soon as night falls on the camp, Mohammed's time begins. He begins wandering the alleys with his friends, past the greengrocers and the martyr posters, past the butcher shop where a cow's head—its tongue sticking out—is hanging above the entrance. The night sky above the camp is lit up by the rotating spotlight of a nearby watchtower belonging to the Israeli military. The boys slip into one of the little shops where for a few minutes and shekels they can escape reality—play foosball or a car-racing videogame. Or else they just sit in the teahouse on the yellowed plastic chairs and drink what they call "Balata whiskey" (chickpeas in a hot broth), puff cigarette smoke into the air, and wait for what the night will bring. "Mohammed is one of our young leaders," explains the owner of the teahouse: "the new generation." Mohammed looks proud. He tells the story of how he was once beaten up at an Israeli checkpoint when he said that he came from Balata. He also tells the story of how a couple of years ago he and a friend had snatched a kippah right off of a Jew's head in the crowds filling Jerusalem's old town. Policemen caught them and kicked them with their heavy boots.

The boys walk down a street lined with auto repair shops that leads away from the camp and further into the night. At one of the street corners they stop to buy a bag of salted sunflower seeds; that's cheaper than a pack of marshmallows or peanuts. They point to a traffic island. This is where they spend much of their time.

Every Tuesday evening a string of Israeli vehicles passes by: armored vehicles are accompanying pilgrims on their visit to the nearby monument, Joseph's Tomb. Mohammed and his friends like to throw stones before quickly running away. Sometimes the soldiers catch one of them and he disappears into prison for a couple of months. "Once," Mohammed tells proudly, "we even made a bus tip over."

We drive back to Tel Aviv.

At what price has my inner wall held? I suppose this inner rift is part of the job. In the evening, Rothschild Boulevard is packed with people, mostly partiers in high heels and skimpy clothing. I feel like a nerd in the long black pants and tunic I always wear for my investigations in the West Bank. Here a woman's uniform is likelier to be a pair of hotpants. It all suddenly seems foreign to me: the people around me, my own life. I don't belong here. I don't want to belong here, I think—to either side.

I take a shower, put on something skintight, curl my lashes. Maybe I'll go eat a steak at Milgo & Milbar, or to a gallery opening. Or maybe I'll meet up with a couple of friends at Mersand Café on Frishman Street. Or else I could have a drink at Anna Loulou, smoke a joint, and dance to Arabian electro music with the rest of my liberal friends.

I don't talk about the things I've seen or heard. Why should I? Who wants to hear such things? Me least of all. All it does is disturb. The thoughts begin to blur with the beat, the Campari soda, the glances of the others. It's all about attention and attraction here—one's power.

Then I wake up and drive back to Balata.

In her dark living room, Zuhdya Ekdiesh lays a photograph out on the table. Pictured is a young couple posing in front of a tree. The woman is wearing a long dress and her dark curly hair down. "Back then we still went out without a headscarf," she says. "I was so pretty." The photograph is from the Seventies. It was taken on her family's land close to Haifa. "In those days, we could still go out there," she explains. Before the Intifada, Palestinians from the West Bank were still allowed to work in Israel, in the fields or on construction sites.

Her husband, the old lady tells me, was never politically active. He was scared, too scared to talk to Israelis. But she could not remain quiet herself. She wanted to fight, "for Palestine's freedom." When the First Intifada erupted in 1987, she joined the crowds, stood up against the soldiers and shouted in protest. Those were the days of throwing stones, of curfews, and rooftop snipers. Surreptitiously she had kept a lookout for the fighters, checked if the routes were clear, because as a woman she raised no suspicions.

In the living room is a photograph blown up larger than life. It shows Zuhdya and a young man who is putting his arm around her and kissing her hand. "The night must end, the handcuffs must break," reads the caption. It is a picture of her son Khalid, Mohammed's father, who is celebrated within the camp as one of the superheroes of the Second Intifada. He was a leader of the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades that committed attacks against Israel. At the time, the Israeli soldiers came to the camp with tanks in a siege that lasted for days. They searched homes, arrested suspects, and destroyed buildings in retaliation for the terror caused in Israel. Many suicide bombers, such as Ahmed al-Khatib and Sami Antar, came from Balata. They blew themselves up in public spaces in Tel Aviv, killing dozens. Balata became a place of pain.

"The First Intifada was a popular uprising; it was about an idea," says Mahmoud, the social worker. The Second Intifada, which ultimately became a terror campaign, was the result of worsening conditions under Israeli occupation and a corrupted, dysfunctional Palestinian leadership. Following the Oslo Peace Treaty, the United Nations decreased its support. The Palestinian Authority was to be responsible for the care of the refugees, which greatly reduced the aid given. Food aid was available only in cases of extreme hardship.

Khalid Ekdiesh has now been held in an Israeli prison for twelve years. He was accused of—and eventually convicted for—acquiring weapons for the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades. His mother only receives permission to visit him once every couple of months. And the security checks are humiliating.

"But I never cry," she says. She must show strength, even in front of her son. Yesterday was one of those special days. Zuhdya and her thirty-five-year-old daughter-in-law Samar Khadish got on a bus provided by the Red Cross to take them to the prison. During the visit, she is only allowed to see her son through a glass screen and speak to him on a telephone. "He doesn't tell me what's going on with him," Khalid's wife Samar adds. But she can tell just by looking in his eyes that he is suffering. As they made their way back through the West Bank, someone threw a Molotov cocktail at the bus. "Everyone knows this is the transport vehicle for the family members of the inmates," Samar says. Ever since, she's been scared to visit her husband.

They lived together for eight years and have been separated for twelve. Samar recalls throwing glances at him after school. When she turned eighteen, they celebrated their wedding in the camp.

On the morning of his arrest, she gave birth to their youngest child. Her husband managed to visit her and see the baby at the hospital in Nablus at lunchtime. That same night Israeli soldiers took him away. When Samar received the message the following morning, she thought to herself: better caught than dead. Now she and her four children live in her mother-in-law's house. She has never had a job and now the children are already starting to leave. "My life is over," she says.

She is my age, the age of my friends in Tel Aviv and Berlin. Meanwhile we are asking ourselves if our lives have even really started yet, if we are really fully grown up. We've traveled the world; we have careers. Most of us still don't have children, but we have serial or various relationships, frozen egg cells or embryos. Our husbands don't exist because they don't want to grow up either. The realm of possible experiences seems inexhaustible to us. We consume them; intensity is our god. We complain about exchangeability. We haven't been waiting twelve years for the father of our children who is still imprisoned and visible to us only through a glass screen. It almost seems romantic to me. I am ashamed of this thought.

We shake hands and I glance into her eyes. I trip over the unplastered step on my way out.

Mohammad is sitting on a boulder in a meadow between two small fields on the outskirts of Balata. Rubbish, empty candy wrappers, and cigarette butts are scattered in the grass. "I can breathe here," he says. Even as a little boy he would sneak away, flee again and again into these hills. Sometimes he disappeared for days.

"Up there," he tells me, pointing at a slope covered in cypress trees, "is where I was sitting, thinking about my brother."

Mohammed was four years old when he and his twin brother were caught in the midst of a shooting between Israeli soldiers and residents of the camp. A bullet hit his twin brother in the face and he died right there in front of Mohammed's eyes. After that, Mohammed, who never said much, stopped speaking altogether—for two years.

It was during this time that order in the camp began to fall apart. Mohammed's father was arrested along with most of the leaders of the Second Intifada. Criminals, armed clan leaders, began to rule the camp instead. Israel built a wall and barriers in the West Bank.

On a wet February day, the cold infiltrates the houses of Balata like a parasite. It is freezing indoors. We are back with Zuhdya who has been living here for sixty years now. "We are so tired," she says in her dark living room. The fights were all for nothing. What have they achieved? No state of their own, no compensation. As is the case with most of the people here in Balata, she mistrusts the Palestinian National Authority.

"They are weak and incapable of standing up to the Israelis," Zuhdya says. They betrayed the interest of the refugees during the peace talks and continue to postpone a solution to a later date. When President Abbas spoke of a symbolic right of return in 2013, he was heavily criticized. "We already know we won't be getting our country back," Zuhdya says. What she wants is for her son to finally be released.

Suddenly the old woman stands up and slams shut the open door, revealing a photograph stuck on the back. Pictured is a young lady with a green headscarf, her eyes lined with black kajal. Dangling from the photograph is a stuffed heart ornament. "My daughter" Zuhdya exclaims, tears running down her face, "killed by her own child!" Her grandson shot his own mother in a drug high because she refused to give him 200 shekels for drugs. Exhausted, Zuhdya falls back onto the sofa. "Years ago, Balata was still Balata," she says, "now it's only bad."

"Anyone who can leaves this place," Mahmoud the social worker says. Those who remain, lack the money and chance. And land prices have only continued to rise in the West Bank in recent years. There are no secondary schools in the camp. Those who wish to qualify for university have no other option but to go to Nablus. Only a few dozen students from the camp ever completed a university degree. Before the First Intifada, the majority of men had attended a secondary school. Today people no longer believe in education, "and those who manage to get out of here, never come back," Mahmoud admits.

The cultural center for which Mahmoud works offers psychosocial counseling for women and children. Children can also participate in theater activities or learn to sing. “The idea is for them to have some fun,” Mahmoud says, “so that, for a moment, they forget about the wish of becoming martyrs.”

Mahmoud says that he often doubts the meaning of his work, that he is unsure if his energy is well spent. He hears the most awful stories and tries to help. But then the people just disappear again. “Then everything remains the same or gets worse.”

On a Thursday evening in Balata, the streets are decorated with colorful flags. In a brightly lit hall, a couple of men are celebrating the release of the seventeen-year-old Amiran from an Israeli prison. To eat there is chicken, rice, and yogurt. Mohammed and his friends are also there. Amiran was away for four months. Now they have come to listen to his stories. “I hope that in five years I will also be in prison,” a small boy whispers.

Mohammed remains silent. Maybe he is thinking of his father. Ever since he turned sixteen, he hasn’t been given permission to visit his father in prison anymore; he is too old, he might be a fighter. Only once did his mother smuggle him past the security checks using his younger brother’s ID. Not even his father recognized him. “Who is the boy?” he asked. When his wife told him, he began to cry.

Now his father lets him know to stay calm and not to get into the kind of trouble he had gotten into when he was still in school—like when Mohammed and a few friends got into a fight with another boy at school, tied a rope around his neck and stood him on a chair, ready to hang him. Fortunately, at that very moment a volunteer from the cultural center entered the classroom and prevented the act.

“Mohammed is alive and not yet in prison,” Mahmoud says. “I guess that’s already a lot for Balata.”

I feel uncomfortable walking by the sea in Tel Aviv that same night. As far as cramped Balata may be from Gordon Beach, as invisible as the world behind the wall seems from the hipster bars in Florentine, something strange has happened: the tension is here, too. It is a phenomenon. From the beginning, something captured me

here that I later recognized in my Israeli friends, an anxiety that they had to sedate with all sorts of aids such as weed, Ritalin, sex, or obsessions with work or childbirth.

A few weeks later a taxi driver in Tel Aviv asks me, "Which occupation?" His tone is slightly aggressive. "There is no occupation!" I hear this more and more often. For the fiftieth anniversary of the Six-Day War, the occupation has been abolished mentally. It seems that some people have moved from shutting out the reality behind the Green Line to focus on their own small worlds to something new, namely denying the occupation's very existence.

As a foreign reporter I am only an observer, even in Tel Aviv. I can book a flight to Berlin anytime. The Israeli reality is not mine; my story is a different one. My past is not one of persecution, existential threat, or terror. I was not caught in a suicide bombing as a teenager. I only dove into this Israeli reality, and, occasionally, into the Palestinian reality. Still, during my dives I witness the experiences of others and sometimes I am able to see things clearly.

"The occupation is haunting us," the Israeli journalist Nahum Barnea once said to me, expressing what I sensed but had not found the right words for.

The Palestinian reality cannot be separated from Israel's. Israel, as we know it today, is built upon it. Thousands of Israelis have to send their children to serve in the West Bank every year. These young people keep watch with guns and fearful eyes at the entrances of Palestinian villages. They are nineteen years old when they enter into this abyss of power. Meanwhile the two-state solution has become something reserved for delusional dreamers and traitors of the country.

But the occupation is existent and only a few miles away. It is not going anywhere. In fact, the occupation has begun to seep down into even the city of Tel Aviv. It can be felt in everyday life, in society at large, in the family, even in the most intimate of relationships. The occupation is seeping into the ground beneath our feet.

This article was translated from the German by Jack A. Pryce and Lara Mehling