



AFTER THE NAKBA: AN EXPERIENCE OF EXILE IN ENGLAND

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The year 1998, the fiftieth anniversary of the fall of Palestine, occasioned an outpouring of eyewitness and other accounts of the events of 1948. But relatively few accounts exist of how the displacement affected people's lives in the immediate wake of the exodus from Palestine. The following is one such account, a memoir of the author's early experience in postwar London.

WHEN WE ARRIVED IN BRITAIN IN 1949, the country was still in the grips of food rationing because of the war. We were given five ration books, one for each member of the family. They came in different colors and had pages of coupons that could be exchanged for food. Everything—milk, bread, meat, fish—was rationed. There were different types of coupons for different items, including ones for sweets. Neither my brother Ziyad nor I understood much about this, but I recall that soon after our arrival in London, we took our two ration books and went down the road to the newsagent's shop. There, we offered them to the woman behind the counter with the one important word we knew in English: "chocolate." She looked through the books and shook her head. Evidently, we did not have the appropriate coupons, but we must have looked so crestfallen that she smiled and gave each of us a toffee.

Our ration books also had a pork and bacon allowance. Since pork is forbidden to Muslims, my mother gave these coupons to the greengrocer at the bottom of the road. His shop was next to the newsagent's and opposite them was the butcher's shop. Used as we were to the profusion of fresh fruits and vegetables in the markets of Jerusalem and Damascus, the sight of orderly rows of lemons, cabbages, and pears displayed as if they were pieces of jewelry was strange indeed. "Their fruit and vegetables have no taste," my mother would grumble. "Like eating water. But what can one expect when they all come out of refrigerators? What an awful country!"

The pork coupons that she gave to the greengrocer ensured his lasting devotion. He picked out his best fruit for her or kept it back until she came. Or he would postpone taking payment if she did not have enough money. All this was conducted in sign language mixed with English on his part and Arabic on hers.

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Her success with the butcher was even greater, but only after an initial battle. He had been with the British army in Egypt and spoke a few words of Arabic. Realizing that my mother was unfamiliar both with the country and the rationing system, he helped himself to one of her ration books one day when she innocently offered them to him to locate our meat coupons. When my father found out what had happened, he went to our local police station. After this incident, the butcher was utterly repentant. Eventually, my mother and he made friends again. She won his heart by giving him our bacon coupons. This enabled her to teach him how to cut up meat the way we liked it. Not only did the butcher learn how to cut up the meat in the required way, he also learned more Arabic words, and he and my mother would converse after a fashion in this pidgin language.

SITTING IN THE KITCHEN IN THE DARK

My mother made no secret of the fact that she resented being in London. She complained endlessly that there was no decent food to cook, none of the vegetables we were used to. Even garlic, the staple of all Arabic cooking, was a luxury. She hated the cold weather and the rain and complained that she could scarcely keep the house warm. She was lonely and longed for company. In the Arab world, one was never alone for a moment. Neighbors or friends were always there to call on every day, and in any case the family was around at all times. In London, she had no neighbors she could talk to, no family beyond her immediate family, and few friends. In the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, there was only a small number of Arabs in England and hardly any Palestinians besides us. My mother had been a gregarious, sociable woman who depended on the company of other people almost for her very survival. "Try and read something," my father would say, "it will help to pass the time." But she said reading only made her restless and want to be with people even more.

With our coming to London, she had changed. Whereas in Jerusalem, she had been house-proud and energetic, rushing noisily around organizing the cooking and the cleaning, here in London, she sometimes found it hard even to get out of bed. We might come back at lunchtime and find her still there. She took no interest in the house and, apart from the obsessional blitz on the floors, did not bother to clean it at all.

She often sat in the kitchen in the dark with her ear pressed against our secondhand radio, trying to tune into Arabic stations on the shortwave. She listened avidly to the news coming out of the Arab world about Palestine, and she and my father would talk to each other about it in the evenings. Once, a month or so after we had arrived, I heard them saying that there was still no word from the Jews—they never once used the words "Israel" or "Israelis" to the best of my knowledge—about allowing us all back to Palestine, and that the United Nations was doing nothing about it. It was at this time that I first heard them refer to the Nakba (the catastrophe)—a word I would

hear over and over again throughout my life. When I asked what it meant, they fobbed me off with "Never you mind about that. It's something that happened in the past."



The Karmi Family, 1945.

When there was no news on the radio, my mother would listen to Arabic songs or to recitations of the Qur'an. Probably nothing is more evocative of the Arab world than hearing recitations of the Qur'an. I can remember a Jordanian Christian friend telling me about visiting a beautiful, ancient church in Berlin during the 1960s and how it left him cold and that it was only when he entered the mosque there out of curiosity and heard the Qur'an recited (quite badly by a Turkish imam, he said) that he suddenly felt a tug of nostalgia for home. And for me, too, coming into our house in London and hearing my mother's radio emitting Arabic songs or Qur'anic recitations, albeit that the sound was crackly and intermittent, had an uncanny effect. In an instant, I could feel myself transported back to Palestine, as if the key to our front door in London was all it took to send me there.

As time went on, my mother adapted herself somewhat. Within our first two or three years in London, she had made our home into a communications center, not just for Palestinians but also for Arabs of every description. This continued throughout the 1950s, when the number of Arabs in England, especially Palestinians, grew steadily. She went out or had visitors nearly every day. Although she spoke no English, she mastered the London bus system and could recognize the landmarks needed to lead her where she was going without having to read signs or ask for help. On days when she did not go out, she made visits on the telephone instead.

At times, her socializing became frenetic, but these bursts of activity were interspersed with episodes of her old gloom. This showed itself in the way

she dressed. My mother was a good-looking woman with soft brown eyes and fine aquiline features, and in Palestine she had taken a considerable interest in her appearance. But during these periods of depression she hardly bothered and might go out wearing a dress with an uneven hemline or a clashing color scheme. My older sister Siham was acutely ashamed of this, but my mother felt anonymous in London and was therefore not affected by the Arab fear of "what people would say." Of course, if she were due to see "real people"—that is, other Arabs—she took care to dress properly.

A TEMPORARY EXISTENCE

The daily routine of our life at home was as Arab as my mother could make it, just as if we had never left Jerusalem at all. Our food was entirely Arabic, difficult though this was to achieve at first—it was before the arrival of the Indian, Pakistani, and Cypriot immigrants who used the same spices and vegetables, so my mother had to be ingenious and use what was available from the street market at Soho. My father went there every week on his way home from the BBC and bought aubergines and peppers and garlic at inflated prices. But we had no option other than to modify our cuisine to become more English or European, which for my mother was wholly unthinkable.

Our home soon acquired a reputation for being a home-away-from-home amongst newly arrived and homesick Palestinians. These were often young unmarried men who had found their way, like my father, to a job at the BBC Arabic Service. Some of them also brought their friends to our house. My mother would cook them Palestinian dishes and find out where they came from and who they were related to.

This sort of inquiry was always important amongst Palestinians, but it became obligatory after the exodus of 1948. People were eager to define each other's exact town or village of origin in Palestine. Who their families were was no less important, since this was the way in which people assessed each other's social position and, what was more significant, established any family links there might be.

"Are you the Canaans of Nablus or the Canaans of Jerusalem?" my mother would ask. My father, who prided himself on knowing every inch of Palestine, often joined in. But sometimes he was stumped when someone cited the name of a small village. He would worry at it until he found it. "Ah," he would suddenly say, "it's in the district of Jaffa! Why didn't you say so at first?"

For years, I thought this obsession with places and family names and who was related to whom was just a quirk of my parents. My sister and I used to imitate them in our bedroom after a particularly gruelling interrogation with some hapless Palestinian visitor and laugh and shake our heads. It took me years to realize that after 1948, establishing a person's origin became for Palestinians a kind of mapping, a surrogate repopulation of Palestine in ne-

gation of the Nakba. It was their way of recreating the lost homeland, as if the families and the villages and the relations they had once known were all still there, waiting to be reclaimed.

And indeed, for Palestinians in the immediate aftermath of the 1948 exodus, the prospect of return to Palestine was very real. Who can believe, they used to say, that we won't be allowed to return to our homes? It's our country, they're our homes! The United Nations, the Americans, the British, will never allow such a terrible injustice to happen. Of course we're going back!

This was my mother's conviction, too, and even my father, who had seemed to have given up hope, still harbored a secret wish to return. "I'll put up with being here," my mother would say about living in London, "because I know it won't be for long. And you children," she would continue, "don't get too used to things here, we're not staying!"

She put this philosophy into drastic effect. She refused to learn English, she had no English friends, she would reject any suggestion of decorating our shabby house or even of buying such a basic thing as a refrigerator. "I never had such a thing in Palestine, where it was hot. Why should I need it here, where it's freezing?" Meat and other perishables were put out at night on the window sill outside the scullery door, and she devised other means of preserving our food. Succumbing to the refrigerator would for her have symbolized her acceptance of the European way of life—*franji*, as she might say, a term with derogatory overtones that Arabs use to designate Westerners and the West. Agreeing to any house improvement other than cleaning would have meant that her stay in England was no longer temporary. Since this possibility was not remotely acceptable, we struggled on, living in a cold house (for central heating was another rejected improvement) with peeling walls, a dilapidated bathroom, and an old-fashioned kitchen.

As for my father, his sole concern was that we would all go to university and gain degrees. Beyond that, he thought very little about the other aspects of life in England and what we would make of them. With our mother at home maintaining a traditional life-style, he assumed that we would naturally retain our identity as Arabs and Muslims without effort. If he thought about the environment outside at all, he saw it as no more than a backdrop to the crucial work we must be doing on our education.

As a result, we were left to find our own accommodation to the schism in our lives between our Palestinian Arab origins, so zealously maintained by our mother, and the new society we had joined; between our identity as Arabs and Muslims and that of the European, Christian country around us; and above all, between the awareness of our bruised and dislocated history and the British indifference and hostility toward it. In the years that followed, each of us would feel our way forward uncertainly, trying to make sense of these contradictions and resolving them in our own different ways.

WHAT'S PALESTINE?

During those first years in England, the memory of Palestine grew ever more distant. No one talked about the past at home beyond the occasions when the news on the radio would provoke the odd exclamation or comment from one or other of our parents. Politics continued to form the subject of major concern to our father and his friends whenever they visited, and we might pick up stray pieces of information about Israel and the Arab world from their discussions. However, there was nothing personal in any of this, no reference to our life in Jerusalem, no expression of sorrow over what happened except in our mother's deep sighs when someone reminded her of people or events there. No one spoke about the circumstances that had prompted our departure or explained the history and politics of it.

My parents' silence was much at variance with what was happening in the refugee camps on the borders of Israel. There, Palestinian parents told their children every detail of the villages and towns they had come from, showed them the keys to the houses they had been forced to abandon, recounted stories of their past lives, such that in years to come these children knew Palestine as if they themselves had lived there. Not so in our case. What private memories and griefs our parents entertained, we never knew.

This played directly into my own loss of memory. In some subtle, insensible way, I found that I had wiped out all remembrance of Jerusalem. If I ever thought about it, it was to realize with some shock that I could no longer recall the way our house had looked or the dog or even the face of Fatima, the village woman who took care of us. Those essential memories of my childhood had simply melted away, leaving only shadows and elusive fragments of feeling. Even our early time in Damascus became blurred, as if an extension of the amnesia that shrouded my earlier life in Palestine. I did not dwell much on this strange phenomenon, and I put away the past as if it had never been.

In any case, no one in England seemed to remember Palestine either. It is remarkable how quickly the word went out of general use. By 1953, when people asked me where I came from and I answered "Palestine," they would respond, "Did you say Pakistan?" Palestine, whose turbulent history had so frustrated Britain's government but five years before, simply vanished from people's consciousness. Instead the talk was of Israel, the new young plucky state that was making such rapid advances. Events there marched on apace; new facts were being established despite all our mother's efforts to make time stand still in the Palestine of her young womanhood.

MEANWHILE, IN THE OLD COUNTRY

We did get news from time to time from family members back in Palestine. My cousin Zuhair wrote to us from Tulkarm, where my father's family had originated, to tell us that all the town's land up to the railway line was

now Israeli-occupied. You could see the Israelis working the newly acquired land with tractors and modern machines, he wrote, an odd sight for the people of Tulkarm who had tilled the soil with donkeys and mules for generations. Occasionally, villagers tried to go across the dividing line with Israel to visit their houses or fetch some of their belongings; Zuhair's wife, Aziza, had been tempted, too, just to go over and pick a piece of fruit from what had been her father's orchard. But this practice soon stopped when the Israelis opened fire on the intruders and the rumor went about that one or two people had been killed, though not anyone we knew.

Tulkarm was now under Jordanian rule and everyone had been given Jordanian citizenship, but this did nothing to abate people's anger against King Abdallah. They held him responsible for a large part of Palestine's tragedy. It was rumored that he was still secretly negotiating with the Israelis and preparing to concede more to them of what remained of Palestine. Things were bad enough as it was, with the Israeli army still evacuating Palestinian villages on its borders.

Some 200,000 Palestinians had been left in Israel, but no one heard much about them. They seemed to have disappeared, swallowed up in the waves of Jewish immigration that were filling the country. The only Palestinians we had any awareness of were the ones like us, who lived outside the old borders. It was only when our friend Adib Khoury married a woman from Haifa and brought her back to England that we could even imagine that there were such people as "Israeli Palestinians." Adib had come to England in 1946 to study and as a result had missed witnessing the drama of Palestine. He supplemented his income, as many Arabs did at the time, by working on an occasional basis for the BBC Arabic Service, which is how he and my father met.

One day Adib announced that an introduction with a view to marriage had been arranged for him by his relatives in Haifa. This was not in itself unusual, since it was the Arab custom for prospective couples to be brought together by their families. Such things were best conducted between people living in the same locality, but the fact of being overseas and unable to enter Israel did not deter anyone. The Arab world was in a state of war with Israel which meant that only those people who had non-Arab passports could be admitted. Despite this, both Adib and his family expected him to marry a girl from his hometown, no matter that life had drastically changed for everyone there and that Palestinians like them had become a small minority in a massively dominant Israel.

Prospective couples could only meet on so-called neutral territory, and Cyprus was a favorite place for such encounters. Both Adib's family and that of the bride expected them to go there. However, Adib did not need to go to Cyprus, for he had acquired a British passport by then and could go directly to Haifa to meet his intended bride. But he kept both of these facts hidden from all but a handful of his closest friends, for the prevailing view amongst

Palestinians at the time was that anyone who could bring himself to accept British nationality was almost a party to the betrayal Britain had committed.

But by far the worst treachery any Palestinian could commit was to contemplate going to Israel. This struck a chord of such revulsion as to make it unthinkable, for it implied a recognition of Palestine's occupation and an acquiescence in what was seen as its rape and plunder. For decades after Israel's creation, scarcely any Palestinian or Arab who could legally have done so ever went there. Israel was a no-man's-land that for most ordinary Arabs existed only as a name on a Western map, for no Arab maps of the Middle East bore any reference to it. Inevitably, the minority of Palestinians still left in Israel were similarly invisible.

Adib was away for barely a few weeks, during which time all arrangements were speedily executed, from the couple's first meeting to their wedding and then their departure for England. On his return, he brought his new bride to our house and introduced her to us. I remember how we gazed at her with curiosity, for she presented us with a fascinating enigma. She was fair-haired and hazel-eyed and did not look particularly like an Arab. She wore a green knitted suit and low-heeled shoes—"Israeli clothes," I thought to myself with a shudder. But she spoke Arabic as we did and seemed normal. We knew that she was different from us, however, because she had lived "there," with the Israelis, and I remember watching her for signs that would betray her otherness. But she never did, and when my father asked her how it was in Israel, she only answered, "Well, you know how it is. They think it's all theirs now. They're in charge, and they make sure you know it."

BETWEEN WORLDS

By that time, in any case, my primary preoccupation had nothing to do with Palestine or the past. Unnoticed by my parents who were busy with their Arab customs and culture, I was relentlessly being absorbed into the English way of life. Our local library was to me a place of hidden treasures and delights—all I had to do was show a library ticket, and I could get all the books of the world, or so it seemed, to read for free. Increasingly, I became a devotee of Western music, much aided by the fact that I had begun to take piano lessons, and when I was eleven Siham and I began visiting art galleries. I started to collect postcard reproductions of well-known paintings, sticking them into a large scrapbook and writing underneath the picture an account of the painter's life with painstaking pedantry, and would take pride in showing off my scrapbook to puzzled Arab visitors. Siham, who was already mature when we reached England, remained relatively unaffected by these Westernizing influences. Her appreciation of European art and music and books did not touch her inner core, but my case was different. In my overt exposure to these cultural experiences and in myriad insensible ways, my inner sense of myself was irrevocably affected.

My parents sensed nothing of this and blithely persisted in their assumptions that held all of us suspended in their world, as if our new world were only temporary and could be left behind at any moment. They heard me playing the piano (which they had helped me buy), let me go with Siham to concerts and art galleries, knew that we read nothing but English books. Yet none of this deflected them from the view that we were the same, unchanging Arab unit that had lived in Palestine.

Indeed, to our parents, our culture was so strong, so natural, and so right that no amount of Western influence could dislodge it. Our father held this attitude despite his extensive explorations of Western philosophy, literature, and religion; while this induced in him a tolerance toward my own intellectual inclinations, it went no more toward integrating him into Western culture than our mother. In essence, his pursuit of Western civilization was a form of mental pastime, a complex scholarly facade beneath which he nevertheless maintained a total emotional and cultural separateness. Though he understood Western cultural paradigms, for him as for many Muslims, they could never be the norm. His adherence to Islamic philosophy, Arabic literature, and above all the Arabic language ultimately took precedence.

Because of this conviction, I suppose, it never occurred to them that we needed formal education in what was our natural environment or even that they needed to tell us much about our culture, customs, or religion. At first, my mother used to make me read the Qur'an out loud to her, but our formal education in Arabic, in the Muslim religion, in Islamic history, even in Arab social behavior, ceased the moment we left Damascus. Still, the depth of my father's allegiance to Arabic culture did unconsciously communicate itself to us. Defective as my knowledge of these matters was, I thrilled uncomprehendingly to the language of the Qur'an, resonated to the recitation of an Arabic sonnet, and felt an inarticulate reverence for classical Arabic.

My parents' cultural isolation should not be viewed simply within the context of migration. Many migrant groups maintain their previous cultures and lifestyles in their countries of adoption, often insisting that their children do the same. But this is by way of acclimatizing to their new situation, creating a bridge between the past they had chosen to leave behind and the present they had opted for. None of this held true for us. My parents did not choose to leave Palestine and they never willingly acquiesced in its loss. They did not see England as a place of the future, but as a staging post on a route that only pointed back—to a place, of course, where they could never return. My father's finest achievements—the English-Arabic dictionaries he was to write and the reputation he earned as one of the foremost savants of the Arabic language—were in fact the bridges he built to connect him to the past, to Palestine and the Arab world. And the large Arab social circle that my mother managed to gather around her was a bridge of the same kind.

GOLDERS GREEN

My brother Ziyad and I had a large number of Jewish children in both our schools, which was only natural because the area of London where we lived, Golders Green, had been famous since the 1930s as a refuge for Jews fleeing Nazi persecution in Europe. In fact, our neighborhood was so Jewish that when we lived there in the 1950s, the bus driver would shout out when reaching the Golders Green stop: "Anyone for Tel Aviv?"

Strange as it may seem, we were largely oblivious to Jews. My father had rented the house with little awareness of the neighborhood's composition, and I do not remember, growing up, that the oddity of our living in a Jewish environment was ever discussed. Perhaps it was because we lived such parallel lives to those around us; we could have been anywhere in England for all the difference it would have made to the atmosphere of our home. Since our parents did not engage in the life of the community, London never acquired more than a utilitarian function for them.

At all events, Ziyad and I inevitably made friends among our Jewish classmates, and I recall no time at which our parents so much as hinted that we should refrain from doing so. When the issue came up, my mother maintained that she distinguished between "the Jews"—that is, those whom she held responsible for our plight—and individuals who were Jewish, for whom she felt no personal animosity. Still, I was dimly aware that there was something anomalous about all this, for despite my lack of interest in Middle Eastern politics, I could not avoid knowing that Jews had played a hostile role in our lives. The fact that we now moved so freely amongst them posed a contradiction that gnawed at me beneath the surface of my consciousness.

It was not until much later that I realized the main reason for our apparent indifference to the Jewish presence in Golders Green—a reason that should have called into question the larger issue of our whole presence in Britain. Although my father appreciated full well the Zionist plans for Palestine to which we had fallen victim, he placed the primary responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the British. "If you let a thief into your house and he robs you," he was fond of saying, "who is to blame, you or the thief?" It was the British who were in power, he would continue, and they had a sacred trust not to abandon us. Their callous betrayal rankled my father to the end. "If you ask me why I was not too bothered about the Jews of Golders Green when you were growing up," he told me later, "that was the reason."

THE STRAINS OF EXILE

As we children became more integrated, our parents increasingly lived a life separate from ours. We had few activities in common. On our major feast days, the Id al-Fitr at the end of Ramadan and the Id al-Adha, we went together to attend prayers at the Regents' Park mosque, at the time the only mosque in London. There was not much festivity on these occasions, although our mother still made special sweets, and we had visits from our

Arab friends. But it was not the way it had been in Jerusalem or Damascus, and since we did not celebrate Christmas or Easter either—even though we had done so in Palestine—we ended up with hardly any religious celebrations at all. Aside from the feast days, there were few family outings. At home, we had to join in when visitors came, mainly by helping to serve food or coffee, and occasionally we went as a family on return visits, but this was more of a duty than any real communal activity.

My parents, too, seemed to be going their separate ways under the strain of exile. Our father was occupied with his job at the BBC, where he was now chief language supervisor. His old interest in books had revived in London, and he spent much of his leisure time buying what he considered to be bargains from secondhand bookshops. This soon became an obsession, such that he scarcely ever came home without having one or two new books under his arm. As the house began to fill up with these books, he had shelves put up in every room, including the kitchen, much to our mother's annoyance. She complained that her kitchen was being invaded, and he grumbled that his books were being damaged by the steam from her cooking pots. "Well, take the wretched things away then!" she would cry, at which point he would retire to his tiny study upstairs and shut the door.

This was but one of the ways in which they vented their frustrations on each other; in her case, an unforgiving anger at being forced to come and live in a foreign country she hated and for which she blamed him, and in his, a mixture of guilt about this and resentment at the way in which she unfairly vilified him for it. When, in 1950, barely a year after we had left, news of our grandfather's death in Damascus reached us, our mother wept inconsolably for days. She had not been close to her father, in fact had resented her harsh upbringing at his hands, but she grieved for being in England, so distant from her family at such a time. "He knew it when he said good-bye to us that terrible day," she sobbed. "He knew we would never meet again, he knew!" And she eyed our father balefully, unmistakable accusation in her eyes.

These tensions were a new and depressing experience. For, although our parents had never "got on" in the romantic European sense, having different temperaments and sharing few outside interests, in our society married couples had fewer expectations; the ill effects of incompatible unions were ameliorated by the clearly differentiated roles assigned to men and women, which kept both busy in their separate spheres, and by the support of the numerous relatives who constituted the extended Arab family.

But here in London, bereft of the traditional support structures and with few social outlets, our parents found themselves unrelievedly face to face, the fabric of their relationship cruelly put to the test. This was harder for our mother, since our father had many more escape routes. As a man, he had his daily job to resort to, and he joined what became a sort of informal Arab social club created by those working at the BBC Arabic Service. A few of these friends started to come regularly to our house, and we sometimes also met his more interesting contacts. It was in this way that Habib Bourgiba,

later president of Tunisia, and Nizar Qabbani, the famous Syrian poet, as well as a number of Arab ambassadors came to visit us in the 1950s.

ANGLOPHILIA PUT TO THE TEST

None of this impressed me, however, for by that time I had formed the opinion that anything Arab or connected with the Arab world in general was inferior and of no interest. These ideas were almost wholly derived from my English surroundings. Unwittingly, I had absorbed them together with the English culture that I was so eagerly embracing. I believe that it was for this same reason that I later found myself prejudiced against Indians as they started coming into Britain. Nothing infuriated me more in those days than to be taken for one, as frequently happened, for English people at the time had a tendency to define all dark-skinned foreigners who were not African as Indian. I sensed an unspoken insult in this attributed resemblance, since I could see that Indians were regarded as rather fawning, unattractive, and altogether inferior. Absurdly, I even adopted the pervasive English resentment against immigrants, as if my family were part of the indigenous population and these new arrivals were usurpers who had no right to be there.

My sense of assimilation was soon to be sorely tested. One day at school, I was queuing for lunch with my friend Josie. We were late, and the two girls ahead of us seemed to be holding everyone up. Urging Josie to hurry, I pushed past them and as I did so heard one of the girls mutter something at me. I did not catch it, but I noticed Josie going red and looking embarrassed. When I asked her what was wrong, she said, "It's one of those girls we pushed past. She called you an FF." "What?" I asked, mystified. "Don't you know what that is?" said Josie with disbelief. I shook my head. "Filthy foreigner," she said slowly, "that's what it means." I was astounded. Why would anyone want to say such a thing about me? It gave me a sudden sickening feeling that I was somehow different, undesirable, contemptible. I could not reconcile this with my belief in my own assimilation, and it preyed on my mind.

The fact was that during those first few years at school, I lived in something of a fool's paradise. I deprecated, as we all did, the school's academic rigor and humorless discipline, but I had an illusion of amity and harmony among us girls, Jewish or otherwise, which I innocently cherished. I saw myself as one of them, an ordinary schoolgirl in an ordinary school. I knew of course that my family was different, but I did not think it any more foreign than the German Jewish families of my school contemporaries. Nor did I see my origins as an impediment to my personal integration into the society of my peers.

With the shattering of this illusion began a painful process of realization and discovery, soon to be accelerated by the dramatic events of the Suez crisis and the 1967 War. This was to be the watershed from which my lingering illusions of assimilation into British society and Jewish-Arab harmony would never recover.