



THE 1948 EXODUS: A FAMILY STORY

GHADA KARMI

The story of my family is not unusual in Palestinian terms. It is a story of displacement and exile and loss, replicated in thousands and thousands of cases where Palestinians fled or were driven out in order to make room for the establishment of the new State of Israel in 1948. It is also the story of how Zionism, a political ideology formed in Europe by Jews for Jews, came to affect the lives of a faraway Middle Eastern people who had not the remotest connection with the events that engendered it. Reams have been written about the politics of the Arab-Israeli conflict, its regional and international context, but little has been said about the local history of that conflict and the personal price paid for the establishment of Israel in place of Palestine. There is literally not one Palestinian whose life was not altered by it, and the effects live on in the children of those Palestinians, and beyond. The Palestinian experience was varied and, understandably, the more dramatic fate of those who ended up in refugee camps overshadowed the more subtle aspects of exile. Those luckier Palestinians who found roofs over their heads and food and education also suffered, but in a different way. Such a case was mine and that of my family.

Dr. Ghada Karmi, a specialist in public health in London, is also a research associate at the Middle East Centre of the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University. She has lectured and written widely on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Jerusalem 1940 to 1948

I was born in Jerusalem to a comfortably off, middle-class family. We were not natives of Jerusalem, for my father originated from the town of Tulkarm (hence our name of Karmi), and had come to live and work there as a young man. At the time of my birth, we lived in a house in Qatamon, in which we stayed until the time of our flight in 1948. As a child, I remember it as a beautiful, leafy residential area of substantial villas set in gardens full of flowers. Most of its inhabitants were well-to-do Palestinians, although several foreign consulates were located there, and there was also a very small number of European Jews who had come over to Palestine during the 1920s and 1930s. Forty-four years later, it still had a tranquil charm which instantly evoked my childhood.

My father worked as an inspector in the education department of the Mandate government of Palestine, where he was successful and well thought of. He was due for promotion in the early months of 1948, when the conflict between Arabs and Jews had become extreme and, in the end, he never attained the position he desired. I was the youngest of three children and we lived the life typical of people of our class. We had a peasant woman, Fatima, who came daily to clean the house and look after us. She was with us from the time of my birth, and I remember how we all loved her and would beg for her to stay at night, but she never would, preferring to return to her village of al-Maliha on the outskirts of Jerusalem. My mother did the cooking and spent a great deal of time visiting or being visited. Our house was one of those sandy weather-beaten stone villas with a veranda and large garden: I say "large" because I knew it only as a child and my puerile sense of perspective colors my memory. It stood in a sleepy road off the top of the Qatamon hill, not far from the Saint Simone monastery which is still standing in Jerusalem today. One can see such old Palestinian houses still in Qatamon, but their original inhabitants have long since gone.

It is strange to think that I opened my eyes on a world already in turmoil, yet I had no inkling of it then. For, while I played with my toys and learned

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to take my first steps, great events were sweeping Palestine that would inexorably lead to the destruction of that world I barely knew. My sister and brother, though older, fared little better, for Palestine had been riven by conflict since the 1920s. By the time I was born, the great Palestinian revolt of 1936-39 had already been totally crushed by the British, and Arab-Jewish antagonism had reached new levels with the issuance of Britain's White Paper of 1938. By that time, too, the Palestinians had become split amongst themselves. Haj Amin al-Husayni, the Mufti of Jerusalem and the most prominent nationalist leader, had been exiled during the rebellion but was still able to deal summarily with the Palestinians who opposed him. One of these was my paternal

uncle, Mahmud, a journalist and writer, who made no secret of his opposition and denounced the Mufti openly. On Christmas eve of 1939, my uncle was shot dead. My family was convinced that the Mufti's men were behind it and that other family members, too, were in some danger, since they shared my uncle's views. My father was thus on his guard constantly after my uncle's assassination. One afternoon at the beginning of 1940, when I was a baby, a man came to our house and my mother opened the door. He was armed and demanded to see my father, who was concealed inside. When she recoiled in terror, he relented and said that he had been sent by the Mufti to kill my father but that he had been unable to go through with it. Many Palestinians were killed in internecine strife throughout the 1930s and in the early 1940s, which added to the insecurity and instability already afflicting Palestine.

Of course, as children, none of us understood anything of this. My world was circumscribed by our house and our road and, as I grew up, I apprehended the presence of foreigners in my vicinity as a fact of life. I remember walking down the road with a neighbor's child when I was six or so and seeing a British soldier leaning against a wall. It was hot and I remember thinking how red his neck was. He called out, "hallo!" and we giggled and raced off. A great joke we thought it, little realizing that the British were on the streets to fend off attacks on them from Jews and attacks between Jews and Arabs. While the overall political situation deteriorated for the Palestinians, as a family we did not feel the effects personally until after 1943. By that time, World War II had begun and the Nazi extermination of Jews, already underway, gave enormous impetus to a mass immigration of Jews into Palestine, bringing the objective of a Jewish state within reach for the Zionists. In 1942, while I was a toddler and my brother and sister were at school, a meeting of world Zionist leaders at the Biltmore Hotel in New York was deciding our fate. The meeting passed a resolution for the Jewish Agency to build up Palestine into a "Jewish Commonwealth." At the same time as this was happening, a new terror was beginning to grip Palestine in the shape of the Stern and Irgun gangs, extreme Jewish nationalists bent on creating a state for Jews in Palestine no matter what the cost. These two were responsible for acts of terror against Arabs, against the British, and against Jews who did not agree with them. They were guided by hatred and a passion for revenge without pity or compassion. It was the Irgun who perpetrated the notorious Dayr Yasin massacre of 250 Arabs in April 1948, which set off the chain of events precipitating our departure just two weeks later.

It was also the Irgun, led by Menachem Begin, who later became prime minister of Israel, who blew up the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946 as part of the campaign of terror against the British. One of the wings of this hotel was entirely taken over by British officials and was widely viewed as the center of British power in Palestine. In the massive explosion, some eighty-eight people died, both British and Arab, including fifteen Jews. Many years later, in London, I became good friends with a Palestinian woman, Leila

Mantoura, who had been at the hotel with her father-in-law the day before the explosion. She left, but he stayed on and was killed along with the others. Although the target for the attack had been the British, it was an extremely shocking event for all of us in Jerusalem and signaled the start of a more violent and dangerous phase in the conflict.

As it was, the street fighting between Jews and Arabs had been intensifying before the King David Hotel incident. It now got worse, to the point that by 1947 a third of Jerusalem had been fenced off for security reasons by the

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British, and no fighting factions were permitted entry. Such a zone existed in an area of Qatamon down the hill and to the left of our house where there was a complex of British Mandate offices. By the end of 1947 and the beginning of 1948, our neighborhood had be-

come so hazardous that my sister could only walk to school through this security area, after first getting to it through the gardens of the houses in between. There were many snipers, both Jewish and Arab, hidden between and inside the houses, and many passers-by were caught in the crossfire. I can remember seeing one of these shot in front of our house one morning, a poor Bedouin carrying a tin of olive oil. A neighbor opposite rushed out and dragged him into the house, and I do not know if he died or was just wounded. One night, I awoke to hear whisperings and comings and goings and doors banging in our house. When my brother and I tried to come out of our bedroom to see what was happening, my mother, looking terrified, pushed us back in. We later found out that a group of armed Arab fighters had hidden in our back garden that night. No sooner had they jumped over the wall into the next garden than another group of armed men, Zionists this time, appeared in hot pursuit. No shots were fired in our vicinity, and all the men vanished into the night as suddenly as they had come. Still, my parents were never at ease thereafter in our house after dark.

By the first months of 1948, life in our part of Jerusalem had become intolerable. Qatamon was a center of Arab resistance against the Jews, and, being on a hill, had strategic importance. It became a specific target for the Jews, especially the Haganah, the so-called regular Jewish army in Palestine. One of my most vivid memories of that wretched time was the Haganah attack on the Semiramis Hotel. This hotel, which was situated on the corner of the road directly behind ours, was a center of Arab resistance from which attacks were mounted against the Jewish settlements of Rehavia and Kiryat Shmuel. On the night of 5 January 1948, the Haganah blew up the Semiramis, killing at least sixteen people. It so happened that there was a torrential thunderstorm that night, and when the explosion came, it was almost like another clap of thunder. But it was so terrific that it blew out our windows, scattering glass everywhere. Immediately after, the whole sky was lit up with fire. My brother and I were terrified, and I can remember my mother dragging us from our beds onto the floor and pressing us against the wall. I did

not understand that it was an explosion and kept asking if the glow in the sky was the sun rising. The exact events are blurred in my memory, but what remains vivid is the terror of my parents and the fear that began to grip me as I saw it.

By the end of that same month, the Haganah blew up the Shahin place, a big Palestinian house in Qatamon. And thereafter, many more houses were blown up. The streets around us became no-go areas, and from the beginning of 1948 my brother and I could no longer go to school. Fatima still came but there were days when she couldn't make it. My sister, who was due to take her matriculation examinations that year, became a boarder at the school, since she could not safely get there otherwise, even through the British security zone. Getting food into the house was becoming harder and my mother seemed endlessly harassed. We hardly saw our father at all at this time. He still went to his work every day, but he was preoccupied. At some point during those early months of 1948, he must have made the decision that we should leave Jerusalem, but he never discussed it with us children. When the time came to leave at the end of April that year, it was to prove the most shattering event of our lives.

Our last months in Jerusalem were totally disrupted and extremely unhappy. As a child, I did not of course understand the great historical and political events that were swirling around me. I only knew that the foundations on which my life and security rested had gone. I did not go to school, Fatima no longer came every day, my sister had left, my parents were too harassed to notice me or my brother, and I could no longer play out in the road or even in the garden. The air was electric with danger and anxiety. I think that my parents tried to conceal from us the grim reality of the situation, but their whisperings and furtive preparations for departure only imbued me with fear. Meanwhile, all our neighbors, family by family, began to leave their homes, panicked, as I found out later, by the massacre at Dayr Yasin on 9 April. Our road, which had recently teemed with life, had become a ghostly place, abandoned to the guns of the snipers. Finally, we too were forced to leave, and I recall how difficult it was to get any taxis to come to Qatamon, since the area by then was an open battleground. My parents' idea was that we should be evacuated temporarily out of the war zone and, when the situation settled down, we would return. I believe that they thought then in terms of two or three weeks, for there was no suspicion at that time that the Jews would win or that we could lose our country and our homes. Accordingly, on 27 April, we left for Damascus where my mother's family lived and where we could remain with my grandparents for a short while.

The Palestine we left was occupied by two regular armies—the British and the Haganah—and four irregular forces—the Arab Liberation Army, sponsored by the Arab League, the guerrilla army of Abd al-Qadir al-Husseini,

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and the Jewish Irgun and Stern gangs. Civilians were terrorized and in flight—ours was virtually the last family in the neighborhood to leave. By 26 April, the Jerusalem Central Post Office closed down for good, no one paid or collected taxes anymore, and food had run out in the shops. The British were preparing to evacuate the country and had largely lost interest. There was thus a vacuum of leadership and the whole country was heading for chaos. Our departure came not a minute too soon, for, when my father, having delivered us safely to my grandfather's house in Damascus, headed back for Jerusalem, he was stopped in Amman by the news that Qatamon had fallen to the Zionists and was now impassable.

And so it was that on that morning of 27 April 1948, we saw our house for the last time. But we did not know that then, and when my mother packed for our journey, she only took one suitcase, certain we would be back soon. She would not even let me take my bedraggled but much loved teddy bear named Beta (after an English friend of my fathers, called Peter). All our belongings, papers and documents, family photographs and mementos—our whole history—was left behind forever.

That event marked the end of my childhood. As the taxi drew up to the house that last morning and my parents started to pack it with our overcoats and few belongings, I was suddenly overwhelmed by gloom and loneliness. Fatima and our half-Alsatian mongrel dog, Rex, whom we children doted on, were to stay behind. I still remember with what passion my brother and I begged Fatima to come with us to Damascus. She refused, saying she preferred to stay in her own village, and I remember my mother giving her the key to the house and asking her to look after our affairs until we returned. I do not know what became of her, for her village, al-Maliha, was attacked and its inhabitants partly evacuated by the Zionists in early May, shortly after we left. A few months later, in July 1948, it was attacked again by the Irgun gang and all its people were expelled. I suppose that she must have died by now, though God knows how and in what refugee camp.

As the car drew away from the house, I knelt on the back seat to reach the rear window and take a last look back. And there I saw an ominous sight. Rex, who was never normally allowed to go outside the gate for fear of being run over, was standing in the middle of the road, his tail stiff, staring after our retreating car. It was then that all the half-digested, half-understood events in Palestine that had mysteriously overshadowed my short life coalesced into a kind of premonition, and I knew that something truly awful had happened to us.

Flight to Damascus

I remember little of that car journey to Damascus. There was immense traffic, with many families like us fleeing across the border. We passed through Amman, crossed into Syria, and finally ended at my grandfather's house in the evening. This was an old-fashioned "Arabic" house in a rather

poor area on the outskirts of Damascus. It had a central courtyard with rooms around it. My grandparents seemed bewildered by the responsibilities thrust upon them, for we were soon joined by my aunt's family as well, escaping from the Old City of Jerusalem where the situation had also deteriorated. There were five of us and six of them, the youngest two younger than I. We slept on mattresses and ate off a great sheet spread on the floor in the courtyard. No one had time for anyone, certainly not for us children. My father was constantly out looking for work, ever since his abortive attempt to return to Jerusalem. His was the same problem afflicting thousands of Palestinians, similarly stranded. Even then, everyone believed that the situation was temporary and that, if we could tide ourselves over for a short while, we would soon return to our homes. One of my paternal uncles, Abu Salma, had also joined us in Damascus, having been expelled from Haifa. In time, he established himself there and became a household name as a great poet and Palestinian nationalist.

Syria was full of Palestinians. Many went into refugee camps during the rest of 1948, but a minority found jobs or moved on to other Arab countries. The Arab world was traumatized in the aftermath of the creation of Israel. There was confusion about the ultimate fate of the displaced Palestinians, as to whether they would be permitted to return to their towns and villages, and if not, what was to be done with them. Most Palestinians were unskilled workers or peasants, and could only swell the armies of disadvantaged people already present throughout a pre-oil Arab world. In the meantime, as families, we were supposed to carry on a life with some semblance of normality. But life was anything but normal. We were placed in nearby schools, where we tried with difficulty to fit in. The strains of communal living were also beginning to tell, and in August of that year, my mother was left to fend for us on her own while my father departed for England. As he had worked for the British Mandate authorities, he still had contacts in Britain and in his search for a job was invited to apply for work in the BBC Arabic Service in London. I hardly remember him leaving: it was yet another bizarre happening in a totally disrupted life. After he left, I was not aware of missing him either; it was as if he, along with our sunny villa, Fatima, and my childhood in Palestine, already belonged to an unreachable past. He wrote that he had been accepted for a job at the BBC and that we should join him in London as soon as he had set himself up. He had no choice but to remain where he could obtain employment, and he reasoned that we should make the best of a bad job and take advantage of the opportunities England had to offer. My mother was distraught. She foresaw great dangers in our leaving the Arab world and joining an alien people and adopting a strange way of life. Her objections, however, came to naught. Much against her will, she packed us up for our second exile in London.

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Exile in London

We were among a small number of Palestinians, just a few hundred, who left the Arab region in the wake of 1948 and sought refuge in the Western world. When we arrived in September 1949, London had barely a single Palestinian family. In time, a few others joined us, but we were very few and therefore tended to socialize closely amongst ourselves. I was so dazed by being uprooted twice in just over a year that I accepted my new home without protest. This time, neither my brother nor I spoke the language, and the landscape was totally unfamiliar. My father soon put us into schools, where I struggled miserably until I had learned some English. My sister, having learned English at her school in Palestine, was the least affected. But my mother was devastated. She had been a typical woman of her society—gregarious, confident, centered on her family and friends, and with little ambition to travel and see the world. She now found herself in a situation where nothing was familiar, comprehensible, or attractive to her. She had come to England against her will. If she had been able to, she would have left and returned to some part of the Arab world, even if not to Palestine.

As it was, we were stuck in London. The second anniversary of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194, which required Israel to repatriate the Palestinians, came and went without compliance from Israel. The realization was beginning to dawn on my parents that an early return to Jerusalem was unlikely. As more time passed and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) was set up in 1951 to support the Palestinian refugees encamped around the borders of Israel, the likelihood grew more remote. But my mother refused to accept it and ran our lives on a temporary basis. We were told that our return was imminent, and so there was no point in moving to a better house or even repairing the present one. We lived out of a suitcase, so to speak, for years, and as I grew up I would echo faithfully what I had been taught whenever anyone asked me about my future plans: "We are going back to the Middle East." Meanwhile, my mother kept our house as if it had been in Jerusalem. Our food was Arabic, our radio played Arabic music, we spoke nothing but Arabic, all our friends were Arabs. Like a Palestinian Miss Havisham, for my mother the clock had stopped in April 1948 and she never looked forward thereafter. This was but one of the effects of exile, and in its own way, rather tragic. For my mother in a sense lost her life with our departure from Palestine. A woman only in her thirties when we came to London, her existence became whittled down and impoverished. And in his own way, my father fared little better. Although he went to work diligently and eventually became well known throughout the Arab world for his literary broadcasts on the Arabic service, he never participated in life in Britain. He never made English friends, went to the theater or to exhibitions, never joined any clubs. His social life was as circumscribed as my mother's, and he never spoke of Palestine.

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In fact, neither of my parents spoke of Palestine to us. I imagine that the wounds were too deep. They never wanted to visit Jerusalem after it became clear that return was impossible. For, of course, our house, Qatamon, and all of West Jerusalem had been taken over by the Jewish state in 1948 and no Palestinians were ever allowed back. All the Palestinians' houses, like ours, became the instant property of new Jewish residents who neither offered to compensate us for our losses nor ever acknowledged our ownership. My father, who had a British passport, could have returned to West Jerusalem as a tourist. He never chose to exercise this option and both he and my mother preferred to preserve the memory of their home as it had been before they left, intact, like a photograph. Seeing the place altered in alien custody would tarnish the image. I remember writing to the Israeli embassy in 1973 and asking for permission to go and live in Jerusalem, since I had been born there. I too could have used my British passport to visit my old home, but I did not see myself as a tourist. They answered that there was no provision for such cases and the most I could get was a tourist visa. In fact, the prospect of going to Palestine filled me with dread, partly because I was infected with my parents' feelings, and partly because I too had my own little precious memory that I was reluctant to soil. My brother and sister were no different: for them, too, the Palestine they knew had gone forever and they feared their own reactions to seeing the new proprietors.

But the day came when I decided to return. In August 1991, after forty-three years, I took a journey to Jerusalem to face the monster I had been hiding from all my life. The pretext was a conference in the Galilee, and this gave me the courage I needed to undertake the journey. I stayed at the American Colony Hotel in East Jerusalem and it was from there that I set out to discover my old home. By this time, my parents had gone to live in Amman, and I had to rely on my brother and sister for a map to find the place. They drew what they could from memory, but when I actually got there, their maps were of little use because the landmarks to which they referred had disappeared. I drove to Qatamon on a hot August morning and stood at the bottom of the hill, looking up and straining my memory for a glimpse of the past. It seemed to have changed little, but it was not the detail, but rather the atmosphere and the colors, muted beiges and dark greens, sandy and restful. I walked up and down the hill and into all the side roads, but could not find our road. There were no names to recognize, and no one I asked knew where the pre-1948 places had been. Eventually, with the help of an Israeli friend who had come with me, we found an elderly shopkeeper at the top of the hill who remembered where the Semiramis Hotel had stood—the same hotel whose bombing had so terrified me as a child. It was now replaced by another building, but from there I could go down to the street immediately below and parallel it and know that it was our road. Many of the old Pales-

tinian houses still stood in Qatamon, and it was considered prestigious to live in them. I prayed desperately that ours would still be there. But alas, not a single house in what had been our road was original. When I came to the site where our house had stood, I found a Jewish Yeshiva instead. I stood trying to recreate the memory, to will the image of our old house to blot out the building that had replaced it. A few children with long sidelocks looked at me curiously, they could not have known how alien and out of place to me they looked. There was no one I could ask about the history of that place, when and how our house had been knocked down; who had taken it. I walked away along the road and down the other hills, trying to relive the past, to sniff at distant memories, and I found a house down the next road very much like ours had been, with a veranda and a surrounding garden. A plaque said that it belonged to the lawyer Shlomo Schindler. I wondered to

whom it had really belonged. Ironically, a few people took me for an Israeli, spoke in Hebrew, and smiled at me. I stayed for a long time, trying somehow to absorb what remnants of my history still lingered there, but it was no use. The place for me was desecrated and spoiled. Its current inhabitants cared nothing about me and my ilk. They

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had managed somehow to purge themselves of guilt or even knowledge of what they and their compatriots had done to us. For I have never yet met an Israeli who was prepared to apologize for what Zionist ambitions in Palestine have done to people like me.

We were an ordinary family with ordinary lives and ordinary hopes. Left to ourselves, we would have remained a natural part of our society, married people like ourselves, raised children, traveled perhaps, but always knowing we had a home to return to. Eventually, we would have grown old with our families, died, and been buried in the same cemetery as our ancestors. Instead, we were displaced, uprooted, and sent into exile. Israel even denies Palestinians the right of burial in their native land. My uncle Abu Salma, who died in 1980, is buried in Damascus, and my mother, who died in 1991, is buried in Amman. An innocent people, we were made to pay for the Zionist dream which, unluckily for us, decided to find its expression in our country. This human cost of Zionism has never been computed, and if it were, it might turn out to be overwhelming.