

My Father's Return to Palestine

by Lila Abu Lughod*

I NOTICED something new in my father's apartment when I walked in. On the living room wall was a large sepia poster, three foot by three and a half: a blown up photograph of an old Arab seaside town. Across the top it said, in Arabic: Jaffa...the year 1936.

My father had decided to "return" to Palestine in the wake of the first Intifada. Perhaps he had suddenly sensed his mortality after a serious lung hemorrhage and operation. When I first visited him in Ramallah in 1993, with husband and infants in tow, he had not yet made the final decision to ship over his books and furniture. But he was excited to be there, feeling at home not because he had ever lived in this West Bank town, the summer resort of the wealthy when he was a young boy in Jaffa, but because he was living among fellow Palestinians.

He was eager to show us the whole of Palestine, from Nablus to Nazareth, Jericho to Haifa. He especially wanted us to go to Jaffa. His tour, the same one he gave anyone who came to visit, was about claiming and reclaiming the city in which he had been born,

the sea in which he had swum as a boy, and the home he had been forced to flee in 1948.

On his own first visit in 1991, he'd had friends take him to Jaffa. He'd driven back and forth, completely disoriented. The landmarks weren't there. The house he'd grown up in was no longer there, though his brother twenty years earlier had done what so many Palestinians have done: knocked on the door to find out which Jews - Russians, Moroccans, Yemenis, Poles - were now living in their old family homes.

But then my father spotted the mosque where, in his zeal to outdo his brothers for his parents' favor, he had eagerly agreed at the age of 13 to help the local imam by climbing the steps of the minaret to call people to prayer. This was the mosque of Hasan Bey. From there he was able to figure out where the coffee shop had been. He remembers hanging around outside in the evenings, hoping to listen in on the storytellers and reciters of epics, and being chased away because he didn't have the money for tea. Bit by bit, circling more widely around the mosque, he began to find his way.

But what had made him confident that indeed "Palestine was still there" was another encounter in Jaffa on that first trip. He'd asked some kids on the street, Arabs it turned out, if they knew where King Faysal Street was. They immediately took him there, though he could see that the street sign said something altogether different. From this he knew that Palestinian parents were still teaching their children the old names of things even as Palestine was being buried, erased, and rewritten by Israel.

There is an image in one of Doris Lessing's "African Stories" that has never left me. I assigned the short story to my students in a course on colonialism 15 years ago. A young girl, a white settler living in southern Africa, looks out over the savanna and acacia trees

* In memory of her father, Ibrahim Abu Lughod, who passed away on May 23, 2001 and now rests in Jaffa. The piece was originally written in March 2001. It is reprinted from the Palestine Report with the permission of the author. Lila Abu Lughod is professor of anthropology at Columbia University.

and sees the large gnarled oak trees of her English fairytales. My father does the opposite. Where I, who never knew anything else, see only the deep gouges in green hillsides made for Israeli settlements with garish red tile roofs, or miles and miles of highways criss-crossing the rocky landscape and claiming it with modern green signs in Hebrew and English, he sees beyond, between, and behind them to the familiar landscapes of his youth.

He used to travel as a boy, he says, all around Palestine with workers from his father's foundry as they delivered, installed, and repaired water pumps and olive presses. He still knows his way around though he was denied access for more than 40 years. He sees the orange groves where he might have stolen a fruit or two when young. (I associate oranges with him because he loves them, always peeling them and eating a few sections, then distributing the rest to his children; I knew it was hard for him to look at Jaffa oranges in the supermarket, with their provenance listed as Israel.)

He sees the stubborn cacti that still mark the boundaries of Arab fields that no longer exist. Tucked in and among the new structures that dominate the towns and cities, he notices only the arched windows of old Arab houses that have somehow escaped destruction. Half-ruins he rebuilds in his imagination.

My father's tour of Jaffa begins with the factory on the outskirts of the city that his father founded in 1929. He recalls an old Afghani gentleman who was the guard at their factory. With a big white mustache, the man used to entrance them by reading their palms. He had a premonition that they would all have to leave Jaffa. But he said he himself wouldn't. And in fact, the man never did leave. He was run over by a car before the events of 1948.

My father parks across the road, at the water fountain of Abu Nabbut, and points to the industrial structure that was in his day the Palestinian Iron and Brass Foundry Company Ltd., a name imprinted on manhole covers found even now in Jaffa. This foundry provided a service to the Palestinian Arab farmers by manufacturing the diesel pumps, crushes, and presses they needed for their orange and olive orchards. Though his father learned his trade first from some Germans, who left when the British seized their factory during the first world war, he then went on to work for German Jews.

Later, my father's father decided to set up his own company, with relatives giving five pounds here, five pounds there as shareholders. This made it possible for Arabs not to have to depend on foreign or Jewish industry. Over the course of its almost 20 years, the factory was shut down several times by the British. In 1936 and '37, the time of the Palestinian rebellion, his father was accused of secretly manufacturing arms. One time when they sealed his factory with red wax, he surreptitiously removed all the machinery, smuggling it piece by piece through the orange groves behind the foundry and carrying it on donkey carts to a new location.

My grandfather's nationalist activities got them into trouble. My father remembers the night raids of his house by British police and soldiers. They would storm in, shouting for everyone to put their hands up, then head for the kitchen to rifle through the sacks of flour and rice looking for weapons. He and his brothers learned early to identify as cousins the many visitors they harbored from the countryside. They learned early too about lawyers and British prison guards who could be bribed to smuggle in food and pillows to his father. In and out of prison, my grandfather

died in 1944, when my father was only 15. His factory, though, went on producing until it collapsed with the war in 1948.

For my father, growing up in Mandate Palestine, the British were the enemy. He marvels now at how little anyone sensed the Zionists as the real threat. I grew up listening to his stories about boyhood run-ins with the British. He talked recently about his first arrest: "The British imposed curfews, as the Israelis do now. We were kids, aged nine or 10, and I remember we would go up to a soldier and say, 'Hey, f___ you George!'

"Once my older brother was arrested by a British patrol and taken to the police station. They slapped him around and then released him. Everyone who got arrested became a hero. I wanted to be a hero too; I was always competing with my older brother. So when we saw a policeman on a motorcycle, I did the same thing: 'Hey, f___ you George!' But the bastards came after me and my friends! We ducked into a bakery. I was so embarrassed going in there because it was shut and we had entered by a side door. One of the British soldiers came in and caught us, red-handed as it were. Standing there doing nothing.

"They arrested four of us. They were on four motorcycles and they made us run in front of them. They had whips. I was dressed in robes, what we wore for ordinary street clothes, so I had to pull them up and hold them in my teeth to run. We got tired but they whipped us to keep us on the run. People called out to us from their homes, 'Come in here Ibrahim! Come in here Mohammad!' But we were afraid they would come after us so we went along with them."

After much crying, some genuine, some faked, they were released, but not until they'd been scolded by the local collaborator and then chased all the way back by another

motorcycle, the soldier whipping them again. The way my father tells the story, you have to see the funny side of a scrawny kid desperate to outdo his brother, running with his robes in his teeth.

He says he learned more of a lesson the second time he was caught. That's because the British police had also learned their lesson. Instead of releasing the kids, they made them work. My father and his friends were ordered to pull out by hand all the grass in a large courtyard at the police station, to turn it into a tennis court.

As he tells it, "It took us two hours to finish the job. So now what could they do with us? The curfew was still on. So they told us to move the grass from one side of the garden to the other, just to keep us working. We were tired. We were being beaten continuously. I can never forget the face of Abu-Niyab, that son-of-a-b___ who beat the hell out of me. We started crying. We didn't want to be imprisoned; what we had wanted was to be leaders.

"In retrospect I think, Goddamn that kind of nationalism. We had to go through beating and torture to become leaders?" Since then my father has seen himself struggling against colonial occupation of his country (by Zionists now, not the British), but always within the law, using his mind, his pen, and his gift for oratory.

A very important stop on the tour of Jaffa is his high school, the school that taught him the geography of England so well that when he finally set foot in London he knew every street name. While it now bears a plaque outside with the name "Weitzman School," it was in his day the Amiriyya Government Secondary School. He looks through the gate and tries to talk his way in.

He managed it once, accompanied by some friends visiting from the US. They had to

leave their American passports with the guard. It was the same, he thought, except that the drawings on the wall were made by Jewish children. It was also now co-ed; they used to have to climb a wall to look over at the former girls' school, Al Zahra.

My father is amazed when he thinks back to his final year there, in 1948. Knowing that troubles were coming, the British announced that the final year examinations would be moved forward to March. My father and his friends studied hard. Fighting was going on across the country. It was going on right there between Jaffa and Tel Aviv. After school every day he and his friends went to help out, even as they told their mothers they were going to study. Students were put in charge of the checkpoints, since they were presumed to know English and to be able to tell the difference between the British and Jews. They didn't have a clue.

When his best friend's brother was killed, my father insisted that he had to choose between taking his exams or following the funeral procession. It was critical that they pass the end of year examinations. Their future, they thought, depended on it. When they showed up to take their exams, they found that the roof had been blown off the school where the Palestine matriculation exams were to be held. They carried on.

But by the time they heard the test results, on Radio Israel, it was the Jewish Department of Education that announced them - there was no longer an Arab Department. My father was, by then, a refugee in Nablus, soon to leave for Amman. He sent a telegram to his best friend, now a refugee in Beirut. He remembers the irony: "It was such a thrill - we passed! There we were: refugees with no future."

My father's tour of Jaffa then takes one down a boulevard passing a majestic colonial post office (where he has tried in vain to get

his old postbox, just for the pleasure of being able to receive letters addressed to Jaffa); the law courts where he had dreamed of practicing law, modeling himself on the famous lawyers of Egyptian films whose eloquence could win people over to a cause; and the spot where once sat an ice cream shop where they hung about looking at the Jewish girls (who were less secluded than their own).

There is also a nondescript apartment building on the tour. Jaffa and Tel Aviv bordered each other and as the tensions intensified in the 1940s they split Arabs and Jews. The fighting in the winter of 1947 and '48 was near this border and my father's neighborhood suddenly became too dangerous, subject to mortar and gunfire. They took shelter with a cousin who lived downtown.

After two weeks, they realized that the battles were going to go on longer than expected and that they wouldn't be returning home soon. When the Jewish Irgun and Haganah dynamited the Palace of Justice not far from their cousin's house, killing 69 people, most of them young, they thought it might be best to move the family to a safer neighborhood.

My father had volunteered to help the hurriedly-formed National Committee to Defend Jaffa. With no training, he was issued an old gun that came in handy only in the ensuing search for an apartment. Knocking on doors, he eventually heard of one empty flat and went to visit the local agent. He explained politely his desperate situation. But the man refused to rent it; the apartment belonged to a couple on their honeymoon.

My father pleaded, assuring him they wanted it only temporarily and would give it up as soon as the couple returned. But the man was stubborn. My father then let his gun show. Finally, the rental was agreed. A modern apartment with the first bathtub and

toilet they had ever seen, it was a place in which his mother was not happy. But she was not there long. As more and more of Jaffa fell and news reached them of the massacre of the entire village of Deir Yassin, there was great panic. It was decided that the women and children should go to Nablus to wait things out. They, like the honeymooning couple, were never to return.

My father's last days and nights "defending" Jaffa at the age of 19 were spent in various places that are also part of the tour. Food was running out, the bakeries had closed, mortar fire from Tel Aviv was falling on the city. The streets of most neighborhoods were now empty. The British were escorting convoys of fleeing people. There is a spot my father points to as the place where he and his school friend laid down their guns when they left.

He had lost touch with his brother, who was on another front; the rest of his family was gone. On the morning of May 3, my father and his friend joined a throng on a small barge that was transporting people out of the harbor to a ship that announced itself as the last ship to carry people to safety. Sent by the Red Cross, it was going to Beirut.

But they hesitated, asking themselves what they were doing, and decided to go back ashore. After all, they had been part of the National Committee that had been urging people not to flee, insisting the city was safe, promising that reinforcements were on the way (they weren't).

When they did return, they realized that no one was left. The shooting was all coming from the other side. Around three o'clock in the afternoon, they saw the smoke billowing from the smoke stack of the ship. It was about to leave. They put down their guns and ran to catch the last dinghy out. The words of a Belgian sailor who confronted them on board still echo in my father's ears: "How could you leave your country?"

The tour of Jaffa always ends with the sea. My father ignores the Hebrew being spoken all around him, the young couples in tight jeans flirting and laughing, the Oriental Jewish families having picnics. He makes a place for himself and his guests on the sand and goes in for his swim. Then he sits and looks wistfully out to sea.

His blue American passport allows him to sit on the beach in Jaffa where he swam with dolphins and turtles, the beach that his mother could see from her window as she drank her coffee. His white hair and black beret allow him to pass as a foreigner, someone who can talk his way in fast English past Israeli soldiers who are no older than he was when he left Jaffa. The yellow license plates that identify his car as Israeli and give him freedom of movement (cars sold to temporary visitors who need not pay taxes are always this color) allow him to pull up unnoticed alongside the others in the parking lot at the beach. These are the colors of his return to Palestine.

My father's only disappointment has been trying to recapture the scene of his happiest childhood days, the August vacations when the families of Jaffa not rich enough to go to Ramallah took their tents and camped out on the sandy dunes by the sea. The place where they went was called Rubeen because it was near the shrine of the Prophet Rubeen. The children went wild, swimming and eating fruit ices by day, watching puppet shows and listening to stories by night. Their fathers came only on weekends and the women loved the freedom from their daily routines of cleaning and cooking so much that the phrase they used was legendary: "Take me to Rubeen or give me a divorce!"

Ever since his return, my father has begged old Jaffawites to take him to Rubeen. Many claimed to know where it was but no one ever seemed to want to take him. Finally, last

spring, he convinced some people to do it. They even hired a guide. But when they got to the spot, with the shrine in the distance, he just couldn't recognize anything. No sand dunes - everything was covered with grasses and shrubs. Trudging around and around in the heat of day, straining to find traces of the Rubeen he knew as a child, my father began to feel unwell. This continued. Nine months later, he lay in hospital coughing blood.

He is home from the hospital now. As the siege of Palestinian towns tightens, he mutters, "They are choking us." He himself is hooked up to an oxygen tank, unable to catch his breath. I can't help thinking this is not an accident.

He looks out his window at the hills of Ramallah, with Jerusalem in the distance. He doesn't have the energy to go to the terrace from which - on a good day - one might see Jaffa. The news comes that there are tanks now on the road between Ramallah and Jerusalem. Birzeit University, where he has taught for years, has been cut off by a huge trench dug by the Israeli army.

He is gaining strength, seeming to get better. His apartment is comfortable - full of his books, his rugs, his music, the clutter of the many projects he has worked on since his return, and his many plaques from Arab organizations in the United States, recognizing his service to the cause of Palestine. He is surrounded by friends. But he really needs to be close to medical treatment. People tell him he has to think about leaving. Again.

Postscript - May, 2001

My father's body made the decision for him. He did not get better. He became too weak to make the trip to the US. And he wanted to stay. Finally, in late April, the diagnosis came from the sharp young doctor at Hadassah who

had been trying to figure out what to do for him: there was a lung tumor that has somehow eluded detection. On May 23, he died, surrounded to the end by family and friends. Two days after, he was joined by people from every corner of Palestine who came to walk with him, to feel the gentle breeze coming off the sea as they carried him to a bluff overlooking the beach where he always swam, burying him in his beloved Jaffa, near the graves of his father and brother. His body was made strangely full and vibrant by the Palestinian flag and his final return to Jaffa was seen as not just a wish fulfilled but a symbol.

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