



## **Prisoner of War: Yusif Sayigh, 1948 to 1949**

### **Excerpts from his recollections**

As told to and edited by  
Rosemary Sayigh

*The Jerusalem Quarterly published in its fall 2006 issue the first of two instalments of Yusif Sayigh's recollections describing his work in Jerusalem with the Arab Fund until much of Jerusalem was taken by Jewish fighters in 1948. This second instalment describes Yusif's life as a prisoner of war.*

*Yusif Sayigh was born in Kharaba, Syria, in 1916. His father was Syrian; his mother was from al-Bassa in Palestine. The family was forced to leave Kharaba during the Druze uprising of 1925, going first to al-Bassa and then Tiberias, where they lived until 1948.*

*The bulk of these recollections were recorded by his wife Rosemary Sayigh, beginning in 1989, when an operation forced Yusif to remain in bed at home for several weeks. Yusif fully intended to listen to the tapes and edit them one day, but sadly, this aim was never achieved, as he passed away in 2004.*

Yusif as prisoner of war between 15 May, 1948 and February 1949. *Source: R. Sayigh.*

## Prisoner of War

I was taken prisoner of war a few days after the state of Israel was established. In fact, I had realized that I was going to be taken prisoner because I could see that the Zionists, the Israelis, were advancing on Katamon and closing the roads out of Katamon one after the other. I felt like a bird—it's said that when a bird sees a snake, it begins circling around its head until it gets so close that it is grabbed by the snake and swallowed. I felt that this was going to happen to us.

On the other hand, I didn't want to leave. At the beginning, I and my friend, Ahmad Abd al-Khalek, could have left. We were together with a few others in Baqaa, the Greek colony area, and we could still have made it if we had walked downhill into the back side of the Old City. But I didn't want to leave. I felt that if a young man like me left—I was 32 then—then I couldn't blame somebody 50 or 60 with a family and children if they ran away. So I stayed on, and when eventually people in the area told us that the Zionists were closing in, Ahmad and I and about 20 young men from the quarter decided to go and register as guests in the German Hospice. There was a German Hospice that had already been placed under International Red Cross protection.

When we got there, the nuns were very kind. They registered us as guests who had been there before—bona fide guests. It was a hospice where people could stay like paying guests. They told us that there were others who had come there with their families. In all, there might have been 150 people.

Then, one afternoon, somebody who was acting as a scout came in to say that it would be a matter of an hour before the Zionists reached the hospice, and got hold of us. There were still occasional bursts of firing, but by then the whole of West Jerusalem had fallen to the Jews, and the more daring of us could walk out of the hospice and see the Zionists already occupying the Arab Higher Committee office, a bit further west. What surprised me was that they were just throwing paper from the windows by the kilogram, not caring to collect these papers and to study them. I was surprised because I always assumed that they would be very systematic, and collect every scrap of paper, and take it to study it. They were not firing at us; they were just narrowing in on us.... They were afraid that there might be an ambush or something. They were moving a building at a time.

When somebody said that they would be here within an hour, I rushed to the mother superior of the convent and said to her, Now we are going to be encircled, and soon they'll take the young men, and take us, too—God knows where, maybe to shoot us. But since you are under Red Cross protection, please pass around sheets of paper so that everybody in the hospice can fill in their names.

It was about dinner time. We were having dinner early, in one dining room, so it was easy to do this. I stood up (I took over as though I was already elected leader of the



Portrait dates between February 1949 and October 1950, Beirut. Source: R. Sayigh.

group). I said, Look, soon the Jews will come (they were waiting for it to get dark before they entered), so we'd better give our names to the sisters here so that there will be a record of who's been caught. Don't worry: women, children and older men will not be taken prisoner. But for us young men, it's essential that we make a list. They registered the names, and a few weeks later, when the mother superior managed to have access to the Red Cross and to pass them the lists, that's when the Israelis acknowledged our existence.

But I'm getting ahead of my story. Another thing that we did—the few of us who had pistols—we went out and buried them along with any ammunition we had in the hospice garden. The nuns knew, but they didn't say anything about it. I also had my car there inside the walls of the hospice—an almost brand-new Studebaker, a beautiful car. Then one of the nuns came in and said, Please stay calm. The officer in charge of the Israelis who are

here wants to come in with his soldiers, and he'll tell you what to do next. In came a number of soldiers carrying submachine guns—later on we came to know these as Uzis, or an earlier version of the Uzi, which they had produced themselves. They were very nervous and edgy, a large number of soldiers who went all around, with their backs to the wall, facing us with their submachine guns in their hands.

Someone I thought was an officer started talking to us in Hebrew. I said to him, We don't speak Hebrew. Will you address us in Arabic or English?

Then a young man stood up, a smart aleck. He turned to us beaming, as though he had achieved something great, and said, Hai! Ana bahki ebrani [What luck! I speak Hebrew]. He was Lebanese—later on we discovered that he worked as a cook somewhere. I said to him, Shut up! We want our language to be used, or English. I turned to the officer and said, I'm sure you speak English. We don't trust this man's translation. So he spoke to us in English and ignored the young man. He gave us instructions. He said, You have finished dinner. Over the next few days, you're going to be called in for interrogation. After that, we'll see what we will do with you.

The first thing they did was to ask people to separate: women and anybody below [age] 15 and above 55 were allowed to go to their rooms, or wherever else they took

them (I don't know what happened to them because I never saw them after that). That left 20 or 30 young men, among whom were Ahmad and I. They began taking us to be interrogated in an upper room, like an attic, inside the hospice.

When my turn came, much later that night, they put me in a chair. The guard stood behind me with a revolver to my neck, the muzzle touching my neck. In front of me sat a smallish young man with a smile on his face, and I noticed that on the floor there was a blanket with two mounds under it. I didn't know what was under the blanket.

The officer—he had a long stick in his hand, like the kind that professors use to point at maps—said, Tell me about yourself. I said, What do you want me to tell you? He said, What do you do? I said, I'm an accountant. I'm the manager of the head office of Saba and Co., the auditors (which I had been before becoming the director-general of the Arab National Fund). He said, What is your work, what does it consist of? So I explained it.

He said, Let's be a little more honest. Tell me about your real activity. You may have been with Saba and Co., but what are you doing now? At that point I assumed that he knew that I had left Saba and Co. more than a year before and that I was the director-general of the Arab National Fund. But I didn't want to collapse and tell him everything. So I said, Well, Saba and Co.'s work has almost ended—who would be thinking of auditing their accounts now? I have an assignment as a journalist with *al-Nahar* newspaper, and my car is out in the garden; it has a press card on it.

He said, If so, why do you have all this material on the PPS [*Parti Populaire Syrien* or Syrian Social Nationalist Party<sup>1</sup>],—he tried to translate it into English—in the boot of your car? I had forgotten all about it. Weeks before, I had collected all the documents I had on the PPS in Palestine, including the seal of the party, and all this material was in a big parcel in the boot of my car.

He lifted the side of the blanket where one of the two mounds was, and I could see the PPS material there. There was no hiding that, and I talked a little bit about it. He wanted to know if we had trained people, mobilized them. I said, No, we were too small a group to do that. We just wrote articles—because I had many articles under my name in the press, you see. Then he went on about the PPS, and what was its attitude to the establishment of Israel.

I spoke frankly, because all along I didn't think that I was going to get out alive. So I thought I might as well be brave, and say what I felt as a young Palestinian Arab about the establishment of Israel, and the Zionist takeover of Palestine. This discussion went on for several hours. I can't remember the details now but this is essentially what he wanted to know. He didn't mention the Arab National Fund. Then I relaxed a bit, because I felt that if their records were that good, then before calling me in he would have gotten a card from some central office, and he would have said to me, How about your work with the Mufti? That would have been the most serious thing for me to face. But he didn't say that at any point in the discussion.

About three or four hours after the start of the interrogation, he smiled a little more broadly and lifted the blanket from the other mound. There were the letters exchanged between me and the woman I was in love with for years, tied together with string. Obviously, he had looked at one or two of them. He said, As to this literature, that would make very interesting reading, but I'll have to have the leisure to read it. I'll come back to you after I have read it. He never did, though I was terrified to death that something in these letters would reveal the identity of the woman. But at no time after that was there any reference to the letters. I never got them back.

About three days later, they told us to collect our small belongings, and to go out in a line. They had brought sort of armoured buses with no windows at all, and they crowded us into them. There must have been more than four or five buses because by then we were more than 520 persons. Other people who had been captured in other areas near the [Young Men's Christian Association] had been brought to the centre where we were. They put us in, and guards came in with us, and they locked the door from inside. Then they started moving in a convoy. Of course we couldn't see anything outside. We moved and moved and moved—it seemed like hours. Incidentally, we had nothing with us. Not even pyjamas, no toothbrush, nothing, because we had just pretended to be living at the hospice. Later on, when we left the buses, some of us knew Jerusalem well enough [to know that] they must have driven us round and round to confuse us.

About 15 minutes after we started, our bus suddenly stopped. The door opened a little bit, and a soldier put his head in and said, Who owns the Studebaker number so and so? I said, I do. My name is so and so. He said, I'm not interested in your name. How does the radio work? The officer is driving it and he can't run the radio.

I said, Let him find out for himself; I'm not going to tell you how it works. I thought that regular armies would register any property they seized and then return it to the owner after the armistice. Very foolish!

We drove on until ultimately we stopped and they opened the doors. Come down! Come down! They guarded us very heavily. It turned out to be a new settlement. Only the foundations of the houses were laid, and the floors had no walls at all. We were made to squat, and put our hands behind our necks. Somebody came who spoke to us in English and said, I'm the commander of this camp, and you'll have to obey my orders and the orders of any sergeant or soldier. We have to see what we'll do with you. We consider you saboteurs who have been left behind to carry out sabotage. According to international law, we are allowed to shoot you. But since Israel is a state now, we want to do the right thing. We have to make sure that you are really saboteurs, and under what article of international law you will be shot.

So I said, No, we are prisoners of war. Luckily—I don't know why it occurred to me—a few months before Palestine fell, I looked up some sort of convention—not the Geneva conventions because they were not signed until 1949, but there was some



Residents of the city of Akko moving towards Qala' prison after the fall of the city to Jewish forces on May 17, 1948.  
*Source: Before the Diaspora, p. 239.*

other convention from earlier wars. I knew what the rights and duties of prisoners of war were. I said again, We are prisoners of war. He said, Huh! What kind of prisoners of war are you? A prisoner of war is a soldier; he's in uniform. He has arms, he has a number. You have none of these things. What army are you with?

And we couldn't pretend that we belonged to any army.

That night (we got there in the early afternoon), we were divided into three or four of these big rooms [on] the floors of houses that had no walls. Before they brought us there, they had built some wooden scaffolding, and guards sat on it with their submachine guns pointing at us. There was no wired fence around us. But we were heavily guarded.

In the daytime, we could see Bethlehem far to the south, but we could not see much of Jerusalem. Anyway, that night we slept without food or water, in the open. And how did we sleep? I remember that a few of us wanted to bring flat stones or tiles to put as a pillow under our heads, but they wouldn't let us have stones for fear that we'd use them against them. They were not much of an army. They were wearing different uniforms. Some were in khaki trousers, others had grey flannel trousers, but most had either a jacket or trousers that was quasi-military in colour and shape. I personally—it was May then, May 21st—I had a pair of grey flannels and a zip jacket. Luckily, it was warm.

All my life, I've suffered from a weak stomach. But there I was in Jerusalem—you know how many thousand feet above sea level it is?—without cover. What I did was to unzip my jacket, take it off and put it on top of my stomach. And I slept like that. On the floor, tiles, cement. And I took off my shoes and put them under my head as a pillow. I had very nice crêpe shoes with a thick sole, and this provided some comfort for my head.

We stayed there for about six weeks, until the siege of Jerusalem was broken. In all that time, nothing changed. Not a blanket, no pillow, nothing. They began giving us some food, but guess what kind! The guards made their tea—we could see them doing it—on firewood. They had no gas fire, or anything of the sort. After they had finished their tea, which they made in a saucepan, they would send the saucepans to the various 'rooms' with the tea that they had already cooked once. They told us to make some fire; they let us collect wood from the immediate neighbourhood. Because it was a building site, there were pieces of wood. They gave us cans that had held jam or tuna fish or whatever else to use as cups. There weren't enough for all of us so, in the beginning, each six had to use the same can. You know how fussy I am about using other peoples' cups!

They said, Now this will be your tea. There was no sugar—they didn't have sugar because they were under siege and sugar was rationed in West Jerusalem. And they said, We are going to get barrels of water, and you will have three litres per person per

24 hours for washing yourselves and the utensils. You have to dig cesspits, and throw everything in them. But we ended up getting much less than three litres; it was more like three Coca Cola bottles per person. So we had to be very, very careful with water. As for food, all we got was 100 grams of bread per person per day. A hundred grams is not much, no more than a *ruba reef* (a quarter of an Arab loaf). There was nothing else—no jam, no butter, no margarine, no olives, nothing—just bread and tea. We had to cook the tea over and over again. I had a pipe, one box of matches, and no tobacco, so after the tea had been cooked three or four times, I would dry it and use it as tobacco. It didn't smoke well at all, and I gave up.

The greatest thing was the first parcel I received two or three months after being taken prisoner, which contained tobacco as well as jam. This was much later on, when we were taken to a proper POW camp by the sea. But at the beginning, for many days, that's all we got—tea and bread. It was terrible. But the strange thing is that I didn't have any pain in my stomach at all, not once. I'd been spoilt before. If I didn't put a blanket on my stomach when having a nap, I'd get pain. Yet there I was without food or cover...

Two or three days after we had settled into this routine, the officer came and lined us up and addressed me. Since you are acting the brave fellow, he said, I'll talk to you as the leader of the camp. Tell these dogs that they have to dig cesspits to use as toilets. (Before that, they had let us go a few steps away, and do our business in the open.)

I looked around and I said, I see no dogs here. He said, Don't try to be clever. I am the officer here, I'm captain so-and-so (I forget his name now). I'm ordering you to tell these dogs to dig three WCs. The sergeant will tell you where to dig them, and there are tools there. So I said, Unless you say, Tell your men, or your colleagues, or your friends, or the other prisoners of war... (I always tried to bring in the word 'prisoners of war'.)

He said, First of all, we have not decided that you are prisoners of war. All right, tell your men to... He was so angry by that time that when he said the last words he fired three shots between my feet. I was standing in front of him; he was shaking with anger. He did not aim at me; I don't pretend that. He wanted to shoot at the ground, but between my legs. It was the only time in my life that a bullet came that close to me.

I kept quiet; I shut up. We started digging and they gave us some kerosene tins that had '*kils*' [lime] in them; every few days we had to throw it in. Then they brought wood, and asked if anybody could do carpentry. It wasn't difficult to make a frame. And they gave us some jute sacks to nail to this frame, to give us some privacy. It simply covered our bottoms when we sat there. Nonetheless, when we went in we had to leave the flap open, and the guards would stand or sit in front of us, watching us do our business. Of course, we had no newspapers to clean our bottoms. We had to use stones, and we weren't allowed to use big stones in case we threw them at the guards.

One day a Red Cross car came. God, what a relief it was! We were scared because they kept saying, You are saboteurs, you ought to be killed. When the order comes!

Out of the car came a civilian. Short, he spoke English with a French accent, and he said, I'm doctor so-and-so, and I represent the Red Cross. I'm coming to tell you that you are under Red Cross protection. My God! I could have fainted.

He was so good, that man. He remained a friend for two or three years after I was released. We corresponded with each other. He was Swiss. It was thanks to the nuns that he got our names. They went to some minister or the other, and said, We know that you have these people. They denied our existence. The nuns didn't show our names at first. They told the minister, You have a number of prisoners of war. We want to know their location, their numbers, their names, everything. They said, No, we don't have any prisoners of war. When squeezed, they said, We have some saboteurs.

The nuns said, No, you took them from the German Hospice, which is under the Red Cross protection. In the end, the Israelis had to admit our existence and our numbers.<sup>2</sup> Before they arrested us, we had thrown away our identification papers. I threw away my Syrian passport so they wouldn't know I was Syrian because they were extremely hostile to Syrians—Syrians, and anybody who had taken part in the '36 Intifada, or the fighting under Abu Diyeh or Abed al-Qader al-Husseini.

A couple of weeks later, parcels came from families. I remember five or six of us got parcels the first time—no letters to begin with. One [who got a parcel] was a Jerusalemite, a very nice young man. His father was the Greek Orthodox pastor in West Jerusalem. Ahmad got a parcel, and I got a parcel from friends in Amman—they sent us sardines, jams, cheese like Picon, chocolates, tobacco, another pipe—God! I will never forget that.

The guards began to envy us; they began to smile at us hoping that we would give them some. There was tension between us—they were as afraid of us as we were of them. There were about ten guards at any one time. But they were armed—we weren't. When we had to be nice to them was when we wanted to open the cans. We had no knives. We'd give them a bit of something as a bribe. But I remember how mean one becomes. When my parcel came, I opened the jam. I wanted something sweet. The soldier had a spoon with him, so I gave him a spoonful and I called Ahmad because I opened my parcel ahead of him, and I called to a young boy who must have been only 16 or 17 from the Sakkab family. I called these three or four around me in a conspiratorial manner. It was mean because the majority had not received anything, and yet it didn't occur to me to share. Greed, self-preservation—I wanted to fill myself, to have mouthfuls of something sweet.

After that, we began to feel ashamed. We gathered and said, We must share. If not everything, at least let us give up some of these things. Now that we have begun to

receive parcels there'll be more to come. So we distributed something to everybody, but [it was] very little of course.

One day, a civilian car arrived and out came two soldiers and a priest. The priest was the father of the Sakkab boy. Poor man, he started crying when he saw his son, and hugged him: *Ya ibni, ya ibni, shu a'milet fiyyi!* [My son, my son, what have you done to me?]. We had to console him. Apparently he had contacted the authorities (I don't know who), and said, Look, since these people are prisoners of war, they must be allowed a priest to pray for them. The majority are Christian. He pretended this because we were in the German Hospice. He said a few words of prayer for us. But really he wanted to talk to his son. A guard was standing near by.

We began to feel slightly more at ease as more people knew of our existence. Parcels began to come to others as well, so the food situation became a little easier. But bread remained scarce, and they gave us only five grams of sugar per person a day. They, too, were rationed. The officer who shot at my feet was removed, later on. Then the good Red Cross doctor lined us up and said, Under international law you are allowed to have a camp leader. Who do you want?

Everybody shouted, Yusif Sayigh, Yusif Sayigh, because I had stood up to that officer.

Around the end of June, about six weeks later, they put us on buses again (they were closed, no windows), and we started on a very long journey. This was because, as we discovered later, Jerusalem was still under siege but the Israelis had managed to find a route whereby they could avoid the cordon. Hours after we had started moving, we stopped in a place that was called Ijleel, a village somewhere near Jaffa or Herzliya.

There were already hundreds and hundreds of other prisoners of war there. Trucks brought tents for us to put up. We had no experience in putting up tents, so every tent fell two or three times before we managed to get it up. There were big tents in the officer's quarters where I was. Our tent had six to eight people in it. There were bigger tents for things like kitchens, where many had to be together. They provided us with showers—not proper showers, of course, just piping with holes in it. We had to take showers in front of each other, naked.

This camp had a barbed wire fence around it, as well as watchtowers, a gate and guards. On a hilltop next to the camp were the offices. With a big institution like that, you have to have offices for the commanders. When we went there, the commander was somebody of no significance, but under him were two officers—one was a security officer, the other was in charge of employment and arranging the gangs for work.

The security officer turned out to be an Irgun man, Almog. His assistant was a sergeant, an Egyptian Jew who made friends with everybody because he spoke Arabic and cracked jokes '*a l'Egyptien*'. Later we became friends enough for him to take us to the nearest town (I think it was Herzliya). He'd take six of us at a time from the officer

class, mainly Palestinians, and not Egyptians. We couldn't escape because we had uniforms with big blue diamonds painted on the trousers and the jacket—you could see them from kilometres away. He made it clear that we had to pay for him and he would even let us drink beer. I don't know how he managed to take us; it must have been his own initiative. Almog, too, though he was Irgun—we were afraid that he would be very fanatical—was gentle and civilized. I think that way he got on better with us, and was better informed, than when later, a Stern man took his place. This man always came into the camp on horseback with his revolver, although this was against the rules. He would trot his horse among the hundreds of thousands of prisoners.

There were several incidents when security had information that certain prisoners had been actual fighters, not just villagers or farmers. Several times these men were shot and were buried without any religious ceremony. When the officers came back, they would say that so-and-so was shot while trying to run away.

I remember the case of one young man who knew that they had recognized him as a fighter. He was afraid that they would shoot him. I tried to save him from going with the work gangs by putting him to work in the laundry, or in the kitchen. Eventually they said, We want this man to work; you are protecting him. This is favouritism, it's not correct.

So he went sadly, said goodbye, and never came back. When I asked, they said that he tried to run away and he was shot by the guards. So I went up to see the Stern man.<sup>3</sup> I wanted to tell the Red Cross about it. But he wouldn't let me get in touch with the Red Cross. I said, It's my right under the Conventions. He said, I'm not going to let you use the telephone.

The following day I went up again and saw the commander of the camp, a decent man, a bookseller—when he realized that I'd read many English novels, he used to come and chat for hours with me in the camp about books that I had read, or books that he had. Every now and then he used to get me books from his bookshop in Tel Aviv, to lend them to me and take them back—very human! He allowed me to use his telephone. I talked to the Red Cross. They came. I complained about this young man's death, and then they left.

Eventually it got to Ben Gurion himself, and the Red Cross got authorization to dig up the body to see how he was shot. Instead of having been shot in the back from a distance of 40 or 50 meters—which would have been the case if he was running away—it was found that he was shot in the chest from the front. According to what this doctor told me later on, after I was released (Moeur,<sup>4</sup> I think his name was, the acting head of the Red Cross), he had said to Ben Gurion, If you don't let us dig him up, I will suggest to headquarters in Switzerland that we pull out our mission and announce the reason. So they gave in. Of course, the camp authorities gave the Red Cross assurances that this would not be repeated, and the Stern officer was removed six weeks later.

Before he was removed, he sent for me. I went to the gate, and said to the soldier who came after me, I want four guards to go with me. He said, Why do you want four guards? You usually have two.

I said, I want four guards, I don't want to be tempted to run away. So he gave me four guards, and I went up.

He said, Look, I know you well enough now, and you know me well enough. I know you are a gentleman, so if you are willing to give me your word of honour that you will not try to run away, you can come up any time you want without guards. I said, Yes! To be killed by your soldiers pretending that I was running away? No! If you can triple the number of guards, I'll be happier.

He got angry. Then he said, Look, you are a source of trouble, and you ought to know that we can punish you. I know from the record of your interrogations that you have five brothers and a sister. If you want to see them again, you'd better behave! Some Arab bravado came into me, and I said, Since you know I have five brothers, one less won't matter much. There'll be others in my place.

Actually, I was really worried that he might carry out his threat, but I conveyed that story to the Red Cross, and few weeks later he was removed.

I remember that when we were on the way to the camp near Jerusalem, and later on, on the way to the camp by the sea, there was very little talking among us prisoners. The soldiers kept saying, *Uskut! uskut!* [Shut up!] if anybody tried to talk. They were afraid that we might be inciting something. But if the people sitting there said anything it was, Ya Allah! May God protect us! or My poor family!

Then after we settled, and felt that there was no immediate danger of our being killed—especially after we moved to the camp by the sea—there was a lot of political discussion, especially between myself and the Egyptian army officers, the Syrian prisoners of war—a few of them—and the Palestinians that I became friends with. As far as I remember there were no Jordanians or Iraqis there. I think the Iraqis avoided being captured because after they made a thrust, and cut Palestine in two reaching the sea, they got orders from Baghdad to withdraw to Jenin. This withdrawal cost them more casualties than the actual takeover of that tongue of land that cut Palestine in half. So they were not taken prisoner, as far as I know.

The main subject of discussion was whether or not our side had a chance of winning the war. I think most people extrapolated their own situation as prisoners of war to their general expectations. Here we were, thousands of prisoners. It meant that the Arab nation itself was defeated, a prisoner of war itself. It couldn't do anything. But what shocked me, I remember clearly, was how the officers, instead of discussing the question in terms of balance of power and military preparedness, either took consolation in quoting verses from the Qur'an, such as *Allah byahmi* or *Allah kabir*

[God protect us, or God is great] or indulged in expressions of bravado, that without doubt we would win eventually.

But everybody's morale dropped when the first armistice was announced.<sup>5</sup> The Jews looked terribly happy. It lasted for several weeks, that armistice, and the Israelis made good use of it militarily. The work gangs were used to make trenches and fortifications, which is against the laws of war. Prisoners of war are not supposed to be used in military effort. Those who had some experience with weapons saw new types they hadn't seen before. They saw boxes of machine guns with markings that showed they were quite different from the more primitive types that had been used at the beginning, many of which had been produced in Israel itself. Now they were importing weapons from East Europe and elsewhere.

My own feeling was that it was wrong to accept the ceasefire, essentially because the Israelis wanted it to rearm, and make new plans based on the positions they had already acquired. I had a feeling that our side was not rearming, a feeling that was confirmed later on by military people outside. There were many stories, for instance, the fall of Lod and Ramleh. After their fall, we had hundreds coming in as prisoners of war. They picked up all the young men, and treated them as prisoners of war. These people told us how the Arab Legion had just deserted them, left them to their fate, and moved eastward. All this made me feel that we were not going to use the Armistice properly to get more arms (apart from the fact that we didn't have the money that the other side had to import arms). Whereas the Arab governments, except for Syria and Lebanon, took orders from the British, the Israelis did not. Instead they got support from the British and Americans.

We went on for months until winter came. The tents were very bad; they leaked heavily. I began to have a very severe pain in my back. Two or three times, under heavy rain, the whole tent fell on top of us—at night, with its big poles. We'd get up and clear ourselves, and try to pick it up. In the end, the pain was so much that I couldn't move. Much later, it was found to be a slipped disc, but then we didn't even know the word. Three or four weeks of awful pain like that, and all they gave me was four aspirins, and then only on the last day before the Red Cross came to see me, to find out why I wasn't contacting them. I stayed flat on my back. I used to pee in a tin, and this Sakkab boy used to take it and pour it out. But when I had to do the other thing, it would take me 10 or 15 minutes of rising slowly, slowly to be able to stand upright, and walk.

I didn't get my first letter from my family until three or four months after being taken prisoner. It was from my mother. All that we were allowed to write was a very simple formula, nothing that could be a code. My mother was always confident, saying I know God will keep me alive until I see you. Don't worry about me, I'm not going to die before you come out. I have the letters with me still.

Then there were the attempts at escape. A number of prisoners managed to escape. Two of these attempts are worth mentioning. One was just before a Muslim feast when the prisoners were allowed to stay late outside the tents, and sing religious chants. They told me that this was going to be the night when 24 of them would try to escape. I said, It's very risky; I'm sure it will cost many lives. It's your decision, but I'd hate to see you nice young men getting killed. The nearest haven was Tulkarem, estimated to be 18 kilometres away. To walk 18 kilometres was to risk being met by patrols.

They said, Twenty-four of us have sworn to go together. Their plan was to sit in circles near one of the watchtowers where the barbed wire had a little gap, so that a man could slip under. I said, Why under the watchtower? Why not somewhere far away? They said, Ah, that's deliberate because we want to make him drunk!

I said, What do you mean, make him drunk! He's way up there 12 meters above you. They said, No, not that way. We are going to chant. There are 60 of us, and 15 will chant the same chant: *Allah hayy, Allah hayy, Allah hayy*. For hours! And when the first 15 stop, the next 15 will start.

Sure enough—I was watching from my tent—I could see the whole thing happening. The guard was very curious at first, sitting, watching and shaking his head: What are these Africans doing chanting like that?! Then you could see his head was drooping, and then he went to sleep. The others who did not escape that night told me they saw his submachine gun leaning against his thigh, on his chair. Then the 24 who had decided to leave slipped under the wire, while the others went on singing.

Many months later, when I was out, I made inquiries and found that only six or seven of them succeeded in escaping. The others were either captured or killed. According to the rules of war, they should be taken back to a stiffer POW camp, where security is higher. If a prisoner of war is caught escaping, he's ordered to stop, and if he doesn't stop you shoot. But if he stops, you ought to take him back.

A second incident of escape involved many more people. It was not a real escape—a rumour circulated that a number were going to be released for health reasons. And 'bad health' was never defined. As it turned out later, a new security officer spread this rumour so that people would bribe him to put them among those who qualified for release. Ahmad Abed al-Khalek was one of those who bribed him. I said to him, You won't get away with it. It could be a trick. He said, Well, it's only 15 pounds; I'm going to pay it. And he did. At the very end when we were released from another camp—this is just to complete this story—Ahmad told me (because he was released a week or so after me) that they held him back for interrogation, as a witness, as one of those who bribed that officer. The officer received five or six years of prison for having accepted bribes.

The only interesting story about this 'escape' was that one of the Egyptian officers, Muhammad Annan, came to me and said, I want to go out with these sick prisoners.<sup>6</sup>

But if they recognise me as an Egyptian officer, they are not going to let me. I want to borrow a *kombaz*. I found him somebody with a *kombaz* his size. He wanted to change his face, so he grew a moustache. Then he said, I want my eyes to look smudged. I asked one of the work gangs to get some fig leaves, and told him to rub his eyes with them, and sure enough, two or three days later, he was crouched there with a hundred others, all claiming to have hernias, or ingrown toenails or whatever. He was there because of his trachoma. We gave him a different name, the name of somebody who was willing to give him his name. They waited hour after hour for the buses to come, but nothing happened. In the end they were all ordered back to their tents. It didn't work.

There were other escapes, smaller groups. Some of them got away. The earth was not rocky. It was agricultural earth, and they could dig under it. They always somehow managed to find tools. We had to be able to repair things—it was a big establishment, 5,000 able-bodied young men, and they had to have huge kitchens.

We had several very nice young Egyptian officers in the camp. Six or seven of them were airmen, and one was [trained in] artillery. They were in the officers' quarters with us. But they had their own tent, and we had ours. It's always like that in POW camps—that's what we were told. Five of these officers were downed the same day because they had the wrong maps. They had flown over an Israeli airbase near Haifa, and thought it was a British airbase. The Israelis downed them one after the other. We spent a lot of our time together. We played cards. They taught me chess—two were very good chess players—and I taught them economics.

The food was *terrible*. The vegetables were alright. I could eat them, but you know how I hate meat. Imagine boiling a tail for three hours, and not getting anything out of it except some unchewable cartilage! Me, eating that! I lived on bread and the vegetable broth. I was quite thin when I came out.

One more thing to tell about is the lice. It became so awful that they began to wake us up half an hour earlier, so that we could clean ourselves. There's a word in Arabic, '*taboor*', when soldiers are woken up by the bugle or a siren, and they line up to be counted. Prisoners also have the *taboor*. So we were woken up half an hour earlier than usual, and we called it the 'lice *taboor*'! After a night of feeding on our blood, the lice would be easier to get out. We'd sit next to each other, and I would look in Ahmad's hair, and he'd look under my armpits. In the end, they decided to do something about it. They brought a few huge DDT pumps. We would put the hose under our arms, and they would pump the powder into our hair, and everywhere on our bodies where there was hair. We got rid of the lice in the end, but it took weeks.

Eventually, after I became ill, they said, You can't go on being *homme de confiance* if you can't move and look after the others. They said, We're going to move you with 30 others to another camp. I was quite afraid that it would be like Ansar III, a very tough place. They picked leading Palestinians, all activists. Like, for instance, Daoud Jaber, a devil, very active. He knew a lot about electricity, and technical things. They moved

us to a place between Jleel and Atleet, which is near Haifa. We stayed there for a few weeks.

The only interesting event there was another attempt to escape. This time it was Daoud Jaber who was the leader. He had been a sergeant major with the Jordanian army, an electrician. He spoke German beautifully because his father believed in German discipline, and sent him to the Schneller School, although he was not an orphan. He was well-read, a very fine person.

Eight or nine people decided to escape. We were all in one huge room, like a dormitory. I wasn't going to take part. I couldn't walk far, my back was still bad. Ahmad decided to go with them. The plan was that we'd all get into bed, and cover ourselves up to our chins, but those who wanted to escape would stay in their clothes and their shoes. Daoud Jaber was to short-circuit the electricity, which he did by scraping one bulb in the dormitory. All the lights in the whole camp went off.

But it only took two or three minutes before the guards rushed in. They realized that somebody had played around with the electricity, and they stood by the doors with their guns in their hands. It was fortunate for the people who wanted to run away, because they would have been pursued immediately and killed. We all pretended to be in bed, and when the guards came in, we said, *Shu hadha?* What's the matter? Why are you here? They said, What have you done? The following morning, they came at dawn, and took out every bulb, and looked at it, and found the bulb that had been scraped to make the short-circuit. But they didn't find who did it.

Nothing else eventful happened there. Then they moved us to another camp, to Atleet camp, which had been an army camp under the British. By then, our numbers had gone up again. From 5,000, we were reduced to 30. Then we found hundreds more in Atleet camp. The *homme de confiance* was a Bahai from Tiberias, a collaborator with the Israelis. He was quite nasty. I knew him from Tiberias—we were friends there, we used to drink together. But I discovered immediately that he was on good terms with the Israelis, so I avoided him. I didn't want to challenge him by trying to have an election, because I was really tired. Being in continuous friction with security is not easy, and my back was still giving me trouble.

In this other camp, we were getting on towards winter. It was December '48, or early January '49. We used to get papers now and then, the *Jerusalem Post*—the *Palestine Post*, as it used to be called then. We heard that another armistice was coming, so we expected to be released pretty soon. They began to prepare us for that, and life became quite routine, no surprises. Then my back got very bad again, and I had to stay in bed.

During the last part of my stay in the big camp, I had a regular bed, like many others, with a mattress. Most mattresses had straw in them, village mattresses. Sometimes we'd get nice blankets. I remember getting a blanket that was six meters long. I used to fold it three ways, and sleep under it. Then I sewed it and turned it into a sleeping

bag so that it would give me greater warmth all the way round, and put a sheet inside it—I managed to get a sheet also.

After we were released, everybody was interested to know what the Israeli army looked like. Fortunately, I took notes while in the camps, thanks mainly to Daoud Jaber. Those who went out to work told us things they saw. We had an idea more or less of the Israeli lines of defence. I took notes. Of course, I had to hide them. I remember a very close shave I had one day when suddenly a large contingent of soldiers trotted in and started searching the tents, beginning with the tent where I was. Whenever I finished writing the notes, I would hide them. The edge of the tent had a folded section, all the way round, like a pleat. I made a little pocket in it, and put the papers inside. They went round touching this, all the way round, but they missed that little bit of about one foot where the notes were.

I decided then I could not leave them on paper. So I tore up a shirt—by then we had received some shirts, things they brought from Palestinian houses they were occupying—I tore up a white shirt into handkerchief-sized pieces, and I wrote on them in outline form the things that I wanted to remember and develop later on. This was easy, because even if they searched—and they came again a few weeks later—it didn't matter because it was cloth inside cloth; it didn't feel like paper.

Two weeks before the exchange—it was common knowledge that we were going to be exchanged as armistice agreements were signed—I undid the lining of the zip jacket that I had [...] and slipped these pieces of cloth into the right and left side, and sewed them up. There were two that remained. I used to wear old-fashioned underpants—homemade, my mother used to sew them. They were a bit baggy, and that was fortunate because I could sew the pieces of cloth inside them. I went out carrying the notes. They searched us very thoroughly, touching us, but cloth doesn't crackle like paper so I got them out.

One day, the commandant of the camp came to me—I was in bed—and said, Sorry that we ignored you, with your back. We want to treat you. Here's a doctor who will give you an injection. I thought, My God, they want to finish me off so I won't even be freed with the others. So I said, No, I don't want an injection. And they started struggling with me physically, to force me to be injected. I said, Look, this is my ninth month here, and I haven't received a single injection. *Now* you want to look after me? I don't want an injection. You're all my witnesses! If I die from this injection it means the Israelis have killed me! There were the other prisoners of war, and soldiers around. So they didn't give me the injection.

Sure enough, a few days later, we were taken to buses and driven to Jerusalem. It was after the last armistice agreement between Syria and Israel. There at the Mandlebaum Gate, Abdullah Tell and Nasib Boulos were waiting for me, and many other friends. They brought journalists to interview me from Jerusalem, and from Amman. Somehow stories had reached them of my friction with the Israelis. The interesting

thing that I found out was that when we had been in the first camp near Jerusalem, before the first ceasefire, the Jewish quarter inside old Jerusalem had fallen to the Jordanians. The Zionists had an enclave there, and the Jordanians captured 1,200 fighters—it was quite something.

Munir Abu Fadel dashed to Amman to see the king. He said, Your majesty, there are 123 of our men in the hands of the Jews—we have lists of their names from the Red Cross. They are ill-treating them; they are only giving them a scrap of bread a day. But these 1,200 Jewish prisoners are being given live sheep so that they can kill them according to Kosher rules. And they are getting apples! Let us end this situation. Let us ask for our men in place of theirs. The king said, What! Should I exchange an Arab for even ten Jews? I will free my men with the power of the sword! So we stayed there nine and a half months, whereas the Jews were set free almost immediately.

When I got out, I told Anwar Nusseibeh about the notes I had taken while in the prison camp. By then he had lost his leg—he got a bullet in the thigh while in the Nablus area, and the medical services were very poor. They were late in taking him to hospital, and they didn't have equipment. Anyway, gangrene began and they had to cut off the leg, way up here, in the thigh. But he was still active and his morale was high, and I talked with him and analysed the situation. Most people outside were terribly dispirited and depressed. They said, *Khalas, Intahet* (It's over, finished.) They felt that we'd missed our chance mainly with the first ceasefire, but the second was final. It sealed our loss in battle. A few people said, No matter, in five years time we will re-arm, we will do this and that. They weren't many.

But I was taken round to meet many people apart from the journalists. For instance, I had a very long sitting with Abdullah Tell. My information came mainly from the Egyptian officers and from Daoud Jaber, who could assess military things. I told him about the Israeli armaments, and whether or not they were disciplined and well-trained, whatever these officers thought was the situation. Then Abdullah Tell said, I want you to talk to the highest ranking British officer in Jordan, the commander of the Arab Legion. I went and talked to him. He said, Are you a military person? I said, No, I'm not, but I had my eyes open. He grunted. You could tell from the beginning that it was not going to be a friendly meeting. He let me talk for a while, then he said, What were people saying about Lod and Ramleh? I said, Everybody said that if the British officers had not ordered the soldiers not to shoot, Lod and Ramleh could have been saved. On that he stood up and said, Thanks for coming to see me, and walked out.

However, I didn't give up. I got out my notes on cloth, and even while in Amman, even before going over to Beirut, I started preparing my thoughts. I decided that of the various Arab governments involved, the only one that seemed to have some heart, some toughness, was the Syrian government. So I decided to prepare a memorandum to send to the prime minister to give him the information that I had. When I suggested this idea to a few friends like Anwar Nuseibeh, they said, Well, certainly there's no point in sending it to the prime minister of Egypt, or Jordan, or to Nuri As-Said.<sup>7</sup>

Eventually, when I got to Beirut, I prepared a memorandum divided into: observations on Israeli military preparedness, what arms they had, and so on; observations by the officers around me and myself; the feelings of people inside and how the prisoners of war saw the Israelis as distinctly less than Supermen—we were not as afraid of them as we found people outside to be. I sent this memorandum and never got any acknowledgement of receipt. I sent it to the prime minister himself, Jamil Mardem Bek.<sup>8</sup> Essentially there was a general loss of hope, a feeling that the Arabs were no good. If even the political or military authorities in Egypt were willing, for a huge commission, to buy defective arms for their army, what could you expect from such an establishment?

In Jerusalem, I was interviewed by many journalists, foreign and Arab. Nasib Boulos took me to his apartment, and I stayed with him for a few days. He made me shave my beard. Then I went to Amman, and stayed there for a while to recuperate because I had lost weight and my health was in poor shape. After getting better, I took a plane to go to Beirut. I had lost my passport, so Abdullah Tell gave me a letter saying, To whom it may concern, Yusif Sayigh was a prisoner of war with the Israelis, and has just been released. It had my photo on it. I thought they'd let me in to Lebanon on the strength of this letter. Well, this didn't stop me from entering Lebanon. The plane couldn't climb Dahr al-Baydar. It was February or March, and it was one of those planes with a propeller and two wings, one on top of the other. We were seven passengers; that's all it could take.

We went back to Amman, and I decided to come to Lebanon by road. In Syria, between Dera'a and Damascus, gendarmes stopped the bus, and looked at the passengers' papers. When they came to me, I didn't have a passport. They asked me what my nationality was, and I said that I was Syrian. What's this paper you have? I told them that I had been a prisoner of war. I thought they would immediately pin a medal on my chest. They said, A prisoner of war? With Israel? And you're coming to Syria! You must be a spy! I said, I'm not a spy, my papers are in Sweida. If you are willing to telephone, you can ask the *etat civile* office there. I'll give you my name.

They said, We belong to Dera'a. I was taken down from the bus. They made me hire a taxi and take them and me to Dera'a, where they kept me overnight on a bench, under arrest. The following morning they telephoned Sweida, and asked for my cousin Farid Ghorayeb. They said, Do you know somebody called Yusif Sayigh? Eh! Yusif Sayigh! He's my first cousin! They said, What's his father's name?—to test him. He said, Of course, he's Syrian. His registration number is such and such. So they allowed me to go to Damascus, to obtain proper papers, but under guard. Somebody came with me; I had to pay for him again. I went there, I spent a few days, got a new passport, and travelled on to Beirut, where my family was. They had left Palestine after the Tiberias massacre, which was in April after Deir Yassin, on April 9th.

My family knew that I had been released. They were expecting me by the hour. I stopped in Place de Canons, to have a shave and a hair brush, so that I wouldn't look

too thin and worry them. It was a very moving meeting. My poor father—it was he who opened the door for me—he hugged me. I had never in my life seen him cry until then—*Yusif, ibni Yusif, ibni Yusif!* My mother was waiting, and saying, *Abdullah, bikafi. Ana kaman bididi aboosu.* (That’s enough Abdullah. I want to kiss him, too.) Then the others gathered, one after the other. Tawfiq, Mary and Munir were there with them. Fuad was in Gaza, Fayez was in America for his doctorate, and Anis was in Sidon high school.

When I came back to Beirut, I turned my political attention to one group only, the PPS of which I was a member, in the hope that the PPS would itself be an important factor in Syria and Lebanon in creating enthusiasm for another round of fighting. I must admit I was quite naïve in thinking that there would be another round soon. With every year that passed, the Arabs were less ready for a second round—for a number of years this was true. Until, of course, in the mid-60s, things began to change a little bit.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> On 16 November, 1932, Antun Sa’adah founded the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, a secret society that grew from a few students to about 1,000 members by 1935. During the 1930s the party expanded into Syria, Transjordan, and Palestine. It might be considered the first indigenous Arab youth organization.

<sup>2</sup> Yusif recalls here that the prisoners at this time numbered 123.

<sup>3</sup> Yusif believes this officer was named “Schneidman”.

<sup>4</sup> No records of a Moeur could be found, however a 27 February, 2003 article in *al-Ahram* by Salman Abu Sitta refers to a ‘de Meuron’ as the ICRC delegate at the time (see <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/627/focus.htm>, accessed 10, April 2007). The same article refers to a demand that Zionist forces acknowledge the capture of Palestinian prisoners.

<sup>5</sup> There were four armistices signed between Arab states and the Zionist forces in 1949: between Israel and Egypt (24 February), Lebanon (23 March), Transjordan (3 April) and Syria (20 July).

<sup>6</sup> This Egyptian officer later wrote a book entitled *Kuntu Asiran, (I Was a Prisoner of War)*. In this

he told that Yusif was again elected *homme de confiance* in the larger camp, though this position should have gone by rights to the highest-ranking officer, who was a Sudanese Lieutenant-Colonel, whom Yusif described as “very sweet, but spineless with the Israelis”.

<sup>7</sup> Nuri al-Said (1888 - 15 July, 1958) was an Iraqi politician during the British Mandate and monarchy, and served in various key cabinet positions, including fourteen terms as prime minister.

<sup>8</sup> “Years later, in 1984”, Yusif said, “I met Salma Mardem Bek at Oxford, and learnt from her that she was working on her father’s papers to prepare a doctoral dissertation on that period when he was prime minister, the period when Palestine fell. I told her, I sent your father a memorandum. She said, Yes of course, I saw it. So you are the same Yusif Sayigh!, I have seen all these papers, and there was this one memorandum, written by hand, to which he attached a note saying, This must be a very intelligent and patriotic young man. She promised to give me a photocopy, but she never did. The papers were in Geneva, maybe she forgot. Anyway I haven’t forgotten it; one day I’ll get it.”