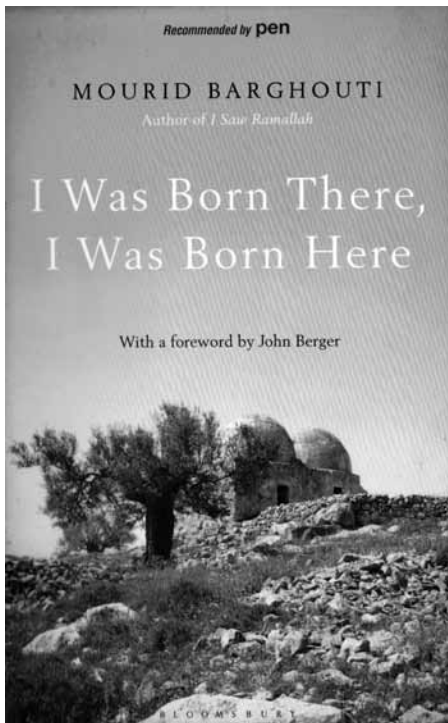


Book Review

Touring Home, Returning Home

I Was Born There, I Was Born Here. Mourid Barghouti. Translated from the Arabic by Humphrey Davies, with a foreword by John Berger, London, Bloomsbury, 2011, 214 pages plus glossary.

Reviewed by Raja Shehadeh



I read this book on a Kindle. The copy we ordered from London never arrived: Israel had stopped international mail to the West Bank several months ago. Electronic book delivery becomes important when you live subject to the whims of Israeli officials. Formerly, getting a manuscript out to publishers was a real ordeal. Thanks to the Internet this misery has become a thing of the past. Yet electronic communication has done nothing to ease the de facto sovereignty and control of the borders which Israel exercises, as Mourid Barghouti, the Palestinian poet who lives in Egypt, discovered when he brought his son, Tamim, for his first visit to Palestine. *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* is an account of several trips that the author made to Palestine: at its center is the saga of the father bringing his son to see the homeland. It is noteworthy that there is never a question of living in Palestine but only visiting and obtaining residency papers. I couldn't help wondering why. If Palestine means so much to Mourid and he is among the fortunate ones who are allowed to stay what prevents him from exercising that option? There might be good reasons but it is intriguing that he doesn't venture into them in this book.

When Mourid stands before the formidable wall of Acre's old city's he is shocked by the insight that:

Palestine didn't fall in a war that had a beginning and an end, like the wars we're familiar with. Wars big and small, from the Trojan War to the Vietnam War to the Second World War and more, begin and then end and you know with a precision befitting the human mind that you've lost or you've won...No

power besieged a Palestinian army, thus allowing it to raise the white flag and end everything with a final winner and loser. I think to myself Palestine was lost through drowsiness, slumber and trickery. Every time we tried to wake up, we found death and cruel displacement to places of exile, to other pillows and to other mistakes – and yes, I do mean mistakes (and we’re still making them). All this happened with a relentless slowness. How can an entire nation drowse? How could we have been so heedless – so heedless that our homeland becomes theirs? (p. 57-8)

As I read this reflection, I found myself assenting to our mistakes but not entirely agreeing with the author because, among other matters, his attribution of drowsiness does not take into account the experiential divide between the Palestinian Arabs and the Jews which I believe was ultimately the most effective weapon used, certainly against the urban population, accounting for the Palestinian defeat in the psychological warfare in 1948.

The Jewish communities in Europe had been subjected to one of the worst campaigns of systematic carnage in human history by the Nazi and Stalinist regimes. Many lived in the areas of Europe which Timothy Snyder has called “Blood Lands,” the troubled zone between Poland and the western rim of the Russian Federation, where from 1933 to 1945 the Nazi and Stalinist regimes murdered, according to the author’s calculation, more than fourteen million people. These were crucial dates for Zionism and for the future of Palestine both because of the increased emigration of Jews, many from the blood lands, and the brutality that was exhibited by the Jewish Forces leading to the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. What appeared to the Palestinians as unthinkable was minor in comparison to what some of the European Jews had witnessed or experienced.

This level of organized, sustained perpetration of violence was unknown to contemporary Palestinians. Not that there were no acts of violence carried out by Arabs against Jews in Palestine over the years, but those were sporadic and lacked the level of organization and planning that was now evident in the Jewish attacks against the British in Palestine and during 1948 against the Arabs. When it was unleashed against them, the Arabs seemed unprepared to interpret what was happening to them, let alone resist and endure it without fleeing. In 1948 the violence of Europe’s WWII came to our small country in the Middle East: among its agents, the victims of that violence.

Where I agree with the author is in regard to the sustained course of our Nakba in Palestine, which certainly did not end in 1948. It is still continuing as the Israeli occupation does all it can to encourage Palestinians to leave the occupied parts of Palestine, whether East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, or indeed the Galilee.

Barghouti then asks: But how will our “drowsiness” end? His answer is when we admit to “ourselves, that we are responsible too. Our ignorance is responsible and our historical short-sightedness is responsible, along with our internal struggle, our tribal-familial logic, and the way we were let down by our Arab ‘strategic depth’ which is made up of states enamored to the point of scandal with their colonizers.” But he is not

interested in excuses: “we cannot take this as a reason to stay silent. We have to break the state of denial with which the world confronts us.” How are we to do this? His answer: “by telling our personal histories... so as to draw the world’s attention to the loss of a love story that concerns the world.” (p. 58) He then writes:

I shall record our sitting on the wall of Acre and eating a meal of fish in Christo’s restaurant like any tourist who has come from far away. I shall record the history of this fish meal too, and here I am, writing it. I shall make of every feeling that ever shook my heart an historic event and I shall write it. (p. 59-60)

Not only does the author record these events, he also manages to evoke with a poet’s sensitivity the deepest emotions of a Palestinian exile returning to his occupied country.

Yet I could not read that someone like Mourid Barghouti, who was born and raised in Palestine, felt like a tourist in Acre without feeling sad. I was reminded of a news item in the Israeli daily *Ha’aretz* of July 19, 2011 announcing that more than 60,000 Palestinians were expected to visit Israel in 2011 – as tourists from the West Bank. It reads:

Civil administration sources said: “We want Palestinians especially young ones to see another kind of Israeli, not only soldiers and settlers. Anything that can help them blow off steam and relax. Perhaps instead of demonstrating in September they’ll go to the beach.”

In this book there is a sense of Palestine as ephemeral and transient – so that if it is not captured now through the senses and recorded in words it will vanish. Perhaps this is not untypical of the anxiety felt by the returning exile who knows that he is not here to stay. These fears are confirmed as he and his son are stopped on their way to Deir Ghassanah, the village where Mourid was born, and told by the Israeli guard at the settlement of Halamish: “This is the State of Israel! Understand? You are driving a car in the State of Israel.”(p. 85)

When they arrive in the village, his son asks, “Where’s the room? Where were you born..? Mourid answers: “I was born here.” Then he writes:

The word “here” takes me to everything that is “there.” It takes me to the houses of exile. It takes me to times that overlap in my mind. It flies with me from “my” room here and Tamim’s silence to searching in 1963 for a place to rent in the Agouza district of Cairo,... to sleeping on the floor in the Khalifa Prison in Cairo.... (p. 89)

This section ends by explaining how “paradoxically, the political mistakes of the PLO [in the Oslo Accords] then brought me back to ‘here’ under a nonsensical selectivity that permitted my return but not that of my brothers or their children....” (p. 90)

Nine years later Tamim gives a poetry recital at his father’s village to wild acclaim.

Barghouti writes:

The child born in the Dr. Gohar Maternity Hospital on the banks of the Nile in Cairo will become the young poet of Palestine and its handsome son, with his flowing verses, his smile, and the message of hope that these brought them... this was a new son who was “theirs”... He had arrived “ready-made.”... (p. 105)

And yet his “arrival” is only metaphorical for as soon as he secures his residency he leaves again.

The book is also about “there,” Egypt, home to both father and son, and the experience of the Palestinian living in an Arab country. As under other Arab regimes,

the Palestinian is simply a security file. He is dealt with by the interior ministries, not foreign ministries as though to give meaning to the secret motto embraced by the Arab states from the Atlantic to the Gulf: “We love Palestine and hate the Palestinians.” (p. 201)

The book comes full circle in a chapter titled: “The Dawn Visitor,” when back in Egypt the son goes through the same experiences as his father, being deported from the country of his birth, in the course of which he is incarcerated in the same prison in which his father had been locked up seventeen years earlier. Barghouti writes: “As to what happens to him there, it’s no different from what any foreign occupation would do to a citizen who had the miserable luck to fall into the hands of its security forces. Humiliation, slapping, torture with hot and cold water...” (p. 199) He concludes that cruelty and abuse are the same whoever the perpetrator. Palestinians whether in Occupied Palestine or in Arab countries know this all too well and this book gives eloquent expression to their yearning for justice and liberation.

On a more cheerful note, there are good grounds for hoping for real change in the Arab countries and in their governments’ treatment of Palestinians. Recently, it was announced in Egypt that Palestinians born to an Egyptian mother would be given Egyptian passports. Tamim hopefully has a new entitlement. It is also unlikely that prior to the events of last year Mourid Barghouti would have considered publishing a book in Egypt which has this level of criticism of the Egyptian regime, and indeed, the Arabic version was published not in Egypt, but in Lebanon. Now he can do it without expecting to be arrested and placed where he and his son had previously been incarcerated, at Al Khalifa Prison.

Raja Shehadeh’s latest book is A Rift in Time: Travels with my Ottoman Uncle (London: Profile Books, 2010). His Occupation Diaries will be published by Profile in August 2012.