

## LETTER FROM LYDDA

# Farewell to Najiyya al-Ash'al (Um Hafiz)

Khaled Farraj

Translated from Arabic by  
Muhammad Ali Khalidi

The silent witness to the massacre of Lydda has passed away, she who saw the exodus from that town on 14 July 1948. She who walked among the corpses, the destroyed houses, and the great mosque, and who refused until the day she died to utter even a few humble words about the massacre. I don't know whether it was out of fear, diffidence, or forgetfulness, but the only thing I am certain of is that she did not give testimony to those events – even to her children and grandchildren.

Widowed in the prime of her life, her husband had died before she was thirty, she has passed away. She who worked tirelessly for over fifteen years to secure a dignified life for her five children. The wandering traveler among Palestinian cities and towns has passed away. Her trips to these towns and cities were not in pursuit of tourism or relaxation but in search of her children in Israeli military prisons and detention centers, particularly to visit her second son 'Abd al-Rizik, who has spent twenty years of his life in prison. She spent her time looking forward to visits behind barbed wire, brief calls on a telephone line surveilled by the prison authorities, or a quick embrace in a courtroom when the occupying soldiers would permit – in a rare show of sympathy. When embracing was forbidden, she would settle for a look and smile through the window of the military courtroom.

She passed away. Fatigued by the illness that ravaged her memory and paralyzed her, especially in her final year, not realizing that 'Abd al-Raziq, now 57 years old, had been imprisoned yet again. She was uncharacteristically silent, not shedding any tears on news of

his imprisonment nor damning the hour that the occupation had come to our land. She had never cursed the Arab leaders for their inaction on Palestine. At the time of ‘Abd al-Raziq’s recent arrest, she had passed the point of no return and no cure. She passed away not having listened to a news bulletin in more than a year. She had never before ceased to look for a news item that might put her mind to rest about one of her sons or their friends or other Palestinians. She passed away not having learned the news that ‘Abd al-Raziq had been subject to brutal torture during his latest incarceration.

She passed away certain that he would walk in her funeral and lament her passing, and she went in ignorance of the fact that her favorite grandchild, Wadi‘, ‘Abd al-Raziq’s son, was in prison, too. She closed her eyes for the last time, confident that Wadi‘ would carry her coffin alongside her other grandchildren. Ironically, the day she died, her grandson Wadi‘ was coincidentally transferred to the same prison where his father was being held (in the Naqab desert), which may provide some comfort and consolation for both of them, as well as for those of us who are outside the prison walls.

In 1989, my third brother ‘Abd al-Nasir, was studying in the United Kingdom, and after much persuasion, he managed to convince his mother of the need to visit him in London. This was part of an effort to alleviate her constant anxiety over my imprisoned brother, ‘Abd al-Raziq. She was also distressed about Khaled, who was under surveillance by the occupiers, and Hafiz, who was awaiting imprisonment, and Mariam, the activist who was also pursued by the occupation authorities. Eventually she went to visit him and spent a whole month in the UK. On the day after her return to Palestine, she went to ‘Asqalan prison to visit ‘Abd al-Raziq, ashamed at having been on a trip abroad while her son was in prison. The following week, she went to Dahariyya prison to visit Khaled who had also just been arrested. The joke was that Um Hafiz was travelling between Heathrow and Lydda airports, ‘Asqalan and Dahariyya prisons, and Jalazun refugee camp, so that she could spend her retirement with her children.

*Khaled Farraj is Director General of the Institute for Palestine Studies, a member of its Research Committee, and a member of the Editorial Committee of Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya. He has published a number of reports on life in the Palestinian cities and refugee camps of the West Bank.*