

Jerusalem Quarterly Remembers Graham Usher



Graham Usher, Gaza, 1994. Source: Photo by John Tordai, courtesy of Barbara Plett.

Graham Usher, writer, journalist and long-time friend of, and contributor to, Jerusalem Quarterly, died on 8 August 2013, aged 54, of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. In the tributes below, JQ editors Salim Tamari and Issam Nassar remember Graham's outstanding qualities as a writer on contemporary Palestine, as well as the friendships forged in JQ's early days when the slow-moving JQ and the fast-moving Graham shared a Jerusalem neighborhood, meals, conversations, and convictions, before the editors and the journal's office were banned from Jerusalem.

*Graham Usher came to Palestine in the early 1990s to teach English in Gaza after working in London's East End teaching the children of immigrants and refugees. He began writing for Middle East International and then became the first Palestine correspondent for The Economist while writing two acclaimed and prescient books on Palestine during the Oslo Period: *Palestine in Crisis* (Pluto, 1995), and *Dispatches from Palestine* (Pluto, 1999). The Economist's obituary termed Graham "a correspondent of integrity and courage," and recalled how despite his left-wing politics, Graham's contributions quickly convinced even their skeptical editors as he provided a view of Palestinian affairs that was "continuous, direct and knowledgeable." It concluded that Graham's work was informed by "a passion for justice" – an assessment that rings true for all who knew him.*

Graham is survived by his wife and partner in every sense of the word, Barbara Plett. His courage in facing a severe and debilitating illness was only matched by hers. We extend our condolences to Barbara and to the many colleagues and friends who feel his loss.

The Mukhtar of Sheikh Jarrah

Salim Tamari

Between 1994 and 2000 the Institute of Jerusalem Studies (IJS) was located in Sheikh Jarrah, and it conducted its research activities there for several years before it was forced to relocate to Ramallah by the Israeli authorities. Sheikh Jarrah was the abode of a residual Jerusalemite upper class (Nashashibis, Jarallahs, Budeiris, and Imams), invaded in the last three decades by concerted groups of drug dealers, international NGOs, diplomats, and Israeli settlers. This period saw the formative years of Graham Usher's journalism, and his best work on the post-Oslo period in Palestine. In those days Sheikh Jarrah was also the hub for leading Palestinian media and research organizations: The Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre (JMCC) and its polling unit, PASSIA (in nearby Wadi al-Joz), the Arab Studies Society headed by the late Faisal Hussein, and the Technical Committees headed by Nabil Qassis whose objective was to prepare logistical technical work for the foundation of Palestinian statehood. The area also housed the *al-Quds* and *al-Fajr* newspapers (the latter now defunct) and the Institute for Palestine Studies of which IJS was the Jerusalem affiliate.

Graham was living five minutes' walk down the road from our offices, and was an almost daily presence at IJS. He came for coffee, chats, and at least three times a week for lunch. His timing was perfect. We shared the office with Baraka (the nascent Palestinian internet group); the Italian NGO COCIS (Italian Cooperation Group) headed by the Sicilian intellectual, Franco La Torre; and with Michele Giorgio, Jerusalem correspondent for *Il Manifesto*. Michele, who mistrusted our hummus and falafel, had the habit of cooking basic pasta dishes *a la napolitana* – which Graham was very fond of. It must have been the only food he got in those days since he looked malnourished and was the first to jump on Michele's pan.

This was the period of the political euphoria engendered by the early days of the Madrid Peace Talks and the first Palestinian elections which brought the Palestinian Authority, the Palestinian Legislative Council, and the return of Yasir Arafat and the PLO cadres to Gaza and the West Bank. Graham Usher was writing at the time for the *Middle East International* (London), *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Cairo), the *New Statesman* (London), and *MERIP* (Washington), eventually becoming *The Economist's* correspondent for the occupied territories. From the beginning Usher was very skeptical of the heralded peace achievements of the Oslo Accords, which he basically assessed as a security arrangement between Israel and the PLO. His criticism was engaged with the new realities that were emerging in the region and often he articulated his analysis through biographical portraits of emerging political personalities. He was particularly intrigued and troubled by the figures of Jibril Rjoub and Muhammad Dahlan, who represented in his writings the manner in which revolutionary fighters from the West Bank and Gaza respectively became instrumental in creating the new security state. We published several of his critical

essays on the PA and the new governance in our journal the *Jerusalem Quarterly*, as well as in *Majallat al Dirasat* and the *Journal of Palestine Studies*.

Graham was mesmerized by three populist figures who ushered in his mind the future Israeli and Palestinian politics: Aryeh Deri (the leader of the Shas movement), Marwan Barghouti (the rising star of young Fatah), and Sheikh Ahmad Yassin (the leader of Hamas). Deri represented the emergent voice of Mizrahi rebellion against the Ashkenazi Zionist establishment in which religion and populism combined to challenge the old elites. Barghouti, before and after his imprisonment, was seen by Usher as the voice of the young Fatah activists trying to overcome the heavy patrimony of the diasporic PLO cadres brought in by Arafat. He saw the Israeli establishment as carrying a sustained attack on these three figures – in the first case by pursuing anti-corruption charges against the lone figure of Deri by an establishment itself riddled with corruption. Both Barghouti and Yassin were subsequently eliminated through the imprisonment of the former and the assassination of the latter.

In this period Graham published two outstanding books on contemporary Palestine and the conflict with Israel, *Palestine in Crisis* and *Dispatches From Palestine*, dealing with the rise and fall of the “Oslo Peace Process.” Both had a defining impact on how many analysts saw the state of Palestinian politics. Usher was one of the very few Western reporters who moved to Gaza early on to report on the political situation there, and on the growth of Hamas as a new movement that would change the face of Palestinian politics. Although he had close working relations with the leaders of both Hamas and Fatah, and a fundamental compassion for the Palestinian plight, he never let his sympathies blind his critical perspective on the PA or its opposition.

In the spring of 1999 the campaign to evict Palestinian media and research offices from Jerusalem intensified, and the Israeli authorities succeeded in using the new residency laws to expel the vast majority of local writers, journalists and research groups from the city. Graham Usher wrote about the paradox of how this campaign was initiated immediately after the then Israeli Foreign Minister (now President of Israel) Shimon Peres signed a memorandum with the Norwegian Foreign Minister Jurgen Johan Holst (in his capacity as the arbiter and host of the Oslo Accords) guaranteeing the protection and freedom of Palestinian institutions in Jerusalem. During this period our office was visited several times by the Israeli police. On one occasion I was summoned to the police station at the Russian compound and told in no uncertain terms that we had to leave our offices since we had no permit to be in Jerusalem. The rupture of Jerusalem from the West Bank had begun in earnest. When one of the Israeli papers (I think it was the *Jerusalem Post*) interviewed me about this forced relocation, I was asked to identify my professional designation. I said, in jest, that I was the *mukhtar* (selectman) of Sheikh Jarrah. The reporter duly published this designation which he probably thought was some kind of administrative post. In Arabic the term is often used to identify the village headman, but it is also used as a term of endearment for a local wise man to whom people resort for information and counsel. A term which, I thought, rightfully belongs to Graham Usher.

A Letter to Graham

Issam Nassar

Dear Graham,

I was recently in Ramallah, back in my old apartment. The very place where we often had long intense conversations about the intifada, the peace process, the Israeli elections, and more importantly about your two obsessions, Marwan Barghouti and Rabbi Aryeh Deri. I don't believe we ever had a discussion when you failed to mention their names. I still wonder what it was about Deri and Barghouti that caught your attention.

Those nights at that apartment were very special. Not only were we younger and more excitable, but also the times were interesting. Hope was still in the air despite the Israeli tanks that were often heard rolling up and down the streets of Ramallah in the aftermath of Ariel Sharon's reconquest. Some nights we used to hear the battles in the nearby areas between the guys of the *Tanzim*, another fashionable term at the time, and the Israeli army.

Do you remember our failed interview with the leader of the Popular Front Abu Ali Mustafa? After waiting for a long time to get him to meet with us, or I should say to meet with you since I only tagged along to help with translation, we arrived in his office in al-Bireh, close to the Israeli settlement of Bet El. I still wonder why he did not say anything original to us at a time when he was leading an effort to transform the PLO and to form an emergency government to lead the Intifada? I guess we will never know whether he had full trust in us or not since a few days later an Israeli rocket hit him in the very same spot where we met him, killing him instantly and unleashing a retaliation from his group that led to the Israelis besieging Arafat's compound in Ramallah. We knew that the Israeli "response" was only a pretense to do what their prime minister had wanted to do all along, namely get rid of Arafat. But the events emerged in a certain sequence that we cannot ignore.

I also remember fondly the days we spent at the Jerusalem office of the Institute of Jerusalem Studies. Your insights on what was happening in Jerusalem, with the late Faisal Hussieni and the Orient House, the building or expansion of the Jewish colonies near Silwan and Ras al-Amoud, were enlightening. Do you remember one of our colleagues who was set in his ways, but you still had a way of convincing him to do things with you? Is it true that when you both visited Ras al-Amoud in his car, you broke the window lever, but that did not stop you from going on with the subject you were talking about? You almost did not notice the damage, while he saw nothing else. I am not sure if such stories were fully true or not. But they evoke your character at the time. For you, nothing mattered but politics.

You, and of course John Tordai, made our working life in the office more exciting. You always came with news that we had not heard. I remember when you and Michele Giorgio were busy in the office trying to cover the visit of the Pope to Palestine. You made our work, which dealt with publishing a quarterly journal that moved at a slow pace, seem more like work at a daily newspaper with all the commotion your visits

used to induce. Did we live in interesting times? Sometimes I wonder. Palestine and the Middle East have changed so much since those days before and just after the start of the new millennium. Your heroes, Marwan and Aryeh, have been removed from the scene. No one calls the Fatah guys the *Tanzim*, the Oslo Peace process died long ago, Arafat is dead and his nemesis Ariel Sharon is out of the picture, if not of life itself. Mubarak is in prison, Assad is battling his own people, and Iraq has been transformed to an open wound. But I am certain that were you in Jerusalem again, you would have no problem finding new players in the region to interview and write about.

Still, I miss those old days when we had firsthand experience of all the political players and could anticipate what they would do. More importantly I miss your company and our never-ending discussions. Now I cannot even visit Jerusalem following the fortress-like checkpoints erected by Israel around the city. The neighborhood where you lived and I worked is full of settlers and the very presence of the Palestinians in it is in question. How could our lives only a decade ago become part of a history of a different time?