

My Spiritual Father

Honaida Ghanim

I met Elia Zureik in the mid-1990s. Baruch Kimmerling, my professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, made the connection. He told me that Elia was looking for a research assistant to work with him on a research project on refugees. That was incredible – names like Elia Zureik, Edward Said, and Ibrahim Abu-Lughod were mythical characters for us few Palestinian social science students at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. They bore a halo of respect and awe that only those who studied at Israeli universities, surrounded by Zionist Ashkenazi scholars – whose body language oozed a sense of supremacy – could understand.

I contacted Elia and began working with him as his research assistant – amassing material written about refugees. We worked in the office of the Institute of Jerusalem Studies in Shaykh Jarrah. Our daily meetings nourished my soul. I felt lucky to be in the heart of Jerusalem, working at the respected Palestinian institute, with a top sociologist. He shared his views on Israeli sociology, mainstream theories, and academia's role in whitewashing colonialism. He helped to expand my academic world beyond the alienating confines of Hebrew University, and to inspire my research with passion and a desire for knowledge.

Elia was the role model I wanted to follow. He, too, was a 1948 Palestinian. He, too, grew up in an estranged and fearful environment. He, too, had to study using an Israeli curriculum that aimed at dissolving Palestinian identity, using arguments that this was a democratic country, that Israel was the historic homeland of the Jewish people, and that the Arabs were to blame for the 1948 war. In the face of the

mainstream Zionist perspectives of the Israeli academy, Elia went on to publish an important book – forty-four years ago – that analyzed 1948 Palestinians through the prism of internal colonialism – a new critical discourse that debunked the dominant Zionist sociological narrative.

Back then, critical voices were small shouts fighting against the roaring sea of dominant thought. Critical theory and post-colonial theory are mainstream today, and even part of the esteemed sociological discourse in some circles in Israeli universities. Today, three decades later, much had changed: Jerusalem is not liberated. Many Palestinian offices and research spaces closed and Shaykh Jarrah, where our relationship began, resembles a military base with its cluster of settlements. Still, we would correspond and meet up whenever he visited Palestine.

After I received my PhD, Elia visited me in Ramallah. We ate stuffed vine leaves together, which I had prepared especially for him, and we talked about many things – academic, personal, and political. As he was leaving, he looked at me with his usual fatherly demeanor, and said: “You’re my adopted daughter. I’ve adopted you. Anything you need, don’t hesitate to ask me.” His words moved me, although they came as no surprise. He was my spiritual father – the father of my spirit – and I treated him as such.

Honaida Ghanim is a Palestinian sociologist and general director of the Palestinian Forum for Israeli Studies (MADAR).