

LETTER FROM JERUSALEM

Books, Not Soldiers

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For years now I have been working in my family-run bookshops in Jerusalem, the Educational Bookshop on Salah al-Din Street, established in 1984 by my part-time UNRWA teacher dad and later run by my oldest brother Imad. More than thirty years on, the bookshop has expanded to three branches and is considered by many as a “cultural hub” for the city.

My work as a bookseller has allowed me to take advantage of having to travel often to visit bookshops around the world. I am particularly interested in small, independent bookshops: the style, selection, and method of sorting and displaying books have always fascinated me. One of my favorite moments came on the Greek island of Santorini, when I stumbled upon the Atlantis bookshop in Oia, a charming place, cozy and warm with endless titles in every room. Growing up, my dad had an obsession with how books should be arranged: always standing side by side, “like soldiers,” with no gaps in between, and shelved by height from left to right. Then, I never questioned his curious comparison of books to soldiers. Now, if anything, I would argue that books are the opposite of soldiers: their life is longer and they are less exclusive, open to be used by anyone who wants to be enlightened and educated, while soldiers are under the orders of generals, their life spans may well be brief, and above all they must face enemies, whether real or imagined, rather than be open to friends.

My dad’s influence stayed with me for years; in fact, it made its imprint on the way I arrange the books in my bookshop. I followed his advice in displaying my books “like soldiers,” one standing straight next to the other, even though now I am arranging books in a bookshop, not in my personal library. And customers usually prefer to see books grouped by sections, so they can browse according to

their interest and not spend time looking at titles that do not immediately match their tastes. In private libraries, the owner would have read each book and formed some intimate relationship with the volume, and hence size, color, cover, and the touch of its pages would make the volume distinguishable wherever it was placed and in whatever way; there is thus no need for a system aiding people to navigate to find certain title, as the library owner would have established his or her own hybrid emotional and visual indicators to locate a particular book.

To use my father's method at the bookshop is strange. Customers are regularly asking me why I don't use the "typical" system. To avoid explaining that my system was inherited from my father, I often say I use a principle called "random organization" – to reflect the reality of the Middle East. Everything in this part of the world is random and there is no system in place, so why should there be one for my bookshop? For years now, I have enjoyed a very colorful view of my bookshop shelves: books aligned side by side, matching in size, grouped according to publishers and height or harmonized by their spine colors. I think the German philosopher Goethe would have been very proud of me applying his color theory in practice!

In fact, now that this "system" has been in operation for a few years, I have begun to reap the benefits. Apart from those who become irritated with not finding what they intended to find, there are many readers whose eyes accidentally land on shelves that they wouldn't usually look at, leading them to buy new titles across genres, books that otherwise would not spark their interest. I am very proud to have found a good explanation, and subsequent positive results, behind an otherwise very weird obsession.

When I spoke again to my wise dad about his analogy of books "like soldiers," he defended it, emphasizing their shared characteristics. He explained the embedded power in each, the ability of books to empower the reader, as soldiers do their leader. His eyes were sparkling, full of emotions. I asked him if books can defend the truth; he said they could, but we need first to defend our books. This last statement came out with much anger, and with a brittle and wheezy voice – I understood and did not utter a word further.

Khalil Sakakini, a pioneering Palestinian educator who reformed the educational system in the 1940s, and Is'af al-Nashashibi, a prolific author and celebrated critic of literature, owned two of the most prestigious and extensive book collections in Palestine, housed in their Jerusalem homes. Book lovers in Haifa, Jaffa and Nazareth, among other locations, developed other important family libraries. During the war of 1948 – the War of Independence as Israel calls it, the Nakba as the Palestinian refers to it – several Israeli librarians, including the librarian of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (established in 1918), joined the military personnel of the Zionist militias and army in search of books. They entered the homes of well-known Palestinian families, the homes of famous writers, teachers, and scholars who were known to be book collectors. The army, directed and aided by the librarians, looted the houses and collected about thirty thousand volumes from Jerusalem alone, and another forty thousand from Haifa, Jaffa, Nazareth, and other places. All were boxed and shipped in vehicles to special locations; later, many were relocated to the National Library in West Jerusalem. Today, about six thousand of these books are categorized there under the shelf marked AP (Abandoned Property)! They are kept in the basement of the National Library, available only upon request, and can be used inside the library building only.

How much can irony manifest itself? Librarians tasked with taking care of books were, and are, shoulder to shoulder with the soldiers stealing them. Property that belonged to those who were forced out of their homes under firepower is labeled abandoned. A society that admired books and literature, art and music, is now deemed “invented” or non-existent, while stolen literary works, journals, and manuscripts are kept in the basement of the “national” library of those who stole it. Why in the basement? Is it because they are the literal foundation of the “national” library? Or perhaps because, like any other stolen goods, they are hidden underground, away from people’s eyes.

How unfair that my dad describes books as soldiers! It seems he cannot disassociate the image of soldiers stealing books that is so imprinted in his brain. My dad was born in 1936; he must have been a young boy in 1948. He lived all his life in the Jerusalem city center, literally meters away from the no-man’s land dividing East from West Jerusalem. His father lost property in West Jerusalem like many other Jerusalemites; he witnessed the Nakba, or, rather, he lived through it. He must have seen the looting of books, the looting of the country. He never wanted to speak about it – I tried several time to prompt him into talking; he refused, as if he wanted history to be dead and forgotten, unlike me, who sees the future through history. Perhaps, this is why he has spent all of his life being a teacher, educating future generations, while I am planning to spend my life selling books, focused on the history and what happened in the past.

Years later, when I organized the screening of the film *The Great Book Robbery* in the bookshop, an Israeli audience member expressed his sadness and anger after the film and said that Israel must return the books to their true owners “immediately.” An elderly Palestinian woman who had also been sitting in the screening responded without asking for permission: “We don’t want the books back, just them, we want back the shelves and the houses where they were found.” As a chair of that event, I never felt challenged to remain distant or balanced. I agreed, it would be cruel to return the books without returning the houses, it is like returning a soul without a body – they are simply inseparable.

I am still confused: If books are like soldiers as my dad likes to think, then they should fight for their people’s liberation and, once dead, their body in uniforms should return home to rest in perfect peace. Palestinian books should be returned, with the houses, with the bookmarks exactly where they were left inside the pages. Books should be finally allowed a dignified rest, inside the libraries of Palestinian universities. Or perhaps books are not soldiers, they are substitutes for soldiers, for their abduction might be the guarantee of weakness for the enemy and their existence is an enlightening power; they are harmless, tender, and promise peace, not war. This is why books are my trade; I have become a cultural warrior, as my friend Tanya likes to call me, promoting books and literature as the substitute for soldiers.

Mahmoud Muna was born in Jerusalem and received degrees in Media and Communication from University of Sussex and King’s College London. Known to many as the “Bookseller of Jerusalem,” he is proprietor and host of cultural and literary events at the Educational Bookshop and the bookshop at the American Colony Hotel, and, when not reading or selling books, a writer and commentator on culture, politics, language, and identity.