

ANNE BRUNSWIC

WELCOME
TO PALESTINE

CHRONICLES OF A SEASON
IN RAMALLAH

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Also by Anne Brunswic

A contre-oubli, La Fontaine-aux-Loups/Delphine Montalant, 2000.

Qu'est-ce que tu fais là ?, La Fontaine-aux-Loups/Delphine Montalant, 2001.

Bienvenue en Palestine, chroniques d'une saison à Ramallah, Actes Sud, 2004. RFI-Témoin du monde award 2004.

Sibérie, un voyage au pays des femmes, Actes Sud 2006.

Les eaux glacées du Belomorканал, Actes Sud 2009.

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© Cover : Robert Radford, *High Tension* , after Anne Brunswic's picture of the wall in Qalandiya'h, 2006.

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To my Uncle Etienne

Our inheritance was left to us by no document.

RENÉ CHAR

And even if the Jews were to win the war, its end would find the unique possibilities and the unique achievements of Zionism in Palestine destroyed. The land that would come into being would be something quite other than the dream of world Jewry, Zionist and non-Zionist. The “victorious” Jews would live surrounded by an entirely hostile Arab population, secluded inside ever-threatened borders, absorbed with physical self-defense to a degree that would submerge all other interests and activities. The growth of a Jewish culture would cease to be the concern of the whole people ; social experiments would have to be discarded as impractical luxuries ; political thought would center around military strategy ; economic development would be determined exclusively by the needs of war.

HANNAH ARENDT
“ To Save the Jewish Homeland ”,
in *Commentary*, May 1948, p. 403.

Friday, October 3, 2003, Ramallah

Here Friday is like Saturday over there, on the neighbour's side, not much traffic in the streets, not a car horn all morning ; a tiny crowd of worshippers at eleven o'clock prayers ; then a small political rally. Otherwise a rather quiet day.

I have been in Ramallah for five days, since last Sunday. I live in a spacious well-furnished flat, a hundred metres from Al-Manara Square ; no problem finding a taxi regardless of destination. I already have a fixed-line phone, a mobile phone and an Internet connection. Many thanks to my Israeli film friends and their contacts. It's so easy to make friends here – in the streets, in cafés, in taxis, on campus, with neighbours and shopkeepers. Christian or Muslim, English-speaker or French-speaker, Palestinians are always happy to welcome a guest.

Everyday life here is not what you would expect from a country at war. To be sure, Arafat's compound, the Muqataa, only a kilometre away, can be targeted by the Israeli army at any time. Built under

British occupation, the compound's two large buildings housed the offices of the security forces until the autumn of 2002. Today it is little more than a pile of ruins : floors collapsed on top of each other, clumps of rubble stuck to metal struts, a layer cake of iron and concrete. Only the building occupied by Arafat – Abu Amar as he is known here – still stands, in a wind-swept courtyard.

Israeli soldiers, I'm told, make frequent forays into the city in search of a suspect or just to intimidate. They are young (most are under twenty) and frightened ; they don't understand the reality of the situation. This makes them even more dangerous. They understand very little Arabic and among themselves most speak Russian. Armed to the teeth in a conquered land, heads full of video games, these teen-aged newcomers to Israeli society fancy they are somebody, or something important.

To tell the truth the last Israeli soldier I saw was last Sunday, when I passed through the Kalandia checkpoint (I wasn't even asked to show my ID). Not a single Palestinian policeman, except the one directing traffic feebly at a roundabout and the three characters huddled near a wooden shed bearing a portrait of Arafat and serving as a guard post at the entrance of the presidential building. None of them is wearing a uniform, to avoid becoming a target.

The Jewish settlers on the surrounding hilltops are invisible. They no longer move about in Ramallah and haven't fired one shot from their eagle's nests for some time.

Ramallah, I'm told, is the Champs-Élysées of Palestine : a rich city with a large Christian and Muslim bourgeoisie. Luxury stores and villas with gardens –

holiday homes built in the 1930s by Arab families from the Emirates – are plentiful. It seems the Gulf Arabs appreciated the city's climate, particularly its cool summer evenings. Many of Ramallah's residents have been to university in Palestine, Europe and the United States ; many have relatives in America. Three thousand civil servants work for the Palestinian administration. Some two hundred foreigners are employed by international organisations, NGOs and cultural services. Every evening they fill the city centre's five cafés, where beer and wine are served until midnight.

The architecture, landscape, the atmosphere of the busy shopping streets remind me of what I knew in Jerusalem in the mid 1960s, when I first went to visit my grandmother. The landscape of endless desert hills stretches northwest from my balcony as far as I can see. The same white stone as in Jerusalem covers the facades of even the most recent buildings. The same pleasant scents of jasmine and fig, lemon tree and bougainvillea float in the garden below. The same lively confusion reigns near the taxi rank at the upper end of the street, where boys serve coffee to waiting drivers. The same carpets are laid in my flat on the same sand-coloured stippled tiles. The same marble around the basin ; the same spacious rooms.

In the district of Ramallah resistance to the occupation is dull, except in the refugee camps. In the north near the Jalazone refugee camp and in the south around the Kalandia camp, the army patrols are regularly hit by young people throwing stones.

If Ramallah is Palestine's Champs-Élysées, Gaza is its working class suburb ; Jenin and Nablus lie somewhere in between. Social class is clearly visible

here, and the different classes, people say, mix no better than oil and water.

The headscarf expresses subtle social distinctions that, for the moment anyway, still escape me. Monday evening, for example, at an event in honour of Edward Said – the audience made up primarily of the local elite – not one woman in the room wears a headscarf; outside, in the street, there is not one without. Last Friday, at a sumptuous lunch with the Huzris, my neighbours in the flat on the same floor, the sixty-year-old mother wore her traditional garments and headscarf; in contrast, her daughters and daughters-in-law did not cover their heads. One of the daughters is a professor of science at the local technical college (financed by the United Nations); the other is finishing her degree in Journalism at Bir Zeit University; her daughter-in-law works for a bank.

Majid, my neighbour's eldest son, speaks fluent French (he studied law in France). Thirty-five years old, tall and well-built, he looks like many Palestinian men. He is in charge of diplomatic relations with France, travels to Paris frequently and heads the official welcome committee for visiting delegations in Ramallah. "The students who threw stones at Prime Minister Jospin¹ were properly punished and expelled from university, for a few months anyway", he explains. "We have only one friend in Europe, France. It's scandalous to treat a friend like that. Our President immediately presented an apology." Majid is determined to confront the extremists and to do so

¹ The Prime Minister of France, Lionel Jospin, visited Bir Zeit University in February, 2000. He was stoned after labelling Hizbollah a terrorist organisation (trans. note).

as soon as possible. It is a matter of the Palestinian Authority's credibility. He believes in the Authority and in the peaceful coexistence of two separate states.

But Selim Quatab, an activist and leader of a non-violent organisation, does not share Majid's political realism. Fragment of a conversation : “ Selim, you have a university degree ; you earn enough money to live outside the refugee camp. Why do you stay there ?

– It's true, I have a flat in Ramallah city, but I return to the camp every evening. My mother lives there ; so do most of my friends. We all come from the same village, near Lod airport. If I left the camp, I would be throwing away a life-long dream. I want to return to my grandfather's village and raise my children there. I'm thirty-three years old and a bachelor. I don't want to raise my children here, in a refugee camp.

– You talk about your dream. If the two-state solution becomes reality, you'll have to give it up. You won't be able to settle within the pre-1967 borders.

– Not necessarily. All I have to do is marry a Jewish girl from the other side and have some children !”

As a child Selim wanted to be an airline pilot. Instead he studied English, History and Political Science. But his head remains in the clouds and he dreams of a return to his promised land.

What really makes for daily suffering here is humiliation. From the heights above the city, Israeli settlers hold the sixty thousand inhabitants of Ramallah in the crosshairs of their weapons. To the north and south the Israeli army occupies impressive checkpoints, which marksmen protect on tense days.

The military authorities deliver the necessary permits for travel in the West Bank. Every day countless hours are wasted passing through these roadblocks, draining everyone's energy, restricting horizons. Many have not left the city for three years. Not so long ago the trip to Amman took only forty-five minutes ; now it's two days. Going to Jenin took an hour and a half ; there's no telling how long today.

Everyone has his checkpoint story. The latest ? Rami, a civil engineer, went to Jenin with three co-workers the day before yesterday. Since the town is under curfew most of the time, he calls his colleagues in Jenin at four in the morning to get an up-date on the situation. Last Wednesday the curfew was lifted and he was given the green light to travel. He and his team set out by car at seven a.m.. Luckily everyone had a US Aid stamp on his travel permit so the trip took "only" three hours. They finished work as quickly as possible to make it back to Ramallah before their permits expired and reached the last checkpoint at six p.m. The Israeli soldier on guard looked at his watch : "Seven o'clock. Your permits have expired. Your car is impounded. Come with me. – But, it's only six in Palestine", they protested, "Israel is an hour ahead of us. – Six ? Nonsense ! Give me your watches !" The soldier confiscated keys, IDs and watches and went to the guard station. Fifteen minutes later a Palestinian worker arrived from Jerusalem. "What time is it ?" the soldier asked. "Seven fifteen", the worker replies, in Hebrew, "but in Palestine it's six fifteen ; last Saturday we changed over to winter time ; you change next Sunday." These explanations in Hebrew succeed in convincing the Israeli soldier.

Rami adds something to the story. On the way to Jenin the travellers took a back road to avoid certain checkpoints. Somebody says, “Hey, my mother lives close by and I haven’t seen her in months. Can we make a short stop so I can say hello ?” At eight in the morning the young man stands outside his mother’s building and bangs on the front door. Since the former residents – her children and neighbours – evacuated the building, no one but she lives there any more. With all the noise downstairs the poor lady is so frightened, it’s fully ten minutes before she realizes her own son is downstairs at the front door.

Those Palestinians who can avoid contact with Israelis soldiers. They shut themselves in and enjoy the domestic delights of the telephone and Internet. But sometimes soldiers barge right into the living room itself. Last Wednesday, Sally and Shami had a surprise visit in the middle of the night. Sally, a French-speaking Tunisian, described the scene to me.

“The night before last, around eleven-thirty, the soldiers banged at our door. We usually get to bed late, but the day before yesterday my husband and I were really tired ; for once we were in bed early. My husband doesn’t wear pyjamas, so when we heard the knocks he jumped up, pulled on some trousers and opened the door. ‘Identity check. Everyone out of the building.’ There are three flats in our building, and there were six soldiers. They took my husband and our neighbour outside, then started banging on the door of the flat above. As there was no answer, they started to knock it down. My husband shouted: “Wait, the flat’s empty. The owners live in the USA. I’ll get the key. – Why do you have the key ?” the

soldiers ask, suspiciously. – “ So you don’t break down the door on these raids ! ”

Afterwards, the soldiers held all the men in the empty flat, which was covered in dust, for most of the night.

It was a routine operation. The army checks every flat in the neighbourhood and makes a record, listing the names of residents, making a note of fixed-line and mobile phone numbers. Then the information is used to monitor movements of everybody they know.

“ The worst is, when the soldiers were done and ready to leave, the officer extended his hand and Shami shook it without thinking. He’s so good he can’t refuse a handshake. Can you believe it, they try to be polite at the same time ! ”

Sally has another story to tell about the “ delicacy ” of Israeli soldiers. It concerns her friend Jenny.

“ Because Jenny lives next to the Muqataa, Israeli soldiers invaded her place at least six times in 2002. Each time they ransacked it completely. Jenny’s old mother was still alive then. The last time the Israelis barged in, the old lady had a malaise. The leader said : ‘ I’m a medical doctor. I’ll give her an injection. ’ Jenny threw a fit : “ Don’t you dare touch my mother ! I forbid you to touch a single hair on her head ! ”

To conclude this first chronicle, a list of memorable moments.

The most pleasant moment : a taxi driver, setting me down in front of the Sudra checkpoint, refuses my two shekels ; Abeer, a science student, insists on paying the two shekels for my return taxi ride home ; the owner of the Tour Eiffel pastry shop refuses to let

me pay for his cakes ; at the Internet café Naslim insists on fixing my computer free of charge ; the baker gives me bread for free...It is impossible to list all the small kindnesses I receive every day.

The most exhausting moment : I am in Zyriab café around midnight, the sorry witness to a heated argument between a German geologist and a British filmmaker. Peter, the filmmaker, came to Palestine to shoot a documentary about water scarcity ; he wants to prove that the Israeli settlers are responsible for the growing desertification of the lower Jordan valley. Wilhelm, the German geologist, tries to explain that soil salinization did not appear for the first time in 1948. He peppers his remarks with the names of Liebknecht, Kautsky and a few others. My eyes sting with fatigue ; instincts tell me I am in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The most embarrassing moment : “ We are Orthodox Christians and the others don’t like us here. Are you Christian ? ” my landlady asks. – No, Jewish. – Don’t tell anyone. Say you’re Christian or only you’re French. ” I insist, “ But Tom and Ada, the previous occupants, were Jews and they never had any problems here ! ” – “ You never know ”, she concludes with finality. Needless to say, all the Palestinian militants I have spoken with in the meantime strongly advise me to answer frankly to frank questions. And, on the contrary, they find me “ courageous ” and appreciate what I am doing here.

The most official moment : meeting the well-known Israeli journalist, Amira Hass. She bundles me into her old Renault car with TV painted in big letters all over. We drive to a ceremony in honour of Edward Said, which is followed by a candle-light march

through the high street of Ramallah. She knows everyone : the handful of journalists, the officials of the Palestinian Authority and the local worthies. I find the speeches in Arabic too difficult to follow. The pretty young woman sitting next to me offers to translate into English. Reem is a final year student in Journalism and Media at Bir Zeit University. She says she would like to see me again and is keen to help in any way she can.

The moment to put on film : the crossing at the Sudra checkpoint on the road to Bir Zeit University. In the bend of a road, winding up through lovely hills towards the university, two huge slabs of concrete block the middle of the road. Eight hundred metres of no man's land separate the two roadblocks ; hundreds of pedestrians move in both directions ; invalids are pushed through in wheelchairs ; goods move across in horse carts ; some carry a few passengers. At each roadblock, two clusters of fifty or more taxis are locked in an inextricable yellow jam. Most students and professors use this road twice a day. " Once it took barely eight to ten minutes to reach the campus from downtown Ramallah by car. Now it's at least an hour. Yesterday, with the usual Thursday evening traffic at the checkpoint, it took over two hours to get home ", Malika, my downstairs neighbour, says. " It's not all bad though. Before, we never had time to chat. Now there's plenty ! " Another student agrees that the forced march offers rewards : " Now at least everyone is on equal footing and we can talk with our professors ! "

The moment to be photographed : a game of cards at an outdoor café around the corner from Clock Square (the clock has disappeared !). The jolly

expressions of the bald, potbellied players, the play of lights and shadows on the café terrace, the round table with demitasse cups of coffee and cards strewn across the top, the sleepy activity of an afternoon in Palestine.

The moment of black humour: Mamdhour Nowfal, straight out of an Egyptian B movie, is a large-framed comic character, small grey moustache and smiling half-creased eyes, a former PLO military advisor and Arafat confidant. He tells me this story. A short distance after a checkpoint the driver of a collective taxi hails a passenger for the last seat in his minibus bound for Ramallah. “Last seat to paradise! – Will you really drop me off in paradise? – Actually we’re going to hell. But paradise is right next door!”

4 – 10 October

News of the attack in Haifa reaches me in the afternoon : someone from the French cultural centre calls to cancel a dinner engagement for this evening in honour of French-speaking guests in Ramallah. A serious Israeli reprisal is expected. My neighbours rush to the shops for supplies and because their refrigerator is already stuffed full, they ask if they can store some food in mine. They learned their lesson from last year's raids.

How can you predict that something is going to happen in Ramallah? The answer: spot the "vultures". This is the name for reporters who stake out positions around the Muqataa compound (there are several on Jenny's roof). Radio Street, the main artery leading to the compound, is completely empty. Just in case, an ambulance is stationed in Al-Manara Square. Fifty or so onlookers gather to watch, in case something happens. Nothing does, strictly nothing. At dusk we hear that Uri Avnery has cut short his Yom Kippur celebrations and is on his way here to protect the president of the Palestinian Authority with two

Israeli and twenty international volunteers. In Israel authorized voices are taking turns calling for an end to Arafat “once and for all, one way or another”.

Sunday. It is quiet outside, but dread fills the air. Last night Israeli tanks were heard on patrol in the town centre. My landlady, Mrs. Huda, has been to mass already (at the Orthodox Church) and has prepared the family lunch. I’m invited. Seated around the table are her husband, her three nieces, Reem, Wardah, May Soun, and her nephew-by-marriage, Nicholas. May Soun and Nicholas are both dancers; they met at the local arts centre. The handsome young Australian had to show true obstinacy to win the hand of the local girl. Palestinians – both Christians and Muslims – do not willingly give up a daughter to a “foreigner”. Nor does the Orthodox Church. Nicholas got off lightly: he escaped with baptism and two months of catechism. “Any more and I was headed to Cyprus for the wedding.” Today Nicholas is about as Palestinian as he will ever be; he and May Soun lead artistic workshops for children in the refugee camps and villages near Nablus. “I want the kids to be in touch with their bodies, but not through violence or anger.”

The same evening, an Italian choir from Piedmont gives a concert at the Lutheran church. It is pleasant, but the atmosphere hanging over the tiny audience of bourgeois Christians is churchy. Only two women wear headscarves: two ancient Catholic nuns.

After the concert Sally and Shami planned to stroll over to the Muqataa “to greet some friends”. “Can we take you home or do you want to come along?” I certainly have no desire to become a human shield...but how can I say no to such an

invitation? A couple of minutes later, on a balmy evening lit by a waxing three-quarters moon, our tiny group pass through the back gate of the Muqataa. Sunday evening, 9 p.m. October 5.

The players : Ilan Halevi, a devilish man oozing intelligence, bearded, stubby legs, who speaks perfect French and constantly plays with a string of worry beads, like a Greek, battling an urge to smoke ; Jenny Labna, also a French-speaker, elegant, approximately the same age as Ilan, who lives next door to the Muqataa, so we pick her up on the way there. The others are Shami Elias, a senior cadre in a Palestinian ministry, his wife Sally and me in the role of “last-minute guest”. Shami, very tall with a high forehead and a soft voice, and Sally, small and talkative.

The setting is inspired, perfect for a stage director. The outer perimeter is a wall of naked concrete topped by barbed wire a metre high. It looks like a construction site or a municipal dump. Three guards, armed but out of uniform, allow our group through the gate ; they greet Ilan Halevi with a familiar smile, as if he were a resident here. Sally whispers that Ilan is the European affairs advisor to the Ministry of International Cooperation and the Fatah representative to the Socialist International. Nobody checks our IDs. It is hard to believe that the Muqataa is on high alert this evening.

We enter a roughly asphalted esplanade, which once served as the presidential helipad, when Arafat still enjoyed some freedom of movement ; four official cars are parked there now. High piles of rubble – earth, rocks, concrete, girders, stones, twisted metal – frame three sides of the enclosure. Between two mounds of rubble, a poorly lit hut of green boards ; it

houses the Presidential Guard ; no more than twenty security personnel.

On the right a heap of burned-out cars fly the Palestinian flag and blocks the entrance to the official courtyard. The three buildings, one on each side – the sole survivors of the last Israeli raid – form an almost perfect quadrilateral, roughly forty metres wide. The oldest, made of ochre coloured stone, was a prison under the British occupation ; it has a blind facade. The other two, more recent, made of whiter stone, have the same proportions as the former prison – massive windowless cubes.

A sheet with a painted portrait of Arafat hangs from one of the facades. On another wall hand-written bills are plastered like in a high school courtyard on a protest day. A flickering street lamp lights the scene sporadically. A dozen plastic chairs form a circle near the wall.

Uri Avnery sits there, recognisable by his thick white hair, elegant white beard and thin silhouette of an old “ young pioneer ” wearing a black tee shirt and jeans. The respected president of Gush Shalom (the Peace Bloc) celebrated his eightieth birthday last month. His wife Rachel, talking on her mobile phone with friends in Israel, gives him the latest news. “ Ariel Sharon has just declared that Arafat’s fate is sealed ; he is condemned. ” Rachel and Uri – it is said they never do anything without the other – look alike : she is as tanned and slender as he, just as youthful with her large cap pulled down over her thick hair, a thin voice. To protect him from the approaching evening chill she lovingly drapes a plaid shirt over her man’s shoulders. He continues to answer the questions of the journalist seated opposite him as he slips it on.

“ Can Yasser Arafat put a stop to the terrorist attacks ”. “ Arafat won’t start a civil war. The Palestinian movement went through that in 1948 ; it won’t happen again. Even if Arafat did arrest thirty leaders of the extremist groups, they would be replaced immediately. Believe me, when a terrorist movement enjoys popular support, you can put as many leaders in prison as you like, nothing changes. The British locked up the leaders of the Stern group ; the attacks still continued. I know ; I was fifteen when I first joined a terrorist group. I was in a state of shock because, for the first time, the British had executed a Jewish leader. And when an entire population is in such a state, nothing can stop terrorism. Only when people see concrete steps in favour of peace will violence taper off. ”

The journalist scribbles notes in a spiral notebook. Avnery speaks clearly, simply, matter-of-factly. He is a professional politician. At this moment his life is on the line. If Israeli soldiers storm the compound, as in the past, he can be killed. His death would be called an “ unfortunate accident ”. He makes no mention of this now. No reason ; he did so yesterday at an improvised press conference. He and a few volunteers reacted immediately “ to protect Arafat, to prevent an assassination that would drown the region in a bloodbath. ”

This is not the first time Uri and Rachel Avnery have set up camp in the Muqataa compound : last month they were here when the Israeli Knesset voted the elimination of Arafat, regardless of how, including assassination.

In a brightly lit room, at right angles to the courtyard, the “ internationals ” are settled in. Thirty

mattresses line the floor. A few militants are trying to nap ; some are chatting ; others are talking with the soldiers on guard. There are a few Americans, retired teachers pushing seventy, and an Englishman, not much younger, the author of an essay on Marxism and humanism. Surprise, there is also a Japanese singer, wearing Afro dreadlocks and listening to music through earphones. Three young Italian girls practice their juggling skills to the delight of the soldiers. Two young Israeli anarchists, twenty-year-olds, stretch out on white plastic chairs next to a table covered with sandwiches and orangeade. In total, the twenty people hanging around at this late hour are incapable of filling the high-ceilinged, bare-walled room. The glaring neon lights work a chilling effect.

A few Palestinians drop by as old friends, like Sally and Shami, to greet the volunteers, whose only motivation for taking such personal risks is their moral commitment. The lightly armed guards without uniforms continue to ogle the female jugglers.

In the courtyard Uri Avnery is joined by Ilan Halevi, who earlier on arrival disappeared into the floors of the building on the left to greet Abu Amar. The conversation now turns to Shimon Peres, the eternal loser, the chronic fake. “ He never won an election in his life, a true accomplishment for a professional politician ”, Avnery sneers. He delights in giving the dates and facts of Peres’s political career. “ He wasted every opportunity ; he ordered the assassination of the Hamas chief in Gaza to win votes that finally went to Netanyahu. – Peres lied to everybody but Sharon ”, Ilan Halevi chimes in. The complicity between Avnery and Halevi, two wily politicians, bearded, shrewd, smiling, is palpable.

Seated side by side in the courtyard, the two confederates trade stories with grand gestures ; they have been telling them for ages ; still the two journalists attentively take notes and a few friends sit listening in a circle of plastic chairs. The lights in the courtyard flicker on and off and sometimes the two men disappear from sight, only their deep-throated laughs echoing in the dark.

It's nearly eleven p.m., time to rest for those who will spend the night and probably the next few days in the Muqataa.

Monday. The circumstances of the Haifa attack are somewhat clearer. Everybody I meet condemns the attack, even before I can ask the question. They do not like civilians to die regardless of whether they are Israeli or Palestinian ; “ It's against the teaching of every religion ”, confirm both Mrs. Huda, my Christian landlady, and Darwich, the Muslim filmmaker. They know the price will be disproportionately high in reprisals – absurdly high. Not to mention the political price ; every attack gives the Israeli government a pretext to intensify colonisation and postpone the implementation of the roadmap. Yet everyone spares a thought for the young female suicide bomber, a twenty-seven-year-old lawyer, whose brother and husband were killed before her eyes (rumour has it they were tortured). Hamas, I'm told, condemned the attack because it disapproves of female suicide bombers. Only a few, like the economist Hael al-Fahoum (the former second-in-command of the PLO in Paris), put the blame firmly on Sharon for creating the circumstances ; but also on the fundamentalists for objectively lending a hand ; and on the Palestinian demagogues for paying mere lip

service to the disavowal. Everyone deplores the attacks, but no one opposes them. George Khleifi, who runs the educational channel in Jerusalem, expresses similar ambiguities: “What can we say to these young people, who are willing to sacrifice their lives? All they see is their parents’ humiliation day after day; they know Israeli soldiers can do whatever they want. There’s no future for them. Most are desperate. I don’t approve their acts, but I can understand them.” George Khleifi hints that the “resistance work” is shared between the enlightened bourgeois of the cities, who formulate political solutions, and the young in the camps, who provide the muscle.

The week has its lot of bad news: Sunday, a bombing raid against Syria, the tightening of the cordon around Nablus and Jenin, the near total closure of all checkpoints; Wednesday and Thursday, the sealing of the access to Bir Zeit University, all classes cancelled; Friday, a massive attack on Rafah in the south of Gaza. The Israelis pound the tunnels that run under the Egyptian border. “Everyone knows the tunnels exist”, says Shami, but more marijuana goes through than weapons. If the refugee camps were as well armed as the Israelis claim, their army would suffer many more casualties.”

The week has its unexpected lighter moments. Monday, Selim Quatab asks if his girlfriend, Reem, can occupy one of the vacant bedrooms in my flat. “You’ll see. She’s very neat and tidy. She’s a student in sociology. Her family lives in a village. Given our customs I can’t put her up in my place.” How can I say no? Alerted on her mobile phone, Reem (“Gazelle” in Arabic) arrives moments later, a cute

twenty-year-old brunette in jeans. If Mrs Huda accepts and they agree a price, I have no reason to object.

The next day I realise the error of my ways. The young “ gazelle ” is no student ; she has no books, not even a pen. Slouched in a chair in my living room, she watches schmaltzy video clips on Arab TV for hours on end. She dolls herself up, fiddles with her hair, lies around talking on the phone (on my phone). What she likes most, she explains seriously, is to sing, dance, swim and go horse-back riding in Jericho. My phone never stops ringing : Selim wants to talk to her. Sorry, she’s in my shower. Sorry, she’s not here. Sorry, I don’t know where she is. Reem not only disturbs my concentration, the charming thing drives Selim up the wall too ; and he takes it out on my phone. The next time he rings I mutter a few unpleasantries in the mouthpiece.

The following afternoon, I find her in the company of a girlfriend and her two small children. The whole brood has been invited over for a bath in my bathroom. If all her friends and their brats come over to my place, good-bye tranquillity. I might as well look for an office downtown. Together I curse the “ Gazelle ”, her lump-head admirer and my own incorrigible silliness. The whole scene recalls the wonderful Turkish film *Uzak*, the story of a photographer whose quiet life of a bourgeois artist in Istanbul is disrupted by the arrival of a cousin from his village ; the visit, initially planned for a few days, stretches into weeks.

Let’s take the situation with a little philosophy : I wanted to meet some Palestinians ; now they have come to me. It’s their turn to stare at me dumbfounded. Why look any further ? All I have to

do is spend my days watching Reem and Selim in their sentimental throes. I wanted to understand what it is like to be colonised ? Now I know !

Since Thursday evening the melodrama has become an opera. Poor Reem coughs worse than the Traviata. Selim, at her bedside, applies cool compresses to her forehead and spoon feeds her broth. I doubt he will win her heart this way. Then I wonder : is this sudden attack of illness the real thing ? Or is it staged for Selim's benefit ? Indeed for mine ?

Sunday afternoon. I hear loud explosions from the direction of the Muqataa. " It's nothing ", says my neighbour Majid, " just shots to intimidate ". Monday evening, around seven, Darwich Rish and I are talking cinema when gun shots go off nearby. Darwich, who makes action films, is familiar with such sounds. Looking over the balcony he says : " It's nothing. Just some kids having fun. " An hour later we hear the news : the Israelis have just arrested a PFLP* militant in a car with four others at the corner of Al-Manara Square. During the night from Thursday to Friday. We hear planes low over the city. In the morning rumour has it they were F16s on patrol. Who knows ? To be sure, it's best to read the newspapers and agency dispatches on the Internet.

* Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine

11 – 17 October

To introduce this chronicle I need to go back to an insinuation I made earlier concerning the illness of my young flatmate, Reem. Her illness was in no way staged. I caught the virus too and have spent the last three days in bed shivering with fever and coughing until my chest aches. That will teach me to cast aspersions. Since getting back on her feet (I'm still bedridden), Reem has simply disappeared, leaving all her belongings in the room. To be continued.

Allow me, dear reader, a further remark to clarify my method. Not entirely deliberately, I have until now described directly what I see and hear, no more, no less. I intend to continue in this vein, inviting my reader to turn to the media for the usual news on the forming of a new Palestinian government, the construction of the wall (which I have not yet been to see), the hundred twenty-five buildings destroyed in Rafah and their twelve hundred occupants thrown into the street, the American veto against the recent UN Security Council resolution, the killing of three

American agents in Gaza, the new peace proposal tabled in Geneva ; in short all the issues, on which everyone, of course, has an opinion.

Many of the families, who settled in Ramallah after 1948, originated in Jaffa. Contrary to what orange juice drinkers might think, Jaffa was not an overly large orange grove. Darwich, my filmmaker friend, has a talent for bringing back to life the old Jaffa. He was born in the Amari refugee camp near Ramallah forty-five years ago and spent six years in Moscow studying filmmaking. We speak mostly English together, unless he can't find his words, then we switch to Russian. His flat, I tell him, with its outmoded furniture and antediluvian water closet could be Soviet-era. He agrees but adds it is hardly his fault if he spends his whole life in casual over-night accommodations. What he likes about Ramallah : " Today it is one of the most cosmopolitan places in the Near East, another Beirut. Like Jaffa in the old days. "

Jaffa is his paradise lost. His grandfather owned two horses and a cart that he used to haul goods between the port and the city, a useful profession. He was a man who enjoyed a little fun with his wealthier friends. As a child Darwich listened to his grandfather's stories about his youth in Jaffa, the orange blossoms, the irresistible call of the sea, the feverish nights at the port. Back then Jaffa was a city of mixed cultures. Even more than in Beirut and Alexandria, people laughed, played, invented, cheated, cried, sang and sighed in every language. " It was in Jaffa, in 1921 ", adds Darwich, " that the Lama (short for Salama) brothers produced the first Egyptian films. They were born in Argentina but came

originally from Bethlehem. Soad Hosny, the great movie star, the Cinderella of Egyptian cinema, was also a Palestinian from Jaffa – she died in London in 2001. ”

From his grandfather Darwich inherited his love of swimming in the sea. But since the second Intifada three years ago, swimming has become impossible, even in the nearby Dead Sea. “ If the religious Jews hold so dearly to their Holy Places, let them have the West Bank with Hebron and Jericho ; just leave us the coast – they don’t care about it anyway. At least we could go swimming and do some business again ! ” He loves the sea so much that in recent years he has travelled to Syria, Egypt and Tunisia. What are the beaches like in Syria, I ask ? “ Big and empty. Not like Aqaba on the Red Sea, so overcrowded that people literally sit on top of each other. ”

As for orange groves, one has to go down to the plain to Jericho or Tulkarm to see them. Up here in Ramallah, a thousand metres high, only olive trees grow.

Has he ever seen Jaffa with his own eyes ? After studying filmmaking Darwich took a job installing sun-powered water-heaters on roofs in Tel-Aviv-Jaffa (the two cities have now merged) – “ One has to eat ”, he says. His boss descended from an old Jewish family from Jerusalem and spoke Arabic with a slight “ Jerusalem accent ”, but other than that, perfectly. Moshe (Mussa in Arabic) put Darwich in charge of a six-man crew of recent Jewish immigrants (four from Russia and two from Argentina). “ Darwich, I want you to cut these guys down to size before they eat us alive. ” That was in 1989, a by-gone age, when it was

still possible for a Jew to be Arab, even more Arab than Jew.

Sunday. Emily Gayyad, sixty years old, invites me for afternoon tea. She is also from Jaffa, but left when she was still a child. Her three girls and two grandsons sit on the terrace. The curtains are closed on all four sides to protect us from the sun. The building is located half-way up a long staircase in a residential Christian neighbourhood in Ramallah.

As is so often the case when travelling, one comes hoping to satisfy one's curiosity, but it's the host who assails you with questions. I no sooner have time to make myself comfortable on Emily's settee than the cross-examination begins. "You go to church, don't you? What? You're not Christian? But you pray, don't you? What? Never? What do you mean you don't believe in God? Who made this table? these hands? the people sitting in this room? Nature? That's impossible. Everything comes from our Creator and Judge who opens the doors of Paradise to us. What! You don't believe in Him? Then where does morality come from? Why should I return the ring I was given for safekeeping three years ago if God doesn't exist? Do you read the Bible? We are the children of God and must obey His will. After fifteen years of marriage and five daughters, God finally granted me a son, my Slimane (Solomon). I spent an entire night on my knees, on the cold floor, praying and begging. And God answered me. He healed my hands, too. My fingers were worn to the bone from washing, six were bleeding constantly. I prayed to God and again He healed me."

In Ramallah Emily attended a well known school for girls, Saint Joseph of the Apparition. Proudly she

remembers her spelling and grammar lessons, and of course the prayers and hymns in French and English. From a chain around her neck a diamond-encrusted cross hangs pertly on her silk blouse. She has put on make-up and done up her curly white hair for my visit.

Bustling with energy, she disappears into the kitchen and comes back with coffee and a plate of home-made almond fondants. (I dare not count the cakes I have eaten since arriving in Ramallah !) “ Do you like them ? But you haven’t tried that one. ” She invites me to come back during Ramadan to taste her other specialties. Yet she cannot stomach the fact that I do not attend a single religious service. At the Orthodox Church in Ramallah, she explains, prayers are in Arabic ; no more than three words are in Greek. She is proud to be Arab and Middle Eastern. She pities us in the West because we have no family, no morality. As far as she is concerned, we live in hopeless isolation ; we don’t even talk to our neighbours. Once she visited one of her daughters, who now lives in the United States, and realised the horror of Western life. She cannot understand why we in the West are so mistrustful of the Arabs. Only because she is Palestinian, the customs officer at Amsterdam airport asked her one rude question after another. The sainted soul has yet to recover from the experience.

Emily’s three daughters – all university graduates (two are teachers, the third a civil engineer) – are horror-stricken at my lack of interest in God and His manifestations in the world. What a pity ! The eldest, a mathematics teacher, shows signs of an open mind : “ Well, it’s your right to think that way. But I do feel sorry for you ! ” During our conversation the two

young boys, eight and six years old, are seated at a table doing their school work. From time to time they sneak a look at their mothers. In Ramallah, Sunday like Friday is a day off, satisfying the sensibilities of all religious communities. Slimane, the beautiful baby boy who made his mother so happy, has just come in and takes a seat next to her. He is a strapping young man, twenty-two years old, jet black hair, a law student and member of the university basketball team.

“ How did it go last year during the siege ? ” I ask.

“ Well, like everybody, we were pretty much locked up for five weeks, thirty-four days to be precise. It was really hard for little kids ; they weren’t even allowed to go outside and play in the courtyard.

“ Soldiers came to the house three times and searched everything. Once they ransacked our kitchen supplies, threw everything on the floor : flour, sugar, rice, pasta, tea, then mixed it up and urinated all over the mess. ”

Two hours later I tear myself away from the hospitality of the Gayyad household. Showing me to the door, Emily takes my arm and says, “ I will pray for you this evening. ”

Tuesday. I have an appointment with Salam Hamdan, director of the Centre for Gender Studies at Al-Quds University (East Jerusalem). We meet after her lecture and go to her office. Gender studies as a discipline, she explains, is less concerned with women and more with the way gender differences work in society, politics and culture. Her first-year lecture is open to students regardless of major and is called “gender relations in the context of religion and society”. She begins the lecture every year with the

same question: “What do you know about the West?” Unfailingly, male and female students give the same answer: “It’s the rule of individualism; family members don’t help each other; everyone lives in isolation; children don’t have fathers; Westerners have no morality.” – “What do you mean by morality?” – “Well, they’ll go to bed with anybody.”

The students seem to share the same prejudices as Emily. But are their prejudices any more outlandish than the prejudices we hold in the West about them?

In her lectures Salam Hamdan tries to show that the rules defining gender roles in the family and in society owe everything to patriarchal structures, virtually nothing to religion. I ask if she has read Germaine Tillion, *The Harem and the Cousins* for example? No, she is not familiar with Tillion’s work. (Salam’s university background is more Anglo-American.) She frequently faces opposition from Hamas students; but students in general seem to have misgivings, at least until the end of the first quarter.

Salam Hamdan is not easily flustered. Jet-black cropped hair, big dark eyes ringed with kohl in Eastern Mediterranean style, wearing an exquisitely tailored outfit, she gives the impression of unbridled self-confidence. Salam is the daughter of a former communist party leader and is herself an ex-communist. She studied genetics in Prague and social science in Germany. Divorced from her husband (“still a good friend” spoken with a wry smile), she has a twelve-year-old daughter, Luna. Salam’s secular upbringing, which she is now giving to Luna, was far from typical in Palestine, and certainly not representative. – “Given our manner of dress and behaviour, our neighbours thought we were

Christians”. In her teaching she tries hard to transmit values of tolerance, but the Islamists create more obstacles here than at Bir Zeit. “ Maybe we can’t fight for a secular state, but at least we can defend the idea that civil laws have priority over religious laws. ”

“ Do you discuss issues like bridal virginity in your classroom, or is this taboo ? ” – If I did, I’d be finished. What I can do is fight against early marriage. – What about birth control ? – We discuss it, indirectly. Anyway, secular and religious leaders both agree on one issue : their policy is to encourage as many births as possible, for the “ struggle ”. But if we limit the number of early marriages, birth rates will drop automatically.

Salam Hamdan is currently campaigning with a feminist group for greater involvement of women in all aspects of Palestine’s political life and institutions. “ For a long time we thought our own demands as women would be addressed once national liberation was achieved. In other words, we wouldn’t demand our own liberation until our country was free. Today our reasoning has changed. The plight of Algerian women after 1962 gave us an example not to be followed : after fighting for liberation alongside their men, they were sent back to their kitchens. That is what we don’t want here. ” She concludes, “ In my opinion Hamas is even more dangerous than Ariel Sharon. ” She is the second woman to make the point this week. “ Before the first Intifada, Hamas was virtually non-existent ; then Sharon systematically encouraged the movement. ”

Judging by the number of educated women I have met since arriving in Ramallah – teachers, leaders of associations, directors of NGOs and heads of

university departments – it's naïve to think that Palestinian women will go back to their kitchens. Then again, I forget we live in reactionary times.

Thursday. I have a meeting in the Shu'fat refugee camp with more women. These are women “in the field”.

I should say a few words about the “field”, or what is left of it. There are two checkpoints between Ramallah and Shu'fat. Before reaching Kalandia one gets the impression that something is gravely wrong. Suddenly the road becomes rough; rubbish and filth pile up; shops are dusty and dirty, most appear to be abandoned, windows broken. The collective taxi stops a hundred metres short of the checkpoint. Concrete blocks form a ring where Palestinians queue. Sometimes five minutes, sometimes two hours; sometimes for nothing. Under the current clampdown there seems to be no sense in even trying: today only thirty people wait; “normally” there would be several thousand. The Israeli soldiers wear heavy bullet-proof vests over their green uniforms. (In fact, it is the Palestinian civilians who would need such protection.) People on foot stop at one soldier, move on to the next, then reach an “office” – really just a plank of wood – where they present their IDs and personal belongings. Checking documents, the soldiers never utter a word. Permission to pass depends on official instructions, which are as erratic as the circumstances and depend on the mood of the duty officer.

On the opposite side of the checkpoint lorries queue to cross into occupied Palestine. The driver of a cattle lorry explains good-naturedly that he hopes to make it across in less than forty minutes. Only Israeli

lorries – recognisable by their yellow number plates – circulate on both sides of the checkpoint ; lorries from Ramallah are not even allowed to travel to Jenin or Nablus.

To reach Shu'fat we climb aboard a second taxi and drive to another checkpoint. We walk across, take a third taxi, then a fourth...After five taxis I finally reach Shu'fat, eight kilometres from Ramallah. This densely populated area has collapsed into chaos under the devastating impact of colonisation. The Palestinian towns and villages on the outskirts of Jerusalem are physically cut off from one another by checkpoints and barbed wire, the lifeline to the city centre severed. In the collective taxi the silence is gloomy. The contrast with the friendliness of Ramallah is striking. Here the occupation is omnipresent ; life is carried out under the boot of the oppressor. I'm travelling without a compass or a map, but what does it matter ? No map shows the most recent checkpoints anyway. Like everyone else here, when I need information I rely on taxi drivers or word of mouth.

The Shu'fat refugee camp has some twenty two thousand residents. It gives the impression of a shantytown, an oversized village, a transit camp, a ghetto. Like so many poor Mediterranean villages it has narrow hillside streets lined with grocery stores, workshops, hairdressers and cafés, where men while away the hours. Laundry hangs from windows ; pipes and electrical wires mushroom anarchically. But unlike a shantytown, the streets are paved. There are public sewers and running water, and no more stray cats than anywhere else. Building quality is not on a par with council flats and living space is at a premium ; in fact, occupancy rates are high (three people to a room).

There are no parks or green spaces. Shu'fat's residents were driven out of the old city of Jerusalem during the Six Day War (1967). Little by little they built permanent houses, using mediocre material and following the original alignment of the refugee tents. The UNRWA* schools and dispensaries provide good quality schools and health services for the whole refugee population. But more than poverty, what strikes the eye is the population density and the total confinement. Barbed-wire fences carve up the horizon in every direction. The buildings beyond the fences, outside the camp, have white-stone facades that look almost luxurious in comparison.

Jihad Abu Znead is the director of the House of Women. In her office a small painting hangs on the wall given to her by friends from France. "We are twinned with Mantes-la-Jolie", she explains between two phone calls. Her three cell phones never stop ringing. She has three in order to communicate with different regions of Israel and the Occupied Territories. Each works on a different band width (why make things easy?). A stream of joyous female faces files through her office; conversation is constantly interrupted. "This house was designed as the one place in the camp where the needs of women can be addressed. Except for school and their homes, there is simply no place for women to go. No doubt you saw the plaque at the entrance, so you know these facilities were built in 1997 with German government assistance. We provide as many services as possible in

* UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) is responsible for the four million registered refugees in the West Bank, Gaza, the Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. Most of its twenty-two thousand employees (teachers and health workers) are themselves refugees.

the tiny space available to us. We have a multi-purpose hall with cooking facilities, a computer room, a beauty salon, a nursery and a kindergarten for one hundred twenty children. In all twenty-four women work here.” This pilot scheme gives Jihad a sense of accomplishment and pride. Other camps have developed similar projects and are networked together. This probably explains why she only has time for a cup of tea and a whirlwind tour of the facilities.

Every service that Jihad listed exists here in tiny miniature. The beauty salon, barely eight metres square, is packed with at least twenty women ; it is a hive of shampooed hair and rollers. A woman with short hair dyed a strange reddish colour stands out as the instructor. As for the kindergarten classes, they are microscopic too, especially given the number of children. Young boys and girls sit on the floor elbow to elbow. They wear the blue and white striped blouses typical of school children in Palestine. Wherever we go we are greeted by radiant smiles.

“The House of Women is planning an extension. The new building, already under construction, will house a covered swimming pool and a library. The only obstacle to completion is a demolition order issued by the Israelis ; construction work has been halted pending a court decision.” May Sa, a young woman in charge of information on drug addictions, is my new guide. As we tour the facilities we are followed by a group of giggling primary school girls.

Elegant, refined, May Sa has artfully tied two headscarves together to match the colours of her long silk skirt. From a well-to-do family she studied

psychology and education. She does not live in the camp but comes here to work.

“ How long have you worn a headscarf ? – Three years. – Since the start of the second Intifada ? – Yes, but that’s not the reason. – For religious reasons ? – No, not really. Actually, I’m not very religious. – Because your family tells you to ? – No. My sister doesn’t wear a scarf. I do it because I’m Palestinian. If I were Indian, I’d wear a sari. Where’s the problem ? ”

Like everybody else here, after the second war in Iraq, May Sa switched from Marlboro to Gauloises cigarettes. “ The trouble is Gauloises have tripled in price. ” She hopes to obtain a scholarship to finish her studies abroad, “ maybe in Greece ”. She has no plans to get married until she is at least thirty. In the meantime she will “ live her life ” the way she wants. Her light heartedness and warmth make me forget briefly the bleak sadness of the surroundings.

Back in Ramallah I am tempted to try one of the beauty parlours. I follow signs randomly in the high street until I find Yelena’s salon. A native of the Ukraine, she welcomes the opportunity to speak Russian and tells me her story, as she pampers me with soothing facials and neck massages. Married to a Palestinian who, ten years ago, had gone to Kiev on a training course for technicians, she is mother to three young daughters. When she changed country, she also changed profession ; once a nurse, Now, after a training course in Tel Aviv, she is a beautician. “ Life in the Ukraine is better. There’s nothing to do here ; we are constantly hassled. My daughters want to go back. Last Tuesday the Israelis held another night-time raid ; they barged in at two a.m. Their faces painted black and green, green scarves on their heads. Fifty of

them cordoned off the building. Just to control IDs. They do this all the time. And because of that, people here are becoming mean. They have been waiting for fifty-five years and each year it gets worse. I've lost faith, but I can't stop my husband from hoping. It's his country. ”

A few more comments heard throughout the week.

“ What really surprises me is that everybody here hasn't already become fascist. ” Darwich.

“ The Israelis complain that we don't like them. If only they'd give us one reason to like them! ” Souad.

“ Once we have our Palestinian state we'll become an Arab state like every other, and it won't be as exciting. ” Sally.

“ If the good Lord really wants to do something for us, why doesn't he just get rid of Ariel Sharon and Yasser Arafat? Those old fogies will never find a way out of this mess. Worse, they're starting to behave like a squabbling old couple. ” Darwich.

“ We don't need an historical leader anymore. We need a normal political leader that we can get rid of if he does a lousy job. ” Sally.

“ Oh, sure, the Israelis want me to work for them, but only as some sort of country constable. ” Shami.

“ One day the Israelis will have to admit that their State was born in sin. But even a child born in sin has a right to be loved and to go to school. ” Souad.