

Out of Jerusalem?

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"في علم ١٩٤٨ ضيعنا بلادنا وفي علم ١٩٦٧ ضيعنا اولادنا."

"In 1948 we lost our country and in 1967 we lost our children." That was the observation made by my father, Emile Safieh, at the end of June 1967. East Jerusalem had been conquered a few weeks earlier by the Israeli "Defence" Forces, then "annexed" by the Israeli occupying authorities, which immediately conducted a census as a result of which my older brother Hanna and myself – abroad for our university studies – became "legally non-existent" in Jerusalem. An entire generation of Palestinian students were trapped in foreign countries in what was one more manifestation of Israel wanting the geography without the demography.

Before 1948, my family lived in Upper Baqa'a, a residential neighbourhood in West Jerusalem. In May 1948, days after the massacre perpetrated by Jewish terrorists against the Deir Yassin village, (in the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem, in which 254 villagers were savagely butchered), they took shelter, like many others, in the old city where they shared half a classroom, for four months, in the St. Joseph girls school in Jaffa Gate. They then left to Lebanon and stayed in Broumana in the Hotel Freiha for several months before moving to Damascus on their way back to East Jerusalem in September 1949.

I arrived in May 1950. In my early teens, I had the first of many "existentialist" crises. Reading books available at home, on the "absurdity" of life (Camus), brought back by my sister Diana who had studied in England and Strasbourg, and flirting with the idea of suicide (Durkheim), I remember complaining to my parents that procreation was a very undemocratic exercise when the concerned party cannot be consulted on whether interested or not in coming to planet earth (Abu Ala'a Al-Ma'arri). We all settled for the flattering explanation, for me of course, that I was, for the family, the "consolation after the catastrophe".

Having finished high school in 1966, I left for Belgium to the University of Louvain, the oldest Catholic University in the world, in existence since 1425. The 1967 war made me the "wandering Palestinian" I still am. From Belgium I moved to Paris to pursue my studies then lived and worked in Geneva, Beirut, Belgium again, Harvard/Boston, The Hague, London . . .

November 1989, I had called for a big public meeting in the conference centre of The Hague. The pro- Israelis, demonising the PLO, waged a three-week battle to sabotage the event and openly pressured my guest speakers to withdraw. I was interviewed on TV saying: “this meeting has become a test between courage and cowardice”. At the entrance of the conference centre around 50 right-wing supporters of Likud and a few Dutch fundamentalist Christians were shouting anti-Palestinian slogans. To my surprise, one of the slogans was: “Safieh-Satan”. I had thought that the usage of such concepts was restricted to the third world. I sent a friend to tell them (half) jokingly: “Please do not compare me to Satan, you risk making hell look less unattractive than it was intended to be.” And in front of a packed room I started: “I do not know what they are shouting down there but I hope it is: “Safieh go home” – This will be the beginning of a convergence in our respective positions”. Going home, that is what it was all about.

December 1992 in the House of Commons, marking the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, I started my introductory remarks: “My mother from Jerusalem happens to be here with us this evening. Allow me to tell her, and through her to all the mothers of Palestine: please try to wait, your children are coming back home”. Her eyes filled with tears. I was told that she was not the only one.

In September 1993, I welcomed the Oslo breakthrough enthusiastically and, after an absence of more than a quarter of a century, I was the first PLO official to visit Palestine, in a private capacity, with my wife and daughters, months before the Palestinian National Authority was established. With obvious Hollywoodian inspiration, we called it “Home Again 1”. In November 1994, during “Home Again 3”, and accompanied by a Franciscan father, I went to the Israeli office in East Jerusalem to present an application for “family reunification”. The governmental official who received me was an Ashkanazi Jew and his secretary an Ethiopian Falasha who had probably arrived in the country the day before yesterday. An unforgettable and extremely painful moment. “They” were to decide whether I had the “right” to reside again in Jerusalem. Yet, I was optimistic. At the time, all my political friends were hoping to move up. I was dreaming of moving . . . out, away from what de Gaulle had called “la politique politicienne”. I intended to go back not as an official but simply as a “project of a citizen”. I reproduce at the end the document I circulated to friends and acquaintances around the world. It reflects accurately the mood prevailing then.

In February 1995, my mother, Odette Batato Safieh, got a letter from the Israeli Ministry of Interior. One line and a half. In Hebrew, with an Arabic

translation beneath it which said: “Concerning the above-mentioned, we have studied the case and unfortunately could not give a positive response”. Later, to friends who wrote to enquire or to protest, a standard letter was sent saying that they “process in priority cases of minors and spouses”. I was obviously no longer a minor and it was, it seems, a distant relative who had filled in my application . . . My mother.

Theoretically, the “good guys” were in power in Israel then. The late Prime Minister Rabin was also the Minister of Interior and many international and influential personalities lobbied him and Foreign Minister, Shimon Peres, personally and directly concerning my application. The Niet I got for an answer reinforced my belief that it was the Zionist left that had historically made Palestine unlivable for us Palestinians. The novelty is that the Israeli right, secular and religious, makes Israel also unlivable for many Jews.

April 1996, I was invited by my friends Dr. Roger Williamson and Rev. Garth Hewitt to address 150 workers in the field of international development from the different dioceses around the UK. Shimon Peres had just launched an unnecessary war in Lebanon and the Qana massacre was only a few days old. I was revolted, angry, emotional and I believe, moving. During the coffee break an elderly lady, obviously a pro-Israeli, angrily approached and shot at me: “Since when are you a Christian?” I could read through her. She probably believed that one day Yasser Arafat and his colleagues met in clandestine underground and decided that I should convert to Christianity so that I would sensitise audiences who might be more sympathetic if they were to learn that there are also . . . Christian Palestinians. She – and I – knew that Western audiences could have that type of un-Christian attitude. Very quietly, I answered: “Madam, I was born a Christian. My family goes back in Jerusalem as far as the archives exist. Do not forget, Christ and the Christian faith were born in Palestine. So I am a historic Christian. You can even say, a pre-historic Christian.”

August 1997, my brother, a university professor, invited us all to a family gathering to his home in Brazil. The happiest days of my life. Around my mother, four generations assembled with great love and tenderness. A fact could not escape us: the numerical centre of gravity of the family had shifted out of Jerusalem. We are 15 in total: two are still in Jerusalem, four in London and nine in Brazil. The case of every Palestinian family, Christian and Muslim alike.

End of November 1997. Bibi Netanyahu has just visited London where Tony Blair, Robin Cook and even Madeleine Albright “firmly” reminded him of Israel’s obligations. He then appeared on every TV channel to announce that given a choice between keeping (East) Jerusalem and peace, without hesitation,

he would opt for Jerusalem. Writing quickly this article to meet the printer's deadline, I have to admit that I am again passing through one more "existentialist" crisis about the "absurdity" of life, its purpose and its meaning. As a diplomat, I have to confess that I increasingly find the diplomatic avenue – the peace process – to be an unamusing farce. But I can assure you, this time I am no longer thinking of suicide.

November 1997



*Just married – April 1939/My father Emile Safieh and my mother Odette Batato –
Terra Santa Church – King George Street – West Jerusalem.*



*Before my time – 1944/My
parents with my sister Diana
and my brother Hanna at home
in Upper Baqa'a – West
Jerusalem.*



*Christmas 1951/with my
brother and my sister.*



On my graduation day in June 1966. Thinking that the picture didn't do me justice, I had scissored myself out. From left to right: my sister, my father, Brother Félix the Director of the school, myself alas censored, my mother, my grandmother Zakié Batato and my uncle Michel.



Also on graduation day with 3 teachers and a few classmates. I am, geographically, on the extreme left and already a dreamer or absent minded.