AN INHERITANCE OF SILENCE: NOTES ON PALESTINE

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My recollection of Abu Dis is more positive than the reality of that neighborhood would suggest. The Palestinian suburb of Jerusalem—once a village but now overcrowded, with houses built on top of one another in a helter-skelter fashion, and loud, chaotic streets—is where I lived as a child, where my mother grew up, and where my maternal grandmother has remained.

I was born near the end of the first intifada, the Palestinian uprising against Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza that began twenty years earlier in 1967. As a school-aged girl, the world was talking about the "glorious" Oslo Accords, but our lives didn't seem to change much. The soldiers and checkpoints were still there. Abu Dis was, like many Palestinian areas, riddled with poverty. I didn't realize that the dilapidated infrastructure, because of the occupation, was poisoning the people around me. I hadn't made the connection between the autoimmune disorders rampant among my family and the pollution we lived with. To me, Abu Dis felt homey, cozy even. We had it no worse than other Palestinians.

More than anything, life in Abu Dis was defined by cousins and sharp-tongued aunts, the thick grape vines that provided shade while we played, afternoons spent climbing the mulberry tree, and mornings waiting for the ka'ak seller who carried pastries on a tray on his head. It thrilled my sister and me to stand on the veranda and pass him a shiny shekel, then rip out the warm bread under the crust.

Even then, though, during the Oslo years, fear and danger seeped in. One morning while I waited for the school bus, a confrontation broke out between a couple of young Palestinian men and Israeli soldiers. When I heard shooting, I panicked and ran into a convenience store owned by our neighbor. The routine of going to school shifted instantly to terror. I thought I would die if I went outside—I'd end up just another news story about a dead child who couldn't outrun the soldiers. I sobbed and refused to leave the store.

My grandmother picked me up and took me to the school run by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), where she worked as a principal. I had never seen the UNRWA school; I attended a private Catholic school on another side of town. The building was drafty, and the classrooms poorly lit. Palestinian girls my age wore thin, blue striped uniforms; despite it being the dead of winter, few had coats or warm socks. I realized in that moment that this was how most Palestinians lived. I was suddenly uncomfortable in my Catholic school uniform with stockings and thick overcoat. But the biggest difference between me and them was that they seemed less rattled by the confrontation that had so shaken me. They had become accustomed to violence.

For ten years, I lived between Abu Dis and Japan, where my father was pursuing a graduate degree, feeling alien in both places. In 2000, we moved to the United States, just as the second intifada was unfolding. From there things became disjointed in my family life. My parents divorced, my connection to my mother's side of the family was severed, and Abu Dis receded in my memory.

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The intifada lasted until roughly 2005, by which time the Israeli army had crushed the armed groups, and the Palestinian Authority had wrestled back enough control from the armed factions to assuage the concerns of international backers. A wall was constructed by Israel, ostensibly to deter the kind of attacks that had increased during the second intifada, but also (and perhaps chiefly) to confiscate more land from border villages and sever Palestinian areas in Jerusalem from the center of the city.

If you look at maps of the wall's trajectory across East Jerusalem, this objective could not be more clear. The farther out, illegal settlement of Ma'ale Adumim falls within the wall, but closer Palestinian neighborhoods and refugee camps are bisected and pushed out.

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Abu Dis was one of the many Palestinian areas in Jerusalem cordoned off from the rest of the city behind that 26-foot concrete monstrosity, which is topped with barbed wire and known by Palestinians as the apartheid wall. Shufat, a neighborhood in the north where my father's family lived, was spared this fate, even as its lands were eaten up by Israeli settlements like Pisgat Ze'ev and Ramat Shlomo, squeezing the Palestinians into a few, ever dwindling, square miles.

One of the last times I visited Jerusalem, in 2016, I saw Abu Dis from a distance. The town is more crowded now, and more impoverished. The wall, as the UN Humanitarian Affairs office stated in 2004, has "severely disrupted Palestinian access to schools, hospitals, and work."

Some members of my family applied for permits to leave Abu Dis to see me. After a journey that took several hours of passing through checkpoints, we met awkwardly, sipped tea, and tiptoed around our memories of each other and the past.

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I realized too late into my adulthood that silence was my inheritance and, in many ways, my country's, too. There were many things we refused to discuss, and many more we were forbidden to.

Growing up, my family seemed at times to be defined primarily by estangement and erasures: closed doors, long silences, buried memories. Though some of this was the stuff common to many families, it is impossible to disentangle from the political conflict that these dramas played out within.

The biggest revelation was a landmine I accidentally stepped on during a conversation one afternoon with my dad, when he told me that my great-grandmother on my mother's side—her father's mother—was Israeli.

I felt uncomfortable with this knowledge, because I was a Palestinian from Jerusalem. The only Israelis I had ever seen in my childhood were soldiers. My mother never addressed this family history, and refused to acknowledge her lineage and her father. My grandmother, his ex-wife, was adamant in her anger at him, for reasons never specified (to me at least). I got the impression that, like me, my mother had lost contact with a side of her family when her own parents divorced, a family habit I still have no explanation for.

This Jewish-Israeli great-grandmother, and whatever her story was, seemed a lost mystery. For years, I hid the fact that I knew, encouraged by the silence of my family.

Years later, as I grappled with my Palestinian identity, I asked my father again about his offhand comment. Was he sure this person existed? Or was this a rumor he relayed with too much confidence?

"I met her myself," he replied. "She came to visit when you were a toddler."

That's when he told me as much of the story he knew. Rachel (my father pronounced it Rakhel) was a Polish Jewish woman who married, by my father's description, a wealthy playboy from the Muhtadi family in Sheikh Jarrah—my great-grandfather. They had two children. In 1948, when the Israeli state declared itself and engaged in ethnic cleansing of Palestinians to ensure a Jewish Israeli demographic majority, my great-grandmother and great-grandfather split up. We don't know why. The result was that Rachel left her children and joined her new countrymen. At least, this was what he understood to have happened.

Jerusalem also split up, the Western side cleared of its Palestinians by Israeli militias. My paternal grandmother, who had lived in the West Jerusalem suburb of Bekaa, lost her home when the armistice line bisected the city. She cried over that house until she passed in 2019. In some of the neighborhoods right on the armistice line, such as Musrara, the new Israeli state housed Arab Jewish migrants, later termed Mizrahim. They were placed there as cannon fodder—precisely to make sure the area stay Israeli, but their Arab ethnicity and national origin made them expendable should they be killed. This was the same community that, a generation later, would revolt and produce the Israeli Black Panthers, who advocated for the rights of non-Ashkenazi Jews in the new state. On the Eastern side of the city, Palestinians fell under Jordanian rule.

When Rachel left, the story goes that my great-grandfather put his children in an orphanage where, my father says, they were often mistreated because their mother was Israeli.

Twenty years passed. When Israel occupied the rest of Jerusalem in 1967, Rachel went looking for her children. But my father heard that my grandfather, Rachel's son, refused to reconnect, and later died a lonely death in Amman.

My father only knew what had been told to him—scraps of information he gleaned when he was married, and gossip he heard from the neighbors, all colored by his own experience of this, dare I say, difficult family. I took his account with a grain of salt and needled my mother for more information. As age weakened her resolve, she finally revealed Rachel's last name: Halber.

I did the flimsiest search imaginable, googling the name and seeing what popped up. I found an academic article about a "non-partisan" Zionist youth group in Belgium

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in the 1920s and 1930s, called Zeire Ha'am, getting their members ready to make the journey to Palestine. They were non-partisan in the sense that they included various strains of Zionism among their members, the Zionism itself taken as a given. The article included quotes from former members and grainy black-and-white photos, of which the name Rachel Halber appeared in the captions. When I saw the woman identified as Rachel in a group photo, I knew I had found her. She looked like a blond version of my mother.

On closer examination, I saw that she was identified as "Rachel Halber" in the photo captions but as "Rachel Halber-Muhtadi" in the footnotes where she was quoted. Here she was, still using her married name long after she and my great-grandfather had split.

I wanted to know what had happened to her after these pictures in Belgium were taken. The article stated that she immigrated to Palestine in the early 1930s, at the encouragement of her "Zionist mother." What had led her, between 1933 and 1948, to marry and then leave a Palestinian? What led her back to Abu Dis in the 1990s?

It would surely be more dramatic to claim that I searched for months and months, deep in the archives. The reality is—finding Rachel was easy. I was able to fill in the gaps by asking historians and those interested in Jewish genealogy I met online. I had information on Rachel's entire backstory within a few hours.

It turns out that Rachel Halber had not been lost, nor had she suppressed the story of her marriage to a Palestinian. In an article about her history and mixed family for the Israeli magazine *Maariv* dated June 12, 1987, Rachel Halber had been featured in a three-page spread. In the interview, she spoke of her childhood in Antwerp, her immigration to Palestine as a young woman, and her marriage to the man from the Muhtadi family in Jerusalem. After their civil ceremony in 1935, they traveled across Europe, meeting her extended family in Poland. Her new husband was honored by her uncle, an important rabbi. (I later learned that Rachel was the granddaughter of one of the leading rabbis of Warsaw.)

Rachel didn't outline the reasons she left my great-grandfather in 1948—perhaps she assumed the separation would be temporary? But unlike the story I had been told, she had not left her children. In fact there had been four of them. She left two children (including my grandfather) with their father, and took the eldest and the baby she was pregnant with to West Jerusalem. She kept her married name, and never officially divorced. No one could have guessed then that the city would be divided, or for how long.

When Israel took the rest of the city in 1967, she not only reconnected with her other children but also had warm relationships with them until the end. When my grandfather, Rachel's son, married my grandmother, Rachel had helped compile the dowry. Rachel's Israeli children reconnected with their extended family to varying degrees, and the children who were raised Palestinian visited the children who were raised Israeli in Tel Aviv, according to this interview. Rachel even reconnected with her husband, living with him until he passed in 1983.

Rachel had also maintained a relationship with her daughter-in-law, my maternal grandmother, even after her son's divorce. With a jolt, I recognized the descriptions of my mother and aunts—none of them named in the article but described so clearly as to leave no doubt. My mother is referenced as a star student, with a bright smile, who, at the time of writing, was studying in the Soviet Union. Rachel had visited them regularly until her death in 1996.

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It had been easier for my family to pretend that none of this had ever happened. Just as each prior generation had attempted to sever ties with each fracture of the family, they preferred a neater story of clean breaks and solid national divisions. It is also not lost on me that much of this obfuscation relies on the common misogynistic trope of the negligent mother, so easy for everyone to believe, since women often bear the brunt of patriarchal systems regardless of identity.

I won't say that Israeli-Palestinian marriages are common, or that intimate relationships between the two groups are easy to find. But they aren't unheard of. In the course of discussing my family relevation, two Palestinian and one Lebanese acquaintance revealed that they too had Jewish grandmothers. Palestine's most well-known poet, Mahmoud Darwish, was famous, among other things, for a poem he wrote to his Jewish girlfriend titled "Rita." This was the same man who joined the Palestine Liberation Organization, lived through the Israeli siege of Beirut, and wrote the Palestinian declaration of independence. Israeli political parties are certainly scared enough of the prospect, publicly condemning interethnic relationships.

Rachel, though she had been part of a Zionist youth group, and had actively joined an effort to facilitate the migration of Europe's Jewish population to Palestine, married a Palestinian. In the interview for *Maariv*, she describes running to the eastern part of Jerusalem in 1967, to see "her friends." And marrying my great-grandfather? She would do it all over again if she could. "You see, dear, it was a great love," she told the interviewer.

Ironically, it was my parents and grandparents—who shared national and religious identity—who ended up

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divorced. But Rachel and her Palestinian Muslim husband somehow stayed together. In spite of the Nakba, in spite of differences in identity, and in spite of years of militarized armistice lines.

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When Rachel came to visit my family in the 1990s, my father said there had been some sort of argument. My mother's family had harangued her for the actions of the Israeli state. According to my dad, she responded, "What does this have to do with me? I came during the mandate. I'm a Palestinian Jew."

It was an interesting deflection on Rachel's part, given how differently she had lived compared to her Palestinian children and grandchildren. Rachel's Palestinian descendants were and are stateless. Palestinian Jerusalemites cannot claim Palestinian citizenship and be issued a Palestinian Authority passport or we forfeit our ability to live in Jerusalem. But we also are not citizens of Israel. Instead, we are issued a "residency" by the Israeli government that can be taken away as punishment for political activity, if we work or live outside Jerusalem, or if we leave Jerusalem for too long. It doesn't matter how long our families have lived in the city. Our right to live there can be taken away at any moment.

Palestinian Jerusalemites have more freedom of movement than our counterparts in the West Bank and Gaza, but we still need state approval to travel outside the country. Palestinians in Jerusalem pay hefty taxes, and receive few services. It is almost impossible to get building permits, so as our population grows we are squeezed into increasingly inadequate housing. We face walls and checkpoints, and illegal settlement encroachment in our neighborhoods, with all the violence that entails. Two buildings down from my paternal grandmother's house, a Palestinian boy was kidnapped by Israeli settlers and burned to death. There were protests, but nothing changed. We have no rights, and can expect nothing from state authorities.

On the other hand, Rachel and her Israeli-raised daughters were full citizens of the state of Israel. They had political rights, could vote for their government, and move freely around—not just Israel but also the occupied territories—on roads built only for them. State services were geared to their well-being; healthcare, schools, infrastructure all served (and continue to serve) Jewish Israelis. Rachel's children and grandchildren very likely served in the army. They exercised power over their Palestinian neighbors directly through the barrel of a gun.

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Rachel's story provoked many questions. I wondered if I had lost relatives in the Holocaust. I must have—Rachel's family was still in Poland in 1935. I wondered, if there were survivors, whether they ended up in Israel. They surely served in the army, if so. Did they kill any Palestinians? Did they end up in Gaza?

Right now, I would rather not know the answers to these questions, not as I continue to watch a genocide unfold. I doubt Rachel's descendants want anything to do with me either. She concealed the identities of her Israeli children in the interview, saying there were "sensitivities" around the issue. Clearly their background is a secret they keep to themselves as well.

How might Rachel's life have looked had it not been overtaken by the Israeli state-building project? Her story speaks to thornier issues that Palestinians grapple with constantly in their struggle for self-determination. What do you do when your colonizer has no home country to return to? How did my grandfather, a devout Palestinian man, make peace with his Israeli mother, and what might this say about coexistence? Is there some way to reform Israeli society, twisted by ethnonationalism though it is?

Many Palestinians, victimized by the version of Zionist ideology that has triumphed in the Israeli state, understandably do not have the bandwidth for these thought experiments. In a time of mass atrocity, these nuances become difficult to acknowledge.

Israelis also have their silences. Many pretend that the Palestinians as a national group do not exist, preferring to think of us as the reincarnation of Nazis, the modern-day manifestation of antisemitism. At best, Palestinians are considered merely generic Arabs, with easily severed ties to this particular land. The Israeli state grows pine trees over emptied and demolished Palestinian villages, to hide the extent of its crimes, and to ensure return is not possible.

Rachel was certainly silent. At many points in the *Maariv* interview she declines to clarify details or reveal the identities of some of her Israeli family members. When my maternal grandmother complains of Israeli soldiers to Rachel, Rachel feigns deafness, and returns the conversation to a discussion of the children.

Governments the world over seem to have taken Rachel's position of turning a blind eye to the oppression Palestinians have faced, and of assuming that Palestinians will live and die never having exercised their basic rights. As I have written for this publication, the American position in particular since the failure of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in the early 2000s has been one of authoritarian conflict management, rather than conflict resolution.

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It maintains a sort of "peace" through violence, without addressing structural causes of conflict, mainly, the denial of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination and return to their homes. For many years prior to the genocide in Gaza, this was the implicit position of the United States and, by virtue of its global hegemony, the position of its allies within and outside the region.

Israel has long rejected a two-state solution, and very few Israelis would consider a one-state solution with equal rights extended to both sides. Instead, the policy of the Israeli state has become one of "surrender or transfer," meaning that Palestinians should live as subjects of the Israeli state in slivers of their land or be ethnically cleansed. This was the catchphrase of the "Decision Plan" of the Religious Zionist Party, whose head, Bezalel Smotrich, is now finance minister in Prime Minister Netanyahu's government. At this point, the fascistic condition in Israel is common knowledge; certainly US officials have been aware of these trends for many years. And yet, the powerful across the globe have stayed silent, even as genocide unfolded.

Palestinians are well accustomed to these silences. They follow us wherever we go. We are silenced for speaking and narrating our own experiences in many places where our diaspora exists. Governments across the Global North have engaged in well-documented repression, the US, UK, and Germany being among the worst offenders. In Germany, Palestinian and Arab activists targeted by the state have found themselves without status overnight. In the United States, American elites on both sides of the political aisle seem content with destroying democracy rather than allowing Palestinians to speak. University administrations have been willing to erode basic academic freedom rather than allow students to protest for Palestine, or faculty to teach on Palestine.

And Palestinians also silence each other. Despite the diversity of the Palestinian people, queer Palestinians, feminist Palestinians, and everyone else who strays from the mainstream are told this is not the time to enter the discussion. Even as Israel erases our countrymen and women in Gaza, we tell each other this is not the time to discuss pathways forward honestly, or to assess varying strategies of resistance. Our leaders continue to repeat *al-thawabet*—the constants of the struggle—at a time when every constant has been shattered.

These silences are not equal. Some silences are more harmful than others, as some who silence are more powerful than others. But all these silences prolong the inevitable: the truth, the return, the embrace. The longer we wait to acknowledge the reality of our conditions, the longer we conceal the truth, the more people will unnecessarily suffer.

As the Jewish Bundist Leivik Hodes once stated, "belief in mankind is not popular today. In these last years we have all seen it become deeply debased, despoiled, and spat on. But if man is at heart a beast, no amount of running away will help."

We cannot run from each other. We cannot continue enforcing our silences. I believe resolution is only a matter of time. The victims of the genocide in Gaza have refused to be silent. And the pine trees planted on top of Palestinian villages have begun to die.

To read Dana's most recent piece in *Current History*, see:
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