

Writing 'City of Oranges' Jerusalem Report, July 23 2007.

By Adam LeBor

Like every long-term relationship, my love affair with Israel has ebbed and flowed over the years. It certainly had a rocky start. We did not much like the Israeli pupils at my Jewish school in London. Not because of politics - we were teenagers, and didn't care about Zionism. No, we didn't like them because of something much more important: girls. We were weedy Ashkenazis, with spectacles and spots, sons of salesmen in the schmatta business. The Israelis had somehow missed out on puberty, progressing straight to bronzed adulthood. We were from Willesden and Hackney, unglamorous suburbs. The Israelis were from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. We took the bus. They drove. Worse, they were girl- magnets. They colonized, as Israelis will, a corner of the sixth- form common room. There they sat, slouched in green army parkas and canvas lace-up boots, feet on the table, surrounded by admirers.

Despite this unpromising start, before university I spent six months on Kibbutz Ramat Hashofet. I had dreamed of tilling the fields and reclaiming the soil. The dream did not last long. We were put to work in a wood factory, manufacturing ammunition boxes. We fed planks into various machines and tried not to breathe in the sawdust. And the soil was already claimed: by the Arabs who lived there (and their relatives in exile). Many Arabs worked in the wood factory, but they could not join the kibbutz. The kibbutzniks said they were socialists, but excluded the Arabs because they were not Jewish. This did not seem very socialist to me. I began to ponder the complexities of Israel and Palestine.

From Ramat Hashofet I went to Leeds University to study international politics and Arabic. I also spent a summer at Hebrew University, learning the colloquial Palestin-ian dialect. I always wanted to be a foreign correspondent, but somehow ended up in eastern Europe, after the collapse of Communism, rather than the Middle East. I covered the Yugoslav wars, witnessing the reality of ethnic cleansing. I began to understand the power of national identity, whether organic or manufactured, and its ability to foment

conflict. Always in my reporting I tried to focus on the human narrative, the cost of war and the human suffering it causes. That led to my biography of Slobodan Milosevic, recounting his life and times to tell the story of the birth and death of Yugoslavia. I then felt ready to approach Israel and Palestine, but I knew my book would be different to myriad of works already published. Like my biography of Milosevic, "City of Oranges," I realized, would also focus on the human narrative of the conflict, recounting the story of Israel and Palestine through the lives of six families, three Arab, and three Jewish.

With the theme decided, I needed a place. Jaffa, rather than Jerusalem, was the logical choice. In many ways Jaffa symbolizes the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians. Neve Tzedek, the cradle of Tel Aviv, was founded as a suburb of Jaffa in the late 19th century. But Jaffa is now a run-down suburb of Tel Aviv. It was not always thus. Pre-1948 Tel Aviv, with its European-style streets, municipal orchestra and public transport system, did not have the only claim on modernity. Jaffa, too, boasted newspapers, cinemas, theaters, a radio station, cultural and literary associations, even boxing and sports champions. As I delved further into Jaffa's past, I marvelled at the vibrant, cosmopolitan Arab society that once thrived there.

Of course no single work can fully illustrate a century of conflict, but by carefully choosing the families, I tried to include as many strands of Jaffa's complex narrative as possible: Muslim, Christian, Jewish; left and right wing, bourgeois and working class. The basic concept was simple, but almost revolutionary in the fevered atmosphere around Israel/Palestine: Recount events through memories of those who lived through them, and add enough context where necessary. We see the reality of the nakba, the catastrophe as Palestinians term 1948, through the eyes of children of the Hammami family: the panic of quickly packing whatever can be grabbed; the pain of leaving Fairouz, the cat; the way their father, Ahmad, stared rigidly ahead on the drive to Jaffa's port; the stink of urine and vomit on the boat during the three-day journey on a very slow boat to Tyre, Lebanon. I became friends with Ahmad's son, Hasan, who now lives in Florida. An elegant, courteous man, Hasan wrote a 40,000 word memoir, one of the book's key sources.

Yoram Aharoni, a Bulgarian-born member of the Stern Group, was wary at first of sharing his life history with a British writer. After all, during the 1940s he had spent years underground as a member of the Stern Group fighting British soldiers and officials. But he grew to trust me and his narrative brought new life to the story of Israel's independence. He told of his recruitment in a blacked-out room in a Tel Aviv safe house, his fake identity as a travelling flower salesman, how he was shot in the shoulder while robbing Barclays Bank in Tel Aviv and where to place the explosives when blowing up Spitfire fighter planes (at the spot where the wheel strut joins the wing).

But even in Israel war is an interlude, and everyday life continued. After 1948, Aharoni became an expert spice blender. His spice and coffee shop, Tiv, on Raziell Street catered for each wave of immigrants into Jaffa: the Balkan Jews needed black pepper and paprika, but North Africans demanded the hottest chillies, ginger and cinnamon. Tiv's stock became a culinary metaphor for a changing population.

I know much more now about Israel, and my love affair still has its ups and downs. Some things infuriate me: the continuing appropriation of Palestinian land across the Green Line; the unequal municipal budgets for Arab and Jewish areas, and the Byzantine electoral system that gives vastly disproportionate power to small religious parties. But it's only because I feel passionately about Israel's fate that I care about these things. And others make me, as a Diaspora Jew, proud: the fact that Israel is a democracy, the only one in the region; its lively civil society; its pugnacious judiciary and dogged media. It's that complexity that I tried to portray in "City of Oranges."

The good reviews are welcome, but more important has been the reaction of the families. It is a responsibility to gain the trust of strangers and recount their lives in print. Earlier this year I organized a party at the Abulafia restaurant in Jaffa to say thank you to the six families. Once the gathering had warmed up, I stood back and watched. The former Stern Group member Yoram Aharoni and his family were there. So were two of Ahmad Hammami's descendants: his daughter Fadwa Hasna who lives in Jerusalem, and Hasan's daughter Rema, who lectures at Bir Zeit University. I watched the guests, Jews, Muslims

and Christians, peaceniks and Palestinian nationalists, mixing easily, chatting and exchanging telephone numbers. It was not an everyday gathering. But it could be. Hasan Hammami told me recently that our lives are "inexorably linked." I was proud. Hopeful too, for the human connection is still the most powerful of all.