

from the INTRODUCTION



I went into the region to give voices to “ordinary people”: men, women, children, Palestinians, Israelis. In setting down their stories and those of their parents, some of whom had survived the concentration camps and others who had been forcibly ejected from their villages in Palestine and taken in by refugee camps, I wanted to understand their needs, their concerns and their sense of the present situation.

I wanted to understand the narrowing of Israeli popular opinion. Israelis supported the Rabin-Arafat agreement, with its goal of peaceful coexistence, but have now embraced the Sharon-led extremists who reject the idea of an independent Palestinian state. The Israeli people have been persuaded that Palestinians want an end to the Israeli state. They live in the irrational terror of reliving the nightmare of the Holocaust – when in reality they possess one of the most powerful armies in the world and face an onslaught of nothing more than stones, a few rifles and the tragic human bombs.

I wanted to understand the bitterness and fear of the Palestinians, who are convinced that the Israeli government lied to them, never had any intention of giving them their own country and is simply waiting for an opportunity to destroy them so that it can finally realise its dream of a “Greater Israel”. I wanted to understand their revolt in the face of the proliferation of new colonies and the misery of a population forced into poverty by a system of expropriation, curfews and checkpoints. I wanted to understand the despair that leads to extremism.

During my time there, I was filled with the sense that every encounter was weighed down by a terrible misunderstanding. Manipulated by extremists at either end, most of the people whom I interviewed were convinced that the other side wanted to annihilate them.

To understand what is going on, one has to have waited for hours behind a checkpoint, in the scorching heat, amid lorries of rotting

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vegetables and stalled ambulances, listening to mothers pleading with implacable, sometimes mocking, soldiers to let their sick child through; one has to have seen the father turning away to weep for his eight year old son, killed while running after an escaped chicken; or the little boy paralysed in a hospital bed, explaining that he was on his way back from school when three soldiers “shot him for fun”. One has to have seen Orit, a young Israeli woman whose sister was killed in a suicide bombing, bravely holding back her tears and repeating implacably: “You don’t understand. They don’t want peace; they want to destroy us”. Palestinians such as Samira, Etedel and Leila all said exactly the same.

I also met a minority on both sides who do not want peace, or who want it at the price of the other side’s total defeat: the Israeli groups for whom the West Bank should be part of Israel, because it was given to them by Yahveh and the Palestinian groups who want all the refugees to return home.

Equally, I met people on both sides who are actively militating for peace. Most Palestinians realise that, given the balance of power, compromise is the only realistic choice. Above all, they refuse to equate extremist Israeli governments with a people with whom they feel they could live peaceably.

On the Israeli side, I particularly wanted to give a voice to a minority from which one rarely hears, yet which represents hope for the Middle East: those few men and women who, in the face of everything, continue to fight for the rights of the Palestinians. They do so to enable not only a victimised people, but also their own country, to survive. They are also fighting, with a rare moral courage, for universal human rights. Indeed, in their own words, they are fighting to be different from those who have persecuted them over the centuries.

In this conflict, victory will be won only if each side agrees to certain compromises. Violence and war are futile. Those who achieve their objectives through such means do not maintain the upper hand for long. This land is too deeply anchored in people’s hearts for a military solution to be anything more than ephemeral. Each new generation will take up the struggle, and ever more ruthlessly. As the killings and the suffering accumulate, the hatred grows deeper. Solutions have been proposed but we need the willingness to implement them and, above all, the generosity and the courage to make them work.

Excerpts on Suicide Bombings

from Wafa, THE FIRST FEMALE SUICIDE BOMBER



On the 27th January 2002, a 28-year-old woman blew herself up in the centre of Jerusalem, killing one man and wounding forty others.

For the first time since the beginning of the intifada, the suicide bomber was a woman and the shock was as great among Palestinians as among Israelis. The Israeli and Western media rushed – as they had done since the suicide bombings began – to point to the fanaticism of religiously indoctrinated, perhaps even drug-crazed, young people promised the delights of a Muslim paradise, with its seventy virgins. For men, that is; Islam is less specific about heaven for women ...

But once the facts were revealed, it became embarrassingly clear that Wafa could not be put into the category of fanatic or crank – categories that allow us to label without need to explain. She had studied, had a profession and, if she was undoubtedly a good Muslim, she was not particularly religious because – an unmistakable sign in her community – she refused to wear the veil. ...

Wafa's mother, Wasfiyah, a robust, white-haired woman dressed in the long embroidered traditional robe, sits waiting for me on the mattress covered with bright-coloured material which, in Middle Eastern families of modest means, serves as a sofa ... In the centre, in a golden frame, a young woman with red hair tumbling on to her shoulders, dressed in the black gown and mortar board peculiar to British students, receives a parchment scroll.

“That's Wafa”, her mother says proudly, “at the graduation ceremony for her nursing diploma.”

I approach the picture and examine the rounded face, with its peach complexion, light eyes and carefully made up smiling lips. I try to understand ...

“She got interested in politics very early on. At the time of the first intifada, the ‘war of stones’, she was barely 14. Her teachers came to see me, asking me to control her because she was going to all the demonstrations and they thought it was dangerous for her. At 15 she

was already a leader.” ...

Her sister-in-law, Mervet, indicated that she wished to speak to me.

“She had been deeply upset for months by what she was seeing. She had joined the Red Cross as a nurse and there she saw the worst. She had witnessed atrocious things in Naplouse, Jenin, Ramallah – women and children killed when they broke the curfew to go and buy food, wounded people dying without her being able to help. Three times when she had tried to go to people, she had been shot with rubber bullets. She had seen women give birth in front of checkpoints and lose their baby and sick people dying because they couldn’t get to hospital. She told me how she had pleaded in vain with the soldiers to let ambulances through ... Every night she would come home exhausted and stressed and tell us everything she had seen. She was more and more outraged by what the Israelis were doing to civilians and by the world’s indifference. But she never talked to me about the suicide bombings. I even remember that she would say nothing when the subject came up.”

“Do you think she had been thinking about it for a long time or did she do it in a moment of despair?”

“Well, it’s something you need time to prepare for. You have to get hold of a belt of explosives and to do that you have to be in touch with certain groups. They have to accept you and be sure that you are reliable enough not to panic at the last minute and, under pressure from the Israelis, give information that would lead back to them. And then you have to choose the place where you are going to carry out the attack and work out how to get into it – which, given the surveillance, must be very difficult. All that must take days, if not weeks.”

Mervet shakes her head, her eyes filling with tears.

“When I think that Wafa was carrying that terrible decision alone all that time and that I suspected nothing ... If I had known ... perhaps I could have dissuaded her.”

“Yet you didn’t notice anything the night before?” I persisted. “She wasn’t anxious, tense?”

“No. We all had dinner together and she told us about what she had done during the day, as usual. In the morning she left for the Red Cross at 8.30. When she didn’t come back at six in the evening, we began to worry, because she was usually very punctual. We contacted the Red Cross, family, friends, but no one had seen her. So we began looking in all the hospitals, thinking that maybe she had been wound-

ed. It was only three days later that we heard on television that the suicide bomber who had blown themselves up in Jaffa Street, in the middle of Jerusalem, was she. We just couldn't believe it and we still cannot understand how she had got to that point. She loved life so much."

I rejoin Wafa's mother, thinking that perhaps she can give me an explanation, but I can get nothing from her other than the usual pronouncement made by the mother of a "martyr". In Palestinian terminology, anyone killed by the Israelis is deemed a martyr, particularly if they die fighting.

"I am proud of my daughter", she declares firmly, "because she served a noble cause and sacrificed herself for Palestine."

"But didn't she also serve it by looking after the wounded?"

She doesn't reply, doesn't look at me, sitting as motionless as a statue. Finally she speaks.

"Nothing could dissuade Wafa when she was convinced that something was right."

I could not be so cruel as to ask her if she too believed that it was right to kill civilians.

from ORIT'S SORROW



On the 9th March 2002, at ten o'clock in the evening, a Palestinian went into *Moment*, a Jerusalem café very popular with young people, and blew himself up, killing 11 people and wounding dozens of others.

One of the victims was Limor ben Shoham. In Hebrew, "Limor" means the delicate perfume of a flower. She was 27 years old.

Three months later I meet her sister, Orit. Her mother had refused to see me, as she had refused to see any journalists – in her eyes, vultures feeding off her suffering. Orit, however, had accepted, saying that she wanted to talk, to explain.

I meet her in the foyer of the King David Hotel, one of the few places where my Israeli interlocutors said they felt safe. Why? The security service there seemed no more nor less effective than anywhere else but it is one of the grand places in Jerusalem, an oasis of luxury that houses eminent guests, and doubtless that is why people feel protected.

I see a tiny figure coming towards me, wearing a simple linen dress.

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I am immediately struck by the large, cat-like eyes that engulf a small, pallid face framed by red hair, cut short like a boy's as though to offset a feminine fragility. She emanates an extreme sensitivity alongside a kind of rebelliousness. There is an indefinable sadness about her. ...

"I can't eat", she confides. "I think about her all the time. If only you had known her! She loved life so much; she adored dancing, had so many friends – most of them artists, like her. Her hobby was theatrical make-up and she was really good at it. She wanted to make a career of it ... Oh, I hate that monster!"

Her lovely smile cracks and she is on the verge of tears. I feel almost guilty about daring to say that Sharon might not be doing all he can to put an end to these killings. She defends him, seeing Arafat as the personification of Evil and Palestinians as heartless creatures prepared to send their children to their deaths to advance their cause. How could she see things any other way? It is what the majority of the mainstream Israeli media dole out to their audiences all day.

"Perhaps you think I hate Arabs?" she parries. "Not at all. There are two Arab women in the firm where I work. I don't have any problem with them, even since my sister died. I have nothing against Palestinians or Israeli Arabs. I will never hate them. It's Arafat that I hate; he exploits his people and doesn't give them any means of educating themselves. All he can do is teach them how to kill." ...

"You think the Israelis are just as much to blame. You don't understand, you put us on the same level but it's false. We are not the same! Our soldiers are not there to kill. It's a war and they are defending themselves; sometimes there's an accident, that's all. The Palestinians want a bloodbath. They don't care if they die or if they see their children dying. You can't compare us and you don't have the right to do that!" ...

She gets up, biting back her tears. I take her hands. I want to stop her going, console her, but what can I say? I cannot enter her nightmare. On the pavement outside the King David, I watch her leave, alone and helpless. I too feel like crying for the distress of this fragile young woman, so lost and so disgusted with a world that does not understand her and that she does not understand, who is taking with her the bitter sense that her efforts to convince me have been in vain.

No, dear Orit, your effort has not been in vain. You have taken me into the depths of your people's suffering and, above all, into the ocean of incomprehension that exists between two nations manipulated by certain politicians and extremists.

Excerpts on the Right to Settle

from A HOUSE DESTROYED THREE TIMES



“I first applied for a building permit in 1990 and paid \$5,000 to the Israeli civil administration to register my application. Eighteen months later they rejected it, saying that my land was outside the building plan for the village. In fact, there is no land register for our villages, since there was none under the Ottomans but the Israeli government uses this so-called land registry as a pretext to prevent us from building. They have simply drawn boundaries around the outlying houses in the villages, so that there is no permissible building zone. When people build houses, the authorities destroy them, saying that they have to do so because the houses were built without permits. In the eyes of the world, they are acting legally but in fact they are making life impossible for us, to force us to leave the country.” ...

“My savings were disappearing and my family was getting bigger; I couldn’t live in one room any more. And so in 1994 I decided to risk building a house. All Palestinians take this risk. We need to live somewhere. You say to yourself: maybe I’ll be lucky, they can’t control everything, thousands of houses are built without permits. Maybe they won’t come for a year or two and maybe there’ll be peace by then ... It was just after the Oslo agreement and I thought, maybe everything will be all right now, they won’t be so strict, they won’t knock everything down. How naïve I was!

“We lived in our house for four years. They were good years! The children were happy: for the first time they had a place to study and to play. We even created a garden, which we planted with flowers and fruit trees – oranges, lemons, figs, olives. It was all possible because of my ten years of working in Saudi Arabia. We enjoyed it to the full.

“Until the 9th July 1998, the worst day of my life ... I was having dinner with my family when I heard a noise. I went out and saw dozens of soldiers surrounding the house. An officer in plain clothes asked me if it was my house. I said it was. ‘Well, it isn’t your house any more. You’ve got 15 minutes to get your belongings out.’

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“I protested and they started beating me. Then they handcuffed me and threw me to the ground. My wife panicked and locked herself in the house with our six children, then called friends for help. The soldiers broke a window and threw in tear gas; then they broke down the door to bring out my wife, who had fainted, and my children, who were screaming in terror. They kept me down on the ground – I could see everything happening but could do nothing.

“Neighbours came running to help. The soldiers opened fire. Seven people were wounded and a fifteen-year-old boy lost a kidney. Israelis from the anti-demolition group came to the rescue and tried to stand in front of the bulldozer but they were also arrested and beaten.

“After having destroyed everything, even the trees, the army left, giving us a bill for \$1,500 to pay for the demolition of our house ...

“The next day, the Red Cross brought us a tent in which we lived with our six children, next to the ruins of the house. We felt numb, as though we were anaesthetised. The children cried all the time.

“The Israeli Committee against House Demolition came to see us and encouraged us to fight back. They said that they would help us rebuild, in the same place. They persuaded me and together we began rebuilding. We finished the external structure of the house on the 2nd August 1998; only the walls and the roof were in place and it wasn't yet habitable. But we were happy. We even held a little celebration.

“A week later, on the 10th August, at four o'clock in the morning, we woke up to machine guns pointing at us. The place was surrounded by soldiers and again a bulldozer was advancing on the house to knock it down. Our Israeli friends arrived. An American teacher tried to chain himself to a balcony but they threw him off. He had three broken ribs. They pulled up the rest of the trees and even took our tent, on the pretext that I had not applied for a permit to live in a tent ...”

“You're joking?”

“I don't have the heart to joke about it. They left us, my wife and six children, in the dust and the rubble, with nothing. That night, Jeff Halper, the co-ordinator of the organisation, who has since become a friend, stayed with us, as well as two other members of the NGO. ...

“For the third time, Jeff Halper convinced me to rebuild. Hundreds of volunteers – Israelis, Palestinians and foreigners – helped. We finished on the 9th July 1999. We had completed only the outer shell: we weren't living there. Nobody came. After several months I started to paint, to do up the inside and the wiring. I finished on the 3rd April 2001. We lived there for one night. On the 4th April, at eight o'clock in

the morning, the bulldozers came and destroyed our house for the third time” ...

He hides his head in his hands. “That destroyed me ... my children think their father can do nothing for them.” ...

“What do you intend to do now?”

“Continue to fight. Two months ago we started to rebuild. Two hundred volunteers came to help us. Soon we are going to put the roof on the new building.”

Salim looks at me intently. “Anyone in this world who has his land occupied and does not fight back is an animal! We will continue to fight back, even if over the past 35 years the situation has just got worse. The other day, the soldiers picked up a man trying to get through the Qalandiya checkpoint to go to work. They blindfolded him and kept him tied to the barricade for hours. The man was thirsty and asked for a drink. I saw a soldier urinate into a bottle and say, ‘Open your mouth.’ The man began drinking but when he realised what he was drinking, he started throwing up and writhing on the ground with humiliation. The soldiers roared with laughter and then took him away. That is what goes on under the occupation. The international community knows about it and does nothing.”

from AN ISRAELI SETTLER



I had begun to despair when I got a call from one of the settlement leaders, giving me details of a Dr Tubiana. I immediately felt reassured, on familiar ground – in France, Tubiana is the name of an eminent professor, who had treated some of my friends. Totally irrationally, I felt less apprehensive about meeting him. I had been warned that settlers do not like journalists, particularly French ones, who are portrayed as anti-Semitic by government propaganda. I therefore needed to avoid contention. Settlers could be violent and some journalists had been insulted and unceremoniously thrown out.

I give the soldier on duty Dr. Tubiana’s name, but he has failed to leave my name, as required. They try to phone him but none of his numbers respond. They get in touch with the settlement office, which says that it will try to help. We wait for half an hour, sitting in the taxi in the scorching heat while I watch the comings and goings of jeeps,

protected with wire mesh and equipped with enormous aerials, in and out of the settlement. ...

There is still no news of Dr Tubiana. I am worried that I will have to go back empty-handed but finally, thanks to my driver's insistence - and his card - they let us through. ...

We finally arrive at Dr Tubiana's. He opens the door to a house decorated very much in the style of the French middle classes, apart from the numerous Hebrew scriptures on the walls and the menorah - the seven-branched candlestick representing spiritual light and the divine presence that will ultimately overcome violence - in pride of place on top of the television. Embarrassed, he apologises: he had forgotten our appointment. Forgotten? I had had to twist his arm to get this meeting. He had claimed to be preparing for an exam but the truth was that he, like all settlers, is wary of journalists.

Dr Tubiana is 47 years old. Small, chubby, light skinned, with lively eyes shining behind steel-rimmed glasses, he sports a fine goatee and, of course, the kippa of every practising Jew. His speciality is acupuncture - or, he specifies, 'auriculotherapy'. He begins his story.

"I am from a pied-noir Tunisian family and my wife is from Algeria. We arrived in France as children, during the events of 1962. In 1985 my wife and I decided to come to Israel with our three children, first to Jerusalem and then to Pisgot in 1991."

"Why did you come to Israel - weren't you happy in France?"

"It was becoming difficult to fit my religious practice - even though I am not a fundamentalist - into daily life: respecting the Jewish feast days, not working on a Saturday, not sending children to school on the Shabbat ... For me, as a doctor in private practice, it was relatively easy but it was difficult for my wife, who worked in the state education sector, to obtain a post that would give her Friday afternoons and Saturdays free. My family had gone to France because of the language, although some of my relatives had already come to Israel, but when one is a practising Jew it is a natural step to make one's 'aliyah' - to go back to Israel to assert one's Zionism.

"When we first arrived it took some time to adapt. I knew the literary Hebrew of prayers but I had to learn the everyday language. In 1986 I became a self-employed doctor but we gradually realised that it was very difficult to live in Jerusalem and practise our religion and our Zionist ideals because we were weighed down with mundane problems; our ideals were threatening to get lost in everyday life. So we

came to Pisgot to establish our right to return to our land and our history. The real aliyah is not living in Tel Aviv or Haifa but here, in Judea Samaria, a land that has belonged to us for three thousand years.” ...

“Do you know that there are around forty United Nations’ resolutions declaring that Israel should give back those occupied territories?”

“Forty?” He laughs. “There are a lot more than that! Three-quarters of United Nations’ resolutions are against Israel but that does not change our position one iota: Judea Samaria is an integral part of Israel, no other peoples have lived on this land and it has had no other capital. Those are indisputable facts!”

“But the Palestinian people also lived here, and for a very long time!”

“The Palestinian people have never existed; you invented them. They have never existed!”

“So who were the people who lived here?”

“Read Chateaubriand, read Napoleon. There were several thousand nomads who went between Egypt and Syria, stopping here and there. To talk about the Palestinian people is an aberration, a theoretical concept. Where is its capital? Its flag? They have had one for only the past fifty years. Do you know any such thing as a people without a country? I don’t. The British talked about Palestine because they wanted to break the Jewish link with this land. ...

“So, was it interesting?” asked my driver when I got back to the car.

Interesting, yes ... but above all moving and terrifying. Dr Tubiana is the kind of rare man who can send shivers down your spine. But, as always, one can understand – without sharing – his rigid views and his visceral attachment to the myths for which he is ready, like thousands of settlers, to give his life.

A life that has been marked by trauma. First, the Holocaust, which neither he nor his family in north Africa experienced personally but which he had gone over in his mind again and again, reliving its worst details as though it were a relentless nightmare. And even if those responsible for it were not Arabs – with whom Jews had lived on good terms for centuries – the blame had been passed, with the help of the West, on to the evil Arab, the bloodthirsty Muslim.

But I also imagine that Dr Tubiana has been marked more deeply by a personal trauma: being torn away, as a child, from Tunisia, his sunny home where, as a French Jew, he had been a privileged being among the Arabs; to arrive in a cold France where his family were con-

fronted with all sorts of difficulties. And it was the Arabs who had pushed him out of that paradise – the same people who today challenged his presence here!

He had been told that Tunisia was not his country when he had known, in all the childish fibre of his being, that it was. The land of Eretz Israel would never be taken from him; it had been given him, not by some colonial power, but by God! God had chosen the Jews to live in Israel, to prepare for the glorious coming of the Messiah. No power on earth could eject them.

Excerpts on Children

from THE THREE KHALILS



“Khalil got up every day at five o’clock to go and sell newspapers. ... In the afternoon he left to go and work in a supermarket. He gave me all the money he earned because we didn’t have enough just with the wages of his father, who worked in a restaurant near Lod airport. In the evening he went out with his friends. He didn’t talk to me about it but I know that he took part in demonstrations against the occupation and that he threw stones. During that first intifada, the Palestinians didn’t use arms against the guns, just stones.

“My son was arrested twice. The first time I had to pay 500 shekels to have him released. The second time he had climbed a tree to attach a Palestinian flag when an Israeli patrol had passed by; he just had time to hide in a dustbin. They found him and took him to the military camp at Mouqata’a, which is now Arafat’s headquarters. That time the fine was 2,000 shekels. I couldn’t pay such a big amount. I waited for my son all night behind the barbed wire surrounding the camp. The soldiers let him go in the early morning, with a fractured knee and a swollen face. They had tied him up and hit him with their rifle butts, mainly on his knees. That was the order given to Israeli soldiers at that time: don’t kill but break stone throwers’ limbs. Thousands of young people were mutilated, some of them handicapped for life.

“I cried and I begged Khalil to stop: ‘Next time we won’t be able to get you out. We’re poor, your father can’t pay’. He promised me he would but I knew that as soon as he could, he would begin again.”

“Did he belong to a political organisation?”

“He was in the student branch of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, but we didn’t know. Neither I nor my husband had ever been involved in politics. We are refugees from 1948, from a village near Jerusalem that is now in Israel. My father worked for the post office and my husband’s parents were farmers who lost everything. When he was very small, Khalil had seen his father wounded by an Israeli bomb. A shell fell right in the centre of Ramallah, killing two men and wounding my husband. We carried him to the house bleeding.

“You know, we don’t need to talk politics to our children: they see what is happening, the curfews, the mistreatment, the humiliation and all kinds of deprivation, and they are outraged. Caution comes with age, and sometimes the resignation that we call wisdom. But for Khalil and for young people generally, not to fight against injustice is cowardice.” ...

“His friends told me what happened. After throwing stones, he ran away from the soldiers who were chasing him and tried to run up into a building to hide. They shot him in the leg but he still managed to get to the top. They got him on the top floor. It was a building under construction. The soldiers got hold of him and threw him into the lift shaft and then ... they threw a slab of cement on to him.”

from I DON’T TRUST ANY ARABS



“When I go to public places, I am always frightened of bomb attacks”, Rivka explains. “When we are invited to eat somewhere, for example in a pizzeria, people now put ‘security guards on the door’ on the invitation. Otherwise my parents wouldn’t let me go. ...

“Do you have Palestinian friends, or at least Arab Israeli friends?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t”, says Efrat, “if they liked me. I don’t think they are so different from us. They have the same

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life as us and they do the same things. Of course, their beliefs are a bit strange! But still ... One of us just needs to take the first step – but everyone waits for the other to do it. I don't know what the solution is ...”

Rivka is more cautious.

“Perhaps I could have an Arab Israeli friend ... but after what happened to that boy at Ashkelon, I'm frightened and I think I have the right to be.”

“What happened?”

“You don't know the story of Ofir Nahum? He was a boy of 16 who chatted up a Palestinian girl on the internet. When he went to meet her, he was assassinated! In fact, I don't trust any Arabs before I know them. As soon as I see one in the street I am suspicious. I don't think they are all suicide bombers, but there's nothing I can do about it, that's how it is.”

“Can you understand that Palestinians of your age are also very frightened of soldiers?”

“Oh no!”, Rivka exclaims, indignant. “Our soldiers don't kill children. They only kill if they know that someone is about to carry out a terrorist attack. And if accidents happen, what can we do? If there is a terrorist, you have to shoot, even if there are passers-by near him. Our lives are at stake – it's them or us! What's more, Israeli soldiers never deliberately kill civilians. From that point of view, the Palestinians live in greater security than we do!”

Somewhat flabbergasted by this last statement, I ask her:

“So, what do you make of all the civilians killed at Jenin or at Gaza, when a one-tonne bomb was thrown into a residential district in the middle of the night?”

Very sure of herself, Rivka repeats her father's explanation word for word:

“We had to go into Jenin. We could have bombed the whole camp and then we wouldn't have lost 23 soldiers. As for Gaza, we also had to do that ... We had no choice.”

Excerpt on the Future

from LEA TSEMEL, DEFENDER OF PALESTINIANS



I have been hearing about Lea Tsemel for a long time. I had imagined a tall, imposing dark-haired woman, a star of the legal profession, who would be a little distant with journalists who waste her time with their repetitive questions. But I am sitting with a small woman with a quicksilver energy, whose manner and gestures speak of directness and a natural warmth.

“How did I come to be the Palestinians’ lawyer?” she smiles.

“Perhaps because I am neither blind nor deaf to what is going on around me” ...

“Have you ever regretted your decision?”

“No. I knew very well from the beginning what I was risking. And then I had the support of the man I married a few years later, Michel Warchawski, who is also a militant. But above all I was encouraged by all those people who so needed someone who would, finally, defend them against the unjust treatment, the violence and the arbitrary arrests. The expressions of those whom I had helped was what enabled me to keep going during those terrible years. It was unthinkable to me that I could let them down.” ...

“So how do you see the future?”

Lea hesitates, lost in her thoughts.

“At any rate, I don’t want my children to stay here, if they don’t fight. If one doesn’t fight, one is participating in the oppression to a certain degree. But they refuse to leave the country, even though it is morally and physically dangerous. ...

“I am starting to ask myself questions: is my presence here and my work for the rights of Palestinians – a work that I do as much for them as for my people, so that we can one day live together – just? Until now, it has been and people like me embodied a future promise and proof that it is possible to live together. But perhaps now, to be here doing what I do, playing the ‘good Jew’ gives the Palestinians the

illusion that future cohabitation is possible when already it isn't ..."

"Don't tell me that – not you, Lea!"

She shakes her head. She seems exhausted.

"I don't know any more. I am telling you the thoughts that revolve in my head. My work here, what I am allowing Palestinians to hope, is an illusion ... Perhaps it would be better to leave them to face Jews of the extreme right, against whom they would be forced to fight to save their skin ..."

"Today, many Palestinians continue not to hate Jews, but on the Jewish side, things are hardening. While we are far and away the greatest military power in the region, with the United States behind us, we are still haunted by the myth that we are a minority threatened with extermination. It is so hard to fight all these myths ..."

"Sometimes I don't know what I am doing here, but at the same time I don't want to leave, not yet. I am fascinated; I have no idea what is going to happen."

She laughs like a little girl.

"I want to know the end of the story, if there is an end ..."

"So, I will still find you here in 30 years!"

"Probably ... because, despite everything I said, I am an unshakable optimist. And then" – a soft light emanates from her green eyes – "I love the climate of this country, its landscapes and people. I want to be able to go on living here without betraying my commitment. No, I won't give up. I am not at all ready to give up."