

**YIGAL SARNA**

*Murder at Home*

Translated from

the Hebrew

At ten  
o'clock in the  
morning, four  
hours after the  
murderer had  
sneaked out of  
the orange  
grove

and killed seven Arab labourers in a long burst of fire, a young girl stood beside the pool of blood and recited from the Quran. No one else was there on that morning of May 18, 1990, other than that girl, a student from an Arab village in Israel, and myself, a Jewish journalist from nearby Tel Aviv. The two of us stood there beside the spilled blood, while the girl, her eyes

burning with anger, kneeled and kissed the blood on the road, and then raised her fist and said calmly to herself "God is most great" (*Allahu Akbar*). "Go away", said a passing policeman to the girl, but she remained. Only at eleven o'clock did she leave in order to catch a bus to return to the university in Jerusalem. "She will take her revenge", said a boy who got out of a car, having come to see the place the radio had been talking about ceaselessly since morning.

In the field where workers had escaped the shooting, I found a bag of still warm food, a torn belt and other signs. "We have been standing near here now for years" said a young worker from Khan Yunes in the Gaza Strip named Najih. "My father began waiting for work here and he brought us, the children, to wait with him; and now I wait here, too."

At eleven o'clock a tractor from the Rishon Lezion municipality came, together with an Arab boy with a broomstick. "Where is it necessary to clear up?" asked the tractor driver. The Palestinian worker, from Gaza, was sweeping away the blood and the remains of the poured-out brains with his broom while a passing Israeli driver was shouting: "Where is their blood?" An Arab family stopped and asked where the hospital was. I knew by their name that their son was among the dead but I pointed in the direction of the Asaf Harofe Hospital.

Just beside the Popper's house there is a small playground with a trampled patch of grass, a rocking horse and a slide. It was a peaceful summer morning in the Shivat Zion neighbourhood. The street where Popper lives runs along the foot of a small hill and then rises until it reaches a memorial park built to commemorate a soldier who died defending the Homeland in 1939. Passing the park, I drove a bit further along a dirt road to the orchard where Popper had slept on the night before the killings. Beyond the orchard I saw the path to the road and the spot where he had opened fire on the line of workers. Everything was within easy walking distance of his home. All within ten minutes walk... his house, the neighbourhood, the pleasant playground, the memorial park, the orchard and the site of the massacre. You could call it a

neighbourhood murder.

When I visited the neighbourhood, I found Popper's friends Gideon, Avi and Barak. We went to Gideon's house to sit and talk about what had happened, walking across a big yard with a tree where two black boxer dogs growled at us menacingly. Their chains pulled taut when we passed by them. "Go and call all the guys", Barak said to Ben Hur, a young boy, "Call all the mates of our Israeli hero".

Now that some time has gone by, I still remember those dogs, as if they had the same sense of blinding hatred of the menace that is part of the whole story, in themselves and in the taut chain that was holding them back from attacking. Popper's friends spoke about the murder with enthusiasm, only regretting the years that he would spend in prison.

The day before they had gone to the sea. They had sat on the Rishon Lezion beach, caught a few fish, and prepared them on an open fire. All in all, a pleasant neighbourhood. Small homes, a lot of early immigrants from Yemen and a few Ashkenazis who picked up a taste for Oriental food. Trees, and a neighbourhood on the outskirts of the city and relatively free of poverty. And then along comes Ami Popper, goes to the edge of the neighbourhood and murders seven Arabs. "Last night, six of us guys were sitting up after midnight in Barak's house, Barak whose wife is now in Argentina. We decided that Ami had made only two mistakes: one, that he didn't kill all of the Arabs there, and two, that he turned himself in rather than trying to make a run for it. He could have come to me; I would have found him a hiding place in the basement of my aunt's house, a place with ventilation where I would have taken good care of him."

I found a pile of newspapers at Gideon's house. Among them was the article published some days before the murder. In the article the reporter described the public tribute that accompanied Rabbi Levinger to prison after he had been sentenced for having shot dead an Arab shoe shop owner. Levinger claimed at his trial that he shot in self-defence after having been attacked in Hebron. He was sentenced to a few months in prison. "It doesn't make sense that the lawmaker

should be the victim," said Levinger in the courtroom. The idea that the murderer is also the victim is a sentiment shared by Ami Popper's friends. "There was a rumour here that Ami was raped by an Arab when he was small. He was such a pretty boy that the Arabs were crazy about him."

"Is there any truth in this, or could it be something invented for the trial?" I asked them.

"Ami never spoke about it. If he had told us that they had raped him we would have gone and beaten them up, but it seems he waited until he grew up to strike the guy who had done it to him."

"Even if that's true, he didn't kill the person who did it to him."

"What's the difference, they're all buggers?"

This rumour was immediately blown up into an excuse, a vindication for the entire incident. It was published in all the papers with a sigh of relief: an explanation had been found. That is the way Popper's friends see the Arabs. When we were sitting there talking about the murder, about Ami and about the Arabs, I suddenly began to feel that this entire country is on thin ground. Under the surface, there flows like lava a terrible pool of hatred. All society's fears are projected onto the Arabs, perceived as devils who live in the fields.

The Arabs, according to Popper's gang, are the source of all evil and all that is threatening: sex and perversions, the threat of death and the kidnapping of children, the loss of property and pollution—it is all the work of the Arabs. "They fuck donkeys in the orchards, rape girls in the park, steal babies' prams, shoes, clothes off clotheslines and the hubcaps from cars." That is the same sort of account which other journalists heard in the small town near Tel Aviv where three Arab workers, who were sleeping in a locked shack, were burnt to death. The perpetrators have yet to be captured. It is a discourse of self-righteous and extreme hatred that calls to mind Belfast or the American south when Mississippi was burning.

Most of the gang were born in the neighbourhood of Rishon Lezion, and they've the feeling of being one family.

That is also the source of their common outlook as well as the time they spend together. Sometimes they smoke dope together, and sitting on the porch opposite the tree, they feel mellow. Some of them work at night. Barak doesn't work. What he does isn't clear. His son is called Ra'am ('Thunder'). Gideon's son is called Ben Hur. In the yard there are two ferocious dogs on chains. Barak has a German Shepherd-Rottweiler crossbred dog. From time to time, they hold dog fights.

There have been times when Barak has picked up as much as 500 dollars when his dog trounced another one. Gideon does not let his dogs participate in these fights. Barak has a good hand for stitching up their bloody neck wounds afterwards. The dog fights and the betting take place on the beach, near the spot where motorbike rallies are held. Barak, like Popper, left the army in the wrong way: "I tore out someone's eye", he says. He made a commotion and was released from the army on psychiatric grounds. They speak about the times they went out to beat up Arabs in the same tones they use to describe the dog fights.

The neighbourhood is on the outskirts of the city. It is almost a village. There's an orchard and a build-your-own-house scheme nearby. The Arab workers sleep there or in the orchard. Some of them are night watchmen. Since 1967, the 1967 war, this has been one of the sites of poisonous contact between Arab workers who spend their nights in squalid places, far from their home, and a Jewish neighbourhood that feels its territory threatened. Everything is so close: the school they used to go to, the orchard, the grocery store, the watermelon stand and the 'slave market'.

Among those of Popper's age some have been exempted from the army on psychiatric grounds; others have been good officers. In the neighbourhood one finds both policemen and deserters.

While we were sitting together, Rosa, who lives in the house behind Gideon's, came into the courtyard. It's all one big family here. Her son went to school with Popper. They were good friends. "My husband," she said, "is against what Ami

did, shooting people who came to look for work. My husband was upset". Rose wished to indicate that not everyone here has the same view as Popper's gang of friends.

Some people disapproved of the act. Others remained indifferent or expressed support based on hatred or tiredness of the endless conflict and continual bloodshed.

"The night before the murder," said Rosa, "Ami slept in the orchard. In the morning he got up. Why did he have to take his troubles out on them? They were there. He was fed up with life and fed up with them. Who to take it out on? So he took it out on them."

Afterwards, I went to listen to others. At times of trouble, we sometimes seek comfort from experts or people who transform tragedy into a matter of statistics. That's also a comfort. In a white villa near the sea in Herzeliya, in a place where no Arab workers hang about, a Filipino maid clears the porch of the house. I spoke to Dr. Dvora Carmiel of the Institute for the Study of States of Stress in Haifa University. She studies the influence of the Holocaust or personal tragedies on people's world views. Dr. Carmiel has done research on the views of Holocaust survivors and bereaved families. The Holocaust pushes people towards the (political) centre, she discovered, but a personal tragedy like bereavement intensifies extremism, whether to the right or to the left.

You might say that in the final analysis Popper's deed was a collective act, and not the deed of an isolated marginal person. Carmiel's analysis increases the horror of the atrocity and precludes the excuse which the (Israeli) media and politicians put forward the morning after the murders. "The fact is that his peer group, his friends in the neighbourhood, are not sitting with bowed heads. They feel proud. The murder of Arabs fits into their moral framework. Not one of them has condemned it. They see his act as heroic even though it was actually cowardly, involved no risks, and was carried out close to their neighbourhood."

"Popper", Carmiel says, "didn't act contrary to the basic values of the society in which we live. The victory march of Levinger, the Arab killer, which occurred a week before

Popper's massacre, created the image of the heroic murderer and provided a model."

During the week that preceded Popper's massacre, while he was still sitting in his home in the neighbourhood and reading the papers, a student, Michal Hallal, who had been given a life sentence for the murder of an Arab taxi driver by the name of Tatjani, was released from prison after only three years. The President already had reduced her prison term twice over the past three years; now she was finally being released by Prime Minister Shamir, acting as Minister of Police because of the Minister's poor health.

Rabbi Levinger had been led in a victory march to Ayal Prison, and the newspapers published his picture being carried on his well-wishers' shoulders. "This is a time for shooting to the right and to the left and not a time for thinking," the winner of the Israeli Education Prize, Moshe Zvi Neriya, wrote to a gathering of a hundred rabbis who supported Levinger, the Arab killer.

A journalist from Haaretz wrote that Rabbi Neriya's letter was hair-raising. In another newspaper, a former pupil of Rabbi Neriya forecast that in a few years, when the volcano explodes and its filthy contents overflow, the rabbis will say "our hands didn't spill this blood".

"We're living in a polarised world," Dr. Emmanuel Berman, a clinical psychologist told me in his Tel Aviv apartment. "In this world, the distinction between the value of our lives and the value of their lives is absolute. Murderous impulses receive partial legitimization. The judicial and executive pardons given [to Jews who kill Arabs] send a clear message about what this society really thinks about the murder of Arabs and the punishment deserved."

Berman sees in the murders by Popper a frightening caricature of an unconscious Israeli ritual. Ami Popper, who emerges from the orchard in order to commit murder, first makes the Arabs stand in line and asks to see their identity papers. This ritual is a daily occurrence in the Israel of the Intifada. It is shown day after day on television; you see it happening on every street you travel along; it's part of the

reality of life under the Intifada. Popper carried out an impersonation—he came along wearing a few pieces of an army uniform and carrying a gun. All the accounts of how Arabs were beaten by Borderguards or members of the Civil Guard begin with the ritual of checking identity papers. This is how Jewish authority is enacted. The Arabs standing opposite Popper obeyed him, as they always do, even though Popper hadn't proved that he had the authority to interrogate or arrest them. They obeyed. This stems from ignorance and uncertainty about legalities. The Arabs have become accustomed to everyone checking up on them; Borderguards, Civil Guards, soldiers, policemen, or the Shabak. Only the end part when Popper shot dead everyone who had taken out his identity papers infringed on the normal rules of the ritual."

Dr. Berman believes that an army that has spent years suppressing demonstrations changes the personality structure of its members, and this process has also been absorbed by people who are not soldiers, whether by way of the press or by stories of their friends. Israel thrives on it. "There is a danger that incidents like this will spread. The line dividing what is prohibited and what is not is being erased. The idea that killing is permissible spreads from inside the army outwards." Berman, by understatement, sharpens the picture.

According to him, Israeli society is one in which moral boundaries have given way. It is rushing headlong into a situation of madness like that in Northern Ireland, one from which there is no way out. Hatred, murder, and a lenient judicial system. The shooting is getting closer to home. It is no longer in Nablus, but on the other side of the orchard, at the edge of the neighbourhood.

In the days following the murders there were confrontations throughout the country. Taybeh was in flames along with Nazareth and Umm al-Fahm. Youths were killed in Gaza. Popper's murders released powerful pent-up forces; but things begin and end in the neighbourhood. A person has bad memories; he feels frightened, inferior, insecure, disappointed. Someone gets hold of his brother's gun, another has a knife. Sometimes they take a vicious dog. Sometimes they go to the



beach. Popper went to the edge of the neighbourhood and, there, he murdered.

At night when quiet has descended on the street where I live, and when only the violinist from the Philharmonic who lives on the thin floor above me can still be heard, I think about that very taut chain—the one that ties the dogs—and about what will happen on the day it snaps.

**Editorial note**

*On May 18, 1990, Ami Popper, a 22 year old Israeli former soldier and convict, opened fire with a stolen automatic rifle on a group of Palestinian workers near Tel Aviv, killing seven of them. The massacre set off demonstrations in the Gaza Strip and West Bank and in Arab communities throughout Israel. In clashes with Israeli security forces another 14 Palestinians were shot dead and more than 200 wounded. On March 17, 1991, Popper was sentenced to seven consecutive life terms by the Tel Aviv District Court.*