

For years Haifa has seemed to me an obvious subject for an issue of our review. It combines most things that make the endless nooks, crannies, islands and cities of the Mediterranean places of dreams and nightmares, some of the best and worst of what human beings have proven capable of. Their aspirations and fears. The specificity of Haifa, of course, lies in its medley of Jews and Arabs of many sorts, Israeli citizens of different degrees. How do they live, together or apart, what have they to say for themselves and about one another, and about their city collectively or separately? Make no mistake about it, the Israeli Jews of Haifa run the show, but the presence of the Palestinian Arab minority is increasingly apparent. We would like you to listen to some of them, both to those who Mahmoud Darwish characterises as victors and victims. To their voices, without prejudice.

One day an Israeli taxi driver told me that he was a Christian Arab who lived in Usufiyya, a Druze village on Mount Carmel just outside Haifa. His family had fled there from their home on the Stella Maris road on Mount Carmel during the 1948 war. His grandfather's brothers had escaped to southern Lebanon at that time. In 1982, after the first Lebanese war, the brothers came to visit and went to see the old family home which had been confiscated by Israel in 1948. While there, a neighbour, an old lady who hadn't fled, heard from a distance the voice of one of the brothers. She didn't see him, but she recognised his voice which she hadn't heard for over 30 years.

The story may not be amazing in itself. But it makes you stop and think. She hadn't forgotten her neighbour's voice. Refugees from Haifa miss it because among other things, they say, everyone knew them there. They recognised one another's voices. These people love Haifa and miss its voices.

Gideon Spiro, a journalist and student activist in Haifa University in the 1970s, left Haifa for Tel Aviv, but he is as active as ever in writing critiques of Israeli policies, in particular calling for nuclear disarmament in Israel and throughout the Middle East. In

1971-72 he established a left-of-centre student movement, a coalition which won the student parliament elections and overthrew the right-wing leadership on campus. He explained that the success of the movement was tied to local conditions in Haifa: the high percentage of Arab students, the important presence of immigrants from South America, women students and the politically unaffiliated. They created a newspaper called *Post Mortem* which played an important rôle in politicising the university, the most radical student paper in the country. They were not anti-Zionists. They accepted the creation of the state as positive, and distanced themselves from 'extreme' anti-Zionist groups. The cooperation and friendship between Arab and Jewish students was essential for them. In their view the conflict in the Middle East and domestic social problems in Israel were fundamentally related in part, at least, because of the huge amounts of budget that went for security. The war had also created a new class of the wealthy, getting rich from the 1967 war and related businesses, and thereby raising social tensions. *Post Mortem* called for the recognition of the right of Israel to exist and for recognition of the national self-determination of the Palestinian people. The same old story.

I'm in Haifa for the month of February 2009. The Gaza war has recently ended. I like to meet friends in Fattush, one of the dozen or so Arab café restaurants in Haifa's German Colony. Its clients are Arabs and Jews, its languages Hebrew and Arabic, its personnel probably wholly Arab. It's on what is now named Ben Gurion Boulevard and before 1948 was called Carmel Street. Since Israeli independence most of the street names in the city have been changed from Arabic to Hebrew ones. But the Judaisation of the city hasn't succeeded very well. Local Palestinians have decided to call Ben Gurion Boulevard the "Street of Abu Nawas", the legendary medieval Arab poet, mystic and bon vivant.

Fattush has small stickers on the wall in Hebrew and Arabic. The Hebrew ones say *zeh lo ygamer ad ndaber* – "It will not end until we talk"; the Arabic ones say *bali fi ghaza* – "My mind is in Gaza". The Israeli buses going up and down the avenue have less discrete stickers that declare *hayom yisrael hazak mitamid* – "Today Israel is stronger than ever". In a manner of speaking, these Arabs and Jews are talking to, or past, one another.

Down the street, there's the beginning of another world. A young Russian entrepreneur has opened a café restaurant whose clientèle is made up of immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Russian food, music, dancing. There are many Russian immigrants in Israel, over a million, about the same number as Palestinian

Arab citizens. Together they make up more than one third of the total population of the country. In Haifa the Russians number some 75,000. They are well organised politically, and on the extreme right, with their party Yisrael Beitenu - Israel, Our House. The restaurant café doesn't admit Arabs because, its owner declares, they become too excited by the blond women. The Russian waitress, who tells me she is Christian - which apparently is the case for a number of the immigrants - says she doesn't like Arabs because they're Chechens. Where am I? Welcome to Haifa 2009.

Israeli Jews are celebrating 62 years of *'atzma'ut*, independence, while the Israeli Arabs are mourning 61 years of the *nakba*, the catastrophe of the loss of Palestine. Can the pride be dampened, the wounds healed? Memory and reconciliation, can they coexist? I agree with John Berger that people are not prisoners of the past, but that they cannot change its consequences (cf. *From A to X. A Story in Letters*, p. 21).

I know my way around Haifa pretty well. I like it among other reasons because both Arabs and Jews still or once again live there in appreciable numbers in what seems relative mutual tolerance despite the massive exodus of Palestinians in 1948 and the abiding consequences of the unresolved conflict. For me Haifa's unique attractiveness and interest come from the co-presence of Jews and Arabs and an implicit connivance to live together. Haifa's 35,000 Palestinians of Israeli citizenship form a substantial minority whose presence is increasingly felt, informally and organisationally.

Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, a substantial number of young Israeli Jews are leaving Haifa for employment and the hedonist attractions of Tel Aviv which with a population of 2.5 million is ten times the size of Haifa, and perhaps because Palestinians there are virtually invisible. Meanwhile more and more young Palestinian Israelis are coming to settle in Haifa. They feel more at home there as Palestinian Arabs. That small prism seems almost hopeful.

Over the years I have looked down on Haifa's layers of buildings and open spaces from the heights of Mount Carmel and peered up at them from the German Colony near the port. I have seen its satellite towns, its inner-city neighbourhoods, winding streets and endless stairways running up and down the mountain. Everywhere, there is a view of the sea, of the azure Mediterranean. Haifa is like a kaleidoscope with its different forms, shapes, colours and with its varied people from whom emerge endless stories, told and wanting to be told.

Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, a professor at Haifa University, says that when he first visited the city in the 1950s he thought it looked like how he imagined Switzerland. Mohammed Bakri, an actor and filmmaker

from a nearby Gallilee village does not like Haifa at all, however much time he has spent there over the years. He quotes an old Arabic proverb from Jaffa, that other former capital of Palestinian urban life: "Haifa's water is salty and its faces frowning". In fact everyone knows him there, whether frowning or smiling. Elias Sanbar, a child refugee from Haifa, says that the proverb expresses jealousy of Haifa. He remembers his father telling him that the city was already modern in the 1930s, long before Beirut; that you could drink draft beer there and watch Tarzan movies. No salty water or frowning faces. The city was characterised as *umm al-gharib*, Mother of the Stranger, meaning that she was ready to embrace any child who came to her: in other words that Haifa was a city that welcomed foreigners.

I imagine from reading and from photos what Haifa may have been like in the past when it grew and prospered during the British Mandate of 1918-1948, a city of Palestinian Arabs and Zionist immigrants with a downtown area, and the British claim or ambition that Haifa was the 'Gateway to the Orient'. I try to make sense of what it has become over the two generations since the 1948 war, the victory of the Jewish forces and the establishment of Israel and the disaster of defeat and exile for Palestinian Arabs.

In the days of the British Mandate and the early years of the state of Israel, the Centre of the Carmel was mostly inhabited by Ashkenazi Jews from Europe, especially the somewhat stuffy and formal *yekkes*, German-speakers who arrived in the 1930s. Their language filled the cafés. The Centre is still mostly an Ashkenazi island, and some say that Haifa is the last of the truly Ashkenazi cities, yet the language one hears today in those cafés is no longer German, but mainly Hebrew, spoken as the mother tongue of the Israeli-born Jewish population already approaching retirement, and the language of their children and grandchildren, who like kids everywhere chose neither their birthplace nor their mother-tongue.

Ali, a semi-retired Palestinian lawyer who met his wife when both were political prisoners in Israel, takes me to his gym. He banters and jokes in Arabic and Hebrew with others. I think that most of the others are Jews, but I'm not sure. What strikes me is the extent to which Ali seems to feel at ease and at home among those who may be or have been enemies or allies. He holds his head up high. When I meet his family at home, I have no doubt concerning their anger and resentment in regard to Israeli policies. They hold their heads just as high.

Israeli Jews today describe Haifa as a Sleeping Beauty, although in the past they named it Red Haifa because of its politics and trades unions. People still say: while Jerusalem prays and Tel Aviv dances, Haifa works. For its Palestinian refugees who fled in 1948, and

their children and grandchildren, Haifa is the beloved, lost, adored in memory and longed for. Many of the Palestinians living there today say it's the best place in Israel for an Arab, a city where they feel truly at home. Indeed it is their home

Without a doubt, the setting has a majestic quality and includes vistas of great beauty, of forests and gardens, and splendid views of the sea and across its bay to the city of Acre. Yet, idealisation and romantic attributes aside, Haifa and its skyline have their share of blemishes, of unattractive industrial quarters polluting the air and clogging the roads that lead around the bay. Abandoned and ruined buildings where Palestinian refugees had worked and lived in the old downtown and nearby neighbourhoods still bear witness to the 1948 war. Not all Israeli Jews or Palestinians adore Haifa, or each other. On the whole, they get along despite the horrors going on in Israel and the Occupied Territories, and the experiences of war, particularly the Lebanese war of 2006 when Haifa was hit by missiles, and Jews and Arabs suffered indiscriminately, and despite terrorist attacks in public places like the Matza restaurant in 2002 which killed among 15 others Dov Chernobrouda, a Jewish architect who had worked for years together with Palestinians and was an activist for peace.

Today's Haifa seems a bit sleepy. The somnolence of its people is legendary. It's said that the British Mandate's only legacy is the curfew; that a Jerusalem pundit when asked if he'd ever visited Haifa replied that he'd been there twice, but it was closed both times; and that young newly-weds are advised, if they want any attention from their spouse, to go for it before 9.30 in the evening when everyone in town falls asleep. Haifa works. So they say. In any case, the city today seems calm, quiet, fairly easy to get around if you don't like or mind steps, pleasant, and somehow alive and always promising of better days to come.

Varying accounts of an ongoing urban saga are the stuff of the following pages. The texts put together in this issue portray Haifa and its inhabitants at different moments of its past and present. They do not offer a complete picture, nor are they intended to. They include sightings, vignettes, histories, short stories, poems, none of them really impartial. States of mind. Voices.

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