

DECEMBER 25, 1988, TO JANUARY 8, 1989

Arrival

It was Christmas Eve and the terminal at Ben Gurion Airport in what is now called Lod, outside Tel Aviv, was a mass confusion of passengers and baggage. As I stood in front of the curly, black-haired Sephardic Israeli immigration clerk, waiting for her to check my passport, I realized that I could have mistaken her for a Palestinian. Her head was bowed in concentration, and she looked up at me and glared momentarily when I requested that she not stamp my passport.¹

Outside, the confusion was even greater, as hundreds of people pressed against a barricade, shouting to attract the attention of those they had come to meet. Dazed, we pushed our heavy luggage carts up an incline. A striking woman, who looked very much like the Sephardic immigration clerk, spotted Eileen and elbowed her way through the crowd to greet us. Mounira, the Palestinian-born American who was leading our group, was an intense woman in her late twenties. Her rapid-fire description of the trip to the airport barely gave us time to exchange more than simple introductions. Her excitement, we were to discover in the course of the next week, was more about rediscovering her own roots than about the trip on which we were about to embark together. Only five years old when her family fled their home on the Mount of Olives after the 1967 war, Mounira was beginning a journey of her own.

1. The request not to have one's passport stamped is both a political statement and a pragmatic act. Except for Egypt, no Arab country will permit entry to the holder of a passport with an Israeli stamp.

We pushed the luggage carts through the rain to a waiting Volkswagen van. Mohammed Barakat, whose van would become our major means of transportation for the next week, introduced himself simply as "Mike." One of the few Palestinian men who did *not* have a mustache, Mohammed, a Jerusalemite, had been a painter by trade. However, since the only painting contracts still available were in the Jewish settlements or in Israeli West Jerusalem, in the spirit of the *intifada* he had sought other work. Mohammed split his time between clerking at the National Palace Hotel and serving as a driver for a children's project.

The Green Line separating Israel from Occupied Palestine is invisible. We passed no border markers or checkpoints as we drove from the airport and crossed from Israeli West Jerusalem to Palestinian East Jerusalem.² But there was a distinct difference between the two sides. The Israeli side looked like a city that had gone to bed, with some stragglers still on the street, some stores still lit. The Palestinian side looked like a ghost town with no inhabitants left, a reflection of Palestinian life since the beginning of the *intifada*, when "normal" activities, including movie-going, restaurant dining, and other forms of entertainment were curtailed.

Jawdat, the Bethlehem based journalist who would serve as our guide, was waiting for us at the National Palace Hotel and led us to the downstairs restaurant as soon as we washed up. Later we discovered that he had not come to the airport because he carried a "green card," the identity card issued to those who were forbidden to cross into Green Line Israel.³ A solidly built, jovial man in his early thirties, Jawdat wears a perpetual, somewhat enigmatic smile. He speaks so softly that you have to lean close to hear him.

We were too tired and jet-lagged to make much sense of the schedule that Mounira and Jawdat proposed to us over dinner, and we were eager to stretch our legs and get some fresh air. Walking around a strange place for the first time at night is always foreboding. The dark shadows cast by the few street lights seemed particularly ominous, and Marvin, Ron, and I were reluctant to wander too far from the hotel on the deserted wet sidewalks of East Jerusalem.

2. Although the Israelis annexed East Jerusalem after the 1967 war and consider it part of Israel, only South Africa, El Salvador, and Costa Rica have recognized the legitimacy of this annexation.

3. The "green card" is issued to anyone who has served time in prison.

A light drizzle was falling, and the city was just beginning to awaken as dawn broke, our first day in Occupied Palestine, Christmas 1988. The streets around the hotel, which had seemed so threatening the night before, looked completely harmless in the light of day. Sleepless from jet lag, Marvin and I walked the few blocks to the Old City.⁴

The stone walls were glistening in the rain, and the quiet beauty of the ancient city was not yet broken by the hawkers. The morning still belonged to the cats, who sniffed around for scraps of food and lapped at the edges of small puddles—the cats and the pairs of Israeli Border Guards who slouched against the walls.⁵

The nonchalant poses of the soldiers belied their true role in the Old City, a role that became increasingly apparent as the flow of traffic through Damascus Gate began to pick up. Young girls in checkered uniforms, rushing down the narrow lane heading for school, jostled bread sellers, their carts loaded with fresh loaves of pita bread. Still sleepy-eyed, the school girls looked surprised as the soldiers stopped them to examine their book bags.

Watching this routine, I recalled my own girlhood and the time that four youths—only slightly younger than these Israeli soldiers—had stopped me on the side street near our apartment. “Where are you going?” they asked me. “To the library,” I answered. Grabbing my books and examining them for the telltale Hebrew letters, they asked, “Are you Jewish?” “No,” I lied, fearing their knives and remembering earlier episodes when boys like them had jumped us on our way to *cheder*. The youths who had terrorized me were local hooligans, brought up on a diet of anti-Semitism. Being subjected periodically to these acts of harassment was part of growing up in Chicago—at least in the 1940s.

For these girls in Jerusalem, the daily intimidation was part of their growing up in Occupied Palestine. But rather than facing the occasional menace of individual bullies, they were confronted regularly by officially sanctioned armed men—the soldiers of the occupying army. School offered no escape. When the Israeli authorities did allow the schools to remain open, they were often invaded by tear gas-wielding soldiers. At those

4. When I refer to the Old City, unless otherwise specified, I am talking about the walled Old City. The adjacent area is also known as the Old City.

5. There are several kinds of uniformed military personnel that police the Occupied Territories. In East Jerusalem, for the most part, it is the Jerusalem Police and the Border Patrol—many of whose members are Israeli Palestinian Druse. In other parts of the West Bank and in Gaza, army units of the “Israeli Defense Forces” (IDF) are deployed as the occupying military force.

times the girls fought back, their usual restraint transformed into undisguised rage.

On our way back to the hotel we noticed three Border Guards sprawled casually on the steps of the post office on Saladin Street in East Jerusalem. They leaped to their feet when they spotted two approaching Palestinian youths laden with plastic bags of fruit. Two of the soldiers nabbed the young men and roughly flung them against the wall, forcing them to assume spread-eagle positions, their hands on the ledge above them. Watching from across the street, we could see the two youths pull their hands back from the ledge as a third soldier, standing above them, stomped on them with his boots. After delivering several kicks, the Israeli soldiers allowed the Palestinian youths to stand "at ease" while they examined their identification cards. That routine accomplished in a cursory fashion, the soldiers let the cards drop to the ground, forcing the young men to kneel down in submission in order to retrieve them. The Border Guards waved the two youths away but kept their bags of fruit, to which they promptly helped themselves. Looking up, they noticed us across the street, cameras held to our eyes. Showing no shame—in fact, the opposite—they mounted the ledge and performed a "bump and grind."

I had seen incidents of police brutality in Los Angeles, been intimidated by the Guardia Civil in Franco-era Spain, and had been frightened by armed personnel carriers creeping along the streets in Lima, Peru. Still, the scene I witnessed outside the East Jerusalem post office set in motion a rage that took me totally by surprise and that surfaced repeatedly during the next ten days.