

An enduring memory

By Munira Shehabi

It felt like Judgment Day, but it was happening to us, in Yarmuk... Suddenly, not one stone was left upon another.

Everyone was running and crying... The one who lost his loved ones wanted reassurance, but he himself was lost, lost within himself, not knowing what he wanted or what to do, or what he felt, or what he should say. He felt himself, yet he was not himself, present and absent, as if unconscious, yet he kept moving, something inside him telling him "Keep going, in movement there is survival, in stopping there is death."

Running, not knowing where his legs are taking him, towards salvation or not, could this really be the end? No, we will surely come out alive, could this be reality? A nightmare, maybe, or a hallucination, it could be anything. Right now, it doesn't matter whether you know or understand, what matters is that you keep going, keep running and dust yourself off, the moment will come when you'll finally understand it all, what matters is that you live for that moment.

There is a struggle inside each one of us, lost thoughts and feelings crashing into each other, there's smoke inside us, smoke outside us, and smoke is spreading everywhere.

The sound of shelling terrified the adults more than the children, but the eldest among us had to manage their fear and hide it, they had to trample on their feelings for the sake of the little ones, they had to maintain their image and stability for the sake of their children. In the eyes of the children, they were the fearless superheroes, the saviors who would protect them and take them away from it all, but the children did not know that inside the adult was a frightened little child just like them, without an adult to protect them. Truly, if only adults had adults of their own to protect them too, to fear for their safety, to act strong for them.

We ran to the shelters to flee the shelling because they said it was an airstrike. As if aerial bombardment were more lethal, but artillery shelling more peaceful, as if death came vertically, not horizontally. It was our first time being bombed by warplanes. After sunset, we went back to the house to gather the household items as a means of precaution. I was walking around the house contemplating it, contemplating every single thing inside it as if for the first time (deep inside, maybe I felt it would be the last time), I was walking around in it, wanting to embrace it, but if only it could have embraced me! Maybe I felt I was bidding farewell to it, I don't know...

And then, shells and clashes started erupting in every corner of the camp, as if the camp were screaming from all directions, as if it were calling out to us, crying out for help, but how to tell it that we were only waiting for it to stop crying so that we could escape from it, how to tell it that it is dear to us indeed, but our own souls are dearer.

Every time we heard a shell's whistle, we were relieved that it had passed over us without landing on our heads, in that moment we were on a high, because we had dodged it, if only we could have celebrated the shell's trajectory missing us, but we barely felt that joy before we remembered that there were many more shells to come, as if we were playing hide-and-seek with death, will it get us or will we steal away!

It was a truly terrifying night, my first time ever experiencing such a reeking death smell, nesting in every corner of the camp. We kept hearing news about someone from the camp being martyred, and the news dropped on us harder than missiles which were truly more merciful, since it only took a moment for their fire to go out and cool down, but the fire of the news continues to burn us to this day.

We had a small room in the house where we would hide as soon as we heard the shelling. It was a winter night with heavy and harsh rain. Only the rain wasn't water, the rain was missiles and rockets. This rain irrigated the whole camp with the blood of its children, but at the time we didn't know the harvest we would reap from this sowing!!

Dawn brought in its calm and tranquility, and with it the news of a mandatory forced evacuation from the camp, or else the opposing camp would slaughter the women and the children, just as they had done in other regions. Such news wouldn't usually scare the women and the children as much as it would scare the men. Maybe the sense of responsibility is harsher than death itself!

This is when the men gathered and decided they must fight, but first, they had to evacuate the women and the children from the camp, so that they would not be used against them by the armed men. Our men were like any Eastern Arab man, they fear for their land and their honor runs through their blood.

But truly, we were not alone, the ones before went through the same, they lived through the same Nakba as us.

I relived these scenes again, and I heard Hajjeh Aminah al-Sayyid talk about them, describing the Nakba nights, and how the days passed, how heavy they were and how slowly time went, the night was long and the day was short, if there even was a day to begin with.¹

The Hajjeh told me "The Jews would bomb us with cannons and shells from the heights of Safad, my dear, they would strike us at night to scare us even more, to spread even more terror." As soon as the darkness of the night intensified, the cannons would knock at the borders of the town, trespassing it, and trespassing the hearts of children and women along the way. At that time, we would flee to the town of Rameesh, which was closest to us, and we would stay there until the gunpowder's fire cooled down, it burned our hearts with its sound and with each strike, and our men were like lions defending their land and dignity, defending the sanctuary of

¹ Aminah al-Sayyid, born 1936, Safad - Palestine, Nakba Archive
<https://libraries.aub.edu.lb/poha/Record/4161>

their lives. We would wait for the sun to come up to go back to our town. The same episodes repeated every few days, but we never lost hope of returning.

One night, we woke up to the sound of people in the streets screaming and shouting “The Jews have invaded us, wake up, wake up...!” At the time, the Jews were planting their wickedness and poison among our homes, such was their deceitful nature, just like foxes.

They planted explosive mines among the houses, to shovel away our souls and take the land, but their deceit turned against them and they fled in fear, the second they heard the sound of gunshots from the Palestinian side, it exposed them, so they retreated defenseless and powerless, despite the fact that the gun sound came from only one rifle, it intimidated the Jews, who thought that the village had weapons and as long as there were weapons there would be confrontations between the two parties, so their plan to mine the town failed. But fear started seeping into the souls of the women and the children, each one of their breaths and sighs weighing on the men and burdening them with a responsibility greater than all existing responsibilities.

Friday night is a blessed night, when people fall asleep imagining a new day, a day known for gathering families and loved ones in sweet moments, but for us it was a night different than for the rest of the world.

Safad fell, the whole region fell, and our town was massacred during the resistance our men led against the Jews. At the time, we had no choice but to either surrender and submit to the Jews, or live and save the homeland. We were accustomed to the yearly sight of convoys, when people went to Hajj, but that night the convoys carried displacement, loss and destruction, they carried pain, we did not know we would carry pain and oppression with us for generations to come. They told us we'd leave for seven days and then return, and everything would be as it was before.

Seven days carried over into seventy-four years... We left the camp with a promise of a week after which we'd return. This famous saying runs among all Palestinians "It's just a week, ya Um Ahmad". The week of '48 turned into 74 years and the same scene repeats itself: families running, the greatly terrifying scene, convoys of pain and displacement, the search for a lifeline of safety and security. We left our homes and our land and our wealth behind, carrying documents that would ensure our return after this one-week departure that never ended.”

When I was young, every time someone mentioned the word “Nakba” in front of me, I would not understand what it meant, it felt like an abstract word, something unclear, an unknown idea, every time I asked anyone about it they would answer “It was the day the Jews expelled us from Palestine”. I imagined the scene many times, but it remained incomplete, not once did I imagine it carried this feeling of humiliation, oppression, loss, helplessness, the feeling of such fear and pain. But when I lived through all these events and emotions in Yarmuk, I understood the essence of the word “Nakba”. The Yarmuk Nakba was a miniature representation, or just one scene among the scenes of the Palestinian Nakba. The same people were struck by this

displacement twice, and those who did not experience both had died before the second one happened, they had lived through the first one, telling it to their children believing it was a past memory, not expecting their children to drink from the same bitter cup they had tasted and suffered from.

Nakba, five letters and at the end of each letter lies the pain of an entire people. We are the generation that sacrificed the springtime of life for a lifetime of wars, displacement and humiliation.

The catastrophes in our lives continue as if we are a people destined to remain afflicted, wherever we go, whatever happens.

Years have passed, and autumn leaves have fallen, and we are still waiting for the springtime of life to hurdle back to us.