# 43

IN SEPTEMBER and October 1947 the papers were full of guesses, analyses, assessments, and suppositions. Would there be a vote on partition at the General Assembly? Would the Arabs succeed in getting the recommendations changed or the vote canceled? And if it did go to the vote, where would we get a two-thirds majority?

Every evening Father would sit between Mother and me at the kitchen table, and after drying the oilcloth he would spread out some cards and start calculating, in pencil, in the sickly yellow light, the chances of winning the vote. Evening by evening his spirits fell. All his calculations indicated a certain and crushing defeat.

"All twelve Arab and Muslim states will naturally vote against us. And the Catholic Church is definitely putting pressure on the Catholic countries to vote against, because a Jewish state contradicts the fundamental belief of the Church, and there's no one like the Vatican when it comes to pulling strings behind the scenes. So we'll probably lose all twenty votes of the Latin American countries. And Stalin will undoubtedly instruct all his satellites in the Communist bloc to vote in accordance with his rigid anti-Zionist approach, so that makes another twelve votes against us. Not to mention England, which is always stirring up feeling against us everywhere and especially in her dominions, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, and they'll all be roped in to thwart any chance of a Hebrew state. What about France, and the countries that follow her? France will never dare to risk incurring the anger of the millions of Muslims in Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. Greece has close trade links with the whole Arab world, and there are big Greek communities in all the Arab countries. And what about America itself? Is America's support for the partition plan final? What happens if the intrigues of the giant oil companies and our enemies in the State Department tip the balance and outweigh President Truman's conscience?"

Over and over again Father calculated the balance of votes in the Assembly. Evening after evening he tried to soften the blow, to devise some coalition of countries that usually followed the United States, countries that might have reasons of their own to oppose the Arabs, and small, respectable countries like Denmark or Holland, countries that had witnessed the horrors of the genocide of the Jewish people and might now gird their loins and act according to the

dictates of their conscience rather than considerations of self-interest and oil.

Was the Silwani family, in their villa in Sheikh Jarrah (a mere forty minutes' walk from here), also sitting around a piece of paper at their kitchen table this very minute, making the same calculations in reverse? Were they worrying, just like us, which way Greece would vote, and chewing the tip of a pencil over the final decision of the Scandinavian countries? Did they also have their optimists and pessimists, their cynics and their prophets of doom? Were they also trembling every night, imagining that we were scheming, stirring things up, cunningly pulling strings? Were they also all asking what would happen here, what would come to pass? Were they just as frightened of us as we were of them?

And how about Aisha, and her parents in Talbieh? Was her whole family sitting in a room full of men with mustaches and jeweled women with angry faces and eyebrows that met above their noses, gathered in a circle around bowls of sugared orange peel, whispering among themselves and planning to "drown us in blood"? Did Aisha still sometimes play tunes she had learned from her Jewish piano teacher? Or was she forbidden to?

Or perhaps they were standing in a silent circle around their little boy's bed? Awwad. His leg had been amputated. Because of me. Or he was dying from blood poisoning. Because of me. His curious, innocent puppy-dog eyes were closed. Pressed tight with suffering. His face drawn and pale as ice. His forehead racked with pain. His pretty curls lying on the white pillow. Jest a moment rest a moment. Groaning and shaking with pain. Or quietly crying in a high-pitched baby voice. And his sister sitting by his bedside hating me because it was my fault, everything was my fault, it was my fault she was beaten so cruelly, so thoroughly, over and over again, on her back, her head, her frail shoulders, not the way a girl who has done something wrong is sometimes beaten, but like a stubborn horse. It was my fault.

Grandpa Alexander and Grandma Shlomit used to come around sometimes on those September evenings in 1947 to sit with us and take part in Father's vote-counting stock exchange. Also Hannah and Hayim Toren, or the Rudnickis,

Auntie Mala and Uncle Staszek, or the Abramskis, or our neighbors the Rosendorffs and Tosia and Gustav Krochmal. Mr. Krochmal had a tiny lock-up shop down Geula Street where he sat all day wearing a leather apron and horn-rimmed glasses, repairing dolls:

*Reliable healer from Danzig, toy doctor*

Once, when I was about five, Uncle Gustav mended my red-haired ballerina doll, Tsilly, for me for nothing, in his miniature workshop. Her freckled nose had broken off. Skillfully, with a special glue, Mr. Krochmal repaired her so well that you could hardly see the scar.

Mr. Krochmal believed in dialogue with our Arab neighbors. In his view, the residents of Kerem Avraham ought to get together a small, select deputation and go and hold talks with the mukhtars, sheikhs, and other dignitaries of the nearest Arab villages. After all, we had always enjoyed good neighborly relations, and even if the rest of the country was going out of its mind, there was no logical reason why here, in northwest Jerusalem, where there had never been any conflict or hostility between the two sides—

If he could only speak a little Arabic or English, he himself, Gustav Krochmal, who had applied his healing skills for many years to Arab and Jewish dolls alike, without distinction, would pick up his walking stick, cross the empty field that divided us from them, knock on their doors, and explain to them, in simple terms, from house to house—

Sergeant Wilk, Uncle Dudek, a handsome man who looked like an English colonel in a film and actually did serve the British at that time as a policeman, came around one evening and stayed for a while, bringing a box of *langues de chat* from a special chocolate factory. He drank a cup of coffee and chicory mixture, ate a couple of biscuits, and dazzled me with his smart black uniform with its row of silvery buttons, the leather belt that ran diagonally across his chest, and his black pistol that reposed in a gleaming holster on his hip, like a sleeping lion (only the butt protruded, giving me the shivers every time I looked at it). Uncle Dudek stayed a quarter of an hour or so, and it was only after my parents and their guests had begged him that he finally let out one or two veiled hints about what he had gathered from the veiled hints of some high-ranking British police officers who knew what they were talking about:

"It's a pity about all your calculations and guesses. There's not going to be any partition. There aren't going to be two states, seeing as what the whole of the Negev is going to remain in British hands so they can protect their bases in Suez, and the British will also hang on to Haifa, the town as well as the port, and the main airfields at Lydda, Ekron, and Ramat David, and their clump of army camps at Sarafand. All the rest, including Jerusalem, the Arabs will get, seeing as what America wants them to agree in return to let the Jews have a kind of pocket between Tel Aviv and Hadera. The Jews will be permitted to establish an autonomous canton in this pocket, a sort of Jewish Vatican City, and we'll gradually be allowed to bring into this pocket up to a hundred thousand or at most a hundred and fifty thousand survivors from the DP camps. If necessary, this Jewish pocket will be defended by a few thousand US marines from the Sixth Fleet, from their giant aircraft carriers, seeing as that they don't believe the Jews will be able to defend themselves under these conditions."

"But that's a ghetto!" Mr. Abramski shouted in a terrible voice. "A prison! Solitary confinement!"

Gustav Krochmal, for his part, smiled and suggested pleasantly:

"It would be much better if the Americans took this Lilliput they want to give us, and simply gave us their two aircraft carriers instead: we'd be more comfortable there, and safer too. And a bit less crowded."

Mala Rudnicki begged the policeman, implored him, as though she were pleading with him for our lives:

"What about Galilee? Galilee, dear Dudek? And the Valleys? Won't we even get the Valleys? Why can't they leave us that at least? Why must they take the poor man's last ewe-lamb?"

Father remarked sadly:

"There's no such thing as the poor man's last ewe-lamb, Mala: the poor man had only one ewe-lamb, and they came and took that away from him."

After a short silence Grandpa Alexander exploded furiously, going red in the face, puffing up as if he was about to boil over:

"He was quite right, that villain from the mosque in Jaffa! He was quite

right! We really are just dung! *Nu*, what: this is the end! *Vsyo! Khvatit!* That's enough! All the anti-Semites in the world are very right. Khmelnicki was right. Petliura was right. Hitler was right also: *nu*, what. There really is a curse on us! God really does hate us! As for me," Grandpa groaned, flaming red, shooting flecks of saliva in every direction, thumping on the table till he made the teaspoons rattle in the glasses, "nu, what, *ty skazal*, the same way as God hates us so I hate him back! I hate God! Let him die already! The anti-Semite from Berlin is burnt, but up there is sitting another Hitler! Much worse! *Nu*, what! He's sitting there laughing at us, the rascal!"

Grandma Shlomit took hold of his arm and commanded:

"Zisya! that's enough! *Shto ty govorish! Genug! Iber genug!*"

They somehow calmed him down. They poured him a little brandy and put some biscuits in front of him.

But Uncle Dudek, Sergeant Wilk, apparently considered that words such as those that Grandpa had roared so desperately should not be uttered in the presence of the police, so he stood up, donned his splendid policeman's peaked cap, adjusted his holster on his left hip, and from the doorway offered us a chance of a reprieve, a ray of light, as though taking pity on us and condescending to respond positively to our appeal, at least up to a point:

"But there's another officer, an Irishman, a real character, who keeps repeating the same thing, that the Jews have more brains than the rest of the world put together, and they always end up landing on their feet. That's what he says. The question is, whose feet exactly do they land on? Good night, all. I must just ask you not to repeat anything I've told you, seeing as what it's inside information." (All his life, even as an old man, after living in Jerusalem for sixty years, Uncle Dudek always insisted on saying "seeing as what," and three generations of devoted sticklers for the language failed to teach him otherwise. Even his years of service as a senior police officer and eventually as chief of the Jerusalem police, and later as deputy director-general of the Ministry of Tourism, did not help. He always stayed just as he was—"seeing as what I'm just a stubborn Jew!").

# 44

FATHER EXPLAINED over supper one evening that at the General Assembly of the United Nations, which would meet on November 29, at Lake Success, near New York, a majority of at least two-thirds would be required if the UNSCOP report recommending the creation of two states on the territory of the British Mandate, one Jewish and one Arab, was to be adopted. The Muslim bloc, together with Britain, would do everything in their power to prevent such a majority. They wanted the whole territory to become an Arab state under British protection, just as some other Arab countries, including Egypt, Trans-Jordan, and Iraq, were de facto under British protection. On the other side, President Truman was working, contrary to his own State Department, for the partition proposal to be accepted.

Stalin's Soviet Union had surprisingly joined with the United States and also supported the establishment of a Jewish state side by side with an Arab one: he may have foreseen that a vote in favor of partition would lead to many years of bloody conflict in the region, which would enable the USSR to acquire a foothold in the area of British influence in the Middle East, close to the oil fields and the Suez Canal. Contorted calculations on the part of the superpowers coincided with one another, and apparently intersected with religious ambitions: the Vatican hoped to gain decisive influence in Jerusalem, which under the partition plan was to be under international control, i.e., neither Muslim nor Jewish. Considerations of conscience and sympathy intertwined with selfish, cynical ones: several European governments were seeking a way of somehow compensating the Jewish people for losing a third of its numbers at the hands of the German murderers and for generations of persecution. The same governments, however, were not averse to channeling the tide of hundreds of thousands of indigent displaced Eastern European Jews who had been languishing in camps since the defeat of Germany as far away as possible from their own territories and indeed from Europe.

Right up to the moment of the actual vote it was hard to foresee the outcome. Pressures and temptations, threats and intrigues and even bribes managed to sway the crucial votes of three or four little republics in Latin America and the Far East back and forth. The government of Chile, which had been in favor of partition, yielded to Arab pressure and instructed its representative at the UN to vote against. Haiti announced its intention of voting

against. The Greek delegation was of a mind to abstain, but also decided at the last minute to support the Arab position. The Philippine representative refused to commit himself. Paraguay hesitated; its delegate to the UN, Dr. César Acosta, complained that he had not received clear instructions from his government. In Siam there had been a coup d'état, and the new government had recalled its delegation and not yet dispatched a new one. Liberia promised to support the proposal. Haiti changed its mind, under American pressure, and decided to vote in favor.* Meanwhile, in Amos Street, in Mr. Auster's grocery shop or at Mr. Caleko's, the news agent and stationer, they told of a good-looking Arab diplomat who had exerted his charms on the female representative of a small state and managed to get her to vote against the partition plan, even though her government had promised the Jews their support. "But at once," Mr. Kolodny, the proprietor of Kolodny's Printing Press, chuckled, "they sent a clever Jew to spill the beans to the infatuated diplomat's husband, and a clever Jewess to spill the beans to the diplomatic Don Juan's wife, and in case that doesn't do the trick, they've also arranged..." (here the conversation switched to Yiddish, so I wouldn't understand).

*See Jorge García Granados, *The Birth of Israel: The Drama As I Saw It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948).

On Saturday morning, they said, the General Assembly would convene at a place called Lake Success and there they would determine our fate. "Who is for life and who for destruction," said Mr. Abramski. And Mrs. Tosia Krochmal fetched the extension cord from the sewing machine in her husband's dolls' hospital to enable the Lembergs to bring their heavy black radio receiver outside and set it up on the table on the balcony. (It was the only radio in Amos Street, if not in the whole of Kerem Avraham.) They would put it on at full volume, and we would all assemble in the Lembergs' apartment, in the yard, in the street, on the balcony of the apartment upstairs and on the balcony opposite, and so the whole street would be able to hear the live broadcast, and learn the verdict and what the future held for us ("if indeed there is a future after this Saturday").

"The name Lake Success," Father remarked, "is the opposite of the Sea of Tears that symbolizes the fate of our people in Bialik. Your Highness," he continued, "will be allowed to take part on this occasion, as befits his new role as devout newspaper reader and as our political and military commentator."

Mother said:

"Yes, but with a sweater on: it's chilly out."

But on Saturday morning it turned out that the fateful meeting due to take place that afternoon at Lake Success would start here only in the evening, because of the time difference between New York and Jerusalem, or perhaps because Jerusalem was such an out-of-the-way place, so far from the great world, over the hills and far away, that everything that happened out there only reached us faintly, and always after a delay. The vote, they worked out, would be taken when it was very late in Jerusalem, close to midnight, an hour when this child ought to be long since tucked in bed, because we have to get up for school in the morning.

Some rapid sentences were exchanged between Mother and Father, a short exchange in shchphzhenic Polish and yanikhatchuic Russian, at the end of which Mother said:

"It might be best after all if you go to bed as usual tonight, but we'll sit outside by the fence and listen to the broadcast from the Lembergs' balcony, and if the result is positive, we'll wake you up even if it's midnight and tell you. We promise."

After midnight, toward the end of the vote, I woke up. My bed was underneath the window that looked out on the street, so all I had to do was kneel and peer through the slats of the shutters. I shivered.

Like a frightening dream, crowds of shadows stood massed together silently by the yellow light of the street lamp, in our yard, in the neighboring yards, on balconies, in the roadway, like a vast assembly of ghosts. Hundreds of people not uttering a sound, neighbors, acquaintances, and strangers, some in their nightclothes and others in jacket and tie, occasional men in hats or caps, some women bareheaded, others in dressing gowns with scarves around their heads, some of them carrying sleepy children on their shoulders, and on the edge of the crowd I noticed here and there an elderly woman sitting on a stool or a very old man who had been brought out into the street with his chair.

The whole crowd seemed to have been turned to stone in that frightening night silence, as if they were not real people but hundreds of dark silhouettes

painted onto the canvas of the flickering darkness. As though they had died on their feet. Not a word was heard, not a cough or a footstep. No mosquito hummed. Only the deep, rough voice of the American presenter blaring from the radio, which was set at full volume and made the night air tremble, or it may have been the voice of the president of the Assembly, the Brazilian Oswaldo Aranha. One after another he read out the names of the last countries on the list, in English alphabetical order, followed immediately by the reply of their representative. United Kingdom: abstains. Union of Soviet Socialist Republics: yes. United States: yes. Uruguay: yes. Venezuela: yes. Yemen: no. Yugoslavia: abstains.

At that the voice suddenly stopped, and an otherworldly silence descended and froze the scene, a terrified, panic-stricken silence, a silence of hundreds of people holding their breath, such as I have never heard in my life either before or after that night.

Then the thick, slightly hoarse voice came back, shaking the air as it summed up with a rough dryness brimming with excitement: Thirty-three for. Thirteen against. Ten abstentions and one country absent from the vote. The resolution is approved.

His voice was swallowed up in a roar that burst from the radio, overflowing from the galleries in the hall at Lake Success, and after a couple more seconds of shock and disbelief, of lips parted as though in thirst and eyes wide open, our faraway street on the edge of Kerem Avraham in northern Jerusalem also roared all at once in a first terrifying shout that tore through the darkness and the buildings and trees, piercing itself, not a shout of joy, nothing like the shouts of spectators in sports grounds or excited rioting crowds, perhaps more like a scream of horror and bewilderment, a cataclysmic shout, a shout that could shift rocks, that could freeze your blood, as though all the dead who had ever died here and all those still to die had received a brief window to shout, and the next moment the scream of horror was replaced by roars of joy and a medley of hoarse cries and "The Jewish People Lives" and somebody trying to sing Hatikvah and women shrieking and clapping and "Here in the Land Our Fathers Loved," and the whole crowd started to revolve slowly around itself as though it were being stirred in a huge cement mixer, and there were no more restraints, and I jumped into my trousers but didn't bother with a shirt or sweater and shot out our door, and some neighbor or stranger picked me up so I wouldn't be trampled underfoot, and I was passed from hand to hand until I landed on my

father's shoulders near our front gate. My father and mother were standing there hugging one another like two children lost in the woods, as I had never seen them before or since, and for a moment I was between them inside their hug and a moment later I was back on Father's shoulders and my very cultured, polite father was standing there shouting at the top of his voice, not words or wordplay or Zionist slogans, not even cries of joy, but one long naked shout like before words were invented.

Others were singing now, everyone was singing, but my father, who couldn't sing and didn't know the words of the popular songs, did not stop but went on with his long shout to the end of his lungs *aaaahhh*, and when he ran out of breath, he inhaled like a drowning man and went on shouting, this man who wanted to be a famous professor and deserved to become one, but now he was all just *aaahhhh.* And I was surprised to see my mother's hand stroking his wet head and the back of his neck, and then I felt her hand on my head and my back too because I might unawares have been helping my father shout, and my mother's hand stroked the two of us over and over again, perhaps to soothe us or perhaps not, perhaps out of the depths she was also trying to share with him and me in our shout and with the whole street, the whole neighborhood, the whole city, and the whole country, my sad mother was trying to participate this time—no, definitely not the whole city but only the Jewish areas, because Sheikh Jarrah, Katamon, Bakaa, and Talbieh must have heard us that night wrapped in a silence that might have resembled the terrified silence that lay upon the Jewish neighborhoods before the result of the vote was announced. In the Silwanis' house in Sheikh Jarrah and in Aisha's home in Talbieh and the home of the man in the clothes shop, the beloved man Gepetto with the bags under his compassionate eyes, there were no celebrations tonight. They must have heard the sounds of rejoicing from the Jewish streets, they may have stood at their windows to watch the few joyful fireworks that injured the dark sky, pursing their lips in silence. Even the parrots were silent. And the fountain in the pool in the garden. Even though neither Katamon, Talbieh, nor Bakaa knew or could know yet that in another five months they would fall empty, intact, into the hands of the Jews and that new people would come and live in those vaulted houses of pink stone and those villas with their many cornices and arches.

Then there was dancing and weeping on Amos Street, in the whole of Kerem Avraham and in all the Jewish neighborhoods; flags appeared, and slogans

written on strips of cloth, car horns blared, and "Raise the Banner High to Zion" and "Here in the Land Our Fathers Loved," sho-far blasts sounded from all the synagogues, and Torah scrolls were taken out of the holy arks and were caught up in the dancing, and "God Will Rebuild Galilee" and "Come and Behold How Great Is This Day," and later, in the small hours of the morning, Mr. Auster suddenly opened his shop, and all the kiosks in Zephaniah Street and Geula Street and Chancellor Street and Jaffa Road and King George opened, and the bars opened up all over the city and handed out soft drinks and snacks and even alcoholic drinks until the first light of dawn, bottles of fruit drink, beer, and wine passed from hand to hand and from mouth to mouth, strangers hugged each other in the streets and kissed each other with tears, and startled English policemen were also dragged into the circles of dancers and softened up with cans of beer and sweet liqueurs, and frenzied revelers climbed up on British armored cars and waved the flag of the state that had not been established yet, but tonight, over there in Lake Success, it had been decided that it had the right to be established. And it would be established 167 days and nights later, on Friday, May 14, 1948, but one in every hundred men, women, old folk, children, and babies in those crowds of Jews who were dancing, reveling, drinking, and weeping for joy, fully one percent of the excited people who spilled out onto the streets that night, would die in the war that the Arabs started within seven hours of the General Assembly's decision at Lake Success—to be helped, when the British left, by the regular armed forces of the Arab League, columns of infantry, armor, artillery, fighter planes, and bombers, from the south, the east, and the north, the regular armies of five Arab states invading with the intention of putting an end to the new state within one or two days of its proclamation.

But my father said to me as we wandered there, on the night of November 29,1947, me riding on his shoulders, among the rings of dancers and merrymakers, not as though he was asking me but as though he knew and was hammering in what he knew with nails: Just you look, my boy, take a very good look, son, take it all in, because you won't forget this night to your dying day and you'll tell your children, your grandchildren, and your great-grandchildren about this night when we're long gone.

And very late, at a time when this child had never been allowed not to be fast asleep in bed, maybe at three or four o'clock, I crawled under my blanket in the dark fully dressed. And after a while Father's hand lifted my blanket in the dark,

not to be angry with me because I'd got into bed with my clothes on but to get in and lie down next to me, and he was in his clothes too, which were drenched in sweat from the crush of the crowds, just like mine (and we had an iron rule: you must never, for any reason, get between the sheets in your outdoor clothes). My father lay beside me for a few minutes and said nothing, although normally he detested silence and hurried to banish it. But this time he did not touch the silence that was there between us but shared it, with just his hand lightly stroking my head. As though in this darkness my father had turned into my mother.

Then he told me in a whisper, without once calling me Your Highness or Your Honor, what some hooligans did to him and his brother David in Odessa and what some Gentile boys did to him at his Polish school in Vilna, and the girls joined in too, and the next day, when his father, Grandpa Alexander, came to the school to register a complaint, the bullies refused to return the torn trousers but attacked his father, Grandpa, in front of his eyes, forced him down onto the paving stones in the middle of the playground and removed his trousers too, and the girls laughed and made dirty jokes, saying that the Jews were all so-and-sos, while the teachers watched and said nothing, or maybe they were laughing too.

And still in a voice of darkness with his hand still losing its way in my hair (because he was not used to stroking me), my father told me under my blanket in the early hours of November 30,1947, "Bullies may well bother you in the street or at school someday. They may do it precisely because you are a bit like me. But from now on, from the moment we have our own state, you will never be bullied just because you are a Jew and because Jews are so-and-sos. Not that. Never again. From tonight that's finished here. Forever."

I reached out sleepily to touch his face, just below his high forehead, and all of a sudden instead of his glasses my fingers met tears. Never in my life, before or after that night, not even when my mother died, did I see my father cry. And in fact I didn't see him cry that night either: it was too dark. Only my left hand saw.

A few hours later, at seven o'clock, while we and probably all our neighbors were asleep, shots were fired in Sheikh Jarrah at a Jewish ambulance that was on its way from the city center to Hadassah Hospital on Mount Scopus. All over the

country Arabs attacked Jewish buses on the highways, killed and wounded passengers, and fired with light arms and machine guns into outlying suburbs and isolated settlements. The Arab Higher Committee headed by Jamal Husseini declared a general strike and sent the crowds into the streets and mosques, where religious leaders called for a jihad against the Jews. A couple of days later, hundreds of armed Arabs came out of the Old City, singing bloodthirsty songs, roaring verses from the Qur'an, howling "*idbah al-Yahud*" (butcher the Jews), and firing volleys in the air. The English police accompanied them, and British armored cars, it was reported, led the crowd that burst into the Jewish shopping center at the eastern end of Mamilla Road and looted and set fire to the whole area. Forty shops were burned down. British soldiers and policemen formed barriers across Princess Mary Street and prevented the defense forces of the Haganah from coming to the help of the Jews who were caught in the shopping center, and even confiscated their arms and arrested sixteen of them. The following day, in retaliation, the paramilitary Irgun burned down the Rex Cinema, which was apparently under Arab ownership.

In the first week of the troubles some twenty Jews were killed. By the end of the second week about two hundred Jews and Arabs had died throughout the country. From the beginning of December 1947 until March 1948 the initiative was in the hands of the Arab forces; the Jews in Jerusalem and elsewhere had to content themselves with static defense, because the British thwarted the Haganah's attempts to launch counterattacks, arrested its men, and confiscated their weapons. Local semiregular Arab forces, together with hundreds of armed volunteers from the neighboring Arab countries and some two hundred British soldiers who had defected to the Arabs and fought beside them, blocked the highways and reduced the Jewish presence to a fragmented mosaic of beleaguered settlements and blocks of settlements that could be kept supplied with food, fuel, and ammunition only by means of convoys.

While the British still continued to govern and used their power mainly to help the Arabs in their war and to tie the Jews' hands, Jewish Jerusalem was gradually cut off from the rest of the country. The only road linking it with Tel Aviv was blocked by Arab forces, and convoys carrying food and supplies were able to make their way up from the coast only at irregular intervals and at the cost of heavy losses. By the end of December 1947, the Jewish parts of Jerusalem were de facto under siege. Regular Iraqi forces, whom the British administration had allowed to take control of the waterworks at Rosh ha-Ayin, blew up the pumping installations and Jewish Jerusalem was left without water,

apart from wells and reservoirs. Isolated Jewish areas like the Jewish Quarter within the walls of the Old City, Yemin Moshe, Mekor Hayim, and Ramat Rahel underwent a siege within a siege as they were cut off from the other Jewish parts of the city. An "emergency committee" set up by the Jewish Agency supervised the rationing of food and the tankers that traveled the streets between bouts of shelling distributing a bucket of water per person every two or three days. Bread, vegetables, sugar, milk, eggs, and other foodstuffs were strictly rationed and were distributed to families under a system of food coupons, until supplies ran out and instead we received occasional meager rations of powdered milk, dry rusks, and strange-smelling egg powder. Drugs and medical supplies had almost run out. The wounded were sometimes operated on without anesthetic. The electricity supply collapsed, and since it was virtually impossible to obtain paraffin, we lived for several months in the dark, or by candlelight.

Our cramped basement-like apartment was turned into a kind of bomb shelter for the residents of the apartments above us, being safer from shelling and shooting. All the windowpanes were taken out, and we barricaded the windows with sandbags. We lived in uninterrupted cavelike darkness, night and day, from March 1948 until the following August or September. In this thick darkness, breathing fetid air that had no escape, we were joined at intervals by some twenty or twenty-five persons, neighbors, strangers, acquaintances, refugees from front-line neighborhoods, who slept on mattresses and mats. They included two very elderly women who sat all day on the floor in the corridor staring into space, a half-crazed old man who called himself the Prophet Jeremiah and constantly lamented the destruction of Jerusalem and foretold for all of us Arab gas chambers near Ramallah "where they've already started gassing 2,100 Jews per day," as well as Grandpa Alexander and Grandma Shlomit, and Grandpa Alexander's widowed elder brother (Aunt Tsipora had died in 1946), Uncle Joseph himself—Professor Klausner—with his sister-in-law Haya Elitsedek: the two of them had managed, virtually at the last minute, to escape from Talpiot, which was cut off and encircled, and taken refuge with us. Now the two lay fully dressed, with their shoes on, alternately dozing and waking—because on account of the darkness it was hard to tell night from day—on the floor in our tiny kitchen, which was considered the least noisy place in the apartment. (Mr. Agnon, too, we were told, had left Talpiot with his wife and was staying with friends in Rehavia.)

Uncle Joseph was constantly lamenting, in his reedy, rather tearful voice, the fate of his library and his precious manuscripts, which he had had to leave behind in Talpiot and who knew if he would ever see them again. As for Haya Elitsedek, her only son, Ariel, had joined up and was fighting to defend Talpiot, and for a long time we did not know if he was alive or killed, wounded or taken prisoner.*

The Miudovniks, whose son Grisha was serving somewhere with the Palmach, had fled from their home on the front line in Beit Yisrael, and they too had landed up in our apartment, along with various other families who crowded together in the little room that had been my room before the war. I regarded Mr. Miudovnik with awe, because it emerged that he was the man who had written the greenish book that we all used at Tachkemoni School: *Arithmetic for Third-Graders* by Matityahu Miudovnik.

Mr. Miudovnik went out one morning and did not return by evening. He did not come back the next day either. So his wife went to the municipal mortuary, had a good look around, and came back happy and reassured because her husband was not among the dead.

When Mr. Miudovnik did not return the next day either, my father began to joke, as he usually did when he wanted to banish silence or dispel gloom. Our dear Matya, he declared, has obviously found himself some fighting beauty in a khaki skirt and now he's her comrade in arms (this was his feeble attempt at a pun).

But after a quarter of an hour of this labored jollity Father suddenly turned serious and went off to the morgue himself, where, thanks to a pair of his own socks that he had lent to Matityahu Miudovnik, he managed to identify the body that had been smashed by an artillery shell; Mrs. Miudovnik had failed to recognize it because the face was missing.

*My father's cousin Ariel Elitsedek wrote about his experiences in the War of Liberation in his book *The Thirsty Sword* (Jerusalem: Ahiasaf, 1950).

During the months of the siege, my mother, my father, and I slept on a mattress at the end of the corridor, and all night long processions of people clambered

over us on their way to the toilet, which stank to high heaven because there was no water to flush it and because the window was blocked with sandbags. Every few minutes, when a shell landed, the whole hill shook, and the stone-built houses shuddered too. I was sometimes woken by the sound of bloodcurdling cries whenever one of the other sleepers in the apartment had a nightmare.

On February 1 a car bomb exploded outside the building of the English-language Jewish newspaper, the *Palestine Post.* The building was completely destroyed and suspicion fell on British policemen who had deserted to the Arab cause. On February 10 the defenders of Yemin Moshe managed to repel a heavy attack by semiregular Arab troops. On Sunday, February 22, at ten past six in the morning, an organization calling itself the "British Fascist Army" blew up three trucks loaded with dynamite in Ben Yehuda Street, in the heart of Jewish Jerusalem. Six-story buildings were reduced to rubble and a large part of the street was left in ruins. Fifty-two Jewish residents were killed in their homes, and some hundred and fifty were injured.

That day my shortsighted father went to the National Guard HQ that had been set up in a narrow lane off Zephaniah Street and offered to enlist. He had to admit that his previous military experience was limited to composing some illegal posters in English for the Irgun ("Shame on Perfidious Albion!," "Down with Nazi British repression!," and such).

On March 11 the American consul general's familiar car, with the consul general's Arab driver at the wheel, drove into the courtyard of the Jewish Agency building, the site of the offices of the Jewish organizations in Jerusalem and the country as a whole. Part of the building was destroyed and dozens of people were killed or injured. In the third week of March attempts to bring convoys of food and supplies up from the coast failed: the siege grew worse, and the city was on the brink of starvation, short of water, and at risk of epidemic.

The schools in our area had been closed since mid-December 1947.We children from the third and fourth grades at Tachkemoni and the House of Education were assembled one morning in an empty apartment in Malachi Street. A suntanned youth casually dressed in khaki and smoking a cigarette, who was introduced to us only by his code name, Garibaldi, addressed us in very serious tones for some twenty minutes, with a kind of wry matter-of-factness that we had previously

encountered only in grown-ups. Garibaldi gave us the task of searching all the yards and storage sheds for empty sacks ("We'll fill them with sand") and bottles ("Someone knows how to fill them with a cocktail that the enemy will find very tasty").

We were also taught to collect wild mallow, which we all called by its Arabic name, *khubeizeh*, on plots of wasteland or in neglected backyards. This *khubeizeh* helped relieve the horrors of starvation somewhat. Mothers boiled or fried it and then used it to make rissoles or puree, which was green like spinach but tasted much worse. We also had a lookout round: every hour during daylight two of us kids had to keep watch from a suitable rooftop in Obadiah Street on the British army camp in Schneller Barracks, and every now and then one of us ran to the operations room in the apartment on Malachi Street to tell Garibaldi or one of his adjutants what the Tommies were up to and whether there were any signs of preparations for departure.

The bigger boys, from the fourth and fifth grades, were taught by Garibaldi to carry messages between the various Haganah posts at the end of Zephaniah Street and around the Bukharian Quarter. My mother begged me to "show real maturity and give up these childish games," but I couldn't do as she wanted. I was particularly good at collecting bottles: in a single week I managed to collect 146 empty bottles and take them in boxes and sacks to HQ. Garibaldi himself gave me a slap on the back and shot me a sidelong glance. I record here exactly the words he spoke to me as he scratched the hair on his chest through his open shirt: "Very nice. We may hear more of you one day." Word for word. Fifty-three years have gone by, and I have not forgotten to this day.

# 45

MANY YEARS later I discovered that a woman I knew as a child, Mrs. Abramski, Zerta, the wife of Yakov-David Abramski (both of them were frequent visitors to our home), kept a diary during those days. I vaguely remember that my mother sometimes sat on the floor in a corner of the corridor during bombardments, with an exercise book supported on a closed book on her knees, writing, ignoring the exploding shells and mortars and the bursts of machine-gun fire, deaf to the noise of a score of inmates who bickered all day long in our dark, smelly submarine, writing in her exercise book, indifferent to the Prophet Jeremiah's doom-laden mutterings and Uncle Joseph's lamentations, and the penetrating, babylike crying of an old woman whose mute daughter changed her wet diapers in front of all of us. I will never know what my mother was writing: no exercise book of hers has reached me. Maybe she burned them all before she killed herself. I do not have a single complete page in her handwriting.

In Zerta Abramski's diary I find written, among other things:

February 24,1948

I am weary ... so weary ... the storeroom full of belongings of the killed and injured ... Hardly anyone comes to claim these objects: there is no one to claim them, their owners are killed or lying wounded in the hospital. A man came in who had been wounded in the head and arm, but was able to walk. His wife had been killed. He found her clothes, her pictures, and some linen ... And these things that were bought with such love and joie de vivre are piled up in this basement ... And a young man, G., came in search of his belongings. He had lost his father and mother, his two brothers, and his sister in the Ben Yehuda Street car bombing. He himself escaped only because he did not sleep at home that night, he was on duty ... Incidentally: he was not interested in objects so much as in photographs. Among the hundreds of photographs ... that survived he was trying to find a few family photographs.

April 14, 1948

This morning they announced ... that for a coupon from the paraffin book (the head of the household's book) you can receive a quarter of a chicken

per family at certain designated butchers. Some ofmy neighbors asked me to collect their ration, ifI was in line anyway, as they had to work and could not wait in line. Yoni, my son, offered to keep me a place in line before he went to school, but I told him I would do it myself. I sent Yair off to kindergarten and went to "Geula," where the butcher was. I arrived at a quarter to eight and found a line of about six hundred people.

They said some people had arrived at three or four in the morning, because the rumor ofthe distribution ofchicken started to spread before it was dark. I had no desire to stand in line, but I had promised my neighbors to bring them their ration, and I didn't like to go home without it. I decided to "stand" like the rest.

While I was in line, it turned out that the "rumor" that had been circulating since yesterday had been confirmed: yes, a hundred Jews were burned alive yesterday near Sheikh Jarrah; they were in a convoy going up to Hadassah and the university. A hundred people. They included distinguished scientists and scholars, doctors and nurses, workers and students, clerks and patients.

It is hard to believe it. There are so many Jews in Jerusalem, and they were unable to save these hundred people who were facing death only a kilometer away ... They said the English would not let them. What is the point of a quarter of a chicken, if horrors like this happen in front of your very eyes? Yet people stood in line patiently. And all the time all you hear is: "The children are getting thin ... they haven't tasted meat for months ... there is no milk, there are no vegetables..."It is hard to stand in a line for six hours, yet it is worth it: there will be soup for the children ... What happened in Sheikh Jar-rah is terrible, but who knows what is awaiting us all here in Jerusalem ... The dead are dead, and the living go on living ... The line advances slowly. The "lucky ones" go home hugging their quarter of a chicken per family ... Eventually a funeral went past ... At two o'clock in the afternoon I received my ration and my neighbors' and I went home.*

***

*Zerta Abramski, "Excerpts from the Diary of a Woman from the Siege of Jerusalem, 1948," in *The Correspondence of Yakov-David Abramski*, edited and annotated by Shula Abramski (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 5751/1991), pp. 288-89.

My father was supposed to go up to Mount Scopus in that very convoy, on April 13,1948, in which seventy-seven doctors and nurses, professors and students were murdered and burned alive. He had been instructed by the National Guard, or perhaps by his superiors in the National Library, to go and lock up certain sections of the basement stores of the library, since Mount Scopus was cut off from the rest of the city. But the evening before he was due to go, he had a temperature, and the doctor absolutely forbade him to leave his bed. (He was shortsighted, and frail, and every time his temperature went up, his eyes clouded over until he was almost blind and he also lost his sense of balance.)

Four days after Irgun and Stern Gang forces captured the Arab village of Deir Yassin to the west of Jerusalem and butchered many of its inhabitants, armed Arabs attacked the convoy, which, at half past nine in the morning, was crossing Sheikh Jarrah on its way to Mount Scopus. The British secretary of state for the colonies, Arthur Creech-Jones, had personally promised the representatives of the Jewish Agency that as long as the British army was in Jerusalem, it would guarantee the regular arrangement of convoys to relieve the skeleton presence guarding the hospital and the university. (Hadassah Hospital served not just the Jewish population but all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.)

There were two ambulances in the convoy, three buses whose windows had been reinforced with metal plates for fear of snipers, several trucks carrying supplies, including medical supplies, and two small cars. At the approach to Sheikh Jarrah stood a British police officer who signaled to the convoy, as usual, that the road was open and safe. In the heart of the Arab neighborhood, almost at the feet of the villa of the Grand Mufti Haj Amin al-Husseini, the exiled pro-Nazi leader of the Palestinian Arabs, at a distance of 150 yards or so from Silwani Villa, the leading vehicle went over a land mine. Immediately a hail of fire assailed the convoy from both sides of the road, including hand grenades and Molotov cocktails. The firing continued right through the morning.

The attack took place less than two hundred yards away from the British military post whose task was to safeguard the road to the hospital. For several hours the British soldiers stood and watched the attack without lifting a finger. At 9:45 General Gordon H. A. MacMillan, the supreme commander of the British forces in Palestine, drove past without stopping. (He later claimed, without batting an eye, that he had the impression the attack had ended.)

At one o'clock, and again an hour later, some British vehicles drove past

without stopping. When the Jewish Agency liaison officer contacted British military headquarters and requested permission to send in the Haganah to evacuate the injured and the dying, he was informed that "the army is in control of the situation" and that HQ forbade the Haganah to intervene. Haganah rescue forces nevertheless attempted to assist the trapped convoy, both from the city and from Mount Scopus. They were prevented from approaching. At 1:45 p.m. the president of the Hebrew University, Professor Judah Leon Magnes, telephoned General MacMillan and asked for help. The answer was that "the army is trying to reach the scene, but a large battle has developed."

There was no fighting. By three o'clock two of the buses had caught fire and almost all the passengers, most of whom were already wounded or dying, were burned alive.

The seventy-seven dead included the director of the Hadassah Medical Organization, Professor Chaim Yassky, Professors Leonid Doljansky and Moshe Ben-David, who were among the founders of the Faculty of Medicine at the university, the physicist Dr. Guenther Wolfsohn, Professor Enzo Bonaventura, head of the Department of Psychology, Dr. Abraham Chaim Freimann, an expert on Jewish law, and Dr. Binyamin Klar, a linguist.

The Arab Higher Committee later issued an official statement in which the slaughter was described as a heroic exploit carried out "under the command of an Iraqi officer." The statement censured the British for their last-minute intervention and declared: "Had it not been for Army interference, not a single Jewish passenger would have remained alive."* It was only through a coincidence, because of his high temperature, and perhaps also because my mother knew how to curb his patriotic fervor, that my father was not among those who were burned to death in that convoy.

Not long after this massacre, the Haganah launched major offensives for the first time all over the country and threatened to take up arms against the British army if it dared to intervene. The main road from the coastal plain to Jerusalem was unblocked by means of a major offensive, then blocked again, then unblocked again, but the siege of Hebrew Jerusalem was renewed with the invasion by regular Arab armies. Through April and up to the middle of May, large Arab and mixed towns—Haifa, Jaffa, Tiberias, and Safed—as well as dozens of Arab

villages in the north and the south were captured by the Haganah. Hundreds of thousands of Arabs lost their homes in those weeks and became refugees. Some of them have remained refugees to this day. Many fled, but many were driven out by force. Several thousand were killed.

*Based on various sources, including Dov Joseph, *The Faithful City: The Siege of Jerusalem*, 1948 (London, 1962), p. 78.

There may not have been anyone at the time in besieged Jewish Jerusalem who mourned the fate of the Palestinian refugees. The Jewish Quarter in the Old City, which had been inhabited continuously by Jews for thousands of years (with the exception of a single interruption after they were all massacred or expelled by the Crusaders in 1099), fell to the Trans-Jordanian Arab Legion, all its buildings were looted and razed and the residents were killed, expelled, or taken prisoner. The settlements in the Etzion bloc were also taken and destroyed, and their residents were killed or taken prisoner. Atarot, Neve Yaakov, Kaliya, and Beit Ha-Arava were evacuated and destroyed. The hundred thousand Jewish inhabitants of Jerusalem feared that a similar fate awaited them. When the Voice of the Defender radio station announced the flight of the Arab residents from Talbieh and Katamon, I do not remember feeling sorry for Aisha and her brother. I merely extended, with my father, our matchstick frontier on the map of Jerusalem: the months of bombardment, hunger, and fear had hardened my heart. Where did Aisha go, with her little brother? To Nablus? Damascus? London? Or to the refugee camp at Deheisha? Today, if she is still alive, Aisha is a woman of sixty-five. And her little brother, whose foot I may have smashed, would be nearly sixty now. Perhaps I could set out to find them? To discover what happened to all the branches of the Silwani family, in London, South America, and Australia?

But suppose I found Aisha, somewhere in the world, or the person who was once that sweet little boy: how would I introduce myself? What could I say? What could I really explain? What could I offer?

Do they still remember? And if so, what do they remember? Or have the horrors they must have undergone since made them both forget the silly show-off in the tree?

It wasn't all my fault. Not all of it. All I did was talk, and talk, and talk. Aisha is to blame, too. It was Aisha who said to me, Come on, let's see you

climb a tree. If she hadn't urged me on, it would never have occurred to me to climb the tree, and her brother—

It's gone forever. It can't be undone.

At the National Guard post in Zephaniah Street my father was given a very old rifle and put on night-watch duty in the streets of Kerem Avraham. It was a heavy, black rifle, with all sorts of foreign words and initials engraved on its worn butt. Father eagerly attempted to decipher the writing even before turning to study the rifle itself. It may have been an Italian rifle from the First World War, or an ancient American carbine. Father felt it all over, scrabbled around, pushed and pulled without success, and eventually put it down on the floor and turned to check the magazine. Here he scored an immediate and dazzling success: he managed to extract the bullets. He brandished a handful of bullets in one hand and the empty magazine in the other, and waved them exultantly at my tiny form as I stood in the doorway, while he made some sort of joke about the narrow-mindedness of those who had tried to discourage Napoleon Bonaparte.

But when he tried to press the bullets back into the magazine, his triumph turned to utter defeat: the bullets had got a whiff of freedom and obdurately refused to be reimprisoned. None of his stratagems and blandishments had the slightest effect. He tried to insert them the right way around and he tried them back to front, he tried doing it gently and he tried with all the force of his delicate scholar's fingers, he even tried putting them in alternately, one facing upward and the next downward and so on, but all in vain.

Undeterred, my father tried to charm the bullets into the magazine by reciting poetry at them in a voice laden with pathos: he gave them selections from Polish patriotic poetry, as well as Ovid, Pushkin, and Lermontov, entire Hebrew love poems from medieval Spain—all in the original languages with a Russian accent, and all without success. In a final paroxysm of rage he declaimed from memory extracts from Homer in ancient Greek, the *Nibelungenlied* in German, Chaucer in Middle English, and, for I know, from the *Kalevala* in Saul Tchernikhowsky's Hebrew translation, from the epic of Gilgamesh, in every possible language and dialect. All in vain.

Dejectedly, therefore, he wended his way back to the National Guard post

in Zephaniah Street, with the heavy rifle in one hand, in the other the precious bullets in an embroidered bag originally intended for sandwiches, and in his pocket (pray God he did not forget it there) the empty magazine.

At the National Guard post they took pity on him and quickly showed him how easy it was to load the bullets into the magazine, but they did not give him the weapon or the ammunition back. Not that day, or in the days that followed. Or ever. Instead he was given an electric lamp, a whistle, and an impressive armband bearing the motto "National Guard." Father came back home beside himself with joy. He explained to me the meaning of "National Guard," flashed his lamp on and off, blew and blew on his whistle, till Mother touched his shoulder lightly and said, That's enough now, Arieh? Please?

At midnight between Friday, May 14, 1948, and Saturday, May 15, at the end of thirty years of the British Mandate, the state whose birth David Ben-Gurion had announced in Tel Aviv a few hours earlier came into being. After a gap of some nineteen hundred years, Uncle Joseph declared, Jewish rule was once more established here.

But at one minute past midnight, without war being declared, the infantry columns, artillery, and armor of the regular Arab armies poured into the country, from Egypt to the south, Trans-Jordan and Iraq to the east, and Lebanon and Syria to the north. On Saturday morning Tel Aviv was bombed by Egyptian planes. The Arab Legion, the half-British army of the Kingdom of Trans-Jordan, and regular Iraqi troops, as well as armed Muslim volunteers from several other countries, had all been invited in by the British to seize key points around the country before the formal ending of the Mandate.

The noose was tightening around us. The Trans-Jordanian Legion captured the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, cut off the highway to Tel Aviv and the coastal plain with massive forces, took control of the Arab districts of the city, stationed artillery on the hills around Jerusalem, and began a massive bombardment whose aim was to cause losses among the civilian population, break their spirit, and bring them to submission. King Abdullah, London's protégé, already saw himself as King of Jerusalem. The legion's gun batteries were commanded by British artillery officers.

At the same time the Egyptian army was reaching the southern outskirts of Jerusalem and attacked the kibbutz of Ramat Rahel, which changed hands twice. Egyptian planes dropped fire bombs on Jerusalem and, among other things, destroyed the old people's home in Romema, not far from us. Egyptian mortars joined the Trans-Jordanian artillery in bombarding the civilian population. From a hill close to the Mar Elias Monastery the Egyptians pounded Jerusalem with 4.2 inch shells. Shells fell on the Jewish areas at a rate of one every two minutes, and the streets were raked by continuous rifle fire. Greta Gat, my piano-playing child sitter who always smelled of wet wool and washing soap, Aunt Greta, who used to drag me off to clothes shops with her, for whom my father used to compose his silly rhymes, went out on her veranda one morning to hang out her washing. A Jordanian sniper's bullet, they said, went in her ear and came out her eye. Zippora Yannai, Piri, my mother's shy friend who lived in Zephaniah Street, went out in the yard for a moment to fetch a floor cloth and a bucket and was killed on the spot by a direct hit from a shell.

And I had a little tortoise. During the Passover holiday in 1947, some six months before the outbreak of war, Father joined some people from the Hebrew University for a day trip to Jerash in Trans-Jordan. He set off early in the morning, with a bag of sandwiches and a genuine army water bottle, which he wore proudly on his belt. He came back that evening, full of happy stories of the trip and the wonders of the large Roman theater, and he brought me a present of a little tortoise he found there "at the foot of an amazing Roman stone arch."

Although he had no sense of humor and possibly had no clear idea of what a sense of humor was, my father always loved jokes, witticisms, and wordplay, and whenever he made anyone smile with his remarks, his face would light up with modest pride. Thus he decided to call the tortoise by the comical name of Abdullah-Gershon, in honor of the king of Trans-Jordan and the city of Jerash (Gerash in Hebrew). Whenever we had visitors, he would call the tortoise solemnly by his full name, like a master of ceremonies announcing the arrival of some duke or ambassador, and he was always amazed that everyone present did not double up with laughter. Consequently he felt it necessary to enlighten them as to the reasons for the two names. Perhaps he hoped that, not having found the joke funny before the explanation, they would find it hilarious afterward. Sometimes he was so enthusiastic or absentminded that he told the whole story to guests who had already heard it at least twice before and knew it backward.

I loved that little tortoise, who used to crawl to my hideaway under the pomegranate bush every morning and eat lettuce leaves and juicy cucumber peel right out of my hand. He was not afraid of me and did not retract his head inside his shell, and while he was gobbling up his food, he would make funny movements with his head, as though he were nodding in agreement at what you were saying. He was like a certain bald professor from Rehavia, who also used to nod enthusiastically until you had finished talking, but then his approval turned to mockery, as he continued to nod at you while he tore your views to shreds.

I used to stroke my tortoise's head with my finger while he ate, amazed at the similarity between his nose holes and his ear holes. In my heart of hearts, and behind Father's back, I secretly called him Mimi instead of Abdullah-Gershon.

During the bombardment there were no cucumbers or lettuce leaves and I wasn't allowed out into the yard, but I still used to open the door sometimes and throw scraps of food out for Mimi. Sometimes I could see him in the distance, and sometimes he disappeared for several days on end.

The day that Greta Gat and my mother's friend Piri Yannai were killed, my tortoise Mimi was killed too. He was sliced in half by a piece of shrapnel. When I tearfully asked Father if I could at least bury him under the pomegranate and put up a tombstone to remember him by, Father explained to me that I could not, mainly for reasons of hygiene. He told me he had already gotten rid of the remains. He refused to tell me where he had gotten rid of them, but he took the opportunity to give me a little lecture on the meaning of irony: our Abdullah-Gershon was an immigrant from the Kingdom of Trans-Jordan, so it was ironic that the piece of shrapnel that killed him came from a shell fired from one of King Abdullah of Trans-Jordan's guns.

That night I could not get to sleep. I lay on my back on our mattress in the far corner of the corridor, surrounded by the snores, mutterings, and intermittent moans of old people. I was dripping with sweat as I lay between my parents, and by the faint trembling light of the single candle in the bathroom, in the fetid air, I suddenly thought I saw the form of a tortoise, not Mimi, the little tortoise I loved to stroke with my finger (there was no possibility of a cat or a puppy: forget it!), but a terrifying gigantic monster-tortoise, dripping blood and mashed bones,

floating through the air, digging with its sharp-clawed paws and chuckling mockingly at me from above all the people sleeping in the corridor. Its face was horrible, crushed and torn by a bullet that had entered its eye and come out in the place where even a tortoise has a sort of ear hole, although it has no actual ear.

I may have tried to wake Father. He did not wake up: he was lying motionless on his back breathing deeply, like a contented baby. But Mother took my head and pressed it to her bosom. Like the rest of us, she was sleeping in her clothes, and the buttons of her blouse hurt my cheek a little. She hugged me hard but didn't try to comfort me; instead she sobbed with me, smothering her crying so that no one would hear, and her lips whispered over and over again: Piri, Piroshka, Piriii. All I could do was stroke her hair and her cheeks, and kiss her, and it was as though I was the grown-up and she was my child, and I whispered, There there, Mummy, it's all right, I'm here.

Then we whispered a little more, she and I. Tearfully. And later on, after the faint flickering candle at the end of the corridor went out and only the wails of the shells broke the silence and the hill on the other side of our wall shuddered with every shell that fell, instead of my head on her chest Mother put her wet head on my chest. That night I understood for the first time that I would die too. That everyone would die. And that nothing in the world, not even my mother, could save me. And I could not save her. Mimi had an armored shell, and at any sign of danger he would withdraw, hands, feet, and head, inside his shell. And that hadn't saved him.

***

In September, during a cease-fire that interrupted the fighting in Jerusalem, we had visitors on Saturday morning: Grandpa and Grandma, the Abramskis, and maybe some others. They drank tea in the yard and discussed the successes of the Israeli army, and the terrible dangers of the peace plan put forward by the UN mediator, the Swede Count Bernadotte, a scheme behind which the British were undoubtedly lurking and whose aim was to crush our young state to death. Somebody had brought a rather large, ugly new coin from Tel Aviv: it was the first Hebrew coin to be minted, and it was passed excitedly from hand to hand. It was a twenty-five *prutot* coin, and it had a picture of a bunch of grapes, a motif that Father said was taken straight from a Jewish coin of the Second Temple period, and above the bunch of grapes was a clear Hebrew legend: ISRAEL. To be on the safe side, it was written not just in Hebrew but in English and Arabic

as well.

Mrs. Zerta Abramski said:

"If only our dear late parents, and their parents, and all the generations, had been privileged to see and hold this coin. Jewish money—" Her voice choked. Mr. Abramski said:

"It is fitting to give thanks with the appropriate benediction. *Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who hast given us life, preserved us, and permitted us to reach this time!"*

Grandpa Alexander, my elegant, hedonistic grandfather, so beloved of the fair sex, said nothing, but simply touched the overlarge nickel coin to his lips and kissed it twice, gently, and his eyes brimmed. Then he passed it on. At that moment the street was startled by the wail ofan ambulance on its way to Zephaniah Street, and ten minutes later the siren howled again on its way back, and Father may have seen in this a pretext to make some pallid joke about the last trump or something of the sort. They sat and chatted and may even have had another glass of tea, and after half an hour or so the Abramskis took their leave, wishing us all the best, and Mr. Abramski, who loved rhetorical flourishes, probably uttered a few high-flown phrases. While they were still standing in the doorway, a neighbor arrived and gently called them over to a corner of the yard, and they were in such a hurry to follow him that Aunt Zerta forgot her handbag. A quarter of an hour later the Lembergs came, looking bewildered, to tell us that while his parents were visiting us, Yonatan Abramski, twelve-year-old Yoni, had been playing in Nehemiah Street, when a Jordanian sniper firing from the Police Training School had hit him with a single shot in the middle of his forehead, and the boy had lain there dying for five minutes, vomited, and expired before the ambulance reached him.

I found this in Zerta Abramski's diary:

> September 23,1948
>
> On the eighteenth of September, at a quarter past ten on Saturday morning, my Yoni,Yoni my child, my whole life, was killed ... He was hit by an Arab sniper, my angel, he only managed to say "Mummy," to run a few yards (my wonderful, pure boy was standing near the house) before he fell ... I did not hear his last word, neither did I answer him when he called out to me.

When I returned, my sweet, beloved child was no longer alive. I saw him at the mortuary. He looked so wonderfully beautiful, he seemed to be asleep. I embraced him and kissed him. They had put a stone under his head. The stone moved, and his head, his cherubic head, moved a little. My heart said, He is not dead, my son, look, he's moving ... His eyes were half shut. Then "they" came—the mortuary workers—came and insulted me and reprimanded me rudely and disturbed me: I had no right to embrace and kiss him ... I left.

But a few hours later I returned. There was a "curfew" (they were searching for the killers of Bernadotte). On every street corner policemen stopped me ... They asked for my permit to be out during the curfew. He, my slain son, was my only permit. The policemen let me into the mortuary. I had brought a cushion with me. I removed the stone and put it to one side: I could not bear to see his dear, wonderful head resting on a stone. Then "they" came back and tried to make me leave. They said that I ought not to touch him. I did not heed them. I continued to embrace and kiss him, my treasure. They threatened to lock the door and leave me with him, with the essence of my whole life. This was all that I wanted. Then they reconsidered and threatened to call the soldiers. I was not afraid of them ... I left the mortuary a second time. Before I left, I embraced and kissed him. The next morning I came to him again, to my child ... Once more I embraced and kissed him. Once again I prayed to God for vengeance, vengeance for my baby, and once again they drove me out ... And when I came back again, my wonderful child, my angel, was in a closed coffin, yet I remember his face, all of him, everything about him I remember.*

# 46

TWO FINNISH missionary ladies lived in a little apartment at the end of Ha-Turim Street in Mekor Baruch, Aili Havas and Rauha Moisio. Aunt Aili and Aunt Rauha. Even when the conversation turned to the shortage of vegetables, they both spoke high-flown, biblical Hebrew, because that was the only Hebrew they knew. If I knocked at their door to ask for some wood that we could use for the Lag Baomer bonfire, Aunt Aili would say with a gentle smile, as she handed me an old orange crate: "And the shining of a flaming fire by night!" If they came around to our apartment for a glass of tea and a bookish conversation while I was fighting against my cod-liver oil, Aunt Rauha might say: "The fishes of the sea shall shake at His presence!"

Sometimes the three of us paid them a visit in their Spartan one-room apartment, which resembled an austere nineteenth-century girls' boarding school: two plain iron bedsteads stood facing each other on either side of a rectangular wooden table covered with a dark blue tablecloth, with three plain wooden chairs. Beside each of the matching beds was a small bedside table with a reading lamp, a glass of water, and some sacred books in black covers. Two identical pairs of bedroom slippers peered out from under the beds. In the middle of the table there was always a vase containing a bunch of everlasting flowers from the nearby fields. A carved olive-wood crucifix hung in the middle of the wall between the two beds. And at the foot of each bed stood a chest of drawers made from a thick shiny wood of a sort we did not have in Jerusalem, and Mother said it was called oak, and she encouraged me to touch it with my fingertips and run my hand over it. My mother always insisted that it was not enough to know the various names of objects but you should get to know them by sniffing them, touching them with the tip of your tongue, feeling them with your fingertips, to know their warmth and smoothness, their smell, their roughness and hardness, the sound they made when you tapped them, all those things that she called their "response" or "resistance." Every material, she said, every piece of clothing or furniture, every utensil, every object had different characteristics of response and resistance, which were not fixed but could change according to the season or the time of day or night, the person who was touching or smelling, the light and shade, and even vague propensities that we have no means of understanding. It was no accident, she said, that Hebrew uses the same word for an inanimate object and a desire. It was not only we who had or did not

have a desire for one thing or another, inanimate objects and plants also had an inner desire of their own, and only someone who knew how to feel, listen, taste, and smell in an ungreedy way could sometimes discern it.

Father observed jokingly:

*Zerta Abramski, "Excerpts from the Diary of a Woman from the Siege of Jerusalem, 1948," in *The Correspondence of Yakov-David Abramski*, edited and annotated by Shula Abramski (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 5751/1991), pp. 288-89.

"Our Mummy goes one further than King Solomon. Legend says that he understood the language of every animal and bird, but our Mummy has even mastered the languages of towels, saucepans, and brushes."

And he went on, beaming mischievously:

"She can make trees and stones speak by touching them: Touch the mountains, and they shall smoke, as it says in the Psalms."

Aunt Rauha said:

"Or as the prophet Joel put it, The mountains shall drop down new wine, and the hills shall flow with milk. And it is written in the twenty-ninth Psalm: The voice of the Lord maketh the hinds to calve."

Father said:

"But coming from someone who is not a poet, such things are always liable to sound somewhat, how shall I put it, prettified. As if they are trying to sound very deep. Very mystical. Very hylozoical. Trying to make the hinds to calve. Let me explain the meaning of these difficult words, mystical and hylozoical. Behind them both is a clear, rather unhealthy, desire to blur realities, to dim the light of reason, to blunt definitions, and to muddle distinct domains."

Mother said:

"Arieh?"

And Father, in a conciliatory tone (because although he enjoyed teasing her, goading her, and even occasionally gloating, he enjoyed even more repenting,

apologizing, and beaming with goodwill, just like his own father, Grandpa Alexander), said:

"*Nu*, that's enough, Fanitchka. I've finished. I was only having a bit of fun."

The two missionaries did not leave Jerusalem during the siege: they had a strong sense of mission. The Savior himself seemed to have charged them with the task of boosting the spirits of the besieged and helping as volunteers to treat the wounded at the Shaarei Tsedek Hospital. They believed that every Christian had a duty to try to atone, in deeds rather than words, for what Hitler had done to the Jews. They considered the establishment of the State of Israel as the finger of God. As Aunt Rauha put it, in her biblical language and gravely pronunciation: It is like the appearance of the rainbow in the cloud, after the flood. And Aunt Aili, with a tiny smile, no more than a twitch of the corner of her mouth: "For it repented the Lord of all that great evil, and He would no longer destroy them."

Between bombardments they used to walk around our neighborhood, in their ankle boots and headscarves, carrying a deep bag of grayish hessian, distributing a jar of pickled cucumbers, half an onion, a piece of soap, a pair of woolen socks, a radish, or a small quantity of black pepper to anyone prepared to receive it from them. Who knows how they got hold of all these treasures. Some of the ultra-Orthodox rejected these gifts in disgust, some drove the two ladies away from their doors contemptuously, others accepted the gifts but spat on the ground the missionaries' feet had trodden on the moment their backs were turned.

They did not take offense. They were constantly quoting verses of consolation from the Prophets, which seemed strange to us in their Finnish accent, which sounded like their heavy boots tramping on gravel. "For I will defend this city, to save it." "No enemy or foe shall come into the gates of this city." "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace ... for the wicked shall no more pass through thee..." "Fear not, O Jacob my servant, saith the Lord: for I am with thee; for I will make a full end of all the nations whither I have driven thee."

Sometimes one of them would volunteer to take our place in the long line for water that was distributed from a tanker, half a bucket per family on Sundays,

Tuesdays, and Thursdays only, assuming the tanker had not been pierced by shrapnel before it reached our street. Or else one of them would go around our tiny barricaded apartment handing out half a "mixed vitamin" tablet to each of the many inmates. Children received a whole tablet. Where did the two missionaries get hold of these wonderful gifts? Where did they replenish their gray hessian bag? Some said one thing and some another, and some warned me not to accept anything from them because their only objective was "to take advantage of our distress and make converts for that Jesus of theirs."

Once I plucked up my courage and asked Aunt Aili—even though I knew what the answer would be: "Who was Jesus?" Her lips quivered slightly as she replied hesitantly that he was still alive, and that he loved us all, particularly those who mocked or despised him, and if I filled my heart with love, he would come and dwell within my heart and bring me suffering but also great happiness, and the happiness would shine forth out of the suffering.

These words seemed so strange and full of contradictions that I felt a need to ask Father too. He took me by the hand and led me to the mattress in the kitchen, which was Uncle Joseph's refuge, and asked the famous author of *Jesus of Nazareth* to explain to me who and what Jesus was.

Uncle Joseph was lying on his mattress, looking exhausted, gloomy, and pale, his back resting on the blackened wall and his glasses raised onto his forehead. His answer was very different from Aunt Aili's: Jesus of Nazareth was, in his view, "one of the greatest Jews of all time, a wonderful moralist who loathed the uncircumcised of heart and fought to restore to Judaism its original simplicity and wrest it from the power of hair-splitting rabbis."

I did not know who the uncircumcised of heart or the hair-splitting rabbis were. Nor did I know how to reconcile Uncle Joseph's Jesus, who loathed and fought to wrest, with Aunt Aili's Jesus who neither loathed nor fought nor wrested but did the exact opposite, he especially loved sinners and those who despised him.

In an old folder I came across a letter that Aunt Rauha wrote to me from Helsinki in 1979, on behalf of both of them. She wrote in Hebrew, and among other things she said:

...We too were pleased that you won the Euro-Viseo Song Contest. And how about the song?

The faithful here were very glad that they from Israel sang: Hallelujah! There is no more fitting song ... I was able also to see the film *Shoah*, which caused tears and pains of conscience from the countries that persecuted to such an extent, without any end, without any sense. The Christian countries must ask much pardon from the Jews. Your father said once that he cannot understand why the Lord allows such terrible things ... I always said to him that the Lord's secret is on high. Jesus suffers with the people of Israel in all its sufferings. The faithful also have to bear their share of the sufferings of Jesus that he let them suffer ... Nevertheless the atonement of Christ on the cross covers all the sins of the world, of all mankind. But this you can never understand with your brain ... There were Nazis who received pains of conscience and repented before their death. But their repentance did not make the Jews who died come back to life. We all need atonement and grace each day. Jesus says: Do not fear those who kill the body, because they are not able to kill the soul. This letter is from me and from Aunt Aili. I received a heavy blow to my back six weeks ago when I fell inside the bus, and Aunt Aili does not see so well.

With love,

Rauha Moisio

And once when I went to Helsinki, because one of my books had been translated into Finnish, the two of them suddenly turned up in the cafeteria of my hotel, both wearing dark shawls that covered their heads and shoulders, like a pair of old peasant women. Aunt Rauha was leaning on a stick and was gently holding Aunt Aili's hand, as she was now almost blind. Aunt Aili helped her to a corner table. They both demanded the right to kiss me and bless me. It was not easy to get them to allow me to order them each a cup of tea, "but nothing else please!"

Aunt Aili smiled slightly: it was not so much a smile as a faint quivering of her lips; she was on the verge of saying something, changed her mind, placed her right fist inside her left hand, as though putting a diaper on a baby, moved her head once or twice as though in lament, and finally she said:

"Praise be to God for permitting us to see you here in our land, though I do not understand why your dear parents were not vouchsafed to be among the living. But who am I to understand? The Lord has the answers. We can merely wonder. Please, I'm sorry, will you allow me to feel your dear face? It is only because my eyes have failed."

Aunt Rauha said of my father: "Blessed be his memory, he was the dearest of men! He had such a noble spirit! Such a humane spirit!" And of my mother she said: "Such a suffering soul, peace be upon her! She had many sufferings, because she saw into the heart of people, and what she saw was not so easy for her to bear. As the prophet Jeremiah says, 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?'"

Outside, in Helsinki, sleet was falling. The daylight was low and murky, and the snowflakes were gray and did not settle. The two old women were wearing almost identical dark dresses and thick brown socks, like girls from a respectable boarding school. When I kissed them, they both smelled of plain washing soap, brown bread, and bedding. A small maintenance man hurried past us, with a battery of pencils and pens in the pocket of his overalls. Aunt Rauha took a brown paper packet out of a big bag that was under the table and handed it to me. I recognized the bag: it was the same gray hessian bag from which they used to hand out small bars of soap, woolen socks, rusks, matches, candles, radishes, or a precious packet of powdered milk during the siege of Jerusalem, thirty years previously.

I opened the packet, and there was a Bible printed in Jerusalem, in Hebrew and Finnish on facing pages, a tiny music box made of painted wood with a brass lid, and an assortment of dried flowers, unfamiliar Finnish flowers that were beautiful even in their death, flowers that I could not name and that I had never seen before that morning.

"We were very fond," Aunt Aili said, her unseeing eyes seeking mine, "of your dear parents. Their life on this earth was not easy, and they did not always dispense grace to each other. There was sometimes much shadow between them. But now that finally they dwell in the secret of Almighty in the shelter of the wings of the Lord, now there is certainly only grace and truth between your parents, like two innocent children who have known no thought of iniquity, only light, love, and compassion between them forever, his left hand under her head and her right hand embraces him, and every shadow has long since departed

from them."

For my part, I had intended to present two copies of the Finnish translation of my book to the two aunts, but Aunt Rauha refused: A Hebrew book, she said, a book about Jerusalem written in the city of Jerusalem, we must please read it in Hebrew and not in any other language! And besides, she said with an apologetic smile, truly Aunt Aili can no longer read anything because the Lord has taken to himself the last of the light of her eyes. I read to her, morning and evening, only from the Old and New Testament, from our prayer book, and the books of the saints, although my eyes are also growing dim, and soon we shall both be blind.

And when I am not reading to her and Aunt Aili is not listening to me, then we both sit at the window and look out at trees and birds, snow and wind, morning and evening, daylight and night lights, and we both give thanks in all humility to the good Lord for all his mercies and all his wonders: His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Do you not also see sometimes, only when you are at rest, how the sky and the earth, the trees and the stones, the fields and the woods, are all full of great wonders? They are all bright and shining and they all together like a thousand witnesses testify to the greatness of the miracle of grace.