

Ramallah

My Dad is Palestinian, and mum is what you now would call Serbian. They met in Belgrade in '79. Dad was in Yugoslavia since 1967 he was 18 or 19. After the '67 war there was this huge sense of defeat which created a feeling of anger. Since '48 until '67 the Arab world was absolutely sure that they will defeat Israel and reclaim Palestine, then of course '67 totally shattered this, but the momentum gave birth to the so-called Palestine revolution which started in 1968.

Like many others he wanted to leave because the West Bank was occupied, now it's all under the Israeli military rule. I know that he received a scholarship to study in Yugoslavia. After the PLO became this revolutionary body and the sole representative of the Palestine people, the relations between Yugoslavia, between Tito and the PLO start to formulate towards support. Because before Yugoslavia's position was more, I think, in support of the creation of the Israeli state. Especially after the formation of the non-aligned movement, the relations between Yugoslavia and the PLO changed, and at some point, the PLO was receiving support. Because early on Tito didn't want to provide arms, he offered means of training.

My Dad studied mechanical engineering, but he never graduated. He only had a couple of exams to pass but he just didn't do it. But this meant that he was there to study, yes, and I think that was the sole purpose, however he was also part of the PLO. And this is where it is very, very, very, confusing because again, he doesn't really quite share. I know that he has gone to Lebanon to the training camps, I don't think he was ever involved in any actual operations. But it wasn't just about carrying arms. What was amazing was that during this period, especially after 1970 Black September in Jordan the revolutionary body moved. They were kicked out, and they moved to Lebanon mostly Beirut. And then this tremendous political work started to happen and then the revolutionary body kind of expanded dramatically and became like a mini government

There were bodies that were responsible for providing health care and education to refugees in Lebanon. But culture, culture was really very much supported by the PLO. Image production was very, very, important and I think it's because Arafat was aware what representation means, and how image production feeds into this representation worldwide. He was very clever. So, there was this almost unlimited almost

support for films, but very particular forms of films – so there was a very formulated way of doing political work through film, and it had to be approved by the PLO.

When I say he went to these training camps, I don't believe it was in relation to being trained to use arms even though it was important for every single Palestinian to be able to know how to use them. In the films that we've seen you have very often scenes of children sitting in circles, like girls in their early teens sitting around in a circle on sand and holding Kalashnikovs and talking about the importance of the arm struggle. It's magnificent. It's crazy.

He ended up doing journalism in Yugoslavia. I think his involvement with the PLO was also related to this circle of cultural institutions because it was also quite intricate the way the institutions were formed. Very intricate. They were specialised. You had film, you had cinema, you had photography, you had press, you had plastic arts, and they all came under the umbrella called the Unified Media. Dad met mum through a mutual friend, I think it was at a gathering, something in support of the Palestinian cause. Mum was somehow active. I wouldn't say my mum is a radical but at the time I think it was important to do political work in Yugoslavia. So, they met, and they got married. I was the first born and my sister was born in Yugoslavia and my brother. We left Yugoslavia in 1995 – that's when I moved to Ramallah. The Oslo Agreement meant that many would be returning, but that number of people is tiny in comparison to all the other Palestinians who were not able and are still not able to return.

We flew from Belgrade to the Ben Gurion airport. Those were the 'happy' times, there was this false sense of freedom. Because the Oslo Agreement was basically done in a way that it makes sure that Palestinians in no way can be autonomous in any sense, economically or politically. But at the time we could travel through the Ben Gurion airport for example. In Ben Gurion, because Mum really liked the carpet in Belgrade, we brought the carpets with us. I remember the carpets arriving on the belt and we had so much luggage and dad wasn't with us. Dad had already been in Ramallah, so mum, my sister and my little brother and I arrived with all the things, which is quite typical. The father or the man, especially in these situations of dislocation because

of a political situation, goes ahead to secure the place, and to make sure that we are all going to arrive to something decent and safe. Then the mother comes in with all the things! And all the children. Imagine the stress of these mothers just thinking about not only the children, but also how to take all the possessions, to make a new home elsewhere so everyone can feel at home. It's also the mental work, which means the emotional work of imagining things in ways that are comfortable, that make life possible, that decreases conflict or discomfort. This is something that very often drops out of all these stories of dislocation.

And then with the taxi we went straight to Ramallah. Because the Palestinian licence plates still didn't exist. I mean now you have Palestinian licence plates and you have the Israeli yellow plates, so you can see there is a distinction. Even though a lot of Palestinians have a Jerusalem ID which is blue, like the Israeli ID, the residents of Jerusalem have a temporary status. They don't have Israeli passports, so they have these temporary travelling documents which basically means that they are stateless. The West Bank and Gaza had the green IDs which is what they call the Palestinian IDs, but essentially, they are Israeli IDs that were given to Palestinians and this leads to further total fragmentation of Palestinian identity by the Israeli state. At the time there weren't any Palestinian licence plates, so I think it was very easy. And there were no check points, because everybody had an Israeli licence plate anyway, so I don't think it was a problem getting a taxi. Nowadays if you take a taxi from the Ben Gurion airport, they will drop you at the check point that's between Jerusalem and Ramallah, and then from that check point you take a West Bank taxi to Ramallah.

So, dad was there to provide the basics. I remember having a pink and white room. I was a teenager you know, like white bed with pink things. I remember the carpet being there, but I don't remember the unrolling. There was also a temporary place that we were staying in before we were moving into a house that was built by the brothers, which is my dad and three of his brothers. He has five brothers and six sisters. They were building this house together on a piece of land that my grandfather managed to buy ages ago. Both of my Grandparents are refugees as well. They left Lidd in 48, it's actually what we call the Ben Guion airport, we call it the Lidd Airport, it's right next to the city of Lidd. My Dad was four months I think when they left Lidd.

They moved around for a bit then at some point they were able to buy a piece of land at the end of nowhere, right across from an Israeli settlement. So, I lived very close to a fucking Israeli settlement and I would wake up and my window was directly onto it. I lived there for I don't know, five years. It's the settlement that's in charge of all the admin of Ramallah and the area, so whenever we need to do any permits or pay fines, like traffic tickets, which we would receive because, I don't know,

we go onto the Israeli settler roads, and these are the roads that connect the cities in the West Bank. They are clearly for settlers, but Palestinians also go onto them, they were first built to be used by both, but then slowly other roads are introduced that are meant only for Palestinians. So, there is this kind of constant imposition of segregation, like apartheid, it's very clear, especially with the wall as well that separates the lands of '67 and '48. So this settlement which is called Beit El, is the headquarters for the administration, and what I am seeing is the military part, so where the watchtowers are.

It was very, very, emotional for everyone the move. Dad was thrilled, returning to the family that he's been missing. Dad is the oldest son, he's not the oldest child but he is the oldest son, so that means that he has a very particular status as the carrier of the family name and the next in line after the Father. So, there was this epic reception, of someone who has returned, that they've been waiting for, and this was very intimidating actually to all of us, but we were not aware, but to Mum yes. Basically, she didn't quite understand what her position was in all of this because at the end of the day she's not just the mother of the children or the wife of the returned hero. So, it was a struggle also, because of language.

She was a lawyer. She studied law, and she had just started having some sort of very comfortable practice when we moved. And this makes me question how much of the decision was hers as well. I think it was actually not forced, but almost not discussed, I feel. Because this was it, there is a chance to go, for my father to go and live in Palestine – and we're going. These discussions never happened in front of us, so I don't know. In addition to not knowing the language she didn't learn law in Palestine, so it was a career that she couldn't pursue.

It was very hard for her. It was crushing. We kind of ended up being her friends, my sister and I – so we were very involved in mum's emotional process, during those first years. And it was a little strange because we were quite young. I didn't know how much support we could have offered but just being there. At some point someone was talking to mum and they asked her – so why did you come right? And she basically said it's because of the family. Also, I would judge her. I remember judging her when I was younger, like why doesn't she just go back? Why don't we go back? Because I wasn't happy. The first five years I was very, very, upset with my father, because it was unforgiveable to just uproot us and take us to a place that for him was an important one, I understand, but with this disregard to what everyone else would be going through.

The first five years I refused to forgive Dad, but that also meant I refused to identify as Palestinian because I wanted to go back. Home was Yugoslavia, home was Belgrade and I'm Yugoslavian. But then at some point I started to identify as Palestinian. It's when I became actually more politically involved.

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Where we come from the landscape is super political, this is where all the politics plays out, with the way villages are in relation to the settlements, the check points, the cities, and so on and so forth. But it's something that you can access and it's there for you. Even though we live under occupation, which is a little crazy, going to it is always like a form of claiming the land somehow. Before we had kids, in a certain period being in a car and moving throughout the West Bank was very much part of our routine. We would go with the car between villages and then get off and just walk around the villages or even stop by the side of the road and climb up a hill.

It's quite Mediterranean. Ramallah is not on the sea, however at certain moments at sunset you can see the sea which means that it's very close. I would imagine that a lot of Greece is like this. Ramallah is on a hill. At some point soon after Ramallah the hills end, and then you go towards the coast. It's kind of rocky hills covered with olive orchards. It's pretty dry but then it's quite green, full of thyme, sage and rosemary. The summers are hot, the winters are cold, and I mean cold. I don't think it's freezing, occasionally every few years it snows, but otherwise it's very wet and windy. It's very extreme, when it rains it pours. You have rivers running through the streets and then in the summer it's very dry, it doesn't rain from May to November.

I understand when someone is sceptical of open landscape that's accessible under occupation, because you know, it's not. I mean farmers are constantly harassed by settlers on their own land, and of course land is taken away constantly to join the settlements. They just basically come and put up the fence and just take it. Because they have the army protecting them and they are carrying guns. I mean the way the wall was built it was just cutting through people's farms without any explanation. Of course, many Palestinians would go to the Israeli court but then things are dragged on, that in a way, by the time anything can be possible, the wall is built and then that's a different legal process. But because you understand the code of occupation you understand how you can manoeuvre in space under these conditions it's easy to find ways of going to nature. This I don't know here. There's no occupation but still there is the state and there are laws of property that I don't know.