

Reminiscence Work with a Palestinian

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Submitted in fulfilment of the Life History Work course assessment guidelines for the Reminiscence Work option which requires ‘one item of analytical and reflective writing (2,500 words) ...’ April, 1999.

For many years I have taken a keen interest in the Middle East, where I lived for many years, and more particularly in the Israel-Palestine conflict. (I spent a few months on a kibbutz in 1976-77.) I have, moreover, been very sympathetic to what might very broadly be called the Palestinian position. Nearly two years ago I became an executive member of the national Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) and am now the Chair of this organisation, and a year-and-a-half ago I revived a local branch of PSC in Brighton and Hove. These activities brought me into contact with many Palestinians both in this country and elsewhere, among them ‘Mohammed’ as I have called him, who forms the basis of the reminiscence work reported on here.

Mohammed was very active before and during the *intifada*, the Palestinian uprising which continued in one form or another from 1987 to 1996. He is a *persona non grata* as far as the Israeli authorities are concerned, which is why his name has been changed and that some of the details of this account and the accompanying session have been altered as well. Mohammed told me that he wanted to write a book about his experiences and had made several attempts, both in Arabic and in English, to do so, but each time he was defeated by two problems. Firstly he digressed too much and lost the thread of what he was trying to say; and secondly he suffered from periodic collapses of confidence in the value of what he had to relate. I was quite convinced, from the little Mohammed had told me at this stage, that he had a powerful story to tell, and my experience as a counsellor and therapist told me that the problems he had had in writing the story himself arose partly from psychological defence mechanisms and partly from feelings of worthlessness which are liable to afflict those who are powerless to change their situation. I believed that these problems could be overcome by my facilitation and that both for his own psychological health, and in the interests of social justice, his story should be told, first privately to me, and then eventually publicly in whatever form we should agree upon.

This was how the present project, which has not yet been completed, was launched. Mohammed’s circumstances made regular meetings difficult, and some of the reminiscence work had therefore to be conducted by telephone. We agreed to make the sessions, in whatever form, as regular as possible, but in reality there have been considerable gaps in the work. All but the first session were recorded on tape, a telephone attachment device being used for this purpose when necessary. On the Reminiscence Work course, most of the discussion was about helping the elderly to reminisce, and there was much emphasis on techniques for facilitating this process. With Mohammed, it became increasingly clear that all that really mattered was that I was there and that I was fascinated by what he had to tell me. Most of the time Mohammed was in free flow, with only occasional encouraging noises from me. Sometimes I would ask for clarification on a point, and he would give this, but compared with my attentive presence, these interventions played, in my view, only a small

part in the facilitation of the work. Of course one of the reasons for this relative pacivity on my part was the recency of the events being recalled; another was their potency as memories.

The main problem which we had to overcome was the fear on Mohammed's part that what we were proposing to do would endanger his family and himself. It is easy to dismiss such worries as paranoia, and indeed there may be an irrational element in them. But when you consider that very many of Mohammed's family, male and female, were injured during the *intifada*, and, even more importantly, that one of his brothers died in another country in suspicious and unexplained circumstances around the same time, you may reach the conclusion that very great care in such matters is entirely warranted. Some well-known incidents involving the Israeli secret services lend support to the same caution. We therefore agreed that he would have a veto on my use of the material, and I promised to keep notes and tapes in a secure place. As an outsider I had to keep reminding myself, and indeed Mohammed himself continually reminded me, that this was not a mere formality for him, but literally a matter of life and death. He wanted to tell his story to the world in order to help his people, but he had to put questions of his family's and his own safety first. 'This is not a game,' he remarked pointedly to me once. The problem of security caused a small degree of tension between us, for while I was keen to use the material he had given me in every possible context, he remained cautious and only gave permission to exploit it on strictly laid-down conditions.

The security aspect of this project is only the first way in which it is unusual. Another is that it straddles the boundaries which are generally drawn between reminiscence work, oral history and therapy. Mohammed's experiences, as related to me, are both an immensely powerful personal testimony, including traumatic episodes which have clearly not been fully worked through, and an invaluable oral resource on recent Middle-Eastern history. Furthermore, the boundary between oral and written history, and between documentary history and fictionalised '*intifada* literature' (as it has come to be called) is also blurred in this project. We started from the attempt to write a fictionalised account, and moved over to a straight oral documentation of Mohammed's experiences before and during the whole period of the *intifada*; we have now agreed that the eventual aim should be to produce both a fictionalised account and a documentary one.

My profession as a counsellor and psychotherapist is clearly highly significant to this project. But it was also necessary for me to make a clear distinction between some aspects of what we were (and continue) to do, and therapy. Mohammed suffers from periodic attacks of depression which may be viewed, in classical psychodynamic theory, as anger turned inwards. He is clearly very angry about what happened to him, his family and his fellow-campaigners before and during the years of the *intifada*; he himself was regularly shot at, most of his family and he were wounded, other members of his family and he were tortured and otherwise physically abused, they were imprisoned simply for attempting to defend their human rights, they suffered constant verbal assaults and they were subject to inhumane administrative mistreatment. Some of this anger needs to be directed at other Palestinians who collaborated either actively or passively with the occupation authorities. The proper channelling of this anger seems to me, then, part of the project, although it is difficult to remember if this was thoroughly discussed between us at the beginning. On the other hand, the desire on both our parts to tell the western world a story which it rarely hears, indeed which one could say it is programmed not to hear, and thereby to influence it to behave differently towards the Palestinians, was a very powerful motivation. In this respect the

reminiscence work we were involved in was similar to cases of abuse, of whatever kind, where the need for resolution of internal conflict goes hand in hand with a desire for public recognition of the injustice which has been committed.

Certain aspects of Mohammed's story and of his character make his contribution particularly powerful for this purpose. Firstly, the narrative has the quality of a gripping adventure story in which we identify with Mohammed. Secondly its credibility is increased by Mohammed's rarely absent humour about the situations, often highly dangerous ones, in which he found himself. Thirdly, Mohammed's openly expressed distrust of many on his own side, and his willingness to give credit to Israeli Jews where due, removes the suspicion that he is engaged in a simple propaganda exercise. And fourthly while anger is clearly present, as already noted, it does not express itself in sarcasm, cynicism or bitterness. Incredulity is much more often his reaction to being mistreated.

All of this contributes to reversing the traditional Western way of viewing the Middle-East. To an extent which most westerners are unaware, and of which I have only become aware by the accidents of my life, attitudes to the Palestinians are shaped by images of 'terrorism' and more generally by what Edward Said has called 'orientalism'. In this narrative, Israeli Jews appear as the beleaguered and civilised 'good guys' facing incomprehensibly wicked and uncivilised wreckers. Little account is taken of the history of the conflict, and where it is, the view of the past presented is unrecognisable from a Palestinian point of view. Their dispossession, for example, is presented as a rational and relatively humane transfer of populations, regrettable, perhaps, but inevitable. Mohammed's story, which has all the hallmarks (even down to catapults and stones) of David facing Goliath, reverses the very imagery used by Israeli myth-creators and is a compelling corrective to it.

This public aspect of the reminiscence work with Mohammed goes even further, for the predominant western attitude to communism is also challenged when faced with Mohammed's entirely comprehensible adherence to the Communist Party and communist principles, and his assertion that the collapse of the Soviet Union was one of the biggest disasters suffered by the Palestinians. I am reminded of my own journey to Russia in 1970 when, despite my liberal outlook, I was amazed to see ordinary Russians going about their ordinary lives in ordinary ways. A few weeks ago I heard the same surprise expressed by an American public relations officer at SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters, Allied Powers Europe, the executive wing of NATO) who remarked about a military mission to Byelorussia which he had been sent on: 'You know, those guys were just like you or me.' We are reminded, furthermore, of those rare attempts to portray to non-Germans the German side in the Second World War as it was experienced by the majority of ordinary Germans, rather than the stereotypical view which is usually presented and which has more to do with projection than with any striving after accuracy.

One aspect of the continuing anti-German culture and narratives in Britain today, and one which I regret to say I still fall into myself occasionally, despite having been married to a Viennese woman for over twenty years, is the stereotyping of a certain kind of aggressive German-English accent. To some extent the same process has been engaged in by those making propaganda against Arabs, though here the situation is more complicated. Hebrew and Arabic are closely related Semitic languages, and, moreover, a majority of Israeli Jews are of Arab origin. Consequently, there is a great deal of similarity between the imperfect

English spoken by Israeli Jews and Palestinians. This has not, however, prevented some degree of stereotyping. Mohammed's story is told in a dialect which resembles the stereotype, but which, by its very power and humanity negates it. It was for this reason that no attempt was made to correct the English in the transcripts which were made of the reminiscence work sessions. This was thought particularly appropriate for another reason. No doubt because of the relationship between modern Arabic and the languages in which most of the Bible was written, and from which it was translated rather literally into European vernaculars, Mohammed's narrative has at times a biblical quality which adds an epic dimension. Phrases like 'so, in the second year of my studying at Bir Zeit', 'all these things, they happened at this time', 'by God, ...' [*walahi*, used with roughly the same meaning as 'verily' in the Bible] and so on, are extraordinarily evocative, not to say *reminiscent*.

It is interesting to compare the motivations of Mohammed and myself in this reminiscence work. Mohammed has at least two quite distinct motivations; the first to tell the Palestinian story to the world in the interests of furthering his people's fight for human rights, and the second to unburden himself of a confused and traumatic set of experiences which are still troubling him. There is an important difference between us. I am not a Palestinian, he is. As already related, this led us to regard the security risks involved in what we were doing in different ways. But it also meant that while I saw the Palestine problem as a paradigm case of other injustices in the world, including those which I myself have suffered, for Mohammed the central injustice in his world was the one which he was talking about, and others, while they were illuminated by it, were, I suspect, of secondary importance.

I have pondered deeply and at length over my own motivation, not only in relation to this reminiscence work, but also in regard to the whole Israel-Palestine conflict. Why have I become so involved in this particular issue? I have found in the Palestinian experience a poignant resonance with my own slow and painful discovery over the years that authority can behave in ways which have nothing to do with *noblesse oblige*, and that victims, like the teacher at school who was paralysed on one side by a piece of shrapnel in his brain, are often quite the reverse of saints. Expressed simply, the moral for me of the Palestinian experience is that authority (which in the present context equals power) should never be unconditionally trusted or accepted. This is particularly the case where the person or people exercising authority can simultaneously claim to be victims in some way. I was raised in an upper-middle class culture in which quite the opposite was preached. As boy scouts we promised to do our duty to God and the Queen, and unquestioning 'respect' was what was expected of us in relation to authority and especially *vis à vis* those who had been victimised while doing their duty. Of course that authority had to be British (perhaps even English), but then most of us knew of no other environment.

I was, and no doubt still am, naive compared with Mohammed. He has seen the naked abuse of power and authority over the whole period of his life, though even he continues to be shocked by it. My reaction to authority has, during most of my life, more resembled that of Jewish Germans who tried to reason with Nazis in the mistaken belief that the latter's actions resulted from some misunderstanding which could be cleared up by rational discussion. The old adage about power and absolute power could not be more true; the corruption which ensues from too much power results largely from the ability it gives to rewrite the narratives through which the *status quo* is regarded. Our task, then, is to resist the accumulation of power in too few hands, and to attack the narratives which arise when such agglomerations

occur. Learning about the Palestinian story, and especially about Britain's complicity in it, is what led me thus far; my work with Mohammed is part of the task to which I have referred.

I should not end this reflection without emphasising that underlying this reminiscence work is my strong personal affection for Mohammed. I liked him from the moment we met and soon felt that I could help him come to terms with his experiences. Had this motivation at the level of human sympathy and intimacy not been present it is unlikely that we could have worked together as well as we did, and continue to do.