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A Rift in Time

Travels with My Ottoman Uncle

Written by Raja Shehadeh

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A RIFT IN TIME

Travels with My Ottoman Uncle

RAJA SHEHADEH

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To Widad, my mother, a story teller, who fell silent before she could find out the end of the story

'Human beings are capable of the unique trick, creating realities by first imagining them, by experiencing them in their minds. The active imagining somehow makes it real. And what is possible in the art becomes thinkable in life.'

Brian Eno



An undated, pre-1916 physical map of northern Palestine and neighbouring regions showing some of the towns, villages and areas mentioned in the text. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress.)

A RIFT IN TIME



Frontispiece: A Bedouin man and his horse at the Makhada in the Jordan River where Najib forded the river in the course of his great escape.

1

Escaping Arrest

'They're coming to arrest you,' Hanan, my sister-in-law, called to warn me in her strong, matter-of-fact voice. 'Samer is on his way.'

My mother had just called Hanan in a panic to dispatch my brother to my aid, convinced that the Palestinian security police would be at my door any minute. She was frantic. An anonymous official from the office of the Attorney General had rung her to ask about me because they did not have my phone number. Prudently, she refused to reveal it. 'Don't worry. We'll find him,' he had menacingly said before hanging up.

I wasted no time. I quickly put on thick underwear, tucked my toothbrush in a pocket and pulled on an extra sweater, prison survival tips learned from experienced security detainees I had represented in the past in Israeli military courts. Jericho, the site of the new Palestinian security prison and the old Israeli military government headquarters, can get

very cold at night. On that evening of 18 September 1996 I sat huddled in the courtyard of our new house and waited for the knock on the door, trying to pretend I was neither worried nor angry.

Those first years of the transitional rule of the Palestinian Authority were strange times. It was the rude awakening at the end of a fascinating and hopeful period for me, during which I had devoted all my energies to bringing about change and a conclusion to the Israeli occupation. I had spent years challenging illegal Israeli land acquisitions in the occupied West Bank. Ironically, the unfounded claim that was now being made against my client was that he was selling land to the enemy by going into partnership with an Israeli corporation for the establishment of a gambling casino in Jericho, and I was accused of helping him with this venture. It was a false claim fabricated by some powerful members of the governing Authority who were hoping to intimidate my client into withdrawing from the project so that they could replace him in this lucrative enterprise.

Prompted perhaps by disappointment over the false peace heralded by the signing of the Oslo Accords, and despite all the fanfare on the White House lawn, my thoughts had been turning to the past, to the time when it all began. I had been reading about my great-great-uncle Najib Nassar, who like me was a writer, and like me a man whose hopes had been crushed when the Ottoman authority of his day sent troops to arrest him. But unlike me he did not wait for the knock on the door.

It was from my maternal grandmother, Julia, that I first heard of Najib. But he was always spoken of with ambivalence. He was the odd man out in the Nassar family, the one who was preoccupied with resistance politics during the British Mandate period while his brothers were making a good living,

one as a hotelier, another as a medical doctor, a third as a pharmacist, all well-to-do, established members of the professional middle class, while he mingled with the *fellaheen*, the peasants, and lived for a while among them. Even worse, he associated with the Bedouins, spoke and dressed like them and generally adopted their ways. My grandmother told me about a visit he once made to the family home in the Mediterranean city of Haifa.

'We did not recognise him. We almost threw him out. Then he said, "I'm Najib." We could hardly believe it. He looked emaciated, all skin and bones. His beard was long and straggly, he wore a keffiyeh on his head and he smelt terribly, as he had been living out in the open. I will never forget that sight.'

Hearing this, I was intrigued. No one had mentioned the order for his arrest by the Ottoman government. I was left to wonder why he went to live out in the wild. What was he running away from? And why was he so poor? How did he lose his money? Did he gamble it away?

To locate the places where Najib found refuge during his long escape from the Ottoman police, I first used a map made by the Israeli Survey Department. But I soon discovered that, in the course of creating a new country over the ruins of the old, Israel had renamed almost every hill, spring and wadi in Palestine, striking from the map names and often habitations that had been there for centuries. It was the most frustrating endeavour. If only I could visit this area with someone able to read the landscape and point out where the old towns and villages had stood. I knew just the person, but the Palestinian geographer Kamal Abdulfattah was not allowed to cross into Israel from the West Bank. How Israel manages to complicate and frustrate every project!

After the failed attempt at mapping out Najib's escape route

using a modern Israeli map, I managed to retrieve a 1933 map from the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh. What a relief it was to look at this and envision the country Najib would have recognised, with the villages, hills and wadis in which he had taken refuge reassuringly marked and bearing the names that he had used.

In planning the route of his escape, Najib had not been hampered by the political borders that many Palestinians are not allowed to cross today. Under the Ottomans on the eve of the First World War there was no administrative unit called Palestine. Haifa, Acre, Safad and Tiberias were part of the Beirut *sanjaq* (an administrative subdivision of a *vilayet* or province). South of that, including Jaffa, Gaza and Jerusalem, was the independent *sanjaq* of Jerusalem. The south-eastern parts of Palestine were included in the *sanjaq* of Maan and all of these were part of the *vilayet* of Greater Syria. The River Jordan did not delineate a political border. Without delays Najib was able to ford it by horse and in no time found himself on the eastern bank in what today is the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. When he finally gave himself up he was transported by train to Damascus, a trip that took no longer than two hours. So distorted has the geography become that for us West Bank Palestinians to travel north to Damascus we would first have to travel east, then north, crossing four different countries; and even that is possible only if we are fortunate enough to secure the necessary visas and exit permits from often uncooperative authorities, both Israeli and Arab.

The quest for Najib – the details of his life and the route of his great escape – that consumed me for the next thirteen years was not an easy one. Most of Palestine's history, together with that of its people, is buried deep in the ground. To reconstruct the journey of my great-great-uncle I could not visit any of the houses where he and his family had lived in Haifa,

his point of departure. This mixed community of Arabs and Jews has become an Israeli city, with most of its former Palestinian inhabitants scattered throughout the world. Najib died on 30 March 1948, just months before the Nakba (catastrophe), the mass expulsion and dispossession of the Arabs of Palestine in 1948 upon the establishment of Israel. Perhaps he was fortunate to be spared that most tragic period in the history of his country. His son, wife, siblings and every one of our common relatives were forced out of Haifa, losing all their property. They did not realise that they would never be allowed to return to their homes and so did not take their personal belongings with them. Furniture, books, manuscripts, memorabilia, family photographs, heirlooms and even personal effects were left behind and never returned. Everything that belonged to them, everything that told their individual stories, was either stolen or seized and deposited in Israeli archives for use by Israeli researchers seeking to understand the history and character of the Arabs whom they were colonising.

A further difficulty was that many of the villages and encampments in which Najib found refuge had also been reduced to rubble, as I discovered when I went in search of them in the hills of the Galilee. I had to scan the terrain with an archaeologist's eye to determine where they had once stood. It was therefore a strange and yet a typically Palestinian quest. Strange because I had to rely heavily on my imagination and train myself to see what was not readily visible. Typical because the process I had to follow to uncover the history of a member of my family is similar to that followed by many Palestinians who had family in the part of Mandatory Palestine that became Israel. I have been able to find only one official Israeli map where all the Palestinian villages existing before 1948 are shown. Next to many of those appears the sinister Hebrew word *harous* (destroyed).

*

Najib was born in 1865. For the first decade of his adult life he had tried his hand at a number of professions, as assistant pharmacist, farmer and translator. Short and plump, he always wore a tarboosh (fez) that leaned forward towards his face in the manner of Beirut merchants. Unlike his brothers, he was not good at making money. He was always involved in pursuing unpopular causes and could hardly earn enough to sustain his family. In 1913, when he was forty-eight, he confessed in an article that he 'despaired of living a free life under the Ottoman Empire'. This made him decide to emigrate to the United States, as many other members of our family had done. Once he had made that decision, he could 'hardly wait to organise [his] affairs and prepare [him]self for the big move'. He was feeling 'only regret for all the efforts [he] applied to establish [him]self in the country'.

I was perfectly capable of recognising these sentiments. I had trained as a barrister in London, but when I returned to work as a lawyer in the West Bank under Israeli occupation I found no professional satisfaction in a ruined legal system. There is hardly a resident of Palestine today who has not considered the option of emigrating. I know all too many who, once they made that decision, regretted all the time they had wasted living in Palestine. I too went through a period when I felt the Israeli occupation would never end and I would be doomed to a life of humiliation, oppression and lack of civil rights. I seriously considered emigrating before turning to human rights activism and writing alongside my professional legal work. The outbreak of the First Intifada in 1987 gave me hope that things would finally change and I dismissed all thoughts of leaving Palestine.

On 24 July 1908 Sultan Abdulhamid (who reigned from

1876 to 1909) granted his subjects a constitution. This was the same constitution that had first been adopted in 1876. Its introduction was part of the process of Westernisation that had begun during the first half of the eighteenth century, with the aim of saving a decaying empire from collapse by creating one Ottoman nation out of many Ottoman subjects, including Muslims, who could be Turks, Arabs, Albanians, Bosnians and others, Christians, who could be Armenians, Greeks, Arabs and others, and Jews, who could be of various nationalities. It also attempted to stem the imperialist designs of Western powers upon the empire advanced by claims of protection for the non-Muslim communities. Constitutional government was to replace absolutism, uniting Muslims and non-Muslims to form 'the Ottoman Nation', based on principles of freedom, justice and patriotism. However, the newly elected parliament, which first met on 19 March 1877, was short-lived. After holding only two sessions Abdulhamid dismissed it and suspended the constitution. Now the experiment was being tried again.

At first Najib received news of the implementation of the constitution with much scepticism. He was not sure that 'among the people or the civil service there was any readiness to act in accordance with its provisions and allow and safeguard the liberties enshrined in it'. Despite this, he decided 'to pin his hopes on it and to support it'. As matters turned out, he was so impressed that such a revolution could have occurred without bloodshed that he decided to stay in the country and not to emigrate.

The Sultan abolished censorship. As a result the number of newspapers and periodicals published throughout the Ottoman Empire jumped to 350, a third of them new. Political opposition groups were allowed, political prisoners released and the army of spies, numbering 30,000, was disbanded. This

revolutionary change, which was not to endure through the years of the First World War, was the work of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), a secret association the Young Turks had formed in Salonica, which was then still part of the Ottoman Empire. They were a group of army officers and intellectuals who were in power from 1908 until the end of the First World War. Up to that point most Muslim Ottomans were not averse to the establishment's identification with an Arab past. Abdulhamid had once remarked, 'We [Ottomans] are a *millet* [religious community] that has originated from the Arab *millet* … just as we took civilisation from the Greeks, Europe has taken it from us.' This identification with the Islamic Arab heritage served to legitimate the Ottoman claim to the caliphate. The shift the CUP brought about in the ideology of the empire from Islam to Turkish nationalism proved detrimental to the future of the entire region. In the decades following the First World War the Middle East was reorganised. Rather than one multi-ethnic empire ruling the whole region, as had been the case for the last 450 years under the Ottomans, it was fragmented into Turkey in Anatolia and a number of small new nation states created by the imperial powers of the day: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel.

As it turned out, Najib was right in his initial misgivings about the future. Nationalism was late in coming, but when it arrived it resulted in the genocide of the Armenian communities in Anatolia in 1915, the forcing out of Greeks from Turkey and of Turks from Greece in 1923, and in 1948 of most of the Christian and Muslim Arabs from Palestine. Wars shatter tranquil worlds. This was how the First World War affected Najib. Until it ended he had insisted on defining himself as 'the Ottoman'. With the intrusion of nationalism, Najib's world was broken apart and restructured.

The years immediately following the implementation of

the constitution were an active time of hope and change. Najib's fortunes improved. In 1908 in Haifa he started the Al Karmil publishing house and newspaper of the same name (which is the Arabic for Mount Carmel), transforming himself from a farmer and translator into a campaigning journalist. But the start of the First World War significantly complicated matters for him. As a public figure and editor of a major newspaper, his views on the impending war were known. He expressed them in numerous articles published in his newspaper. Perhaps this was the problem. As Najib was English-educated and Christian, it was only natural for the Ottoman authorities to assume that he would give his allegiance to the Allies and perhaps even cooperate with them in their war efforts against the Axis powers. The Germans knew he was opposed to Ottoman participation in the war on their side. Someone like Najib was dangerous at a time when propaganda was an important weapon in the war. They wanted him on their side. Or, if this was not possible, they wanted him silenced.

In his autobiographical novel, *Mufleh al Ghassani*, penned at the beginning of the British Mandate in Palestine, Najib describes in precise detail his movements during the years when he was on the run from the Ottoman police: the people he met, who gave him refuge and what he did throughout those three difficult years. As such it provided me with a wealth of information on which the account in this book is based. There is hardly any mention of his wife and children, but perhaps that is no wonder, as she ran away with an Ottoman soldier. Nor for that matter do women figure much in the book. Not only was it a world of men in which Najib moved, but there is never any mention of how he felt, never any complaint about the hardships he had to endure. Stoics seem to make bad novelists. And perhaps most annoyingly for me, he moves through the glorious countryside of the Galilee, but

there is never any description of the landscape. Even with my anti-colonial sentiments, I came to appreciate T. E. Lawrence, with his great capacity for seeing and describing the landscape in which he moved and prefer reading him to reading my unseeing great-great-uncle.

Ned Lawrence, who would eventually become known to the world as 'Lawrence of Arabia', was described by a contemporary as having 'a very keen face. You could see the pressure behind it.' He had fair hair and electric blue eyes – everyone always noticed his eyes. Too short to be a regular army officer, in 1914 he began working as an intelligence officer in Egypt. Before that he spent a summer touring on foot the chain of citadels build by the French seven centuries earlier to defend what is today Lebanon and western Syria. France's determination to return to Syria was an ambition he was determined to thwart. The tribesmen he met on his travels he later recruited to help the British in their efforts against the Ottoman forces in the First World War. But it was not just the Ottomans that Lawrence hoped to remove: with Sharif Hussein of the Hijaz as figurehead, he believed they could 'rush right to Damascus and biff the French out of all hope of Syria'. Thanks to a series of important postings he held during and after the war, he was able to play a crucial role in the formulation of British policies in the region.

In Najib's account there is not a single admission throughout the three exacting years he spent on the run of being sick or feeling tired. The only time he complains is when he had to endure lice during the last stage of his escape on the eastern side of the River Jordan, while living as a shepherd with the Bedouins in the wilderness and sleeping with the goats. From tracing his life and reading his works, I developed a deep empathy with and appreciation of my great-great-uncle, but I disliked his novelistic account, which

I found poorly written. Clearly the man was dedicated to the cause he espoused but had no talent for novel writing.

He describes two encounters that took place before his country's participation in the war. The first was with the German director of the railway in Haifa. The line from Haifa to Dera'a, a northern village in what is now Jordan, had been completed in 1905 as an addition to the main Hijaz Pilgrim Railway, which ran from Damascus to Medina in the Hijaz, in the south-western part of the Arabian peninsula. The director asked Najib when he thought the Ottomans would enter the war. Najib's answers are blunt, revealing a man who was ready, whatever the personal cost, to speak truth to power. He said that he did not believe that those in government were idiotic enough to participate: 'For many years we've been praying to God to pit the English and the Germans against each other so they would stay off our backs. Are we so crazy as to enter the fray now?' The director answered that he thought Najib was 'more fanatical than the Muslims', to which Najib responded that he was indeed 'fanatical about [his] country and [his] people'.

The second encounter was with the German consul in Haifa. The consul summoned Najib to a meeting and proceeded to boast about Germany, its strength and capabilities. He assured Najib, 'The interest of the Ottomans demands that you support Germany.' To which Najib answered, 'If Germany had a fleet to protect the long coastline of the empire along the eastern Mediterranean Sea I would support joining your side.' The consul told him, 'Mines can protect the coastline just as well,' but Najib was unconvinced.

Reading about this incident, I felt it was more foolhardy than brave for a citizen of a country on the brink of war to speak his mind so openly. But that was Najib's way.

The consul then complained that 'the Muslim Arabs are enamoured of England, the Christian Catholics infatuated

with France and the Orthodox with Russia. As to the Protestants they too support England. Germany is loved by no one.'

Najib pointed out that, unlike the English, French and Russians, the Germans had not established missions, schools or hospitals. How, then, could they expect to win anyone's allegiance? 'In any case,' Najib added, 'the support exhibited by the various sects to the French, English and Russians only demonstrates these people's fidelity. So if Germany worked at protecting the Arabs from the oppression which the Unionist government is inflicting on them, their hearts would be full of admiration and support for Germany.'

Najib believed that it was German pressure that led the Ottoman government to adopt, prior to the start of the war, a policy antagonistic to the Arabs. Widespread arrests and hangings of Arab leaders were taking place more frequently than ever before. He argued in his newspaper that such oppressive policies had never been pursued in past wars by the Ottomans and blamed Germany for encouraging the Unionist government to pursue them now. He argued that this was causing deep divisions between Arabs and Turks.

As recounted in his novel, only at this point in the encounter did it become clear that the German consul was attempting to recruit Najib as a propagandist for the German cause. The consul tells Najib, 'The love of Catholics for the French runs deep in their veins. It cannot be wrested out of them without bloodshed. As to the other denominations the time for working with them to win their allegiance has passed. We are in the eleventh hour. Do you understand what I'm saying? If you support Germany you will be rewarded with the assistance and payment we spoke about.' Najib claims that in response to this appeal for his collaboration he told the consul that the only way for Germany to win the hearts of the people was by changing its policy.

In late October 1914 the Ottomans entered the war on the side of the Germans. By then the war had been raging for some months and the devastation it would cause had already become evident. On the night of 2 March 1915 Najib's brother Rashid, the pharmacist, who lived on Mount Carmel in Haifa, heard a knock on his door. He was expecting the Ottoman police to come and arrest him. Times were unsettled and hordes of people had been rounded up and either sent into exile or taken to Damascus for a brief military trial, after which many had been hanged.

Rashid opened the door a crack, asking, 'Who is it?'

'Open up,' said a voice Rashid recognised as the town priest's.

'What brings you here at this unholy hour? Aren't you afraid to be out with all the patrols and spies who never sleep? These days even the walls have ears. Come in. Come in.'

The priest had come, he said, to advise Rashid to send his brother Najib away from Haifa.

'Why?' asked Rashid.

'Because Fakhri Pasha in Damascus has been enquiring about him and his political leanings. This is a time of war. A dangerous time, when even decent government officials are afraid to tell the truth for fear that they themselves will come under suspicion.'

'But where should he go?' asked Rashid. 'Isn't it better to stay where he is known, where government officials know him and would defend him against any accusation? If he flees it would raise suspicion that he is indeed guilty.'

'Had the government officials been able to protect him, the highest ranking among them would not have commissioned me to relay this advice to you. People are in a state of panic. Everyone is thinking: I have to preserve my own life and you can do what you want with the others.'

In his autobiographical novel Najib writes that his brother Rashid could not sleep that night. He could hardly wait for the curfew to end. At daybreak he left his house and rode into the centre of town, where Najib lived, in order to warn him. It was a clear wintry morning, the air crisp and still. Down below he could see the heartening view of the sky-blue Mediterranean stretching out across the bay of Haifa.

Najib describes himself as having been a constant source of trouble for the family and gives voice to his brother's complaints about repeatedly needing to try to keep him in check. As I read his rueful description, I thought of my own brother Samer. More than any of my other siblings, he takes after the Nassars. He has that same deep, sonorous voice and wonderfully dry humour. He must have felt the same way Rashid did after my mother called him that night when she heard of the order for my arrest. Without hesitation he came over and, like Najib and his brother, we discussed what to do. Did Samer leave my house that night feeling burdened by my refusal to renounce activism and raise a family of my own, as he was doing?

Najib was surprised to see his brother this early in the morning, saying, 'It's not like you to come to visit so early in the morning. What brings you here?'

Rashid told his brother what the priest had advised.

Over breakfast the two brothers deliberated. Rashid tried his best to remove from his voice any hint of recrimination or blame. Najib told his brother of an incident two weeks earlier that still caused him anxiety.

'Our old friend Attallah came over and asked me to accompany him because there was something he wanted to talk about. It concerned his son, who had absconded to join the Allies. He said he had received a letter from him, asking for vital information that the Allied army needed. They were

thinking of landing troops here and wanted information about the shoreline, the prices of commodities, available vehicles and the number of soldiers stationed nearby. Attallah asked me whether I would be willing to take the letter and go with him to the Anglican Church, where we could read it in peace and think of the right response. I asked him why he would not carry the letter himself. He said he was afraid. When he said this,' Najib recounted, 'my suspicions that I was being framed were raised, especially as the place to which he had suggested we go to read the letter was not far from the house of the German consul. So I answered, "What have we to do with such matters? We are no experts who can give such information. I suggest that if you have such a letter you immediately destroy it, because having it on you will constitute a danger to your life." I didn't want Attallah to suspect what I was thinking, so I invited him to come with me to visit a mutual friend. Once there Attallah disappeared momentarily, claiming to have destroyed the letter on his return. Before he left I checked my pockets to make sure he had not slipped it there without my knowledge. I also checked all the places where we had been, but found no trace of the letter. What I suspect is that this "friend" was trying to frame me and deliver me to the German consul on a charge of treason. This way he would have removed any suspicions that the desertion of his son had placed on him.'

As it turned out, this was only one of a number of attempts throughout the course of the war when fellow Christians tried either to frame Najib or to attribute to him blame for the treasonous actions of others.

Rashid now understood the background and became convinced that his brother was in danger of being arrested, put on military trial, charged with treason and hanged.

'You must go into hiding,' he said with real urgency.

They discussed how Najib should set about it and whether

he should leave the country and go into exile. Najib was concerned about his family, his young wife, two sons and daughter.

'Should I take them with me?' he asked his brother.

'No. Leave them in Haifa. I will take care of them,' Rashid promised.

His brother wanted him to move away from the areas under Ottoman control and, as many exiles had done, flee to Egypt, where the British were in control. But Najib refused. He feared that if it became known that he had gone abroad the authorities would assume that he had joined the enemy and this would put his family in danger. It was best to stay in the country but remain out of sight. For the time being they resolved that the wisest course of action for him was to leave his home in Haifa and go to live in Nazareth, thirty kilometres to the south-east. So the next day, telling his wife nothing about the danger facing him, Najib simply said that he had business to attend to in Acre in the north. He had to leave immediately but would return the next day or, failing that, the day after.

Compared with other major Palestinian towns – Jerusalem, Jaffa, Nablus and neighbouring Acre – Haifa is a relatively new city. In its present location, its existence began in the mid-eighteenth century when, in 1764, the governor of Acre, Dhahir al 'Umar, laid waste the older hamlet of Haifa al Atiqa, located some two and a half kilometres to the west of the modern site, and transferred the population, numbering around 250 people, to a new location that he had surrounded by a protective wall. He also built a citadel overlooking the settlement to the south, the remains of which were still in use at the time of the British occupation in 1918.