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Legends of the Diwan



Abu Faisal, my cousin and nominal head of the Kanaaneh clan, at the Zawieh with two guests, 1950. Note the prayer niche in which he sits and the coffee set on his left.

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Today I visited my old cousin, Abu-Faisal, who is the nominal head of the Kanaaneh clan though he has little actual influence these days. Every morning he still prepares a new pot of black Arabic coffee and sits in the clan's traditional guesthouse or *diwan*, al-Zawieh, handed down since my grandfather established it. He shares his coffee with his daily circle of visitors, his elderly friends, and with the occasional passer-

by: a door-to-door salesman or a Bedouin visitor. They sit, sip coffee, smoke, stare into empty space, and exchange grunts. Occasionally they talk about the affairs of the village at their own outdated level of understanding of it and reminisce about the good old days. When they are really bored, they play *manqala*, the popular local board game.

Occasionally I drop in at this old-style nook on my way to work. Every time I do, someone seeks my medical advice on behalf of the group, either half-jokingly about their diminishing sexual potency or, more seriously, about common ailments such as headaches, hemorrhoids, low back pain and insomnia.

Can you believe it, but the Shin Bet once tried to get me to inform on this group. Shortly after I assumed responsibility for the Acre sub-district in the Ministry of Health, I received a formal letter congratulating me on my new position and inviting me to meet with the representative of the Prime Minister's office in Haifa. Only after I arrived and entered the bare-walled room furnished only with a small coffee table and two chairs did I realize what kind of "representative" the young man receiving me was. Among other things, he wanted to know how I would react if people in a traditional *diwan* in Arrabeh were to criticize the government of Israel. I insisted that we talk about health only. He pointed out that "the health of the state" should concern me as well. I called his trump by asking him not to light his cigarette while I was in the room. He promptly ended the "interrogation."

The old regulars at al-Zawieh are not unaware that such "spying" goes on. A story is told about Abu-el-Kamel, a traditional man of the old religious school who holds precariously on to his teaching job, having never qualified in accordance with the "modern" requirements of the Department of Arab Education. One Friday morning he was the center of attention at al-Zawieh, telling for the umpteenth time the local equivalent of the born-again Christian prophecy of the return of the Messiah. Traditional learned Muslims know the epic prophecy as al-Jafr, a text that few are reputed to have read. It predicts the rise to power of the Jews at the end of time under the leadership of the One-Eyed Imposter, assumed by most of these old-timers to be none other than Moshe Dayan. He and his followers will conquer the Muslim armies and enter Damascus. Then, and this is as far as Abu-el-Kamel got with his story, the Mahdi, the Islamic version of the reincarnated Messiah, will lead the Muslims to a glorious victory over the armies

of the One-Eyed Imposter and finish them off. But as Abu-el-Kamel reached the climax of his narrative, a young man, assumed by all to be an informer, entered the *diwan* and greeted those assembled. He sipped the black coffee he was offered and returned the polite individual “*Marhaba*” greetings from each of those present. Then everyone turned their attention back to Abu-el-Kamel for the punch-line of the al-Jafr prophecy. But he froze in mid-sentence. He did not dare relate the dire prediction against the Jewish armies in the presence of the presumed informer. His job was on the line. When the company urged him to finish his story, he replied: “I took them all the way to Damascus. Go ahead and get them back if you dare!”

Days were when al-Zawieh was a lively place, the very focus of rural life. I recall it as a crowded gathering place in the cool summer evenings of 1948. It had the only radio set in the village, one brought by the family of my aunt Samieh Rustom, refugees from another village on their way to safety in Lebanon. Men of the village, young and old, would gather around, the elders seated and the younger and less landed crowding at the door to hear the evening news. “Radio Rustom does not lie!” we would say to convince ourselves that the impossible, the surrender of so many Palestinian cities to the Jews, was actually happening.

With the establishment of Israel, almost overnight, al-Zawieh lost its purpose and its chief occupant much of his authority. The loss of so much land through confiscation by the new state—and the resulting shift away from subsistence farming to casual labor—pulled the rug from under the entire land-based social structure that had given credibility to al-Zawieh and its influential chiefs. Suddenly landless laborers had cash in their pockets, more of it than their former masters, and did not need their favors. Any youngster could go to the city and work in construction; when he came home, he was not ready to take orders from his elders. These sudden changes played havoc with the social order of the village.

Al-Zawieh was first established by my grandfather, Ahmad al-Mustafa, a man whose name inspired respect and awe throughout the Galilee, if not Greater Syria—or so his ten children and dozens of senior grandchildren who knew him would have us believe. As a young man, he left the village and took on the responsibility of guarding

the Banat Yaa'qoub Bridge, then the main crossing across the Jordan River between Palestine and the Golan Heights. He was in charge of collecting the transit fees on behalf of the Turkish Sultan from all those crossing the bridge in either direction. No one knows exactly by what luck he landed such a significant job, except that by doing so he single-handedly replaced a whole division of armed Turkish soldiers. He was reputed to be a marvelous and fearless swordsman, so much so that he came to be known to his contemporaries and descendants by the name of his rough hewn sword, *Abu-Shelfi*. His trusty horse cried tears of blood upon his death and refused food from anyone else, dying shortly after him.

At the end of his heroic seven-year assignment, Abu-Shelfi rode into Arrabeh with his double saddle full of gold coins. His first act was to build the *diwan* for the Kanaaneh clan. It functioned, and still functions in a diminished way today, as the center of communal life, the place at which all collective clan business is conducted. Government officials are received there, as are well-wishers on happy occasions and those paying their respects upon the death of any Kanaaneh clan member. Any traveler who arrived in the village after nightfall was welcomed into al-Zawieh and provided with food and shelter for the night. Guests of any member of the clan were accommodated at al-Zawieh, no questions asked, at least for the traditional three days of formal guest receiving. Every morning fresh coffee would be brewed and all the men folk of the clan would gather to consult and receive their respective tasks from my grandfather, a he-man if ever there was one in these parts of the Ottoman Empire.

One morning, it is told, an unfortunate pregnant woman happened to pass by on her way to the fields as Abu-Shelfi was making coffee in al-Zawieh and heard him clear his throat. The thunderous boom caused her to abort on the spot. On another occasion, the same act of him clearing his throat before passing sentence on a group of criminals from south Lebanon caught in the act of stealing cattle from Arrabeh caused them all, without exception, to wet their pants. That's how ferocious my grandfather was.

A while before Abu-Shelfi returned from his seven-year guard duty, eight beautiful girls arrived in Arrabeh with their devout Sufi father, driven out of the Arabian Peninsula by the new Wahabi rulers. The father, Idrees al-Najdi, died shortly thereafter and was buried not far

from the Kanaaneh cemetery. The girls, all fair-skinned and green-eyed thanks to their distant European roots, were the responsibility of a rival Arrabeh clan, the Yasins, after the head married the oldest among them. He had his own *diwan*, al-Qabu, still maintained by his descendants to this day. Idrees al-Najdi must have been held in high regard by his new hosts in Arrabeh for they accorded him the high honor of burial in a specially constructed mausoleum right next to the revered village holy site we knew only as *Qabr-es-Saddeeq*—the holy man’s grave—till the Israeli Ministry of Religious Affairs built a wall around it and prohibited the village folks from entering its vicinity. It turns out that es-Saddeeq was a Jewish rabbi, Hanan Ben-Dosa. It is ironic that after this attempt at protecting its sanctity it has lost all significance to village people. Times were when every family crisis—a sick child, an absent son, a barren wife, or a failed crop—would rate a visit to *Qabr-es-Saddeeq* to dress the grave with green silk cloth or to light an olive oil lamp. Those limited of means or asking small favors would just give the site a good sweeping and sprinkle it with rose water. Now, under lock and key, it is totally abandoned except for the occasional religious Jew arriving on the holy Shabbat or on high holidays. For me, the site is doubly significant, or triply so since my father and mother are both buried on the same hillside as well.

After his return, Abu-Shelfi sent a messenger to the Yasin clan asking for the hand in marriage of Haji, the most beautiful of the daughters. The head of the rival clan demanded what he thought would be a prohibitive bride price, upon which a bag of gold, more than the asking price, was promptly delivered and the marriage contract sealed. That was his first wife, my grandmother, “*Sitti Haji*,” whom I know only through tales of wonder and grace. Later on, he married two more wives: one with the excuse of needing a helper around the house, as the work animals and farm hands had become too much of a chore for one wife to handle; and the second, a beautiful young cousin, very late in his life, to sweeten the days of his waning health.

Upon his death, shortly before the end of Turkish rule in Palestine, his extensive land holdings were divided between his six sons with an equal share held in perpetuity for the maintenance of the guesthouse. His daughters received nothing. Although, under Islamic law, women are entitled to inherit a half-share of what the men receive, traditionally, and even to this day, daughters do not inherit in the Galilee. Their

inheritance right is never exercised. And in fact, most women are not even aware of their entitlement. The idea, presumably, is that it should work out equitably, as a woman's husband does not have to worry about the loss of part of his inheritance to his sisters. Still, it reflects a continuing patriarchy which often has severe negative repercussions for women, especially for single women. When a woman is "not marriageable," she is supposed to be cared for by her brothers. That means in practice that she usually ends up being a servant to them, their go-for.

My uncle Salih inherited two generous shares—his own and that assigned for the guesthouse—and became the boss of the Kanaaneh clan and an influential figure in the wider Galilee. He was reputed to be a wise and courageous man, adept at solving conflicts between the villagers. He acquired sufficient influence and the necessary number of clansmen to make his decisions enforceable and to offer protection to anyone who was in trouble. He was sought out from far and wide by anyone who had committed a serious crime, say a murder, theft, or transgression against a woman's honor. The name of Salih al-Ahmad would be enough to afford such a refuge-seeker protection while my uncle arranged for the traditional truce period needed for peace-making. This was in the days when government did not function properly and the arm of the law did not reach far into the rural countryside. Villagers from around the area would pay their debts in gifts of parcels of land and by swearing allegiance to the man. Or, perhaps, he would grab the land, and the owner would feel so indebted and intimidated that he would not dare to refuse the arrangement.

Despite being functionally illiterate and a villager, Uncle Salih apparently was a dapper and clever man, an intrepid social climber who moved in the circles of the Effendis of Acre; he befriended several influential figures, including Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahai Faith; the nationalist Bishop Hajjar; the head of the Sufi sect in these parts, Sheikh al-Shathli; and a young lawyer and rising star, Ahmad Shukairy, who later became the founder of the PLO. Early on, Uncle Salih took a second wife whom he kept in Acre, a citified cousin and the widow of a high-ranking Turkish officer and hence experienced and graceful enough to measure up to hosting such dignitaries.

Herbert Samuel, the first British High Commissioner of Palestine, once visited my uncle at al-Zawieh to announce the reduction of

taxes from 12 to 10 percent of the farmers' annual crops, thus further increasing my uncle's recognition and influence throughout Palestine. In 1936, during the Palestinian uprising against the British Mandate and the Balfour Declaration,* Uncle Salih befriended the revolutionary firebrand Ezzidin al-Qassam. Nonetheless, he continued to deal with the Mandatory authorities, presumably acting as a double agent in the rural hinterland of the revolt.

I remember Uncle Salih as a tall man, very fair skinned with blue eyes, which made him resemble the master race, the British. That, very likely, was not far from the truth, considering all the miscegenation and fence jumping that must have taken place in these parts during the Crusades. Towards the end of his life, shortly before the establishment of Israel, he rated an occasional visit from an Armenian physician from the city, Dr. Ardikian, who would bring with him a new magic injection called Insulin. His grandson and the current heir-apparent of al-Zawieh has severe Diabetes Mellitus, requiring multiple daily insulin injections. He seems proud of it; even his grandfather's diabetes is worthy of emulation. The young man conducts himself with aplomb, speaks and walks in a manner implying awareness of his social rank and expected special role, a rank and a status that exist only in old people's memory. Even when seeking help at my clinic he takes umbrage at having to wait his turn and tries to pull rank over others. I am not above giving him the occasional pleasure of some special attention, for his psychological benefit and for keeping the peace in my waiting room.

Today, on my visit to al-Zawieh, I met my cousin Salim, one of the founders of the Communist party in Arrabeh and the first young man in the village to dare to walk in its streets without the traditional headgear. The majority of Communists in the village are simply political activists rather than ideologues. Among the Palestinian minority, it is impossible to speak out politically except through the Communist party, which has Jewish activists too. But even if outspoken villagers like Salim are not formally Communists, they are labeled as such by the authorities,

* *The Balfour Declaration*: A 1917 formal letter issued on behalf of the British government to the London Zionist leader, Lord Rothschild, by its foreign minister committing it to supporting the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The country's native Palestinian community was mentioned only incidentally.

who want them pushed to the margins. Toufiq, my closest village friend, started out in carpentry as a furniture maker. For a couple of years, during the period when I was a teacher in a neighboring village, he worked in a workshop with cousin Salim, who was constantly under surveillance by the Shin Bet and the military government and spent much of his time in jail for his political opinions. In fact, Salim had learned carpentry during one of his extended jail terms. It was considered so dangerous to associate with Salim that some of Toufiq's friends abandoned him because they feared he was tainted just by sharing the same physical space. I was not that cautious but certainly I had no desire to be tainted with Communism as I stood at the threshold of applying for a student visa to America. I kept my distance from the party members, adopting the policy, as the saying goes, of "*Ibi'id a'n al-sharr aw-ghaneelu*—Cheer for evil from a distance."

On one major aspect of our community's development, the Communists deserve sole credit. The Soviet Union extends benefits to the Israeli Communist party in the form of scholarships for loyal youths selected by the party, usually children of its well-established local members. The first such cadre of physicians, engineers and lawyers—who have studied in Soviet states—are back and active in our towns and villages, both in their professions and in politics. They are fast becoming the main source of our up-and-coming intelligentsia. In the absence of accessible places of higher education for our youth in Israel, the party is attracting many who otherwise would never make it to college. Enrollment in Israeli universities is nearly impossible for most Arab citizens; witness my own experience: good enough material to win a scholarship at Harvard but not to enter the Hebrew University. Universities in neighboring Arab countries are totally out of reach, of course, because of our Israeli citizenship.