THE GLOBAL AND THE INTIMATE

Feminism In Our Time

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religious, spiritual, and social significance. Despite its bitter taste, the extract of the neem is embraced for all the illnesses that it cures. Neemsaar is also the name of an ancient Hindu religious place of pilgrimage in the Sitapur district. The title, *Ek Aur Neemsaar*, stands for the bittersweet truths of SKMS's journey, a journey that seeks to envision a different world for the people of Sitapur.

4. The touching of feet is an expression of respect. It is important to note that this touching of feet happened during Holi, a day on which it is deemed acceptable to break all taboos. In that sense, it did not carry any "guaranty" of a permanent social shift. However, this event still marked an important breakthrough in our communities.
5. Some authors in the collective chose to use their last names, while others chose to reject them either because they were taking a stand against using last names that reveal caste affiliations or because they did not want their families to feel outed by their own stories and critiques.
6. *Raidas* are seen as lower than Tama's own caste, *Pasi*.

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TEHRAN KIDS

Mikhal Dekel

Growing up in Haifa, Israel, I knew that my father had survived extermination in Poland by fleeing to British-controlled Palestine during World War II together with a group of children later dubbed the Tehran Children. He was, as I was occasionally told, "lucky" to have been a Tehran Child, but what did that mean? For most of my childhood and much of my adulthood I had not given it much thought. When I did, I had an embarrassingly naive and grossly fantastical picture in my mind of a group of Jewish kids carried en masse from their homes in Poland and brought to safety in Palestine in a kind of instant, relatively painless rescue mission. I knew they were attached to an army—I used to believe it was the Red Army—and that they remained in Tehran for a while. Like most post-Six-Day-War sabras of my generation, I didn't take much interest in the Holocaust and took care to avoid confronting any aspect of it too directly and closely. The Shoah was studied in middle and high school, but in a kind of dry, factual fashion that doesn't leave a mark on one's mind. There was, of course, the annual Holocaust Memorial Day, when we would have school ceremonies and when national television (there was only one channel back then) would broadcast Holocaust films nonstop and radio stations would play somber songs, but I generally did not watch or listen or feel affected by this day. If one looked for it, of course the Holocaust was all over Israeli culture at that time—the works of Appelfeld, Kaniuk, and Kazetnik, not to speak of the Yad Vashem Museum, but these works did not appeal to secular Israeli youth of my generation. There is in Zionist ideology a kind of mandatory rejection of suffering, an imperative to joy above all else (as in the popular post-state song "mukhrakhim

lihiyot same'akh"—you *must* be happy), which is really the flipside of extreme sadness. And there has always been in Israeli culture something anarchic, a disinterest in even the nearest past. The Holocaust was abstract, remote and unconnected to our present lives; besides, we had our own (Arab-Israeli) wars—which affected my childhood and adolescence deeply and personally. The dead and wounded of these wars were tragic heroes and not hapless victims, and it was during Memorial Day for the Fallen of the Israeli Defense Forces that I cried my eyes out, glued to those gut-wrenching documentaries on TV about beautiful young men, eighteen-, nineteen- and twenty-year- olds, often talented and unique and as familiar-looking as my own brother.

There was, I think, for people of my generation a dread of the enormity and extreme cruelty of the Holocaust. Many of us were removed by only one generation, which was still not enough to make us feel safe. And my father's generation, who had personally lived through the war—in actuality many of the adults we knew—felt themselves, I think, and rightly so, exempt from watching the representation of the Holocaust in literature and film. It makes sense that if you lived through hell you shouldn't have to watch it on national television, and also, adversely, that the study of hellish mass traumas could be potentially more appealing to scholars with relatively safe lives in America, Europe, and even in present-day Israel.

Nowadays, I also live the safe life of an intellectual far removed from a zone of conflict and mass trauma, so much so that I sometimes wonder if my own relatively recent interest in representations of large-scale catastrophes isn't a product of my comfortable, bloodless, abstract American life. Or is it perhaps the distance and abstraction that my life in America affords me that permits my imagination to get nearer to the source of my father's trauma.

The first thing I discovered after I started doing a bit of research into the story of the Tehran Children was that their journey took three and a half years: from September 1939 to February 1943. *Three and a half years.* One thousand two hundred and seventy seven days of daily battles for a piece of bread, and nearly five hundred of those days spent without parents or other adult protectors. My father, Hannan Dekel (born Tejtel), was thirteen when the Nazis invaded Poland, and his sister Rivka (who back then went by the name Regina) was eight; their cousin Naomi was six. The Tejtels were a provincial aristocracy of sorts, whose successful brewery, I later learned, had supplied beer to America during the Prohibition. They escaped from Poland to Soviet-controlled territories in the days following the Nazi invasion. And in March 1940, six months after they had left, the Soviets presented them with the choice to either rescind

their Polish citizenship for a Soviet one or immediately return to Poland. They chose to return.

Instead they were boarded on cattle cars and shipped off in the opposite direction: to a Siberian gulag in the eastern Russian provinces. They traveled for three weeks without food and with little water. In the gulag they were slave laborers, cutting down the trees of the vast Siberian forests in deadly temperatures. At least a quarter of the gulag's inhabitants died there, if not on the way. But after fourteen months, when Germany invaded the USSR, they were released under a general amnesty to Polish citizens. They decided to head south, toward warmer Uzbekistan, walking in the snow for weeks or traveling aboard cargo trains alongside troops of the newly formed Polish army-in-exile (the "Anders Army"). In Tashkent, Uzbekistan, they joined the huge body of naked and starving refugees that were already there.

It was worse than the gulag. For the refugees, Uzbeki towns were full of sickness and violence, and without a shred of food. Because of the heat, typhus and malaria spread quickly and for a while my father's entire family was hospitalized. Plus, they had nothing left to barter with. Scores of kids roamed the streets on their own, including my father's cousin Naomi, whom they accidently found. Nearing starvation, my grandparents decided to place the kids in one of the Christian-Polish orphanages that had been set up across Central Asia. These were not always hospitable to Jewish kids, but they had food; the streets outside their walls were far worse.

Six months later, it was decided that troops of the Anders Army, who were also stationed in Uzbekistan, would be sent to Iran to strengthen British armies in the Middle East. Along with the troops, 11,000 Polish citizens were taken, including 3,000 children who were culled directly out of the orphanages. Among these were the 900 Jewish children who would become known as the Tehran Children, and among them were Hannan, Regina, and Naomi. The Tehran Children ranged from ages one to eighteen. They left Tashkent in trains, sailed for 25 hours on the Caspian Sea and arrived at Bandar Pahlavi, an Iranian port city, in early 1942.

In Iran they were safe for the first time, though still hungry and cold. They lived in Polish army tent camps on the outskirts of Tehran; in the hierarchical ladder that consisted of adult soldiers, adult civilians, Polish children, and Polish-Jewish children, the latter were always at the bottom of the heap. Eventually the Jewish Agency, a Zionist organization (which was operating in Tehran semi-openly) set up a separate "Jewish" camp, where the children remained for seven months.

The Jewish Agency wanted to get the children to Palestine/Eretz Yisrael, but it was nearly impossible, given the British refusal to admit any refugees into Palestine during the war. An initial plan to bus them through Iraq was doomed when Iraq refused at the last minute; another plan to fly them aboard American war planes also fell through. Finally, in January 1943, an agreement was reached with the British and the Egyptians. Overnight and without any preparation, the children were transferred to Bandar Shahpur, where they embarked on a British war ship headed to Karachi and, after a few weeks' stay, on another warship from Karachi to Suez, Egypt. They then crossed the Sinai Desert by train and were quarantined for two days in El Arish; after nearly four years, they arrived in Atlit, a port city located between Haifa and Tel-Aviv. It was February 18, 1943.

My father's parents stayed in Uzbekistan until the end of the war. They survived but remained refugees for years. Even after the end of the war, the British did not permit my grandfather Zindel, who was by then sick with tuberculosis, to join his children in British-controlled Palestine. My grandmother Rachel stayed back with him, probably in Neubeginn, a Displaced Persons' hospital near Munich (and one of the few German DP hospitals to admit TB patients), where he lingered until his death in 1949. That year my grandmother joined her children in the newly founded State of Israel. She had been displaced for ten years, 3,650 days, without even counting her additional struggles in Israel.

This was the outline. I wanted details. Yet in each historical account I read the story was told in an abbreviated form: some months in the Soviet Union, a year in a Siberian gulag, more months in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, close to a year in Tehran. . . . I found the seminal book on the Tehran Children—*Children of Zion*, by a Polish writer named Henryk Grynberg, until then unknown to me. Grynberg had made a collage from testimonies that were collected from the children by Polish officials shortly after their arrival in Palestine. Still, these were abstract, nameless, factual stories. Their amalgamation conveyed the idea that individual narratives are crushed under conditions of extreme brutality, an idea that Primo Levi and other Holocaust memoirists had explicitly articulated. Still, my father was not in the Nazi camps. He was with his family at least some of the time. There were dynamics within the family; they were their distinct selves throughout.

I wanted details but I didn't want to search for them or write an academic book about them. I had this idea that a colleague of mine, the Iranian-born fiction writer Salar Abdoh, would write a novel about the Tehran Children. Salar had become interested in the story after reading about it in a piece by Abbas Milani in the *The Iranian*, a Persian-American journal. I imagined the plot of

one main character—a compilation of my father, his sister, and other Tehran children, perhaps—that would stretch over hundreds of pages and counter the thinness and dryness of the testimonies I had read. I believed that Salar, who creates worlds out of his sheer imagination, who is not as mentally blocked by the limitations of scholarly research as I am, and who, most important, is not a direct heir to the grave and weighty legacy of the Holocaust, would do a better job with this material than I would. It's a strange thing for a writer to ask another writer to write her story. But I had a burning desire to understand my father and to have his story told, and yet felt that I could not tell it. I did not want to live with my father for more years of my life. Plus, I felt too close to the burn of his trauma: there is a reason why Amnesty International forbids its volunteers from working on their own countries. And I was also convinced that my father's dramatic story would best be told not by an insider but by an emphatic outsider—Salar—who also of course had the unique advantage of knowing Tehran through and through. Because he came from *there*, from the one place where my father began to feel a bit safe in this world and about which I knew absolutely nothing, I trusted him immediately. And no current Israel-Iran tension or the echoes of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, which reverberated across and clouded several friendships I had had with other Middle Easterners in New York, could affect that.

I also saw in Salar, whom I soon found out was himself a child refugee of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, something of my father: Microscopic similarities detectable only to one trained by lifelong cohabitation with a refugee: an anxious relationship to food and to cold; the overcautiousness and preparedness of someone who was for a long time exposed to the elements and expects everything to go wrong; but also a very specific humility that emanates from people who have seen too much in their lives, or who have lost everything suddenly, an attribute that stood in utter contrast to many of our self-important colleagues at the university.

I believe other people's stories can open for us a door into our own. My father, for one, was brought to tears not by a Holocaust film but by the post-Vietnam War film *The Deer Hunter*. It was the only time, as far as I can recall, that we saw him crying. He cried at the famous scene in which Nick (Christopher Walken) is played by the Vietcong as the pawn in a Russian roulette game. And though I doubt that my siblings and I could quite grasp the monumental tragic note of that scene, I remember looking at my father—if I recall correctly it was winter and as always slightly chilly in our Haifa apartment—and seeing that his blue eyes were red and tears were rolling down his cheeks.

I don't remember the precise emotion I felt then, but I know it was in the realm of love and pity. My father was a walled-in man, and there was by then already an invisible wall between us, but the display of raw emotion humanized him and made us feel closer to the man. For both my brother and me, independently, the image of my father crying as he watched *The Deer Hunter* remains even today, sixteen years after his death, one of our strongest and most moving memories of him.

Thinking about it so many years later, I realize now that this scene, about an American ex-POW addicted to pain, too brutalized to care that he had become a gambling pawn, spoke to my father deeply and intimately. For a moment it allowed him to release an otherwise bottled-up pain, which usually manifested itself only as anger. And I gradually understood that Salar's story, which is radically different from my father's, began to have for me a similar cathartic function. Increasingly I pondered my father's story through Salar's eyes—grilling him about his own experiences of hunger and the like as a child exile. I also embarked on more serious research, picking up speed as I got deeper into it: gobbling up books, digging up testimonies and archival materials, interviewing former Tehran Children, now in their eighties, about their journeys and subsequent lives in Israel. The harrowing narrative of the Tehran Children, which has hitherto been told and understood in Israel in a predominantly generic and impersonal manner, slowly began to come alive for me in all its vivid sadness and resiliency; meanwhile, for Salar the story of the Tehran Children had become a kind of reference point and window into his own past experiences as a child-refugee of the Islamic Revolution, which had thrust him and his brothers onto the streets of Los Angeles and New York at about the same age that World War II had thrust my father and his sister onto the streets of Tashkent and Tehran.

CONTRIBUTORS

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