PALESTINIAN WALKS by Raja Shehadeh

Chapter 1

The *sarha*

As a child I used to hear how my grandfather, Judge Saleem, liked nothing more than coming to Ramallah in the hot summer and going on a sarha with his cousin, Abu Ameen, leaving behind the humid coastal city of Jaffa and the stultifying colonial administration which he served and whose politics he detested. It was mainly young men who went on these expeditions. They would take a few provisions and go to the open hills, disappear for the whole day, sometimes for weeks and months. They often didn't have a particular destination. To go on a sarha was to roam freely, at will, without restraint. The verb form of the word means to let the cattle out to pasture early in the morning, leaving them to wander and graze at liberty.

The commonly used noun sarha is a colloquial corruption of the classical word. A man going on a sarha wanders aimlessly, not restricted by time and place, going where his spirit takes him to nourish his soul and rejuvenate himself. But not any excursion would qualify as a sarha.

Going on a sarha implies letting go. It is a drug-free high, Palestinian-style.

This book is a series of six sarhat (the plural of sarha) through time and place that take place on various Palestinian hills, sometimes alone and sometimes in the company of different Palestinians from the past and present – my grandfather's cousin, the stonemason and farmer, and the human rights and political activists of more recent times, who were colleagues in my struggle against the destruction being wrought on the hills.

There were other, less sympathetic, encounters that took away from my wanderings. Each sarha is in the form of a walk that I invite the reader to take with me. I hope, by describing what can be seen, heard and smelled in the hills, to allow the reader to enjoy the unique experience of a sarha in Palestine.

Introduction

When I began hill walking in Palestine a quarter of a century ago, I was not aware that I was travelling through a vanishing landscape. For centuries the central highland hills of Palestine, which slope on one side towards the sea and on the other towards the desert, had remained relatively unchanged. As I grew up in Ramallah, the land from my city to the northern city of Nablus might, with a small stretch of the imagination, have seemed familiar to a contemporary of Christ. Those hills were, I believe, one of the natural treasures of the world.

All my life I have lived in houses that overlook the Ramallah hills. I have related to them like my own private backyard, whether for walks, picnics or flower-picking expeditions. I have watched their changing colours during the day and over the seasons as well as during an unending sequence of wars. I have always loved hill walking, whether in Palestine, the Swiss Alps or the Highlands and outlying islands of Scotland, where it was a particular joy to ramble without fear of harassment and the distracting awareness of imminent political and physical disasters.

I began taking long walks in Palestine in the late 1970s. This was before many of the irreversible changes that blighted the land began to take place. The hills then were like one large nature reserve with all the unspoiled beauty and freedom unique to such areas. The six walks described in this book span a period of twenty-six years.

Although each walk takes its own unique course they are also travels through time and space. It is a journey beginning in 1978 and ending in 2006, in which I write about the developments I have witnessed in the region and about the changes to my life and surroundings. I describe walking in the hills around Ramallah, in the wadis in the Jerusalem wilderness and through the gorgeous ravines by the dead Sea.

Palestine has been one of the countries most visited by pilgrims and travellers over the ages. The accounts I have read do not describe a land familiar to me but rather a land of these travellers' imaginations. Palestine has been constantly re-invented, with devastating consequences to its original inhabitants. Whether it was the cartographers preparing maps or travellers describing the landscape in the extensive travel literature, what mattered was not the land and its inhabitants as they actually were but the confirmation of the viewer's or reader's religious or political beliefs. I can only hope that this book does not fall within this tradition.

Perhaps the curse of Palestine is its centrality to the West's historical and biblical imagination. The landscape is thus cut to match the grim events recorded there. Here is how Thackeray describes the hills I have so loved:

Parched mountains, with a grey bleak olive tree trembling here and there; savage ravines and valleys paved with tombstones – a landscape unspeakably ghastly and desolate, meet the eye wherever you wander round about the city. The place seems quite adapted to the events which are recorded in the Hebrew histories. It and they, as it seems to me, can never be regarded without terror. Fear and blood, crime and punishment, follow from page to page in frightful succession. There is not a spot at which you look, but some violent deed has been done there: some massacre has been committed, some victim has been murdered, some idol has been worshipped with bloody and dreadful rites. (Notes of a Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo)

It is as though once the travellers took the arduous trip to visit Palestine and did not find what they were seeking, the land as it existed in their imagination, they took a strong aversion to what they found. 'Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes,' Mark Twain writes. '… Palestine is desolate and unlovely … Palestine is no more of this work-day world. It is sacred to poetry and tradition – it is a dream-land' (The Innocents Abroad).

The Western world's confrontation with Palestine is perhaps the longest-running drama in history. This was not my drama, although I suppose I am a bit player in it. I like to think of my relationship to the land, where I have always lived, as immediate and not experienced through the veil of words written about it, often replete with distortions.

And yet it is in the unavoidable context of such literature that I write my own account of the land and the contemporary culture of 'fear and blood, crime and punishment' that blot its beauty. Perhaps many will also read this book against the background of the grim images on their television screens. They might experience a dissonant moment as they read about the beautiful countryside in which the six walks in this book take place: could the land of perpetual strife and bloodshed have such peaceful, precious hills? Still, I hope the reader of this book will put all this aside and approach it with an open mind. I hope to persuade the reader how glorious the land of Palestine is, despite all the destruction that has been wrought over the past quarter of a century.

This long-running drama has not ended. The stage, however, has relocated to the hills of the West Bank, where Israeli planners place Jewish settlements on hilltops and plan them such that they can only see other settlements while strategically dominating the valleys in which most Palestinian villages are located. It is not unusual to find the names of Arab villages on road signs deleted with black paint by over-active settlers.

A sales brochure, for the ultra-Orthodox West Bank settlement of Emanuel, published in Brooklyn for member recruitment, evokes the picturesque: 'The city of Emanuel, situated 440 metres above sea level, has a magnificent view of the coastal plain and the Judean Mountains. The hilly landscape is dotted by green olive orchards and enjoys a pastoral calm.' Re-creating the picturesque scenes of a biblical landscape becomes a testimony to an ancient claim on the land.

Commenting on advertisements such as this, the Israeli architects Rafi Segal and Eyal Weizman perceptively uncover 'a cruel paradox': 'the very thing that renders the landscape "biblical", its traditional inhabitation and cultivation in terraces, olive orchards, stone building and the presence of livestock, is produced by the Palestinians, whom the Jewish settlers came to replace. And yet the very people who cultivate the 'green olive orchards' and render the landscape biblical are themselves excluded from the panorama. The alestinians are there to produce the scenery and then disappear.' The land deemed 'without a people' is thus made available to the Jewish citizens of Israel, who can no longer claim to be 'a people without a land'.

The Israel Exploration Society instructs its researchers to provide 'concrete documentation of the continuity of a historical thread that remained unbroken from the time of Joshua Bin Nun until the days of the conquerors of the Negev in our generation'. To achieve this, the intervening centuries and generations of the land's inhabitants have to be obliterated and denied. In the process history, mine and that of my people, is distorted and twisted.

Such an attitude fits perfectly into the long tradition of Western travellers and colonizers who simply would not see the land's Palestinian population. When they spared a glance it was to regard the Palestinians with prejudice and derision, as a distraction from the land of their imagination. So Thackeray describes an anonymous Arab village outside of Jerusalem thus: 'A village of beavers, or a colony of ants, make habitations not unlike those dismal huts piled together on the plain here …' (Notes of a Journey …).

I am both an author and a lawyer. From the early 1980s I have been writing about the legal aspects of the struggle over the land and appealing against Israeli orders expropriating Palestinian land for Jewish settlements. Here I write about one of these seminal cases. I also write about the disappointing outcome of the legal struggle to save the land for which I gave many years of my life. At the same time I explore the mystery of this divided place and my fear for its uncertain future.

Ever since I learned of the plans to transform our hills being prepared by successive Israeli governments, who supported the policy of establishing settlements in the Occupied Territories, I have felt like one who is told that he has contracted a terminal disease. Now when I walk in the hills I cannot but be conscious that the time when I will be able to do so is running out. Perhaps the malignancy that has afflicted the hills has heightened my experience of walking in them and discouraged me from ever taking them for granted.

In 1925 a Palestinian historian, Darweesh Mikdadi, took his students at a Jerusalem government high school on a walking trip through the rocky landscape of Palestine, all the way to the more lush plains and fertile valleys of Syria and Lebanon with their streams, rivers and caves. Along the way the group inspected the sites of the famous battles that were fought over the centuries in this part of the world, staying with the generous villagers who offered them hospitality. While the battles continue, it has been impossible since 1948 to repeat this journey. During the 1980s, the Palestinian geographer Kamal Abdul Fattah would take his students at Birzeit University on geography trips throughout historic Palestine. One year I joined the students and we spent three exciting days travelling from the extreme fertile north of the land to its desert south, observing its topography and becoming familiar with its geological transformations and the relationship between geography, history and the way of life of its inhabitants. The trip was a great eye-opener for me.

Since 1991 after restrictions were imposed on movement between the West Bank and Israel that journey too has become impossible. The Gaza Strip has become completely out of bounds for Palestinians from the West Bank. A merchant from Ramallah finds it easier to travel to China to import cane garden chairs than to reach Gaza, a mere forty-minute drive away, where cane chairs, once a flourishing industry, now sit in dusty stacks. The settlement master plans published in the early eighties that I write about, which called for separate enclaves for the Palestinians, were being systematically implemented. To wrap up these inhuman schemes came the Separation Wall, which was not designed to follow the border between Israel and the West Bank but to encircle the 'settlement blocs' and annex them to Israel, in the process penetrating the lands of the Palestinians like daggers.

As a consequence of all these developments even shorter school trips have now become restricted, so students can only repeat forlorn visits to the sites within their own checkpoint zone. The Palestinian enclaves are becoming more and more like ghettos. Many villagers can only pick the olives from their own trees with the protection of sympathetic Israelis and international solidarity groups. On Election day in 2005 a young man selling sweets told me he was not going to vote. 'Why should I when I have not been able to leave Ramallah for five years now. How would these elections change that?' As our Palestinian world shrinks, that of the Israelis expands, with more settlements being built, destroying for ever the wadis and cliffs, flattening hills and transforming the precious land which many Palestinians will never know.

In the course of a mere three decades close to half a million Jewish people were settled within an area of only 5,900 square kilometres. The damage caused to the land by the infrastructural work necessary to sustain the life of such a large population, with enormous amounts of concrete poured to build entire cities in hills that had remained untouched for centuries, is not difficult to appreciate. I witnessed this complete transformation near where I grew up and I write about it here. Beautiful wadis, springs, cliffs and ancient ruins were destroyed, by those who claim a superior love of the land. By trying to record how the land felt and looked before this calamity I hope to preserve, at least in words, what has been lost for ever.

In Palestine every wadi, spring, hillock, escarpment and cliff has a name, usually with a particular meaning. Some of the names are Arabic, others Canaanite or Aramaic, evidence of how ancient the land is and how it has been continuously inhabited over many centuries. I grew up in total ignorance of any of these names. In this I was not unique. With hardly anyone now walking in the hills those with this sort of local knowledge are few and far between. With the help of the geographer Kamal Abdul Fattah and his students who interviewed old men and women who could still remember them, some of these long-forgotten names came to be resurrected.

Often, on my way home from a walk in the hills, twilight would descend and the stones along my path would be transformed in the half-light. I started seeing the shapes of figures in individual stones and would gather them up to take home. I picked up as many as I could, but once home I usually discarded them. The merciless light of my apartment bleached the magic from them, all except for one, which I have kept for a long time. The grey stone resembles a face with a large slit for a mouth open in a wail of horror. With what has afflicted these hills perhaps it was appropriate for me to have kept this one.

In the course of working on this book I came to realize that the writing itself was the seventh journey. I did not know where I was heading in this particular quest or how it would conclude. As the writing proceeded I realized that I was sometimes as guilty of omission and partial sight as those nineteenth-century travellers whom I had criticized.

Throughout the book, the settlers, the main villains of my stories here, are a constant presence. I despise the aggressiveness of their intentions and behaviour towards my land and its inhabitants but I rarely confront them directly. They are simplified and lumped together, just as the nineteenth-

century travellers generalized about the local ‘Arabs’ as they tried to obliterate them from the land they wished to portray. At various points the settlers are viewed from a distance. I fear what they might do. I wonder what they must be thinking. I ask whether I and my people are at all visible to them.

This last journey led to a confrontation with a young Jewish settler who had grown up and spent his twenty-five years of life in the very same hills. I knew that a large part of his world is based on lies. He must have been brought up on the fundamental untruth that his home was built on land that belonged exclusively to his people, even though it lay in the vicinity of Ramallah. He would not have been told that it was expropriated from those Palestinians living a few kilometres away. Yet, despite the myths that make up his world-view, how could I claim that my love of these hills cancels out his? And what would this recognition mean to both our future and that of our respective countries?

With the inevitable meeting that took place next to a settlement near Ramallah, my seventh journey, the writing of this book, came to its troubled conclusion.