# AMOS OZ

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# A TALE OF LOVE AND DARKNESS

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW BY
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# I

I WAS BORN and bred in a tiny, low-ceilinged ground-floor apartment. My parents slept on a sofa bed that filled their room almost from wall to wall when it was opened up each evening. Early every morning they used to shut away this bed deep into itself, hide the bedclothes in the chest underneath, turn the mattress over, press it all tight shut, and conceal the whole under a light gray cover, then scatter a few embroidered oriental cushions on top, so that all evidence of their night's sleep disappeared. In this way their bedroom also served as study, library, dining room, and living room.

Opposite this room was my little green room, half taken up with a big-bellied wardrobe. A narrow, low passage, dark and slightly curved, like an escape tunnel from a prison, linked the little kitchenette and toilet to these two small rooms. A lightbulb imprisoned in an iron cage cast a gloomy half-light on this passage even during the daytime. At the front both rooms had just a single window, guarded by metal blinds, squinting to catch a glimpse of the view to the east but seeing only a dusty cypress tree and a low wall of roughly dressed stones. Through a tiny opening high up in their back walls the kitchenette and toilet peered out into a little prison yard surrounded by high walls and paved with concrete, where a pale geranium planted in a rusty olive can was gradually dying for want of a single ray of sunlight. On the sills of these tiny openings we always kept jars of pickles and a stubborn cactus in a cracked vase that served as a flowerpot.

It was actually a basement apartment, as the ground floor of the

building had been hollowed out of the rocky hillside. This hill was our next-door neighbor, a heavy, introverted, silent neighbor, an old, sad hill with the regular habits of a bachelor, a drowsy, still wintry hill, which never scraped the furniture or entertained guests, never made a noise or disturbed us, but through the walls there seeped constantly toward us, like a faint yet persistent musty smell, the cold, dark silence and dampness of this melancholy neighbor.

Consequently through the summer there was always a hint of winter in our home.

Visitors would say: It's always so pleasant here in a heat wave, so cool and fresh, really chilly, but how do you manage in the winter? Don't the walls let in the damp? Don't you find it depressing?

Books filled our home. My father could read sixteen or seventeen languages and could speak eleven (all with a Russian accent). My mother spoke four or five languages and read seven or eight. They conversed in Russian or Polish when they did not want me to understand. (Which was most of the time. When my mother referred to a stallion in Hebrew in my hearing, my father rebuked her furiously in Russian: *Shto s toboi?! Vidish malchik ryadom s nami!*—What's the matter with you? You can see the boy's right here!) Out of cultural considerations they mostly read books in German or English, and presumably they dreamed in Yiddish. But the only language they taught me was Hebrew. Maybe they feared that a knowledge of languages would expose me too to the blandishments of Europe, that wonderful, murderous continent.

On my parents' scale of values, the more Western something was, the more cultured it was considered. For all that Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were dear to their Russian souls, I suspect that Germany—despite Hitler—seemed to them more cultured than Russia or Poland, and France more so than Germany. England stood even higher on their scale than France. As for America, there they were not so sure: after all, it was a country where people shot at Indians, held up mail trains, chased gold, and hunted girls.

Europe for them was a forbidden promised land, a yearned-for landscape of belfries and squares paved with ancient flagstones, of trams and bridges and church spires, remote villages, spa towns, forests, and snow-covered meadows.

Words like "cottage," "meadow," or "goose girl" excited and seduced me all through my childhood. They had the sensual aroma of a genuine, cozy world, far from the dusty tin roofs, the urban wasteland of scrap iron and thistles, the parched hillsides of our Jerusalem suffocating under the weight of white-hot summer. It was enough for me to whisper to myself "meadow," and at once I could hear the lowing of cows with little bells tied around their necks, and the burbling of brooks. Closing my eyes, I could see the barefoot goose girl, whose sexiness brought me to tears before I knew about anything.

As the years passed I became aware that Jerusalem, under British rule in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, must be a fascinatingly cultured city. It had big businessmen, musicians, scholars, and writers: Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, S. Y. Agnon, and a host of other eminent academics and artists. Sometimes as we walked down Ben Yehuda Street or Ben Maimon Avenue, my father would whisper to me: "Look, there is a scholar with a worldwide reputation." I did not know what he meant. I thought that having a worldwide reputation was somehow connected with having weak legs, because the person in question was often an elderly man who felt his way with a stick and stumbled as he walked along, and wore a heavy woolen suit even in summer.

The Jerusalem my parents looked up to lay far from the area where we lived: it was in leafy Rehavia with its gardens and its strains of piano music, it was in three or four cafés with gilded chandeliers on the Jaffa Road or Ben Yehuda Street, in the halls of the YMCA or the King David Hotel, where culture-seeking Jews and Arabs mixed with cultivated Englishmen with perfect manners, where dreamy, long-necked ladies floated in evening dresses, on the arms of gentlemen in dark suits, where broad-minded Britons dined with cultured Jews or educated Arabs, where there were recitals, balls, literary evenings, *thés dansants,* and exquisite, artistic conversations. Or perhaps such a Jerusalem, with its chandeliers and *thés dansants,* existed only in the dreams of the librarians, schoolteachers, clerks, and bookbinders who lived in Kerem Avraham. At any rate, it didn't exist where we were. Kerem Avraham, the area where we lived, belonged to Chekhov.

Years later, when I read Chekhov (in Hebrew translation), I was convinced he was one of us: Uncle Vanya lived right upstairs from us,

Doctor Samoylenko bent over me and examined me with his broad, strong hands when I had a fever and once diphtheria, Laevsky with his perpetual migraine was my mother's second cousin, and we used to go and listen to Trigorin at Saturday matinees in the Beit Ha'am Auditorium.

We were surrounded by Russians of every sort. There were many Tolstoyans. Some of them even looked like Tolstoy. When I came across a brown photograph of Tolstoy on the back of a book, I was certain that I had seen him often in our neighborhood, strolling along Malachi Street or down Obadiah Street, bareheaded, his white beard ruffled by the breeze, as awesome as the Patriarch Abraham, his eyes flashing, using a branch as a walking stick, a Russian shirt worn outside the baggy trousers tied around his waist with a length of string.

Our neighborhood Tolstoyans (whom my parents referred to as Tolstoyshchiks) were without exception devout vegetarians, world reformers with strong feelings for nature, seekers after the moral life, lovers of humankind, lovers of every single living creature, with a perpetual yearning for the rural life, for simple agricultural labor among fields and orchards. But they were not successful even in cultivating their own potted plants: perhaps they killed them by overwatering, or perhaps they forgot to water them, or else it was the fault of the nasty British administration that put chlorine in our water.

Some of them were Tolstoyans who might have stepped straight out of the pages of a novel by Dostoevsky: tormented, talkative, suppressing their desires, consumed by ideas. But all of them, Tolstoyans and Dostoevskians alike, in our neighborhood of Kerem Avraham, worked for Chekhov.

The rest of the world was generally known as "the worldatlarge," but it had other epithets too: enlightened, outside, free, hypocritical. I knew it almost exclusively from my stamp collection: Danzig, Bohemia, and Moravia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ubangi-Shari, Trinidad and Tobago, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika. That worldatlarge was far away, attractive, marvelous, but to us it was dangerous and threatening. It didn't like the Jews because they were clever, quick-witted, successful, but also because they were noisy and pushy. It didn't like what we were doing here in the Land of Israel either, because it begrudged us even this meager strip of marshland, boulders, and desert. Out there, in the world, all the

walls were covered with graffiti: "Yids, go back to Palestine," so we came back to Palestine, and now the worldatlarge shouts at us: "Yids, get out of Palestine."

It was not only the worldatlarge that was a long way away: even the Land of Israel was pretty far off. Somewhere, over the hills and far away, a new breed of heroic Jews was springing up, a tanned, tough, silent, practical breed of men, totally unlike the Jews of the Diaspora, totally unlike the residents of Kerem Avraham. Courageous, rugged pioneers, who had succeeded in making friends with the darkness of night, and had overstepped every limit, too, as regards relations between a boy and a girl and vice versa. They were not ashamed of anything. Grandpa Alexander once said: "They think in the future it's going to be so simple, a boy will be able to go up to a girl and just ask for it, or maybe the girls won't even wait to be approached, but will go and ask the boys for it, like asking for a glass of water." Shortsighted Uncle Betsalel said with polite anger: "Isn't this sheer Bolshevism, to trample on every secret, every mystery?! To abolish all emotions?! To turn our whole life into a glass of lukewarm water?!" Uncle Nehemia, from his corner, let fly a couple of lines of a song that sounded to me like the growling of a cornered beast: "Oh, long is the journey and winding the road, I travel o'er mountain and plain, Oh Mamma, I seek you through heat and through snow, I miss you but you're far away! . . ." Then Aunt Zippora said, in Russian: "That'll do, now. Have you all gone out of your minds? The boy can hear you!" And so they all changed to Russian.

The pioneers lived beyond our horizon, in Galilee, Sharon, and the Valleys. Tough, warmhearted, though of course silent and thoughtful, young men, and strapping, straightforward, self-disciplined young women, who seemed to know and understand everything; they knew you and your shy confusion, yet they would treat you with affection, seriousness, and respect, treat you not like a child but like a man, albeit an undersized one.

I pictured these pioneers as strong, serious, self-contained people, capable of sitting around in a circle and singing songs of heartrending longing, or songs of mockery, or outrageous songs of lust; or of dancing so wildly that they seemed to transcend the physical. They were capable

of loneliness and introspection, of living outdoors, sleeping in tents, doing hard labor, singing, "We are always at the ready," "Your boys brought you peace with a plowshare, today they bring peace with a gun," "Wherever we're sent to, we go-o-o"; they could ride wild horses or wide-tracked tractors; they spoke Arabic, knew every cave and wadi, had a way with pistols and hand grenades, yet read poetry and philosophy; they were large men with inquiring minds and hidden feelings, who could converse in a near whisper by candlelight in their tents in the small hours of the morning about the meaning of our lives and the grim choices between love and duty, between patriotism and universal justice.

Sometimes my friends and I went to the Tnuva delivery yard to watch them arriving from over the hills and far away on a truck laden with agricultural produce, "clad in dust, burdened with arms, and with such heavy boots," and I used to go up to them to inhale the smell of hay, the intoxicating odors of faraway places: it's where they come from, I thought, that great things are happening. That's where the land is being built and the world is being reformed, where a new society is being forged. They are stamping their mark on the landscape and on history, they are plowing fields and planting vineyards, they are writing a new song, they pick up their guns, mount their horses, and shoot back at the Arab marauders: they take our miserable human clay and mold it into a fighting nation.

I secretly dreamed that one day they would take me with them. And make me into a fighting nation too. That my life too would become a new song, a life as pure and straightforward and simple as a glass of water on a hot day.

Over the hills and far away, the city of Tel Aviv was also an exciting place, from which came the newspapers, rumors of theater, opera, ballet, and cabaret, as well as modern art, party politics, echoes of stormy debates, and indistinct snatches of gossip. There were great sportsmen in Tel Aviv. And there was the sea, full of bronzed Jews who could swim. Who in Jerusalem could swim? Who had ever heard of swimming Jews? These were different genes. A mutation. "Like the wondrous birth of a butterfly out of a worm."

There was a special magic in the very name of Tel Aviv. As soon as I heard the word "Telaviv," I conjured up in my mind's eye a picture of a

This next section describes the effect of the United Nations vote the created Israel (by dividing the Palestinian mandate into a Jewish and Arab half) and the war that followed.

After midnight, toward the end of the vote, I woke up. My bed was underneath the window that looked out on the street, so all I had to do was kneel and peer through the slats of the shutters. I shivered.

Like a frightening dream, crowds of shadows stood massed together silently by the yellow light of the street lamp, in our yard, in the neighboring yards, on balconies, in the roadway, like a vast assembly of ghosts. Hundreds of people not uttering a sound, neighbors, acquaintances, and strangers, some in their nightclothes and others in jacket and tie, occasional men in hats or caps, some women bareheaded, others in dressing gowns with scarves around their heads, some of them carrying sleepy children on their shoulders, and on the edge of the crowd I noticed here and there an elderly woman sitting on a stool or a very old man who had been brought out into the street with his chair.

The whole crowd seemed to have been turned to stone in that frightening night silence, as if they were not real people but hundreds of dark silhouettes painted onto the canvas of the flickering darkness. As though they had died on their feet. Not a word was heard, not a cough or a footstep. No mosquito hummed. Only the deep, rough voice of the American presenter blaring from the radio, which was set at full volume and made the night air tremble, or it may have been the voice of the president of the Assembly, the Brazilian Oswaldo Aranha. One after another he read out the names of the last countries on the list, in English alphabetical order, followed immediately by the reply of their representative. United Kingdom: abstains. Union of Soviet Socialist Republics: yes. United States: yes. Uruguay: yes. Venezuela: yes. Yemen: no. Yugoslavia: abstains.

At that the voice suddenly stopped, and an otherworldly silence descended and froze the scene, a terrified, panic-stricken silence, a silence of hundreds of people holding their breath, such as I have never heard in my life either before or after that night.

Then the thick, slightly hoarse voice came back, shaking the air as it summed up with a rough dryness brimming with excitement: Thirty-three for. Thirteen against. Ten abstentions and one country absent from the vote. The resolution is approved.

His voice was swallowed up in a roar that burst from the radio, overflowing from the galleries in the hall at Lake Success, and after a couple more seconds of shock and disbelief, of lips parted as though in thirst and eyes wide open, our faraway street on the edge of Kerem Avraham in northern Jerusalem also roared all at once in a first terrifying shout that tore through the darkness and the buildings and trees, piercing itself, not a shout of joy, nothing like the shouts of spectators in sports grounds or excited rioting crowds, perhaps more like a scream of horror and bewilderment, a cataclysmic shout, a shout that could shift rocks, that could freeze your blood, as though all the dead who had ever died here and all those still to die had received a brief window to shout, and the next moment the scream of horror was replaced by roars of joy and a medley of hoarse cries and "The Jewish People Lives" and somebody trying to sing Hatikvah and women shrieking and clapping and "Here in the Land Our Fathers Loved," and the whole crowd started to revolve slowly around itself as though it were being stirred in a huge cement mixer, and there were no more restraints, and I jumped into my trousers but didn't bother with a shirt or sweater and shot out our door, and some neighbor or stranger picked me up so I wouldn't be trampled underfoot, and I was passed from hand to hand until I landed on my father's shoulders near our front gate. My father and mother were standing there hugging one another like two children lost in the woods, as I had never seen them before or since, and for a moment I was between them inside their hug and a moment later I was back on Father's shoulders and my very cultured, polite father was standing there shouting at the top of his voice, not words or wordplay or Zionist slogans, not even cries of joy, but one long naked shout like before words were invented.

Others were singing now, everyone was singing, but my father, who couldn't sing and didn't know the words of the popular songs, did not

stop but went on with his long shout to the end of his lungs *aaaahhh,* and when he ran out of breath, he inhaled like a drowning man and went on shouting, this man who wanted to be a famous professor and deserved to become one, but now he was all just *aaahhhh.* And I was surprised to see my mother's hand stroking his wet head and the back of his neck, and then I felt her hand on my head and my back too because I might unawares have been helping my father shout, and my mother's hand stroked the two of us over and over again, perhaps to soothe us or perhaps not, perhaps out of the depths she was also trying to share with him and me in our shout and with the whole street, the whole neighborhood, the whole city, and the whole country, my sad mother was trying to participate this time—no, definitely not the whole city but only the Jewish areas, because Sheikh Jarrah, Katamon, Bakaa, and Talbieh must have heard us that night wrapped in a silence that might have resembled the terrified silence that lay upon the Jewish neighborhoods before the result of the vote was announced. In the Silwanis' house in Sheikh Jarrah and in Aisha's home in Talbieh and the home of the man in the clothes shop, the beloved man Gepetto with the bags under his compassionate eyes, there were no celebrations tonight. They must have heard the sounds of rejoicing from the Jewish streets, they may have stood at their windows to watch the few joyful fireworks that injured the dark sky, pursing their lips in silence. Even the parrots were silent. And the fountain in the pool in the garden. Even though neither Katamon, Talbieh, nor Bakaa knew or could know yet that in another five months they would fall empty, intact, into the hands of the Jews and that new people would come and live in those vaulted houses of pink stone and those villas with their many cornices and arches.

Then there was dancing and weeping on Amos Street, in the whole of Kerem Avraham and in all the Jewish neighborhoods; flags appeared, and slogans written on strips of cloth, car horns blared, and "Raise the Banner High to Zion" and "Here in the Land Our Fathers Loved," shofar blasts sounded from all the synagogues, and Torah scrolls were taken out of the holy arks and were caught up in the dancing, and "God Will Rebuild Galilee" and "Come and Behold How Great Is This Day," and later, in the small hours of the morning, Mr. Auster suddenly opened his

shop, and all the kiosks in Zephaniah Street and Geula Street and Chancellor Street and Jaffa Road and King George opened, and the bars opened up all over the city and handed out soft drinks and snacks and even alcoholic drinks until the first light of dawn, bottles of fruit drink, beer, and wine passed from hand to hand and from mouth to mouth, strangers hugged each other in the streets and kissed each other with tears, and startled English policemen were also dragged into the circles of dancers and softened up with cans of beer and sweet liqueurs, and frenzied revelers climbed up on British armored cars and waved the flag of the state that had not been established yet, but tonight, over there in Lake Success, it had been decided that it had the right to be established. And it would be established 167 days and nights later, on Friday, May 14, 1948, but one in every hundred men, women, old folk, children, and babies in those crowds of Jews who were dancing, reveling, drinking, and weeping for joy, fully one percent of the excited people who spilled out onto the streets that night, would die in the war that the Arabs started within seven hours of the General Assembly's decision at Lake Success—to be helped, when the British left, by the regular armed forces of the Arab League, columns of infantry, armor, artillery, fighter planes, and bombers, from the south, the east, and the north, the regular armies of five Arab states invading with the intention of putting an end to the new state within one or two days of its proclamation.

But my father said to me as we wandered there, on the night of November 29, 1947, me riding on his shoulders, among the rings of dancers and merrymakers, not as though he was asking me but as though he knew and was hammering in what he knew with nails: Just you look, my boy, take a very good look, son, take it all in, because you won't forget this night to your dying day and you'll tell your children, your grandchildren, and your great-grandchildren about this night when we're long gone.

And very late, at a time when this child had never been allowed not to be fast asleep in bed, maybe at three or four o'clock, I crawled under my blanket in the dark fully dressed. And after a while Father's hand lifted my blanket in the dark, not to be angry with me because I'd got into bed with my clothes on but to get in and lie down next to me, and he was in

his clothes too, which were drenched in sweat from the crush of the crowds, just like mine (and we had an iron rule: you must never, for any reason, get between the sheets in your outdoor clothes). My father lay beside me for a few minutes and said nothing, although normally he detested silence and hurried to banish it. But this time he did not touch the silence that was there between us but shared it, with just his hand lightly stroking my head. As though in this darkness my father had turned into my mother.

Then he told me in a whisper, without once calling me Your Highness or Your Honor, what some hooligans did to him and his brother David in Odessa and what some Gentile boys did to him at his Polish school in Vilna, and the girls joined in too, and the next day, when his father, Grandpa Alexander, came to the school to register a complaint, the bullies refused to return the torn trousers but attacked his father, Grandpa, in front of his eyes, forced him down onto the paving stones in the middle of the playground and removed his trousers too, and the girls laughed and made dirty jokes, saying that the Jews were all so-and-sos, while the teachers watched and said nothing, or maybe they were laughing too.

And still in a voice of darkness with his hand still losing its way in my hair (because he was not used to stroking me), my father told me under my blanket in the early hours of November 30, 1947, "Bullies may well bother you in the street or at school someday. They may do it precisely because you are a bit like me. But from now on, from the moment we have our own state, you will never be bullied just because you are a Jew and because Jews are so-and-sos. Not that. Never again. From tonight that's finished here. Forever."

I reached out sleepily to touch his face, just below his high forehead, and all of a sudden instead of his glasses my fingers met tears. Never in my life, before or after that night, not even when my mother died, did I see my father cry. And in fact I didn't see him cry that night either: it was too dark. Only my left hand saw.

A few hours later, at seven o'clock, while we and probably all our neighbors were asleep, shots were fired in Sheikh Jarrah at a Jewish ambulance that was on its way from the city center to Hadassah Hospital on Mount

Scopus. All over the country Arabs attacked Jewish buses on the highways, killed and wounded passengers, and fired with light arms and machine guns into outlying suburbs and isolated settlements. The Arab Higher Committee headed by Jamal Husseini declared a general strike and sent the crowds into the streets and mosques, where religious leaders called for a jihad against the Jews. A couple of days later, hundreds of armed Arabs came out of the Old City, singing bloodthirsty songs, roaring verses from the Qur'an, howling "*idbah al-Yahud*" (butcher the Jews), and firing volleys in the air. The English police accompanied them, and British armored cars, it was reported, led the crowd that burst into the Jewish shopping center at the eastern end of Mamilla Road and looted and set fire to the whole area. Forty shops were burned down. British soldiers and policemen formed barriers across Princess Mary Street and prevented the defense forces of the Haganah from coming to the help of the Jews who were caught in the shopping center, and even confiscated their arms and arrested sixteen of them. The following day, in retaliation, the paramilitary Irgun burned down the Rex Cinema, which was apparently under Arab ownership.

In the first week of the troubles some twenty Jews were killed. By the end of the second week about two hundred Jews and Arabs had died throughout the country. From the beginning of December 1947 until March 1948 the initiative was in the hands of the Arab forces; the Jews in Jerusalem and elsewhere had to content themselves with static defense, because the British thwarted the Haganah's attempts to launch counterattacks, arrested its men, and confiscated their weapons. Local semiregular Arab forces, together with hundreds of armed volunteers from the neighboring Arab countries and some two hundred British soldiers who had defected to the Arabs and fought beside them, blocked the highways and reduced the Jewish presence to a fragmented mosaic of beleaguered settlements and blocks of settlements that could be kept supplied with food, fuel, and ammunition only by means of convoys.

While the British still continued to govern and used their power mainly to help the Arabs in their war and to tie the Jews' hands, Jewish Jerusalem was gradually cut off from the rest of the country. The only road linking it with Tel Aviv was blocked by Arab forces, and convoys carrying food and supplies were able to make their way up from the

coast only at irregular intervals and at the cost of heavy losses. By the end of December 1947, the Jewish parts of Jerusalem were de facto under siege. Regular Iraqi forces, whom the British administration had allowed to take control of the waterworks at Rosh ha-Ayin, blew up the pumping installations and Jewish Jerusalem was left without water, apart from wells and reservoirs. Isolated Jewish areas like the Jewish Quarter within the walls of the Old City, Yemin Moshe, Mekor Hayim, and Ramat Rahel underwent a siege within a siege as they were cut off from the other Jewish parts of the city. An "emergency committee" set up by the Jewish Agency supervised the rationing of food and the tankers that traveled the streets between bouts of shelling distributing a bucket of water per person every two or three days. Bread, vegetables, sugar, milk, eggs, and other foodstuffs were strictly rationed and were distributed to families under a system of food coupons, until supplies ran out and instead we received occasional meager rations of powdered milk, dry rusks, and strange-smelling egg powder. Drugs and medical supplies had almost run out. The wounded were sometimes operated on without anesthetic. The electricity supply collapsed, and since it was virtually impossible to obtain paraffin, we lived for several months in the dark, or by candlelight.

Our cramped basement-like apartment was turned into a kind of bomb shelter for the residents of the apartments above us, being safer from shelling and shooting. All the windowpanes were taken out, and we barricaded the windows with sandbags. We lived in uninterrupted cavelike darkness, night and day, from March 1948 until the following August or September. In this thick darkness, breathing fetid air that had no escape, we were joined at intervals by some twenty or twenty-five persons, neighbors, strangers, acquaintances, refugees from front-line neighborhoods, who slept on mattresses and mats. They included two very elderly women who sat all day on the floor in the corridor staring into space, a half-crazed old man who called himself the Prophet Jeremiah and constantly lamented the destruction of Jerusalem and foretold for all of us Arab gas chambers near Ramallah "where they've already started gassing 2,100 Jews per day," as well as Grandpa Alexander and Grandma Shlomit, and Grandpa Alexander's widowed elder brother

(Aunt Tsipora had died in 1946), Uncle Joseph himself—Professor Klausner—with his sister-in-law Haya Elitsedek: the two of them had managed, virtually at the last minute, to escape from Talpiot, which was cut off and encircled, and taken refuge with us. Now the two lay fully dressed, with their shoes on, alternately dozing and waking—because on account of the darkness it was hard to tell night from day—on the floor in our tiny kitchen, which was considered the least noisy place in the apartment. (Mr. Agnon, too, we were told, had left Talpiot with his wife and was staying with friends in Rehavia.)

Uncle Joseph was constantly lamenting, in his reedy, rather tearful voice, the fate of his library and his precious manuscripts, which he had had to leave behind in Talpiot and who knew if he would ever see them again. As for Haya Elitsedek, her only son, Ariel, had joined up and was fighting to defend Talpiot, and for a long time we did not know if he was alive or killed, wounded or taken prisoner.*

The Miudovniks, whose son Grisha was serving somewhere with the Palmach, had fled from their home on the front line in Beit Yisrael, and they too had landed up in our apartment, along with various other families who crowded together in the little room that had been my room before the war. I regarded Mr. Miudovnik with awe, because it emerged that he was the man who had written the greenish book that we all used at Tachkemoni School: *Arithmetic for Third-Graders* by Matityahu Miudovnik.

Mr. Miudovnik went out one morning and did not return by evening. He did not come back the next day either. So his wife went to the municipal mortuary, had a good look around, and came back happy and reassured because her husband was not among the dead.

When Mr. Miudovnik did not return the next day either, my father began to joke, as he usually did when he wanted to banish silence or dispel gloom. Our dear Matya, he declared, has obviously found himself some fighting beauty in a khaki skirt and now he's her comrade in arms (this was his feeble attempt at a pun).

But after a quarter of an hour of this labored jollity Father suddenly turned serious and went off to the morgue himself, where, thanks

*My father's cousin Ariel Elitsedek wrote about his experiences in the War of Liberation in his book *The Thirsty Sword* (Jerusalem: Ahiasaf, 1950).

to a pair of his own socks that he had lent to Matityahu Miudovnik, he managed to identify the body that had been smashed by an artillery shell; Mrs. Miudovnik had failed to recognize it because the face was missing.

During the months of the siege, my mother, my father, and I slept on a mattress at the end of the corridor, and all night long processions of people clambered over us on their way to the toilet, which stank to high heaven because there was no water to flush it and because the window was blocked with sandbags. Every few minutes, when a shell landed, the whole hill shook, and the stone-built houses shuddered too. I was sometimes woken by the sound of bloodcurdling cries whenever one of the other sleepers in the apartment had a nightmare.

On February 1 a car bomb exploded outside the building of the English-language Jewish newspaper, the *Palestine Post.* The building was completely destroyed and suspicion fell on British policemen who had deserted to the Arab cause. On February 10 the defenders of Yemin Moshe managed to repel a heavy attack by semiregular Arab troops. On Sunday, February 22, at ten past six in the morning, an organization calling itself the "British Fascist Army" blew up three trucks loaded with dynamite in Ben Yehuda Street, in the heart of Jewish Jerusalem. Six-story buildings were reduced to rubble and a large part of the street was left in ruins. Fifty-two Jewish residents were killed in their homes, and some hundred and fifty were injured.

That day my shortsighted father went to the National Guard HQ that had been set up in a narrow lane off Zephaniah Street and offered to enlist. He had to admit that his previous military experience was limited to composing some illegal posters in English for the Irgun ("Shame on Perfidious Albion!," "Down with Nazi British repression!," and such).

On March 11 the American consul general's familiar car, with the consul general's Arab driver at the wheel, drove into the courtyard of the Jewish Agency building, the site of the offices of the Jewish organizations in Jerusalem and the country as a whole. Part of the building was destroyed and dozens of people were killed or injured. In the third week of March attempts to bring convoys of food and supplies up from the coast

failed: the siege grew worse, and the city was on the brink of starvation, short of water, and at risk of epidemic.

The schools in our area had been closed since mid-December 1947. We children from the third and fourth grades at Tachkemoni and the House of Education were assembled one morning in an empty apartment in Malachi Street. A suntanned youth casually dressed in khaki and smoking a cigarette, who was introduced to us only by his code name, Garibaldi, addressed us in very serious tones for some twenty minutes, with a kind of wry matter-of-factness that we had previously encountered only in grown-ups. Garibaldi gave us the task of searching all the yards and storage sheds for empty sacks ("We'll fill them with sand") and bottles ("Someone knows how to fill them with a cocktail that the enemy will find very tasty").

We were also taught to collect wild mallow, which we all called by its Arabic name, *khubeizeh,* on plots of wasteland or in neglected backyards. This *khubeizeh* helped relieve the horrors of starvation somewhat. Mothers boiled or fried it and then used it to make rissoles or puree, which was green like spinach but tasted much worse. We also had a lookout round: every hour during daylight two of us kids had to keep watch from a suitable rooftop in Obadiah Street on the British army camp in Schneller Barracks, and every now and then one of us ran to the operations room in the apartment on Malachi Street to tell Garibaldi or one of his adjutants what the Tommies were up to and whether there were any signs of preparations for departure.

The bigger boys, from the fourth and fifth grades, were taught by Garibaldi to carry messages between the various Haganah posts at the end of Zephaniah Street and around the Bukharian Quarter. My mother begged me to "show real maturity and give up these childish games," but I couldn't do as she wanted. I was particularly good at collecting bottles: in a single week I managed to collect 146 empty bottles and take them in boxes and sacks to HQ. Garibaldi himself gave me a slap on the back and shot me a sidelong glance. I record here exactly the words he spoke to me as he scratched the hair on his chest through his open shirt: "Very nice. We may hear more of you one day." Word for word. Fifty-three years have gone by, and I have not forgotten to this day.