

From Chile to Palestine

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It has taken me too long to write. The invasion began fifty days ago. It has been 16 years since I first went to Palestine and nine since the Israeli army stopped me from entering a second time, and the Ministry of the Interior deported me and banned me from setting foot on Palestinian territory again.

I write these lines as the third exchange of Israeli hostages for Palestinian prisoners is taking place. I wonder how many Palestinians an Israeli is worth. Who chooses the words and definitions? When is one event a kidnapping and another an arrest? When is a murder an assassination versus a simple death?

I think about these details from the relative calm of Santiago de Chile, 13,000 kilometers from a land that I have come to know over many years: first through my father's stories, then through books and documentaries, and finally by traveling to the other side of the world to see, smell, touch, and know Palestine firsthand.

As I write, I'm trying to understand this new massacre. The images from Palestine go viral, arriving instantly through Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp groups.

In Chile, members of the largest Palestinian community outside of the Arab world—more than half a million people—are trying to help.

They take to the streets, call for marches, hold debates and conferences, light candles, hoist flags in front of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and the United Nations headquarters, and shout "Free Palestine" in the streets of Valparaiso, Arica, and Santiago until they go home.

The members of the Palestine Sporting Club, a professional soccer team founded in 1920, take to the field wearing keffiyehs around their necks, each has a black ribbon tied around their arm. They observe a minute of silence for the victims in Gaza before they begin to play.

The return

From this corner of South America, we bear witness to constant dehumanization. We cannot stop counting the dead as the days go by. No matter how much we repeat that they are not just numbers, we end up talking about figures, relying on hard data to show how serious and urgent it is to stop this genocide.

Time passes slowly. We search for news of a friend in Gaza or a relative who is living in the West Bank. There are many who can no longer stand still.

Just days after Israel announced its latest invasion on October 7, a group of young people in Santiago decided to create a collective.

They named it *Al Auda* (العودة), which means the return in Arabic. Its members are in their early thirties and work in the visual arts, architecture, and music. They can't bear to be silent in the face of what they see. They call their contacts, ask for help, and decide to organize day of cultural events for Palestine.

They launched with Sessions of Return, their first public activity, which was held in the parking lot of the Franklin Factory, a hub for creatives in Santiago, on Saturday, November 11. The organizers split the twelve-hour concert into three sections, each named after a Palestinian city: Nablus, Jericho, and Gaza. People chipped in, either by buying tickets or donating. They raised almost six million Chilean pesos (nearly \$6,800 USD), to be sent to Gaza through Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP), an NGO that advocates for the health of Palestinians.

In a Santiago café, I met with photographer Mila Belén and Marian Gidi, a visual artist and photographer, who told me how Palestine became part of their lives. Both women traveled to Palestine with the Know Thy Heritage program to learn about their roots and connect to the culture. Belén went in 2014 and Gidi in 2017. Both told me that the experience was a turning point in their lives.

Belén and Gidi are the founders of Al Auda and see themselves as outsiders in the larger Palestinian community in Chile. They did not grow up in a traditional Palestinian environment or go to an Arabic school. They didn't spend their weekends at the Palestinian Stadium, an exclusive social club located in an affluent part of Chile's capital. Instead, their bond was forged through food, a connection that is silently passed from generation to generation without preamble, through dishes that contain the history, feelings, and traditions that live in their recipes.

Like me, they made a choice to connect with Palestine. It was driven by curiosity and empathy, a natural outcome of their interest in human rights. Arab displacement links so many issues, just like in Latin America, where history is traversed by colonialism, which Indigenous peoples of this continent understand so well, including in Wallmapu, the Mapuche territory that pre-dates Chile.

"Even if I wasn't of Palestinian descent, I would still defend the Palestinian cause," said Belén. Her intuition is reflected in the work of Chilean-Palestinian author Lina Meruane.

"Palestine, for me, has always been a rumor circulating in the background, a story to which one turns to save a shared origin from extinction," Meruane writes in her book, *Volverse Palestina*

(Becoming Palestine). "It would not be a return of my own. It would be a borrowed return, a return in someone else's place."

I recognize myself in these words and see a process that is repeated and amplified. Third and fourth generation Chilean women of Palestinian origin envision a potential future return and then confirm what they already suspected: the situation is worse than imagined.

But there is another dimension. There is joy in spite of it all. The effusiveness of the Palestinian streets, the shared sense of humor, and the will to be happy despite living with just enough, and without justice, in refugee camps that swell and then disappear over and over again.

For Belén, her trip to Palestine led her to her define herself as an activist. Today she is trying to do something concrete to help the Palestinians in Gaza who have been under bombardment for almost two months.

"Despite all the information we have, reality is still shocking. But we can't turn away, because it makes everything so clear," said Gidi in an interview. "I felt as though it grounded what I already knew."

The two photographers, who have woven a friendship out of shared pain and pride, plan to continue their collective beyond the tragedy that led to its founding: they both know that the invasion will continue when the ceasefire ends. Palestine rarely appeared on television before October 7, but the occupation has been going on seventy-five years.

Palestine, Irreversible

It is Thursday afternoon and I'm with Andrea Giadach, an actress, playwright, and theater director, whom I first met more than fifteen years ago when I attended her play, *My World Homeland*. We met at the Rincón Árabe, a small café redolent with Arab coffee and spices.

It is a hot day and a little early for dinner, but the waitress comes and goes between the kitchen and the patio carrying warm dishes that smell of happy memories. Giadach is accompanied by Ana Harcha, an actress and academic, with whom she co-directs *Irreversible Palestine, Non-Existent Palestine*, an exhibition in which Harcha shares reflections and impressions from her trip to Palestine last October.

Harcha describes her interest in the land of her great-grandparents as a path that opened up to her over the years. The main milestone on this journey was a trip to the Occupied Palestinian Territories just over a year ago. Harcha, too, sees herself reflected in Meruane's work.

"I felt that I understood what she was putting forward in *Becoming Palestine*: that there is a way of being Palestinian that is not based in blood, but in defending life," said Harcha, with a plate of Arab rolls in front of her.

Giadach doesn't remember when she first became interested in Palestine. For her, it was always there. It was something her father encouraged and which she has actively cultivated throughout her life. Eventually she took Palestine with her into the theater. The first play she directed, *My World Homeland*, explores stories of exile, including that of a Palestinian.

Today Harcha and Giadach connect over theater and Palestine. Earlier this year they began working on the exhibition *Irreversible Palestine, Non-existent Palestine*, where images of the apartheid wall are projected in order to show its real dimension. Harcha took the photographs and wrote the text

that accompanies them.

“It has to do with dimensions, with making the geography, the reality over there, present through the photographic record and through Ana’s body,” said Giadach. “For me, Palestine is a paradigm of the relationship between hegemony and otherness.”

This immerse artwork-lecture, co-directed by Harcha and Giadach, was shown for the last time on November 14 at the Chilean National Theater in downtown Santiago. The event had been scheduled months prior but its happening coincided with the bombings in Gaza.

Those in attendance felt the connection between the performance they were watching and the scenes of war broadcast on the news and landing on their cell phones.

The point of the piece, according to Harcha, is “to investigate the possibility of memory and belonging in the territories, of identities and genres, as a thought exercise in creation, fiction, and imagination, one that is not closed off and that can develop through counterpoint or contradiction.”

Reclaiming joy

I was walking down a street in Ramallah, in the West Bank, and I was lost. I had no map with me. It was December 2007 and I still didn’t have Google Maps on my phone. I stopped, took out my camera and started taking pictures in a street full of shops where children were playing and riding bicycles.

When the kids realized I was taking their picture, they opened their eyes wide and started shouting “*sahafiye, sahabiye*” (صحفية) as they ran towards me. It was the first time someone called me a journalist, and they did it in Arabic.

The children were used to the intrusive lenses of foreign correspondents who were visiting or covering the Occupied Palestinian Territories. They entertained themselves by asking for pictures and seeing the images on the camera’s screen. They posed, while joking and shouting happily.

I recently saw a similar video on my Instagram feed. Amidst images of death, human misery, and charred bodies, blackened by dust and explosions, another record, this one full of life, sneaks into the social networks: a journalist taking pictures of children laughing and forgetting for a few minutes that they are surrounded by death and pain and the rubble of what had been their homes just a few weeks ago.

One of the most brutal characteristics of dehumanization is the reduction of the other to something that is not a person, that is less than human, and that does not have the same rights or capacity to experience emotion other than pain.

This narrative of the occupation reduces Palestinians to just a few dimensions of the many they actually possess: crying, suffering, resistance, loss, despair. Their defense of life, their sense of humor, the colors of their childhood are erased. An effort is made to silence this chorus of children who laugh and play in the midst of fear, hunger, and the indifference of the international community, as if they couldn’t possibly be whole human beings who go through a range of emotions, including joy.

Marian Gidi, Mila Belén, Ana Harcha, and Andrea Giadach are legion in this land that is distant geographically and in language, religion and traditions. But the archives show Chile began receiving Palestinians at the end of the nineteenth century.

From here they forge a commitment, borne of the privilege and luck of having been born in a safe place, of having had the possibility to have been girls, of enjoying their youth and being able to imagine what is to come.

That is why we recall our happy memories, and why we keep talking about Palestine.

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