GAZA

Life In a Cage

HERVÉ KEMPF
JÉRÔME EQUER

GAZA:
LIFE IN A CAGE

GAZA:
Life in a Cage

Text by Hervé Kempf
Photographs by Jérôme Equer

Algora Publishing
New York

www.algora.com

ISBN: 0-87586-440-6 (softcover)
ISBN: 0-87586-441-4 (hardcover)
ISBN: 0-87586-442-2 (ebook)

Originally published as *Gaza: La vie en cage*, © Éditions Seuil, 2005, © Jérôme Equer, photos, 2004

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data —

Kempf, Herve.
Gaza: life in a cage / by Herve Kempf and Jerome Equer.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-87586-440-6 (pbk.: alk. paper) — ISBN 0-87586-441-4 (hard cover: alk. paper) — ISBN 0-87586-442-2 (ebook) 1. Gaza Strip—Social conditions. 2. Gaza Strip—Pictorial works. 3. Palestinian Arabs—Social conditions. 4. Arab-Israeli conflict. I. Equer, Jerome. II. Title.

DS110.G3K46 2006
953'.1—dc22

2005035335

Front Cover:
This work is published with the support of the
French Ministry of Culture/National Book Center of France

Printed in the United States

Table of Contents

By Hervé Kempf

La Guerre secrète des OGM. Editions Du Seuil, 2003
La Révolution biolithique. Humains artificiels et machines animées. Albin Michel, 1998
La Baleine qui cache la forêt. Enquête sur les pièges de l'écologie. La Découverte, 1994
L'Économie à l'épreuve de l'écologie. Hatier, 1991

By Jérôme Equer

Traumas. Grandvaux, 2003
Les Murs de l'enfer. Albin Michel, 2001

Acknowledgments

We warmly thank all those who helped us to conduct this research and those who, in the Gaza Strip, cordially welcomed us and spoken in confidence. Thanks in particular to Gilles Paris and Mouna Naïm, of *Le Monde*, for their goodwill, to Frank Weil-Rabaud and Thierry Bresillon for their advice, to our friend Louis-Gilles Francœur and to *Devoir*, of Montreal, which introduced us at a crucial moment to the Israeli embassy in Paris. Thanks also to the team from Doctors without Borders in Gaza, and particularly to Mohammed Kilani who showed us the territory as it is mapped by the heart, to the French Cultural Center in Gaza and to the enthusiastic Luc Briard, to the UNRWA where Imad Okal and Jean-Philippe Laberge were friendly guides and where Lionel Brisson honored us with beguiling discussions, to journalist Hassan Balawi for his invaluable insights. Our deep appreciation to our driver and friend Hamad Chreiteh, to Souhila Abou Khaoud for her good humor and to Nasser Essayed, to those who enabled us to meet the armed combatants and the tunnellers. Our gratitude also to Nissim Amzallag, who introduced us to Gush Qatif, to Socrate Soussan, Laurence Beziz and Avraham Berrebi for their hospitality.

To all, peace and prosperity.

And to Veronique and Brigitte, a thousand thoughts behind the words.

The story behind this book is simple. The idea came to Jerome after he'd spent a long time pondering that bizarre UFO of geography and history known as "the Gaza Strip." Day after day it was in the news but never added up to anything more than a confused impression of violence and frenzy. The whole place seemed populated only by caricatures. It was just a place on a map, a name in the newspapers, the locus of some insoluble conflict, a place about which, fundamentally, most of us really didn't know a thing.

The plan, consequently, was clear: to tell the story of the day-to-day life of the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip. Our motivations were equally clear: curiosity, a nose for a good story, and the pleasure of traveling together. We decided to steer clear of political analyses and meetings with prominent figures. Perhaps our take on this ever so complex and so inflamed Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where every word hits as hard as a shot from a Kalashnikov or an M16, would be useful.

For I understood that in exploring the subject suggested by Jerome we would be exploring the nature of the violence that attended it, and I understood that peace could never be achieved solely on the basis of argumentation, of opposing lines of logic that each had its own legitimacy, but by stepping back, by getting a little bit of distance, that would bring us back to a human perspective, to the real people who live behind the faces.

The method we adopted was to take our time, to go back at different times of the year, once every season — that, we thought, would help us to get beyond the surface of appearances and would allow us, if not to understand, at least to actually get close to the

essence of this story.

Jerome took photographs; I took notes. Together we shared the same adventures and met the same individuals. We made four fifteen-day visits to Gaza between January and November 2004, the year that saw the most intense fighting of the Intifada that began in 2000.

We paid our own way: this meant that we were free to do what we wanted, and we were able to choose whatever angles, subjects and perspectives we found appropriate to our story.

Before entering the Gaza Strip, it is useful to recall a few basic facts about it. The territory, which borders the Mediterranean coast, is small: 365 km^2, roughly ten times the area of Manhattan. As of 2004, part of it was occupied by some 8,000 Israeli "settlers." The rest of the Gaza Strip was very densely populated by 1.4 million Palestinians. About two-thirds of them were classified as "refugees," meaning that they or their parents had had to leave their homes in Palestine in 1948 and come to Gaza. They were exiled when the Israeli army defeated the Arab armies and the Palestinian resistance which had rejected the plan enacted by the United Nations the previous year to divide the land.

The UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) was created to help these refugees. Those who came to the Gaza Strip were settled in eight different refugee camps which have become virtual cities.

In early 2006, despite the never-ending cataclysms that wrack this violence-ridden country, there was hope that the situation in Palestine might be easing. However, while the withdrawal of the settlers from Gaza may make certain internal changes possible, Gaza is still a closed territory and further disruptions can always be provoked. The military and economic threat is always present.

Will the truce be long lasting? We pray that it will. And that the pains and the suffering that we witnessed will start to belong, finally, to the past. But the situation will remain precarious and any truce will be fragile until there is real progress in recognizing the rights of this oppressed people.

Entering Gaza

The last soldier to whom we presented our pass wore a wool cap. "There are a lot of Arabs, on the other side, you know? They aren't as nice as us. Go ahead, have a good day."

We come from Israel: a modern highway leads us through bounteous fields, open space, a landscape crisscrossed with electrical wires, traversed by tractors and dotted with peaceful houses with red roofs. One could have imagined oneself in the Rhone valley. And here is the border crossing at Erez, the border between Israel and the Gaza Strip.

The weather is fine. The wind, which carries the scent of the sea, blows across empty parking lots surrounded by chain link fences. After a sentry box, beyond an esplanade, we come upon a long white prefabricated building and a large warehouse with a blue roof, open on both sides. On the right, ahead, some factories are tucked behind fences. The whole ensemble gives the impression of a dormant industrial park, or the docks of a deserted port for boats heading to the other end the world. And it is, indeed, the dividing line between two separate universes.

But it is also a militarized zone: five days before, a suicide attack killed several Israeli soldiers right here in the Erez passage. Soldiers in bulletproof jackets inspect our bags before directing us to the white hut with the Israeli flags waving

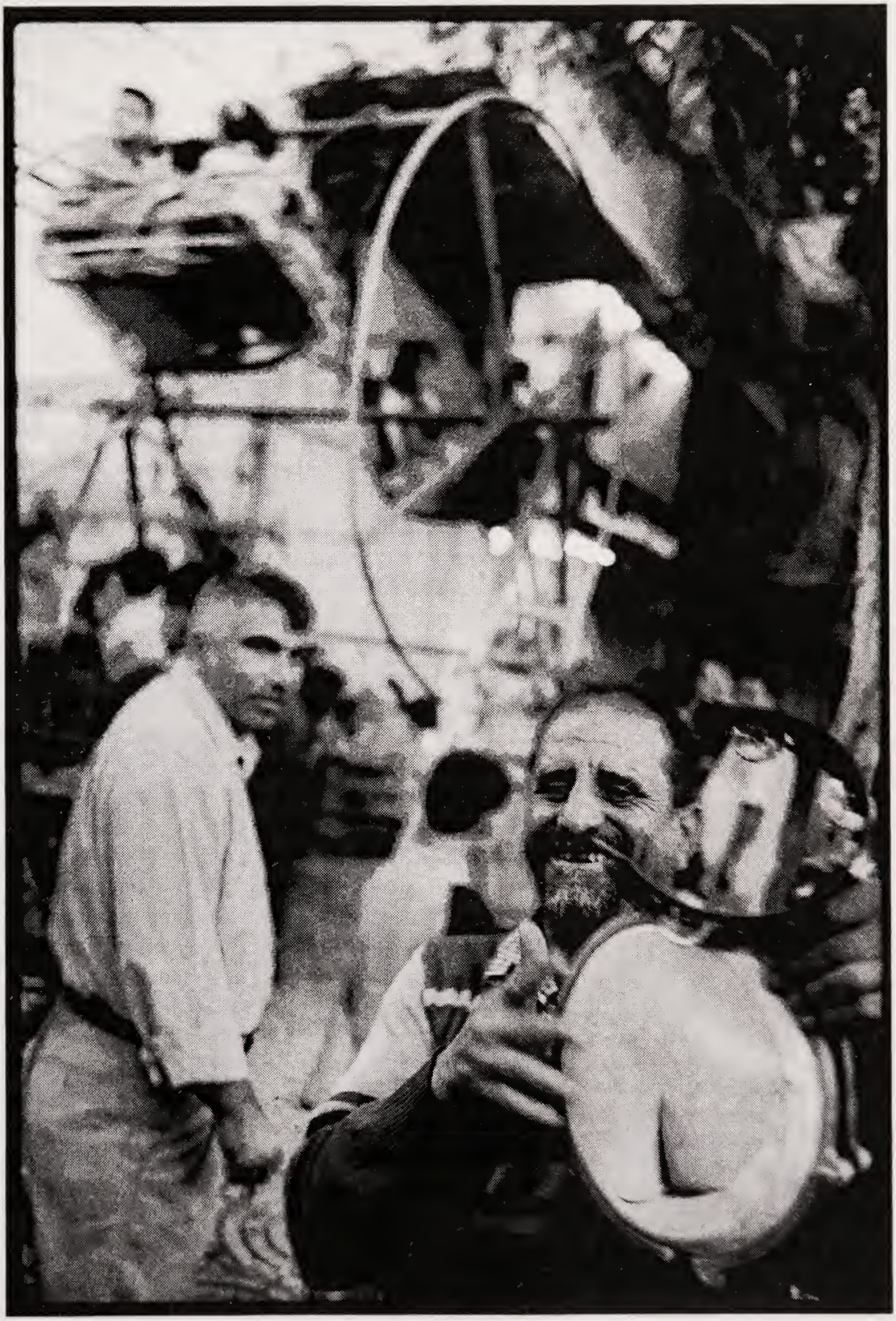
overhead. There, other young soldiers examine our papers and search the computer. After a long wait, we are given a pass that we are to hand over to the man in the wool cap. "A lot of Arabs"?

A track about 300 yards long, hemmed in by concrete walls on both sides, separates the Israeli post from the Palestinian territory. Concrete speed bumps make sure no vehicle can approach too quickly. We haul our bags cross the weed-strewn macadam, skirting rolls of barbed wire. At the end of the walk in this quiet and surrealistic chamber is a booth flying the Palestinian flag, black, green and red, and a simple barrier. Two soldiers sit at a table and write our names and passport numbers in a notebook.

Erez is six kilometers from Gaza. The two-lane road takes us past an assortment of fields, sheds, orchards, factories, garbage dumps, ruins and one-story buildings of unfinished concrete, in a heteroclite mixture which, under the blue sky, gives Gaza its usual appearance. Here is a splendid orange grove; there, a ruined house with twisted floors; donkeys drawing carts full of grass; an old woman tending goats in a field full of rubble, with public housing developments in the background; children going home from school in their blue and white striped uniforms. And then, suddenly, the city, colorful, lively, and a stream of battered cars trying to rush in.

On this stretch of road as in so many other parts of a territory that is only forty kilometers long by less than ten kilometers wide, the geography is always changing, according to the recurrent waves of aggression from the Israeli army. During their month-and-a-half occupation of Beit Hanoun, the town closest to Erez, in July, Israeli tanks destroyed the road leading away from border station, so that all traffic had to use a parallel road, via Beit Laya, a city to the northwest. That road brings the visitor past a whole set of brand new buildings financed, according to the signs, by organizations in the Arab countries.

BOULEVARD OMAR AL-MOKHTAR.
FESTIVAL OF EID, IN NOVEMBER

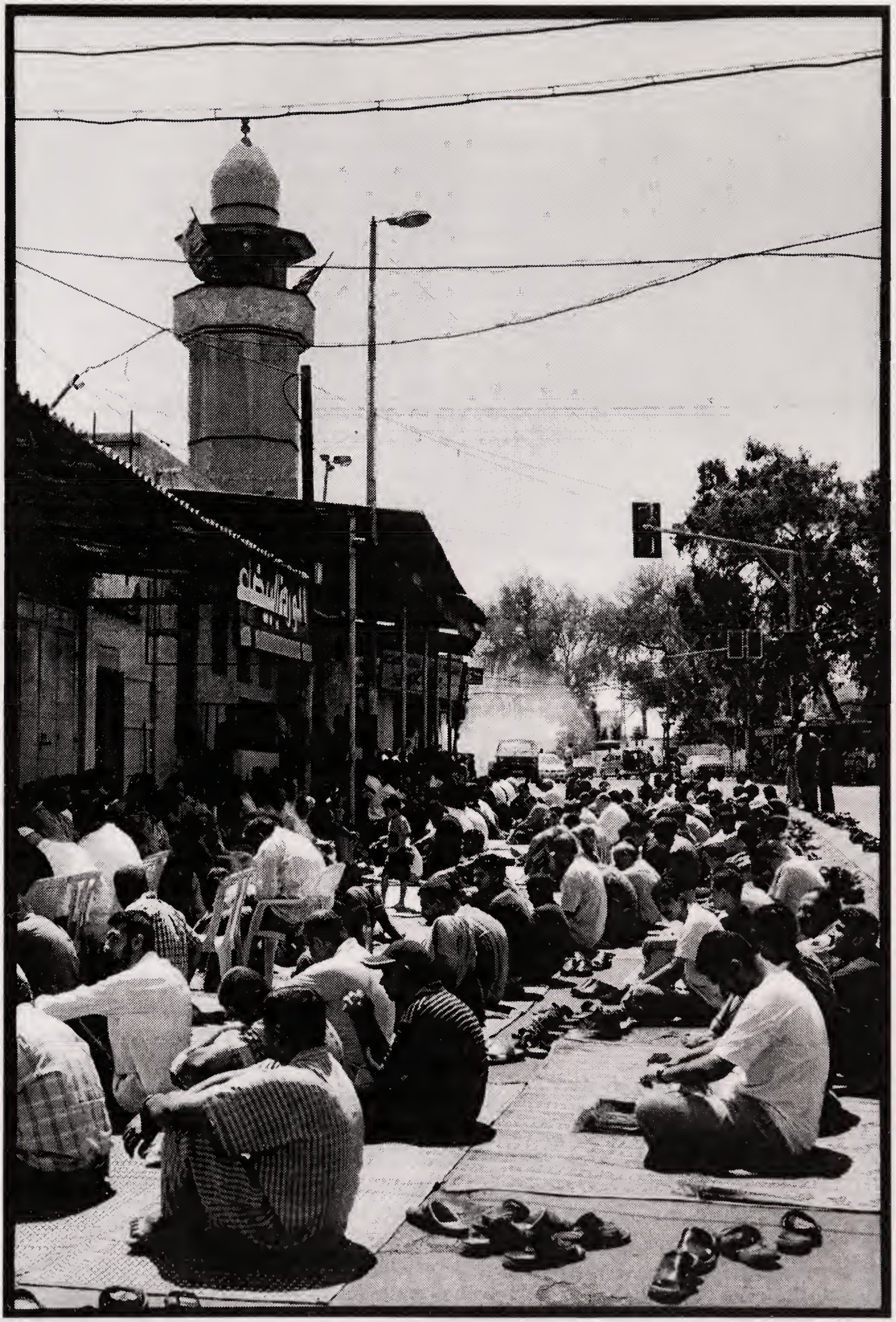


Later, in November, the shops and sheds close to Erez are added to the list of ruins, knocked down the month before during the siege of Jabaliya, the big refugee camp next to Gaza. Another disrupted route now adds its traffic to our road, which soon becomes practically impassable. Better to take a dirt road via Beit Hanoun, this route also rimmed with ruins, until we reach Jabaliya, which is damaged as well: stagnant water is standing in puddles in the streets, ruins are listing on all sides, refuse is everywhere — the street sweepers stopped working in the last three weeks to claim their back wages. But it is the festival of Eid, the end of Ramadan, and the city is celebrating, in spite of the demise of Yasser Arafat, whose funeral was held two days before Ramallah in the West Bank. The streets are full of people, the stores are open, children are all over the place, an impromptu horse race is being held on the boulevard, and swings have been set up on the sidewalks.

In the garden of the Unknown Soldier, in front of the palace of the Legislative Council in Gaza, boys are strolling through what has basically become a fairground, packed with stands selling kebabs, sandwiches, tea, sodas, and dried fruit. The video game shop is full to overflowing. In the public garden, men crowd together, sitting and chatting on the thin lawn. Some guys have climbed up on a tall gantry, twenty feet high. Youngsters are touring the square on horseback, and little kids are playing with plastic machine guns. The hookahs are lit with embers that shine in the night. It is a holiday, everyone is merry; they have forgotten their troubles. There are no girls except for some prepubescent gamines, a group of young mothers by the base of a wall, rocking their babies, and some women in black veils choosing cakes in a pastry shop.

Another day, a Friday. The great prayer is celebrated at the mosque facing Chifa Hospital, not far from our place. Hundreds of men are outside, attentively listening to the vigorous sermon amplified by the loudspeakers perched on top of the stained concrete minaret of the modest mosque (whose entryway is decorated with a tin roof). The mosque is full and men are lined

FRIDAY PRAYERS AT THE MOSQUE
NEAR THE CHIFA HOSPITAL



up three or four deep outside the building, and even beyond, in front of the adjacent stores or on the other side of street. They kneel and prostrate themselves in unison, according to words pronounced by the imam. This goes on for half an hour, an interim given substance by the devotion of the crowd and the silence broken only by the psalmodic incantations of a grave voice. A few cars go by; a donkey waits, leaning against a wall. Then the prayer is completed, the men stand up, put their shoes on and go their way.

Friday is as peaceful as a Sunday in France: the streets are empty and an atmosphere of quiet serenity reigns while everyone savors the sweetness of the morning and a good sleep before the great prayer. On Nasser Street, in Gaza, only a few food stores are open. One or two children are playing on the sidewalk. A car is getting a jump start. The display window of a grocery store exhibits copies of Al-Qods, the daily newspaper published in Jerusalem. A flock of brown and black sheep crosses the street, accompanied by a smiling shepherd astride a donkey. At the intersection, a guy is selling fresh strawberries which he displays on an aluminum tray. Children, one of them sitting inside a metal container, are tending some burning papers. An ambulance passes siren wailing. Although it is Friday, ten laborers are hard at work on construction site.

Further along, as one moves away from the center of town, the urban fabric gives way. A wall is lined with graffiti offering various slogans, and even e-mail addresses — "love25-25@hotmail.com" and "spider2005MAM@hotmail.com". Behind the wall, on the right, is a vast orange grove. On the left is a small orchard, at the end of which is a dirt track running parallel to Nasser Street. Two young men are driving a cart along the track; one of them is black. Then there is another orchard, carpeted with grass so thick and fluffy that one could lounge there all day. The track leads to a vast empty space, where a concrete-mixer and the remains of some cut-down trees indicate that construction must be beginning soon. A herd of goats passes by, bleating, followed by two nonchalant boys.

Loudspeakers issue the call to prayer.

That afternoon, we come upon a raucous wedding — there are a lot of weddings going on, on a Friday in August. The men are perched on a truck, beating drums to the sound of a kind of accordion, and the merry cohort shouts and sings and dances with excitement. The truck stops alongside a grassy slope in front of what must be a restaurant, and the weaving and tumultuous crowd goes in, following the groom and his wife, who is hidden in a large white dress that covers her head.

An evening, a night. The dark street is full of life, wet from the rain, the shops are open — a dazzling display of wedding gowns can be seen in a window — and the men are crowding together by the restaurants offering hot sandwiches or kebabs adorned with of all kinds of vegetables and peppers, prepared in open-air kitchens set up on the sidewalks.

As austere as the restaurants may be, the pastries are fabulous: immense cakes and pies, on round platters, often kept hot. Tasty bite-size morsels are also on display, stacked like

miniature wedding cakes. You can eat them on the spot. The Palestinians love to eat: throughout the markets there are stalls laden with packages of candies and big boxes of chocolates stacked high; it is enough to make us wish we were children again.

During the week, Gaza is full of motion, nervous, agitated — neither happy nor sad, but needy, like any big city. However, it has its own particular music, the dominant note of which is the sound of car horns. They really use their horns in Gaza: to ask a passerby if he wants a ride, to announce one's presence upon entering an intersection, to greet an acquaintance, to urge the next car to get going. But it's all done with very short beeps — transmitting information rather than expressing irritation — which creates a pleasant cacophony. But the region resounds with plenty of other sounds, too: the cries of street vendors, voices arguing, the laughter or squeals of children, muezzins echoing back and forth, the braying of donkeys, ambulance sirens, bird songs, the loudspeakers at demonstrations. The gas and water trucks that plow through the cities add to the hubbub with their distinctive melodies: "Ring the Bells" announces the coming of the water truck; "Lettre à Élise" is the gas truck. The tunes are always refreshing, even surrealistic, and always take us by surprise, echoing through the devastated neighborhoods of Rafah, two hundred yards from the Israeli wall. The percussion part of this concert is played by gunshots, machine gun fire, and the humming of helicopters, which intermittently remind everyone that this is a very weird place, indeed.

If the aural universe of the Gaza Strip is unusually rich, its visual offerings are limited, reduced to a few images obsessively repeated. Along the street there is basically only one type of image: portraits of martyrs who died in combat. At every major intersection and at every plaza, on iron frameworks five or six feet high, the determined faces of young men are portrayed, holding machine guns or rocket launchers, against the

background image of an Israeli colony under attack or the Al-Aqsa Mosque — the great mosque of Jerusalem which for the Palestinian people is the symbol of their freedom to come.

There is almost no advertising, no magazines, and very few books. There is little for a Gaziote hungry for visual nourishment to look at except television. Or the innumerable slogans, whether carefully hand-lettered or scrawled in spray paint, that cover the walls in a proliferation of messages. But here again, the range of themes is limited: there are either pious or political exhortations, or local advertisements. For instance, on the walls facing the Islamic university: "Youth of Fatah"; "Welcome to the New Students"; "Abou Ahmed [a martyr] is in paradise"; "Ask the prophet Mohammed"; "Discover yourself," suggests a Internet room; "There is only one God and Mohammed is his prophet." Across from the school for partially-sighted children we find ads for a nearby store where everything is priced at one shekel (20 cents), for a taxi company, and for calligraphers who take this opportunity to

ENTRANCE TO THE FISH MARKET

display their talent. At the foot of a building: "Apartment to rent, third floor. Ask for X at tel. 059..." Close to Palestine Square: "Despite all the suffering and sorrows, congratulations to the people on the occasion of Eid."

A city that is unfinished rather than rundown, a city that was halted in mid stride, Gaza is not beautiful but it has a certain something. Aside from that particular vibration that characterizes this mixture of the violent and the gentle, its charm arises from a spontaneous architectural unity: everyone is in a hurry to build, and everyone is building in an identical style, determined by the simplest method that is most suitable to the means at hand. These two- to four-story concrete buildings, usually left unpainted, are repeated again and again, producing a harmonious regularity. Everything is square, and they rest on concrete pillars which frame the ground floor with the wide doors of garages or warehouses. But the ground floor is often vacant, the dwelling space beginning one floor up. The door and window frames are often ornamented with decorative motifs.

The city also shows its character in the sandy streets, the soft light of the summer, the abundance of flowers — hibiscus, pinks, flamboyant trees, magnolias — and the trees, many of them recently planted. The city is intermingled with signs of the countryside, little corners carved out to preserve signs of bucolic tranquility: small fields or olive groves tucked into a corner of the streets, gardens hidden behind iron doors, vegetable stalls at the crossroads. The car dominates the roadway, but it makes room for the donkey carts whipped along by their drivers, the flock of sheep guided by a shepherd at the edge of the road or, exceptionally, camels led along by a Bedouin.

The splendid light gives the place an unexpected air of profundity. Here, in November, is the road to the beach, buffeted by the wind and by a great sea gray as steel. The thick bronze clouds are split by sun rays that fire a curtain of light

between the clouds and the flood. It is beautiful, and space, at ground level, seems to expand. The city takes shape in the background, opening onto the road as if centered on the minaret of a mosque.

Or in May, when the yellow taxi descends from Jabaliya toward Gaza by a street with broad sandy shoulders: the light of the setting sun is limpid, the air is warm and soft, the flowers resplendent; this abused city which peacefully offers itself to the sun exudes a paradoxical harmony. Gaza, by the sea, full of light, lined with trees, can be a delicious city. How, in such moments, can we believe we are in a country at war? How can we even imagine that, if it had the chance to live freely, it would wish for war?

Entrance to the Chatila refugee camp from the beach road.

The biggest prison in the world

There can hardly be a place more melancholy than the airport situated next to Rafah, south of the Gaza Strip.

The wrecked runway is oddly moving: it must be the silence that weighs down on this place that ought to be bustling with activity. It underscores the sense of sadness that emerges from this strip of pavement that has been blasted, hacked, and churned by savage machines that left only heaps of rubble, plates of asphalt pointing toward the sky like a chaotic lunar landscape.

In December 2001, Israeli F 16 planes destroyed the radar tracking station. Then bulldozers came and dug seven holes in the runway. After that, engineers finished the job. Of the 3,800 meters of asphalt, only 400 meters remain intact. Before and after the good portion, the runway is ruined. The ground on both sides shows the imprint of caterpillar treads. In the cracks in the pavement, yellow flowers show their heads. One end of the white line remains, just up to the next mound.

"Here, you can smell freedom," says our friend Mohammed Kilani, who brought us to Gaza International Airport. And it was indeed the portal to the world, to freedom, which was brutally slammed shut in 2001. However, this quiet airport,

PRECEDING PAGE:
DESTROYED RUNWAY AT THE AIRPORT

where empty rows of seats wait in the hall decorated with glazed tiles for travelers whose trips have been cancelled, is always active. Pilots continue to take training courses, firemen are polishing their red trucks, civil servants bustle in and out of the offices of the State of Palestine Civil Aviation Authority. Nine hundred employees work here, in three eight-hour shifts. When the moment comes to start again, they will be ready.

Maps of the Gaza Strip published in the newspapers are false. They systematically present the territory as if it were a place where traffic can circulate freely, with a great north-south conduit in the impeccably rectilinear main road, Salah al-Din, the historical route leading from Egypt to Syria, which in antiquity made Gaza an important stopping place and a crossroads of this Mediterranean coast. Actually, this axis is brutally interrupted right in the middle by the Israeli "settlements" of Netzarim and Kfar Darom. To keep traffic away, the Israeli army condemned the central section of the road, and travelers between the north and south now have to follow a circuitous route that goes all the way out to the beach road before coming inland again, through Deir Al-Balah to Salah al-Din, a junction that is under the control of the army at the hamlet of Abu Houli.

The street Salah al-Din (or Saladin, the name of the great Kurdish chief who recaptured Jerusalem from the Crusaders in 1187) is blocked at the end of the Zeitoun neighborhood, where Gaza spreads out before melting into the countryside. It stops because of the proximity of the Jewish colony of Netzarim, three miles away; it stops, for the protection of the Israelis. This part of the city is strangely quiet and dull, as if the life had been drained out of it. The avenue is empty, as are the sheds and other buildings on either side: deserted factories and a few houses where men can be seen repairing cars, or children going home from school. The zone is under curfew; no one can go out at night. There is nothing going on here anymore, we are told,

because it is too dangerous: the Israeli army can come at any time and destroy anything it considers a threat.

Our car turns into a sandy street to the right, after asking the inhabitants if it is OK. "Be careful," they say, "if the car stops, they'll shoot you from up there." And, in fact, a watchtower is positioned so that the whole street is in its line of sight.

To go southward, then, one has to leave Gaza by the road that skirts the length of the beach. On both sides is a motley collection of buildings, ranging from a tin shack to a decrepit house all the way up to a luxurious villa. Then there are fewer and fewer buildings, and the road gives a wide berth to the colony of Netzarim, the roofs of which can be seen amongst the trees. A watchtower over which the Israeli flag is flying stands as an advance station, within two hundred yards of the road. Some half-destroyed houses around it testify to its actions. The house under the fort of Netzarim was destroyed this fall. Its inhabitants have reinstalled themselves in a shack, closer to the road, next to their field.

When I point at the colony with my finger, our companion for the day, Bassim, tells me to put my hand down: the Israelis, with their powerful binoculars, might take it as an excuse to fire on the car. An old shepherd is pasturing his goats in one of these now vacant lots, the turned-up ground strewn with rocks and debris, a remembrance of the tanks and the bulldozers that came, at one time or another, to demolish a house or wipe out a field.

After Deir Al-Balah, the road rejoined Salah al-Din, traveling through orchards and palm plantations, then some fields. Two right angle turns, and we arrive at the crossroads known as Abu Houli. We take a narrow passage enclosed by walls of concrete slab, under the eye of an Israeli guard who follows us into the tight corridor. The passage goes under a bridge, similarly protected with concrete slabs — this is the road used by the settlers when they are coming and going between Israel and the Jewish villages in Gush Qatif. At the exit from the corridor is an

Israeli military base where we see three jeeps and a big armored tank. It is hidden under tarps and concrete, across from a building pockmarked by bullets and now abandoned. Or it was, more accurately, because the resistance blew up the outpost in June. We'll come back to that. The position of Abu Houli makes it easy for the army to close off the passage, effectively blocking any traffic between the south and the north of the Gaza Strip.

Located dead in the center of the territory, this heavily handicaps the Palestinians in their daily life, obstructing essential traffic between Gaza and the cities of the south, Rafah and Khan Yunis. The name of Abu Houli comes from the fact that the land where the barracks and the settlements stand was sold to the Israelis by a woman of the family Abu Houli. This is where little Mohammed Al-Dourah was killed right next to his father on September 30, 2000, at the beginning of the second Intifada; there, where the confrontations went on for several weeks.

If all goes well, you need to count on an hour and quarter to cross the forty kilometers that separate Gaza from Rafah. But on a regular basis, under all sorts of pretexts — someone fired at a colonist's car, the traffic light is out of service because of the rain, the army has heard rumors about a clandestine weapons shipment — or for no reason at all — the passage is blocked. That, of course, causes all kinds of difficulties. It keeps partially-sighted children from getting to their special school in Gaza, it makes students miss their courses (they come by bus from the south, for 10 shekels ($1.80) a round trip, etc.

The road may be closed for an hour, three hours, a day, or sometimes for weeks when the army is launching a large-scale operation in some unspecified part of the territory, as was the case several times in 2004. If there is to be a long wait, itinerant tea or cigarette sellers appear, and they walk up and down the long line of taxis and trucks that sit and wait. Here, a dates-and-cakes stand emerges from a Peugeot 404 light van; there,

someone in a car is selling pistachios. Waiting becomes part of the art of living, a given. Jaber Wishah, from the Palestinian Center for Human Rights, jokes: "If you wait an hour, it's good luck; you might have had to wait six hours. If you wait six hours, you're lucky; you might have had to wait all night. If you wait all night, you're lucky; you could have been wounded. If you get wounded, you're lucky; you could have been killed. If you do get killed, you're lucky; you are finally delivered from all the suffering."

On all sides, then, cars, trucks, taxis, and minibuses crowd together. When traffic begins to flow again, it is a free-for-all trying to get through the narrow entry. Everyone vies wildly to be at the front of the crowd around the entry to the corridor, in the third or fourth row, as if they could make up for lost time — or, more prosaically, to try to get through before the implacable barrier with its mysterious rules has a chance to come down again. We pass the watchtower with the machine guns aiming at people. The vehicles move forward, they are blocked, they move some more, then, at the exit, there is a complete logjam. Finally we exit the corridor, and a line of cars breaks free from the throngs and heads off the road to cut across the fields.

The rules change all the time. They were tightened even more after June 27, when the resistance succeeded in blowing up the military camp with a bomb brought in through a tunnel 350 meters long. The Israelis demolished what remained of the base after the attack, as well as the white building across from it. A fortress was built in its place, looking for all the world like a little château from the Middle Ages, with ramparts and turrets, concrete simply substituting for the fieldstone. The road was widened and a virtual dry moat was created around the fort, which is girded with iron bars. One loudspeaker addresses cars coming from the north, and another those coming from the south: "You! Over here!" And something new: as of this autumn, you cannot go through in your own car; only taxis are allowed.

In November, it rains a lot and water floods the roadways. We are in the long queue, south of Abu Houli, when night falls. From time to time, shots crackle through the darkness. The traffic light isn't working; the electricity is out because of the rain. A loudspeaker gives orders in a wavery, crackling Hebrew, barely intelligible. The water has also damaged the circuits, it seems. For the moment, the orders are pretty clear: "Don't move forward!" Finally, we can move forward. It is a mob. Cars roll forward, squeezing tightly together, trying not to let any other vehicles slip into line, trying to get ahead by a few places. The taxis are full of women, children, and men. It is our turn. We are back on the road that passes in front of the fort, which is beaming powerful flood lights on us. The loudspeaker crackles: "One by one, slowly." The truck in front of us moves ahead, we ease forward at the same pace, the loudspeaker barks something but we cannot understand it, and suddenly, Whack! a terrible explosion, right in front of the car. The noise scares us

silly and time stands still. Hamad is holding his head. Is he hurt? No, fortunately his gesture is just a shock reflex. We pull ourselves together after a moment. That is how the fort asks us to stop, by firing just in front of the car. What do they want? The truck thirty yards behind us has stopped. The loudspeaker quavers in the drizzle. Hollering through the window, in the darkness pierced by headlights and flood lamps, the truck driver explains that our yellow car doesn't have the taxi light on the roof, that we'll have to go back and get it. We turn back along a road to the left, while the procession once again picks up its slow march, punctuated by shots, which are the Israeli army's strange means of communication. Hamad puts the taxi light in place and we take our position again in the line, still upset. We pass again in front of the concrete fort, with its blinding lights and the wet but imperative loudspeaker.

The blocking of internal traffic is not limited to Abu Houli. Often, a second obstacle is posed by the closing of the beach road, further north, alongside the colony of Netzarim. That was the case one hot and sticky day in August.

On the right, some well-maintained agricultural fields and the sea; we can hear the rollers crashing on the shore; to the left, the topsy-turvy ground of No Man's land. Trucks full of straw or manure, big tractor trailers, vans full of food, horse drawn carts, yellow taxis, ambulances, blue police cars, veiled women on foot, families carrying sacks, an old man in a white djellaba: everyone is waiting.

The road has been blocked since morning, Israeli bulldozers having dug a ditch that only pedestrians can cross. We reach the place where the road is cut, not far from the watchtower of Netzarim. This one, too, is like a small but sturdy castle, built on a yellowish earthen mound, surrounded by concrete slabs that form a wall. At its base is an armored jeep. On the ground stands a tank, oblong, anonymous and hostile; not far away, a Caterpillar bulldozer. A little girl exclaims: "Look, mom, there's

a tank. Are you scared? Not me, I'm not scared."

Suddenly, shots split the air. A crack, two more, then bursts of machine gun fire. The sharp snap of the explosions fills the space, blowing before them a wave of fear. The intention seems to be to prevent people from walking on the road. The reflex response would be to run back and look for cover. But it is only by going forward that the people can make any headway, and so they do, with a deliberate calm. The teenagers are relaxed; the children laugh; the women, determined, sigh as they step forward, no complaints, veiled, in black, beside the men, like the men. The tank approaches the road. Two Palestinian soldiers arrive close to the first truck in line and push the people back to the edge of the ditch, but without using force. A young man among them shouts in anger: "What bastards! They're shooting at us, civilians, we don't have any weapons." The tank goes up to the watchtower and stops at its foot. The time is 18.40. The road is almost empty. The bulldozer has also gone back. People

THE BEACH ROAD, INTERRUPTED BY THE ISRAELI ARMY AT THE NETZARIM SETTLEMENT.

speak up, they shout. The tension is palpable. A veiled lady asks: "Where are my children? Oh my God!" And then carts loaded with families are back on the road south, people start moving forward again. The tank disappears in a cloud of dust and smoke. On the other side of the ditch, a boy calls out: "One shekel per person!" — for that price, he'll take you on his cart past the portion of the road governed by the watchtower, five hundred yards from the ditch. A man comes back, pushing a woman in a wheelchair, followed by other travelers who carry large bags.

A Palestinian bulldozer — a Komatsu WA 320 — pushes back a sand heap to fill the ditch. In goes the sand, and the tank moves back, pushing more ground to level out the road. The driver says that he has authorization to work for ten minutes. Daïfallah Al-Akhras, vice-minister of the public works, shows up. He explains: "We are in communication with the Israelis through the intermediary of the special office for the communication. We asked why they fired, and they responded: 'That's the way it is'." They are firing in the air; they fired in my direction when I responded on the radio and the televisions. They gave us the go ahead to fill in the ditch. Last week, they dug fourteen ditches — that will cost us $120,000 in repairs. This is going on every month."

Everyone calms down. We climb back into our vehicles, and the drivers, full of optimism, rev their engines, spreading a strong smell of diesel. Ambulances come from the south, all sirens howling. Night falls. Along the beach, which is festooned with cheerful garlands of colored lights, the crowd presses forward in the soft air. It's a day off, today, doesn't that feel good? The blockade? Just another day in Gaza.

All the houses near the villages and the crossings between the Palestinian roads and those of the "settlements" are subject to constant pressure from the army. Shootings, tank maneuvers, visits and frequent expulsions are the every day lot of these

impotent neighbors, all justified by the fact that Palestinian combatants have launched shells on the "settlements" or fired on settlers' vehicles passing on the roads. That leads to an indefinite expansion of the "security zones," i.e. a sterile no man's land on both sides of the road.

In the Al-Garara district, not far from Abu Houli, Abdullah Al-Zeir invites us to visit his house with its cement floor and corrugated sheet metal roof. The residence is cheered up by a collection of clocks and watches hanging on a wall in the courtyard; this is his father's hobby. The family lives just a hundred yards from the settlers' road, along which at this very moment some all-terrain vehicles are passing. Abdullah's brother's house , behind this one, was destroyed, and his uncle was taken to prison, without a trial, during an army incursion in 2003. The family is utterly destitute, the men being unemployed. In the hamlet, 150 yards from the bridge, a woman with her face veiled minds some sheep amidst the carcasses of

Mohammed Kilani of Médecins sans frontières calls on Sabrina Al-Eidini at Al-Garara. He's holding Azad, a blind baby, in his arms. The Al-Eidinis' house was destroyed three months later.

cars, beside a little hen house and a roll of barbed wire. Further ahead, the crabgrass beside the road is strewn with litter and plastic caps and concrete blocks.

In Lihata, fourteen families are wedged between the dwellings of the colony of Kfar Darom and the greenhouses the settlers have set up, and they are only about thirty yards apart. Since the beginning of the year, these families had had to pass through a special check point which opens only three times a day, for fifteen minutes each time. All the land around the houses has been leveled by Israeli bulldozers. A watchtower guards the end of the road, which is barred by a heap of dirt. Between that and the check point, people have to come and go by foot. This restriction was put in place after shells were launched on the Palestinian side, for which the people living in this cluster of dwellings could not possibly be responsible. In Israeli logic, if there had been the least sign that any one of them had had a part in it, his house would have destroyed immediately. The current restriction has not stopped homemade rockets called "Qassams" being fired on the colony of Kfar Darom several times a week. Approaching the check point we go past some miserable houses. A Palestinian warns us not to get too close to them; they are too dangerous — within shooting range from the settlement.

In the stretch just before Kfar Darom, the Salah al-Din road is cut; all the closest houses have been torn down or abandoned. We are on our way to visit a house located a hundred meters from the colony, the roofs of which are clearly visible, not to mention a watch tower and fence. We park alongside another house, in order to keep the car out of sight from the soldiers. The father of the family brings out plastic chairs and we sit under the canopy, sheltered from view from the Israeli side. We talk over a glass of orange soda, under the curious and somber gaze of the children.

Mounir tells us that the soldiers come to search the house

every week. At night, a strict curfew is the norm. After sunset the soldiers fire at anything that moves.

"I appreciate your visit," he says, "but this very evening the soldiers will come and ask me a million questions about you. One day they came to search the house. They took me along to the colony, threw me to the ground, hit me, they were all shouting at me and one pointed a gun at my head — and they did it all right at the entrance from the village, so that my wife and children could see it from the window.... They treat us like animals. We don't know what to do. Who are the terrorists? You come to my home, you tear up my land, you destroy my house, you kill my son — what do you want me to do? All I want is to raise my children, to live in peace — to live.

"Every day, we expect the worst. They shoot every day. I don't think they pay for their bullets; they sure don't count them." He laughs. Mounir waves at his house; there are eight holes in the façade and impact craters from several more hits. "They must have machine guns; sometimes, they all fire at the same time. Since the walls of the house are thick, they aim at the windows. When they start shooting, we hide in the western corner of the house — which is farthest from the settlement — and throw ourselves to the ground. The children are already used to it.

"The day before yesterday, three shots were fired from the city toward the settlement. They came out with four tanks and three bulldozers; you would have thought that the Egyptian army had attacked them."

The interview is being conducted in a pastoral calm: a breeze is blowing, birds are singing, the hens are clucking in their hen house. In front of the house, the ground has been stripped clean except for some olive trees. It used to be all green, and the olive grove was beautiful and bountiful. Mounir thrived on his 55 donums of olive trees, greenhouses, and lemon trees (1 donum = ¼ acre or 1,000 m^2). But it has all been cleared by bulldozers. He can't grow anything anymore and he leads a miserable life,

soaked in the fear that some day the soldiers will come and destroy the house, like the six others that disappeared in the immediate vicinity. The people who lived there were members of the same family; they had worked in Saudi Arabia and put together some savings before returning to Gaza and building beautiful houses. Now, they are left with nothing.

Before, continues Mounir, "we knew the settlers, from time to time one might even have tea together. But, since the last Intifada, they are threatening and the village has been transformed into a military camp. They want us to leave. But we won't. This is our land, our house. I have papers proving that this is my land, that I inherited it my parents."

Mounir invites us to go inside so he can show us where the bullets have gone through. But his mother arrives and throws us out for fear that we'll bring a curse down upon him, i.e. an evening visit from soldiers in reprisal for our visit.

Under the glorious blue sky, one might think the ten cube-shaped buildings were some kind of showcase subsidized housing project, visually appealing, peaceful, airy, designed on a human scale — only four floors, with five to seven windows per side — and with open space between the buildings so that the inhabitants don't feel crowded. But this style of urban life, just a stone's throw from the Jewish "settlements" and their highly visible concrete wall and not far from the check point of Tufa', has become one of those incredible styles that make the atmosphere of this martyred territory so fascinating.

The buildings are riddled with bullet holes, and some have been broken through by shells. Several have been abandoned. The windows on the ground floor are mostly sealed by cinder blocks. In the rubble- and litter- strewn yard, boys are jumping off dirt mounds that were dug up by the tanks, under the threatening gaze of a watchtower nestled into the wall.

On the first floor of building A, the most exposed, the first one from the watchtower, a young woman, Safa Fayad, explains

how the people there get by. "People who have an apartment here live on the other side of the building, in flats that belong to their neighbors who have left Gaza and who have lent them to those who stayed behind. You can do housework in the apartments on the exposed side during the day, even if sometimes there are shootings. But at night time the bullets really fly. It was very rough last night; I don't know why." A rocket tore a hole through the balcony just before the family changed apartments, in February 2003.

About three hundred yards away we see the dunes, the military fort, the wall and the top of the buildings of what appears to be the industrial park of Dekalim Firn.

Only three families are left in this building, on the non-exposed side. All the others have moved out. Above the front door, on the ground floor, is the photograph of a little girl: Safa's sister Aya Fayad, nine years old, died in February 2003. She was playing in the yard outside the building when a rocket struck

The so-called "Austrian" housing projects at Khan Yunis

the house next door. She was killed by flying debris from the explosion. The children don't play outside anymore; they stay in the apartment. In the entry hall of another building hang the photographs of people who were killed during incursions.

The water tank has been brought down from the terrace to the ground floor to keep it from being destroyed by a bullet. We take a quick look from the fourth floor, Safa Fayad tells us not to linger. "It's dangerous, they shoot." People used to hang laundry on the terrace, but through the Palestinian coordinator's intermediary the Israelis let them know that they should stop doing that and should stay off the terrace altogether. "Pretty soon, they'll stop us from breathing the air."

"Please, don't use our names," says our interlocutor. "We are under the shadow of Israeli security; they might think we're giving information about the army. They could come to my house and expel me." The man is not talking about anything related to security: he is talking about the fruit, the schools, the loneliness of this strange place, a prison within a prison, a thin strip of land in the south of Gaza encircled by the "settlements" of Gush Qatif.

At one time, Al-Mawassi was the Gaza Strip's resort, its Riviera, the place where people came for the weekend, with beach cottages along the shore and a view of the green sea with its pounding surf. But, during Intifada, the settlers seized the cottages and occupied most of the beach, which is now closed to the public and is held by the army. The 5,000 inhabitants of this narrow strip of land wedged between the sea and the "settlements" struggle to survive on the basis of what normally would be prosperous farms but which are strangled by the lack of communication with the rest of the Gaza Strip.

Al-Mawassi obtained the right to install a gas station and propane tank dispensary to provide fuel for cars and kitchens. The enclave counts two schools and two clinics. But groceries can be brought in only one day a week, after "coordination" with the Israelis. And you can only get to Khan Yunis's town, on

the other side of Gush, by going through a military check point that is closed as often as it is open.

Moreover, the Jewish settlers continue to take land, whenever they want it: we bypass a brand new greenhouse surrounded by an electric fence in front of which a large all terrain vehicle is parked. A sign written in Arabic says: "DO NOT ENTER. LETHAL DANGER."

A road separates Gush Qatif from Al-Mawassi. It has been widened, to allow one lane for the Palestinians, the other for the Israelis. There is no barrier between the two. Modern vans and primitive carts pass each other in parallel, as if they didn't exist for each other.

From the buildings standing in the fields and from the palm plantations, Al-Mawassi's inhabitants, blocked from the sea, look through a fence at the few houses that the settlers have established on the beach. Here, the Gaza Strip manifests itself within Israel like a Russian matryoshka doll: an Israeli cordon

AT AL-MAWASSI, ISRAELI SETTLERS HAVE INSTALLED THEMSELVES ON THE SIDE FACING THE SEA. PALESTINIANS ARE BARRED FROM MOST OF THE BEACH

run the length of the beach, surrounded by the Palestinians' Al-Mawassi enclave, hemmed in by Gush Qatif, which itself is embedded in the Gaza Strip, which is enclosed by Israel. Who feels surrounded by "250 million Arabs." What about them? And their neighbors? As if the Earth were a planet populated not by humans but by hostile tribes each besieging the others, in a distrustful and inevitably dangerous cohabitation.

One of the saddest places in this place steeped in misfortune is the Bedouin camp called Malalha Rafah — named for the Malalha tribe, and because it is so close to Rafah. It is a shantytown, made of huts of branches covered with scrap metal and sheets of plastic. The sloping land boasts a few mimosa trees. Donkeys, roosters, sheep with long wool wander among the huts on sand dotted with cans and other trash. We walk up the slope and get close to a modest fence, from where we can see, 150 yards away, the houses of the "settlements" and the flawless paved road traversed by the oblivious cars of the Israelis. This is where the sheep and goats the Israelis killed a few years ago are buried, we are told. The men, dressed in rags, poorly shaved, with a lost look in their eyes, evoke a time of splendor and pride when their tents were made of wool and camel's hair, "like Kadhafi's." Mohammed Abou Zakheir invites us to the divan, the reception space which the Bedouins usually set up by their residences. But this divan is another plastic and wood hut. A radio set sits on the sandy ground beside some twigs and plastic bags. Mohammed is dressed in a dirty green jacket, a sweat shirt, and a green wool sweater. He wears a turban that used to be white. Squatting, while the cocks crow, he speaks to us about his six children, his epilepsy, poverty, and the past: of the thirty times the tribe was driven out by the Israelis, since 1947; of the detour into the Sinai, of being penned up here. In spite of everything, the children go to school and food is provided by the World Food Program. In the evening, they use a gas lamp for light. "I lost my land," said his old father, Slimane Abou Zakheir; "only God knows how vast it was." He

recalled the good old days when travelers used to come to greet his forebears, the Bedouins of his tribe at Ashdod — they weren't obliged to do so, but it was a good idea. The travelers received their protection and could then be sure of safe passage as far as Egypt.

The other Bedouin camp of Al-Mawassi, across from Khan Yunis, is less miserable. A collection of cement-block houses, it is called Malalha Khan Yunis. After strolling down some sandy lanes, we arrive at a house where a blind man greets us. Ahmad lost his eyesight following an infection, and now his condition cannot be cured. He is a grandson of Salama. One of his brothers, Mohammed, six years old, has been handicapped since birth. He has epilepsy; he cannot speak, cannot walk, cannot even stand up.

One room with bare plaster walls, except for a gilded frame holding a verse from the Koran, and an image of the Al-Aqsa mosque. On the ground, a large woven carpet, and some mattresses, on which we sit. Blankets are piled up in a corner — they simply unfold them at night — and a television sits on a small wooden stand. On the window sill facing the door I see a doll, some bottles and medicine containers, and prayer beads.

The grandfather, Salama Mouteik, arrives. We talk about Mohammed. When he was one year old, Salama took him to see a well-known doctor in Egypt. He has gone back there several times. The last time, at the beginning of January, the passage to Khan Yunis, then to Rafah, went well. To get from the border to Cairo takes seven hours by bus. But, on the return, he had to wait three nights in the cold, at the border, for authorization to return.

The doctor judged that the child should be able to walk. He prescribed drugs. But how could they find these drugs? The grandfather spent a year hunting for a little bag of green fabric containing the medicines that the child needed. "It's a miracle!" exclaim Mohammed Kilani, the social worker from Doctors without Borders who is with us today. He quotes a proverb:

"You find in the rivers what you don't find in the seas" — which means that the ingenuity and the energy of this poor Bedouin grandfather locked up in Al-Mawassi managed to succeed where many Palestinians or other men wouldn't have gotten anywhere. Only, the grandfather was now deep in debt. The trips and the drugs cost 2,000 shekels (380 m). Half that sum was covered by Salama's cousins. As for the balance, he acknowledges that he really has no idea how he will repay it.

The simple tale of this old man, while the little one is snuggled affectionately against him or one of his aunts, playing and smiling, is so touching. He could have done nothing: the intractable difficulty of the situation would have provided a sufficient excuse for a less courageous man or less loving man, to submit to this destiny even while deploring it. Mohammed observes, "Here the heart of the world beats."

The Al-Mawassi restriction means that the Tufa' passage, the only authorized point of contact between the enclave and the Gaza Strip, is closed; for those who are holed up at Al-Mawassi, even Gaza is a paradise of freedom. Like Abu Houli, Tufa' opens and closes according to mysterious rules, the fundamental principle of which seems to be that of causing the most trouble. On this day in August, we find ourselves on the Khan Yunis side. A large crowd is waiting, anxious, irritated, and angry. Men, women and children wait under the broiling sun. Some of them have been here since yesterday, others for three days, or even fifteen. Ahmada Mohammed Bekri, a farmer who came to have his child treated at the hospital, explains: "It's the same every day. For four years, we have been going through this martyrdom on a daily basis. Yesterday, the passage was open for two or three hours. Only about thirty people made it back in." A woman about fifty years old is upset. "The children are out there in the sun; it makes them sick. Let the whole world know how much our children are suffering." Another one is worried: she has asthma she came for treatment at the

KHAN YUNIS. THE INHABITANTS OF AL-MAWASSI WAIT AT THE TUFA PASSAGE TO BE ALLOWED TO GO HOME.

hospital, her baby is back home and needs her.

In the distance, the sea sparkles. Under a canopy, the people squeeze together, squatting, trying to stay out of the sun. Others crowd toward the passage, wedged between blocks of concrete and the watchtower. There are no soldiers in sight. A couple dozen men and women wait near the concrete blocks. Five of them step forward and stop. A young man shouts something toward the watchtower. An Israeli flag floats behind a low concrete wall with iron bars. The women start shouting, too, and gesturing with their arms.

A soldier steps out of the watchtower, a machine gun in hand. He holds it up in the air, fires a shot. Then he holds up a canister of tear gas. The people move back a little. A louder explosion. The people recede toward the blocks of concrete; some of them take refuge under a canopy halfway between the place where we are, on the city side, and the watchtower. Then a man starts negotiating again with the soldier. Little by little, the people move forward again.

From the balconies of the hotels in Gaza, visitors enjoy the evening view of lights dancing on the sea not far from the coast. But this picturesque image is misleading. The proximity of the boats, using their lights to attract sardines, belies the restrictions on them: the fishing vessels cannot go beyond a strictly delimited perimeter of just ten kilometers. Even so, they have to let the authorities know when they are going out, in the hope that while they are at sea the Israeli coastal patrol won't "harass" them, as a fish monger puts it. And the port is small; there are no cargo ships or ferries. The sea, here, is not the call of the sea so much as one more barrier.

On all sides, the Gaza Strip is surrounded. To the west, the sea is off limits. To the south, a metal wall cuts Rafah off from Egypt. To the north and east, an electrified fence punctuated with watchtowers runs the whole length of the territory, with a No man's land running parallel that means the death penalty For anyone who steps into it. You can get out through Erez only

under certain conditions, and by Rafah with great difficulty, as we will see. Even goods cannot be taken in or out except under tight control, primarily via the Karni passage, on the east border of Gaza.

The security measures are very severe, and have been reinforced since June when some partisans hid in the double bottom of a container in order to make their way in to Ashdod. Trucks, tractor-trailers and vans park at the forwarding zone which stretches along a wall protected from bad weather by a broad awning. Exported goods are transferred through ten holes bored in the wall. Each one has a metal door, and a hopper about ten feet by twelve. It is has a metal grill and a rubber mat. The cases move on a series of rollers past an x-ray machine to another metal door which opens on the Israeli side. In a corner, a camera shows the contents to an invisible operator. Motorized wagons unload the cases from the Palestinian trucks and deposit them on the conveyor belts.

At window No. 22, for example, cases of crabs packed in ice have been waiting on the mat for an hour and a half for the mysterious Israeli employees to authorize their passage. On another mat, boxes with bars of soap going to the West Bank lie waiting. The factory representative from Gaza explains that he brought them fifteen days ago. But the Israelis decided that the boxes were too bulky; all the soap had to be repackaged in smaller boxes. There are often problems like that: sometimes they say it is because of the machine, or the person behind the machine; sometimes no reason is given at all. That's just the way it is.

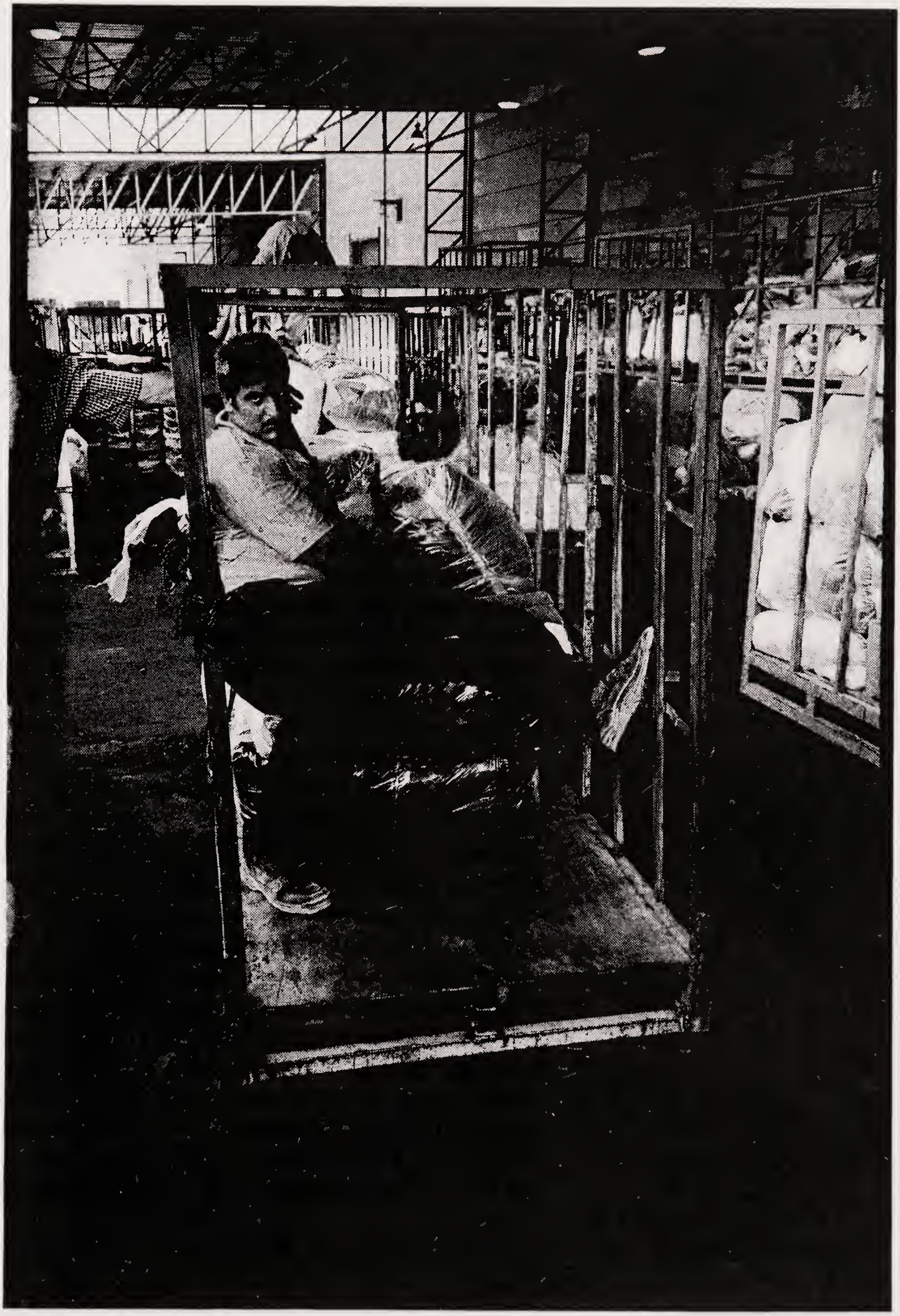
At the next window, pallets of eggs are candidates for the crossing. Things go better here, the rules have been followed: the pallets are stacked not more than seventy centimeters high. The x-ray machine opens, the pallets go through, the door closes again.

But a Palestinian employee, Raed, wearing a jacket with a fluorescent orange band, has climbed onto the conveyor belt

and is shouting to the other side, through the fence. "Yo, Youssi! Youssi!" The answer is a long time coming. He wants to let the other man know that he is putting a pack of chewing gum on one of the pallets of eggs. If he doesn't let them know, the operator of the screening machine will see something abnormal and refuse the delivery. In fact, he could block the passage of all the pallets of eggs, which will become suspect. In fact, the whole terminal would probably be shut down for a few hours because of this inadmissible infringement of the security regulations. Finally, Youssi answers, and accepts the package of chewing gum. And, why the packet of chewing gum? It is manufactured by a factory in Gaza, which has contacted an Israeli importer by fax and telephone. He said he might be interested, but wanted to test a sample in a laboratory before making any decision about importing it. So a sample had to be gotten through....

At the end of the long wall, a watchtower is standing guard. And beyond that, a fence: behind that is the yard where the Israelis dump — there is hardly any other word for it — the building materials that the Palestinian contractors have ordered. The ground is littered with pipes, window frames, cables, all tossed in with utter carelessness by freight forwarders who know there is no control quality. "For us to export," complains a Palestinian employee, "we have to comply with very precise rules. But when they bring in goods for us, they can dump any kind of thing on us and we have to accept it."

An astonishing feature of this commercial "meeting point" is how the Israeli truck drivers are paid by the Palestinian tradesmen or contractors who have ordered the goods. It is all done in cash, through a miserable little slit cut in the concrete wall. After coordinating with each other via cell phone, the two partners approach the slit — each one can see some portion of his counterpart's face — and the purchaser slips the bills through in thin bundles. Another security measure: a larger hole might allow something else to get through ... a grenade, a hand

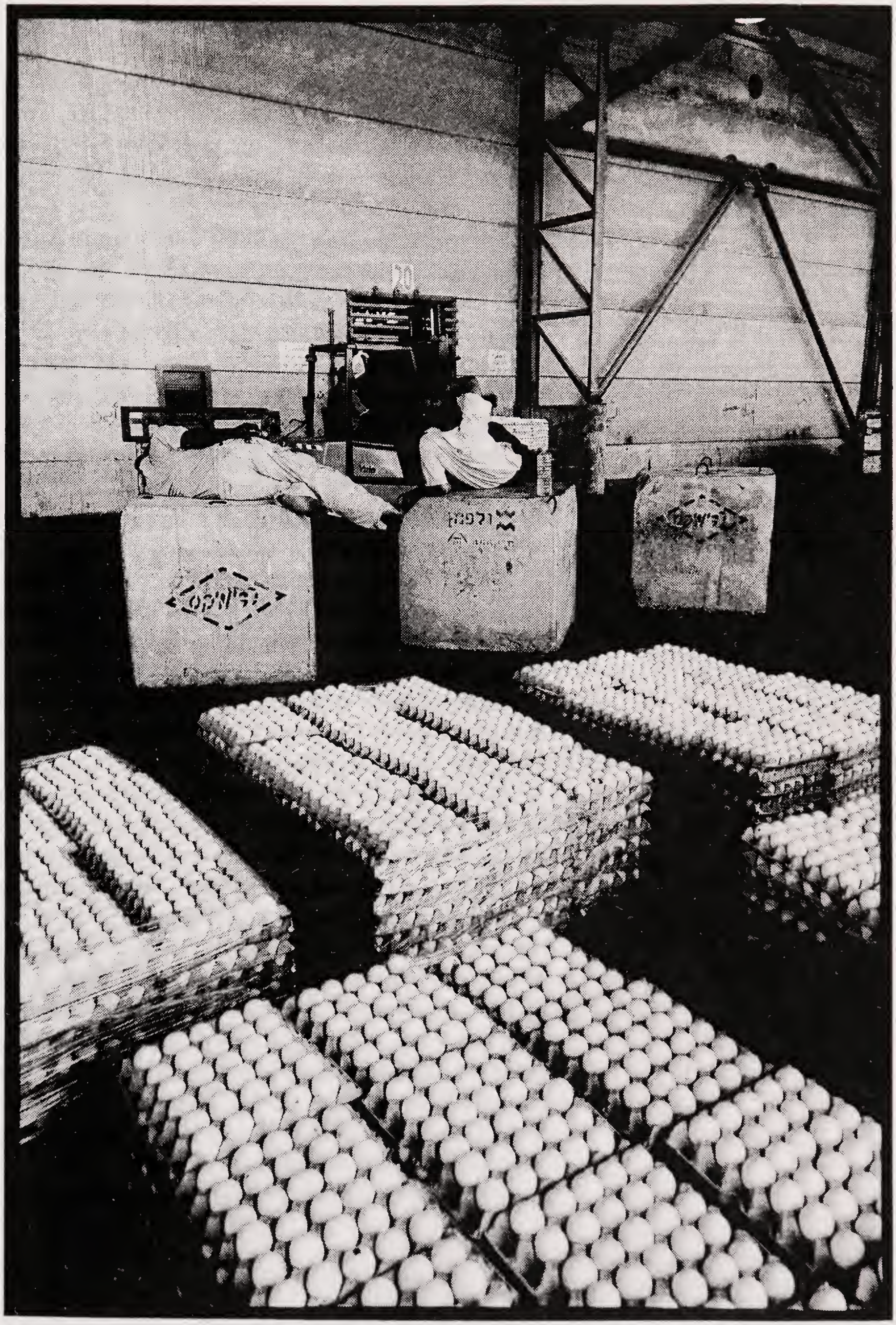


gun, explosives? This slit is absurd, its narrowness a measure of Israeli distrust, and ironically it merely proves that physical contact and exchange are, in fact, unavoidable.

At Karni, where the Palestinian Authority actually has some real power, for once, a subtle game is played between occupier and occupant, where each side can inspect, interrupt, obstruct or encourage traffic. Israel never completely closes the passage: it blocks exports coming out from Gaza, but lets the imports in. The Palestinian Authority responds by blocking those. Then, nothing can get through anymore until a fragile truce can be negotiated in this petty and ridiculous commercial war. Even worse, Karni is also the scene of an inter-Palestinian contest: because of the constraints imposed by the Israelis, the quantity of what can be taken out is always less than the quantity of goods that candidates wish to export. The Authority decides who gets to go first, and that gives rise to all sorts of games of influence, and the imposition of additional fees or taxes, none of which are considered corruption. As the head of Internal Security, in charge of border control at Karni, Mohammed Dahlan has built a power base on fees charged to exporters.

But Karni is Gaza's life support system, the sole interface whereby food and products essential to daily life and to the maintenance of a minimal level of economic activity are exchanged. Its frequent closing considerably obstructs the export of fruits, vegetables, and flowers which the territory produces, not to mention furniture and clothing, which are sold at highly competitive prices that are possible due to the low level of wages. A good indicator of how things are going at Karni at any given time is the price of a pack of cigarettes — a vital product in this place where death is ever present, so that the notion of bringing it on prematurely by smoking cigarettes is hardly a worry. The price varies according to the availability of supplies, that is, the difficulty of delivery, which is only slightly mitigated by the small-scale smuggling that goes on in the tunnels of Rafah. As of May, Karni had been blocked for more

ONE OF THE OPENINGS IN THE WALL AT KARNI WHERE GOODS ARE PASSED THROUGH



than eight weeks and no one could get cigarettes anymore, after the price already went up from 4 shekels to 21.

The restriction is a paradox for a city which has always been a way station and a crossroads. No city could be less war-like than Gaza, no place could be more favorable for trade. Always conquered, always subjugated, but always open. Until this fatal 20th century, and the lead curtain that came down in 1948.

At the turn of the century, according to the Syria-Palestine Blue Guide in 1932,[1] a traveller could go by train from Jerusalem to Al-Kantara, in Egypt, passing through the Gaza Strip. It took nine hours to cover 368 kilometers. Everywhere in the Strip, in Beit Hanoun, Jabaliya, in Gaza, in Rafah, streets named for the "Railroad" (Seka Street) evoke this long gone era.

No, it isn't easy to get out of Gaza: there are no trains, boats, or planes. But they still have feet, and Gaza citizens full of hope use their feet to get to the border crossing at Rafah, seeking to go to Egypt. Nearly 20,000 people passed through, in one direction or the other, each month in 2003; the Israelis gradually reduced the flow throughout 2004 so that by autumn no more than 8,000 crossings a month were recorded.

Even when it is possible, nothing could be more unpleasant than crossing the border. Coming back from a trip to Germany, says Jamila Bakroun, a blind data processing instructor, "the Israeli soldiers opened my bag and spread everything on the ground. After they examined everything, they told me to pack it back up. When I finished, with enormous difficulty, and managed to get the bag closed again, I asked them to point me in the right direction. They just said, 'You got here by yourself, find your own way. We're through with you.'" The Egyptians treat the Palestinians even worse, travellers say. Waiting for re-entry, which can take several days, they are kept in drafty rooms, equipped with notorious toilets, with no water, and with no place at all where one can sleep.

Still, people have to get out. To do so, first they have to

[1] Marcel Monmarché (dir.), *Syria-Palestine*, Paris, Hachette, coll. "Les Guides bleus," 1932.

present their passports to Palestinian Authority office, which maintains a list and determines who can go when. By "Authority," in this case, we mean the four or five security services which each examine the documents in turn. Then the happy chosen people pile into big taxis, six-door Mercedes or minibuses whose roofs sag under all the luggage. Then they wait for the Israeli green light — which can take several more hours. Then, the taxis traverse the thirty-yard separation to the Egyptian border station, discharge their cargo, and go back for more travellers.

Everywhere, there are crowds, waiting under a sun so strong it could knock you over. The sandy ground is littered with trash. People huddle under the awnings in front of refreshment stands. Food-, drinks-, and cigarette-vendors circulate through crowd.

In the last two years, an intermittent ban on travel by those under the age of 35 has made life even more challenging. In late August, with the beginning of the academic year approaching, there are lots of students. Amer tells us: "I am preparing my masters thesis in telecommunications at the Paris-XIII university. I can't get out now because I am under 35. I came home six months ago after studying abroad for four years. I've come here every day for ten days, and I wait with my bag. The problem is that no one knows what is going on. The Israelis are playing with us. I don't understand how this obstruction improves security. Those who have residence permits abroad are likely to lose their jobs. As for the students, they are falling behind in their studies."

Many others are waiting to go Egypt for medical treatment. One is supposed to have an eye operation; another, who has been turned away since May 25, has a failing kidney; a third, with several bullet wounds, ahs been-waiting for three days. A kid, Rami Abu Massen, is breathing through a tracheotomy and his ear has been cut off, he was in a car accident; he holds his ear is his hand so that they can graft it back on; his father has come

every day with him for a month. Happy day! The child finds himself in the first taxi. If the border opens, he will get through today.

The sun is beating down and tempers begin to flare. The students are outraged by the rich people who pay a little baksheesh, trying to get through ahead of everyone else. Suddenly, voices are raised, there's a commotion, hands go up. The crowd squeezes up to the gate that leads to the corridor into Egypt. Ten police officers in blue uniforms face them. But everyone keeps his anger under control; crowd does not tear down the thin webbing that holds them back. They calm down. They wait. And they don't get through today, they'll be back tomorrow.

To leave. That is the dream of every Gaziote. Not only to seek medical treatment, to work or study, but simply to see someplace else, to get a sense of space. "Here," says Hamad Chreiteh, our young driver, "you never see anything but houses, no open spaces, no greenery." "I wish I could refresh my mind," says Imad Okal, a UNRWA employee. To travel just in order not to "go mad," in the words of our interpreter Souhila's husband, who hasn't been out of Gaza since 1983 except once, to go to Ramallah. Airplanes are a dream, and the dreams have been grounded. In the Khan Yunis hotel, the labels on the soap say that it comes from Palestinian Airlines — Gaza.

RAMI ABU MASSEN,
INJURED IN A CAR ACCIDENT,
WAITS AT THE RAFAH BORDER CROSSING
FOR A CHANCE TO GO TO EGYPT
FOR MEDICAL TREATMENT.

“For security...”

Chahada Al-Kafarna lives in Beit Hanoun and works in Jabaliya in a furniture factory. On May 18, 2003, he went to collect his wages. There had been an attack, and there was a curfew in place, but he needed his money. On the way back, on Salah al-Din road, at about 1:00PM, some youths and grown men were throwing stones at two tanks. Chahada waited until things calmed down, then carefully walked his bicycle through the area. Suddenly, a tank fired on him. That was the last he knew. Curtain.

His father Zoher tells the rest of the story, such as he was able to reconstruct it. Chahada lay on the ground, covered with blood, and there he remained for an hour or more until Israeli bulldozers were coming. Then, a man ran forward, grabbed him, and evacuated him. Wounded in both legs, Chahada was inert. He had lost a lot of blood and, when they got him to the hospital, along with all the others who had been wounded and killed, they thought he was dead. They were taking him to the morgue — when he began to move. A finger, a foot? Something moved, and that movement saved his life. The nurses pushing the trolley did an about-face and rushed him to a doctor who sent him straight to the operating room. The operation lasted nearly eight hours. Chahada was in a coma for two days, then he came to.

Preceding pages.
Buildings destroyed by the Israeli Army on Boulevard Salah al-Din, Gaza

One of the two bullets entered his left leg, above the knee, where it tore the muscles and damaged the nerves. The other one penetrated his right thigh and pulverized the femur. The round marks that still show on his leg were left by the platinum prosthesis that was removed in autumn 2003. Chahada walks awkwardly, with a crutch, and will never walk normally again.

"Are you angry at Israel?"

"Of course." He smiles.

"Why are you laughing?"

"There's nothing I can do about it, so I just laugh."

He is twenty years old. After school, he studied cabinet-making for two years at a technical school, then got a job at the factory where he worked for three years. He was earning 1,000 shekels per month (approximately $210). After the accident, his father didn't have any special advice for his other twelve children. "It's fate," he says. In 1962, he lost his brother, killed by the Israelis. "Every family has such a drama."

Nizar Mattar, a social worker with the UNRWA, lives in Jabaliya. His eleven-year-old son was shot by a helicopter three weeks before our visit. "They fired on a group of children, on August 4." A bullet went through Hamad's chest. He spent three days at the Chifa hospital, in intensive care, then ten days under observation. "The Israeli army said that it aims only at specific targets. Is that a specific target?" This is expressed without whining, in a matter-of-fact tone. The drama is obvious; there is no need to add anything. The children smile, the mother offers delicious cakes, they talk about the injury as if it was just one of those things that happen. That's the way it is. A nephew was killed in 1993 by the army, two months before Oslo. He was ten years old.

Three young patients are having physiotherapy at the Jabaliya clinic this morning: "Hani got a bullet in the shoulder, two months ago, in September," explains the doctor. "It came from a

camouflaged gunnery opposite his house. This other fellow, Tamir, a bullet struck him in the thigh and destroyed the nerve; now, he can't move his foot. It happened a year ago, while he was walking home from school. He suddenly realized that he couldn't walk any more." Another child, Moustafa, "fell down, in his house. This one isn't Israel's fault."

Moustafa is an exception. Since the beginning of the Intifada in September 2000, war victims have numbered in the thousands. The UNRWA counted 1,855 Palestinians killed in the Gaza Strip by the Israeli army between September 1, 2000 and the end of November, 2004, with 12,808 wounded. To get a sense of what these figures mean, we must compare them to the population of 1.4 million inhabitants. In the US, with 290 million inhabitants, this would be like having 384,615 killed and 2,653,102 wounded. (The US lost 58,000 in the bloody Vietnam war). And this wholesale slaughter was not accomplished by impersonal bombings but, for the most part, by isolated shootings or targeted rockets.

Doctor Farouk Abou Samra, an emergency room doctor and an orthopedist, wears a blue smock. He is a round man, fairly young despite his baldness, and affable in spite of his lassitude. In the Al-Awda hospital cafeteria at Jabaliya, deserted of a Friday, he talks about the military operation when the Israeli army occupied the city in October. Jabaliya, with 120,000 inhabitants, is the largest refugee camp of the Gaza Strip. It has, in fact, become an actual city, like the seven other camps in the territory.

"The tanks came in from several directions. The Palestinian combatants had planted a lot of mines. To avoid them, the tanks simply drove through the houses. But there was a lot of resistance in the camp, and they couldn't get through to the heart of it. The soldiers stayed for seventeen days. They were firing from planes, too. Victims were brought in every day. We received 350 seriously wounded, some of them requiring amputation of the

HAMAD MAITAR, WITH HIS FAMILY IN JABALIA, SHOWS WHERE HE WAS HIT BY A HELICOPTER GUNMAN.

arms or the legs — and a lot of them were children. The soldiers don't make any distinction between children and combatants. One day, a tank fired a shell on a school, and I have never seen children wounded so badly — crushed craniums, limbs blown off, and so on."

From the window he shows us the place where one of the main attacks came from. "The tanks were grouped close to that eight-story white building. Snipers had taken up stations on the roof and aimed at the people below. It was terribly dangerous for everyone in the hospital and the people in the neighborhood could hardly go out to get supplies." The walls of the hospital are streaked with bullet marks. The doctor asks: "Why kill civilians, children? They shoot at everyone, no matter who they are; they don't even try to differentiate between civilians and combatants."

Beit Hanoun, a large town in the north of Gaza, not far from Erez, was also occupied, in July, after a rocket fired by Hamas

killed two civilians (including a three-year-old child) in the Israeli city close to Sederot. For a month, it has been impossible to get any aid into Beit Hanoun. In August, the city is still under an iron fist: the roads are damaged, houses have collapsed, garbage is all over the streets, and any activity that takes place is halting and lame, like a wounded man.

On Railroad Street, there is nothing left of the destroyed buildings but debris: heaps of rubble, scrap, garbage, old papers, boxes, shoes, pathetic household remains. The former occupants of one house are living on site where it sued to stand, in a beige tent with a blue groundsheet provided by the Red Cross. Squatting on the ground, Ayed Meqbl Al-Sawarka offers us a coffee. All the possessions of a lifetime have been reduced to an old coffee maker, a plate, a few cups. And a beat-up cooking pot. The coffee maker is heated up over a fire right on the ground. With a white turban and a short gray beard, 65 years old, Ayed has eight children and wonders what will become of them.

The Israeli bulldozers did not stop at destroying the houses. Lowering the backhoe, they tore up the asphalt in the roads, and ripped up the trees. The street that curves through Beit Hanoun now goes past destroyed orchards where a woman is gathering wood. Just one year ago, this region now covered with sinister stumps was flourishing.

We drive along through an open area until we come to some earthen mounds which block the street. The people living in the farthest building invite us in to see what happened. We climb the staircase to the balcony, on the fifth floor. There is a dovecote there, cisterns of water, some laundry drying, antennas, solar panels; and the view is splendid — or, at least it would be, if one could still see all the trees that used to grow there and which one can still picture, extrapolating from the carpet of orange orchards interspersed with palm trees that spread out across the plain to the right. Everywhere else, right up to the border half a mile away, the yellow earth is laid bare, scraped clean by the bulldozers, and then there is a military post. It is too dangerous to work in the

few orange groves which remain. Three peasants from here were killed on July 22, with a hundred yards Akram Abou Addra's residence. As far as his house, he doesn't live there anymore. He can go there at mid-day to feed the hens and his sheep. The Israeli soldiers patrol on foot at night.

Ziad Waddan watched them destroy his house, like the nineteen others that used to stand between his and the military post. The soldiers occupied it for three nights. Then they left and tore it down.

Our hosts, Akram and Ziad, say that they and the other peasants paid for no purpose: the Qassams, they say, were fired from far beyond, in Jabaliya.

The place is a war zone, devastated. One of the two lanes of the Salah al-Din road is impassable, blocked by craters and heaps of soil; the ground all around is full of litter. Some houses are falling down while others, still upright, are pockmarked by

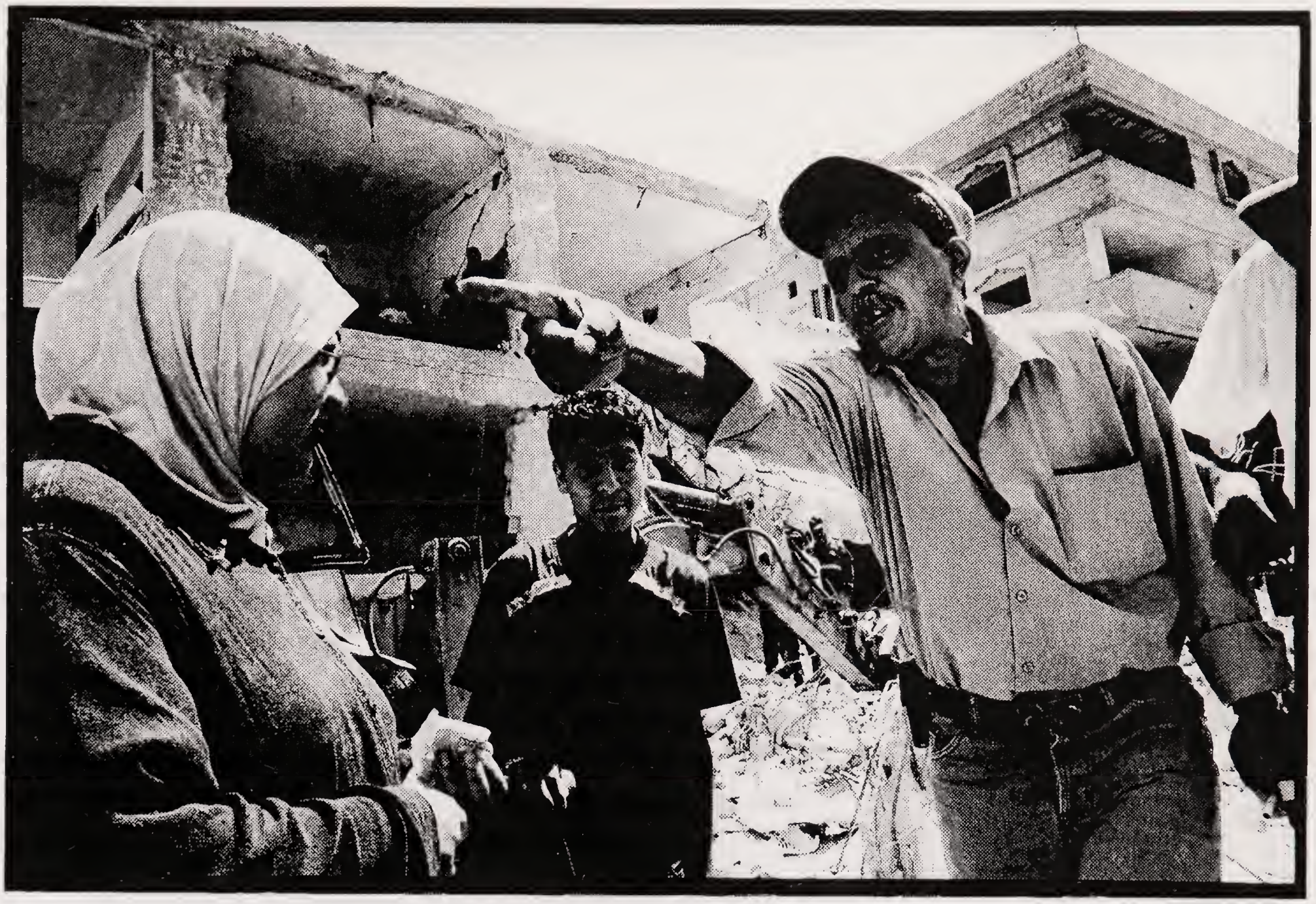
CHILDREN PLAYING IN THE RUINS
OF A DEMOLISHED STREET IN JABALIYA

bullets. The atmosphere is calm. Children are playing, cars and trucks go by, blowing their horns.

In the debris that a Palestinian bulldozer is digging up, Hassan Amran Achour is searching for recoverable objects. "On May 10, while we were all asleep, t hey came. They blew in the door of the building, they walked in, searched us and occupied the house. We couldn't take a thing, not our clothing and not our jewelry. The last day of the incursion, May 13, during the night, they blew it all up with dynamite. Between the 11th and the 13th, four of my sons and a nephew were taken hostage. When we asked the soldiers why they were demolishing our house, they answered: 'none of your business; you'll be reimbursed.'" The nephew is still locked up in Israel, in Adarim. No one knows where he is.

"It was a five-story building. There were six garages, and a spare parts depot for department of public works vehicles. Rent from the garages brought in between $3,000 and $4,000 a year. The house cost me $800,000. Eighty people lived in it, in five separate apartments, parents, brothers, we were all the same family. Now, we are renting, a mile and half from here, for more than $1,500 a month. We didn't receive any insurance payments for the house or the cars. I had a Mercedes. I had also a patch of land, 15 donums of olive trees, which brought in more than $12,000 a year. It was razed on April 20. Then I worked as a taxi driver with my Mercedes. And now, I have lost everything, and I have no job. School season is coming and I cannot give my children what they need — I have five boys and four girls."

Hassan, fifty-one years old, show us some shreds of fabric, bits of paper, pieces of the refrigerator. This was his bedroom...As he speaks, he is overwhelmed by emotion, he gets worked up, almost hysterical. "Israel is a terrorist state!" he shouts. He is furious. Speaking to us has brought it all back to him. "Tell them that we are a people of peace, we want peace throughout the world. But not one country is helping us! The Palestinian State sends journalists, television, but it doesn't do anything to give us back



what we had!" He shows us one of the children, he grabs him: "Everything has been taken from him! I don't trust anyone anymore, nobody can tell us how we are to go on living!"

Facing the day-to-day emergencies, all his energy is expended in the struggle to survive, to find a solution, to adapt. The drama has almost gone out of it. But it rankles in his heart like an open wound, secreting a bile of rancor and distress that never goes away.

In the scale of Israeli armed interventions there is, at the top, occupation: for several weeks, a city is besieged, occupied, strangled and subjected to various depredations. In 2004 alone, Rafah had this experience in May, Beit Hanoun in July, Jabaliya in October, Khan Yunis in December. Then, there are the incursions, which are shorter but more frequent. Usually early in the morning, a group of tanks, bulldozers and armored jeeps penetrates such and such a neighborhood and demolishes houses,

Hassan Amran Achour
on top of his destroyed building
on Salah al Din Boulevard.

factories and warehouses, sometimes with the assistance of Apache helicopters. Officially, the purpose is always to destroy a weapons factory. The resistance tries to slow down or obstruct the advance by laying mines or firing anti-tank rockets. Vastly inferior in fire power, they are subjected to massive barrages of machine gun fire which usually leaves, when the incursion is over, a consequent number of resistance fighters and civilians on the ground. By the border crossing, the soldiers destroy various installations, surely by accident: a gas station and the street lamps on Salah al-Din don't deserve special mention; an institute for the handicapped, in Beit Laya, is transformed into a heap of rubble because some combatants supposedly took shelter there during an incursion in 2003, and it was just bad luck if during maneuvers in July 2004 a tank destroyed one-fourth of a mosaic from the 6th century, all that remains of Jabaliya's Byzantine church, in a section that was uninhabited and was clearly marked as an historic site.

There is finally, and this type of action is so banal and random that the local vocabulary doesn't even have a word for it, shooting in zones close to the roads, the "settlements", the military outposts, and the border, which makes all these places a hell where people live in the permanent fear of seeing one of his close friends or relatives blown away or his home brutally demolished.

At Al-Garara, for example, not far from Abu Houli, in a place where about thirty families had already lost their homes, just three houses were still inhabited. "The Association for Human Rights had obtained an agreement that houses were not to be destroyed without 48 hours' notice to the inhabitants," says Association representative. But on May 2, the soldiers gathered everyone up after sunset, without any warning, and the bulldozers set to work. The destruction was carried out "for reasons of security"; they wanted to widen the buffer zone along the road to the "settlements".

Jaber Wishah: "People live in uncertainty. Whose house will be next, and when is it coming? This uncertainty is more

BYZANTINE MOSQUE AT JABALIYA

dangerous than the danger itself. When a danger is known, one can take preventive measures. But uncertainty is what is most destructive, it is psychologically exhausting."

The worst of it is, perhaps, living in expectation of an inexorable destiny, while continuing to believe in the infinitely small chance that, in his indecipherable rationality, the occupying forces won't destroy the home.

This oppressing concern permeates the places closest to the roads, the "settlements" or the walls. A few hundred yards from Abu Houli, for example, stands a group of houses and unfinished buildings. To get there, you have to drive up a road that is largely destroyed and is barred by two mounds of earth. The ground all around is devastated. A tank, some 500 yards distant, is pointing at the hamlet. Now they go into the house through a hole that has been broken through the cinder-block wall — the main entrance opens on the side where the tank is, and it's considered dangerous. This hole has been created so that the inhabitants don't have to use the other side.

The bare walls are painted a dull green, and the roof is made of corrugated metal. Mattresses lie on the floor and the refrigerator is used as a wall cupboard in the living room, as there is no electricity. This is the home of Yde Abou Leila, a seventy year old. Two of his sons are married; they have ten and twelve children. They live in the next house, which is likely to be destroyed. One was a workman in Israel but now he is unemployed. The other is a teacher.

The family had a grove of olive trees. The day it was torn up, in September 2002, Yde stood in front of the bulldozer — without gaining anything but a whack in the knee from the soldiers. They arrested almost all the young men in the area. Recently, they killed a donkey. "Fifteen days ago, they wanted to pull down my house. I stood in front of it. I called my wife; she came too and refused to move. Finally, they left."

But, while we sit and drink tea, listening to Yde (whose tale is punctuated by the sound of machine gun fire), it feels like we are

Residents of al Garara, their houses having been demolished, are temporarily housed in tents.

in a house that is on probation. And the impression is gathering that all the inhabitants of Gaza are on probation, as punishment for a crime they did not commit.

The sons' house, just two steps away, has not been completed. The walls are unfinished cinder blocks, the windows have no shutters or glass, and the floor is of concrete. On the ground floor they have rabbit cages. On top of a battered chest of drawers are some photographs and pressed flowers under glass. Bullets have dug holes in the walls. The family sleeps on the side away from the road. "We have to stay here; if we go away, the Israelis will destroy the house," says Sayed, one of the sons.

From the window, an Israeli watchtower can be seen two hundred yards away. On the settlers' road, three jeeps have come together and stopped. The ground is scarred by the tread of caterpillars. The children — there are seven of them — listen in on the adults' conversation very seriously. "The soldiers can come at any time; they give you ten seconds to leave. They have no

mercy. They ignore the rights of children, women, everybody." For a long time, Sayed has kept his important papers, his diplomas, in some other, safe, location. "Five times a day we see movements of tanks or jeeps; it is almost a military zone here."

We set out again, full of emotion, across the land that has been torn up by tanks. Not far from the hulk of a wrecked car, a child is flying a kite. The tank, which had turned its gun away, points it back at Yde's house.

Families whose houses were destroyed used to receive 12,000 shekels ($2500) from the office of the president of the Palestinian Authority and, in the case of refugees, 2,400 shekels ($500) from the UNRWA. Nonprofit associations gave clothing, furniture and other goods. But the economic crisis means that the associations have less money, too, and now there is less help. The office of the president only gives 4,000 shekels ($850), and the UNRWA has nothing more to give (although it continues to help pay the rent for replacement housing). People make do in Red Cross tents while waiting to be squeezed in with their relatives, or to find a rental apartment — hopefully not one that is next to a military outpost, where vacant apartments are plentiful.

Violence is the everyday backdrop of life in Gaza. People pay some attention to it; they are not heedless, but detached. It is banal and they have to go on with their lives. One day, we learn that during the night two houses were destroyed by Israeli bulldozers. The following day, the news came that three children had been shot dead by the Israelis. We regret that we weren't able to attend the funeral. "Don't worry," says Imad, "there will be more, soon enough, alas, and you can come then." And so it was, just two days later. The morning news: at Al-Garara, three houses have been torn down since we left. Our appointment with the leader of an association in the south is postponed; his house in Rafah was demolished overnight. An Apache helicopter has killed three men on motor bikes on Salah al-Din, members of Hamas, supposedly.

Every person we talk to has been confronted at least once with the experience of violence. The school where Nasser's wife works is very close to the Israeli lines, and one day she saw a tank passing right alongside the school. It was so close, she wept with fear. Nasser, a mild-mannered French teacher, was driving south; in Abu Houli, six cars were ahead of him. A helicopter showed up and fired a missile on the first car. The car Nasser was in was jolted and thrown into the air by the explosion. Falastine, a little twelve-year-old girl, has a bandage on her foot: she was hit by a bullet on December 12, 2003, while she was playing in front of the house. And inside the house is the photograph of her brother, a martyr: he was having a coffee, a shot was fired during an incursion, and he was dead. "A few months ago," said Hanane, "in a house in Netzarim, there were bullets flying everywhere. I managed to save myself and the children."

No one blinks at the bursts of machine gun fire that are

frequently heard in the exposed zones. The threat also comes from the sky, which is regularly patrolled by military planes and drones — heralding, like a special weather report, the launching of deadly rockets.

The headquarters of the Red Crescent in Khan Yunis is a seven-story building. The first four floors are protected by a building of the same height, but the rooms located on the higher floors are within range of the Israeli watchtowers, and are scored with bullet holes. What gives a visitor the closest sense of the anxiety felt by the inhabitants of the most exposed districts is that they are surprised when they can go to bed with some hope that the night will be calm.

From a distance, you can get a sense of the ongoing violence that makes up the every day environment in the occupied territories by visiting the website of the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR), which posts weekly reports on the summary executions, "accidental" killings, the destruction of houses, and arbitrary arrests. These simple, factual accounts fill more than ten dense pages every week.[2]

But the ever-present possibility of dying, of being wounded or seeing one's home destroyed brings a kind of placidity, as if the ordinariness of the danger has faded it to a hazy presence. While one might go through life being always careful, one cannot go through life always being afraid, and existence itself, even in the most disturbed areas, entails a continuity which can be experienced as a form of resistance. Thus one day in Rafah we meet the family of Saïd Hamdal, who are particularly exposed because they live directly in the line of fire of one of the watchtowers. The house has been hit many times, as evidenced by the many bullet marks in the walls of the main room. But even as the family is explaining to us how they live under this threat — anxious by day, terrified by night — we feel a little embarrassed.

In fact, we arrived right in the middle of a visit by a cousin

[2] ‹ www.pchrgaza.org ›.

who has come on behalf of his son to ask for the hand of one of our hosts' daughters. So at this moment everyone is far more worried about the marital negotiations than the proximity of Israeli weapons.

"O" Block in Ramah
Said Hamdan's family lives in a building that is riddled with bullets and faces an Israeli watchtower

Rafah, city in the line of fire

Among ourselves, we call them the "little catastrophes." For the succession of misfortunes which have hit the Abu Touor family are, on a personal scale, just as bad as Naqba, the great catastrophe which struck the Palestinian people in 1948.

Fekri Abou Touor, who comes from a refugee family in Rafah, had found a good job in Israel. He was working in a Tel-Aviv restaurant since 1985, and he ended up as the manager. He would come back to Rafah every weekend, and otherwise he usually slept in the restaurant itself. Fekri earned a good living, and finally felt rich enough to want to build a beautiful house in Rafah. He put all his savings into it. It was a large construction, with a garden full of flowers. "When I bought the property, people told me: 'It's close to the border with Egypt, you won't be secure.' But the municipality assured me that it there wouldn't be any problem. It was 200 feet from the border. We moved in on August 27, 2000." One month later, the Intifada started.

The house was close to a military tower. Right off the bat, the attacks came hard and fast. Every night, the Palestinians launched rockets and the soldiers came with tanks. The family left the area when the bulldozers started to destroy the neighborhood. The house was occupied by soldiers and, one year later, it was torn down.

Preceding pages: The wall at Rafah.

Facing page:
Jamila Abou Touor and three of her children.

The family is ruined. Fekri is unemployed since, given the Intifada, he lost his work permit. The Authority allocated to the family an apartment in Khan Yunis, in the Austrian district — that laughable subsidized housing unit at the edge of the Israeli "settlements" of Gush Qatif. His son, Hamad, was wounded in September 2001. Then, in March 2003, the elder one, Ahmed, was mowed down in the middle of the street, during an incursion, while he was on his way to the market with his cart. Ahmed spent five months in a hospital in Israel, where he underwent three operations. They removed one lung and part of his spleen. He now seems crippled, and looks much younger than his age. He has trouble sleeping, still spits up blood and phlegm, and coughs up mucus. The family, which had the bad luck of being housed on the top floor, could not sleep in the rooms any more and moved to the entry hall. When the shootings were too intense, they would leave and go to find refuge someplace else. One day while they were there, the mother, Jamila, 37 years old, was hit in the head by a shell fragment.

In November 2003, Abou Touor was finally able to get out of this hell. They moved to Rafah, in a housing project in the Chaboura district. A place far from the lines, and not directly exposed to the violence. But in December, Fekri was injured in a car accident.

During the summer of 2004, the family moved again. Their home was miserable, and their economic situation disastrous. The new apartment, in a building of block O, close to the border area, is very exposed and therefore less expensive. It is also true that Jamila was much taken by the decor of this building that once was grand and now is cursed. The tiles are clean, there is a stone staircase, the apartment's ceiling is decorated with mouldings. What a change, from the damp cement and corrugated metal roofs of Chaboura to an innocent albeit dangerous dream of prosperity. But everything is neglected, there is litter in the stairways, graffiti invoking the names of

martyrs cover the walls on the ground floor. Normally, sixteen families would be living in the building; ten of them have fled, even though the rents were vastly reduced.

In fact, the UNRWA gives Fekri 450 shekels towards the rent, but he doesn't give the money to the landlord. The latter has agreed to let them stay for free; his primary concern is to keep house occupied, as a scant presence, a fragile guarantee that it will not be demolished. The family supplements its income by Ahmed's meager pension from the Ministry of Social Affairs office for those who were wounded in the Intifada: 600 shekels per month.

There are shootings every night, frequent incursions, and nonstop anguish. From the roof, at the sixth floor, you can see the metal wall and the door where the tanks come out. There is a watchtower on the right and another on the left. Below, a sheep is grazing. Bizarre.

AHMED, SEVERELY WOUNDED BY THE ISRAELIS

Jamila: "There was an incursion here two weeks ago. I was alone at the time. Tanks came into the neighborhood; they were firing at anything that moved. They stayed for a day and a half. We managed to survive three times in four months, during these incursions. The grown-ups stay here; they don't want to leave. I take the little ones, I am afraid for them."

Fekri: "When they start shooting, I leave. I go to my mother's or my brother's place. I couldn't stand it if the soldiers came here and locked up us in a room. I'd argue with them, and it would be dangerous. They might kill me."

The head of household is not far from losing his mind. Thin, fairly young-looking for 46 years, emaciated, with a short salt-and-pepper beard, his thoughts go round and round. His dignity as a man has been taken from him, apparently, but for what crime? He feels impotent and expends his still-burning energy by chewing over his misfortunes and his recriminations, sitting on his mattress with his children beside him, smoking cigarette after cigarette.

Fekri: "There are thirteen of us. The children need school uniforms and book bags. They live in the streets. They need clothes."

Jamila: "Ahmed coughs so much, all night long. And when it gets cold, it's worse. The children aren't doing well at school; the girls, well, what do you expect. Abdelaziz is collecting copper from the houses that were torn down. He plans to sell it, to buy clothes. He's eleven years old." She laughs, and gestures at her children: "They are so beautiful! I laugh and I play with them; I cook onions, and lentils; we have to be strong. We don't know what tomorrow will bring. I manage from day to day. This period has toughened me up."

Fekri begins again as if she hadn't said anything: "For four years, I haven't gone anywhere, I haven't done anything. I wander in the street like an idiot. If somebody gave me a weapon and money to shoot, I would do it. There won't be any peace if I don't find a life. If I were working, I'd have some peace. Can you imagine somebody who has thirteen people to provide for, and

he's not working!?"

Ahmed stands up, and spits into the deserted street that leads to the border.

Fekri: "What did I do to call down all these misfortunes? I worked all that time in Israel to build that house. And in one day, no more house. Losing two children would be easier than losing my house. If it were my son, I would cry over him, I would bury him; but my house? He'll be a martyr; but the house? We're all going to die some day, whether from bullets, or a car accident; but the house? I bought 600 m^2 for $15,000, I built it for $60,000, I recorded it, I have the deed. I paid for all the legalities — 8,000 shekels. Sharon should make arrangements with the municipality and they should pay me back for the house."

He lights a cigarette while the children listen in, or play with scraps of paper. "I don't care about the Israelis. I'd like to go back to Tel-Aviv. I worked there for fifteen years without a problem. The fact that they hurt my children? They weren't aiming at them; it was an accident; one of them was treated in Israel.

THE YARD OUTSIDE THE HOUSE WHERE THE ABOU TOUQOR FAMILY IS STAYING IN CHABOURA, A REFUGEE CAMP IN RAFAH.

Hamad was wounded at the cemetery during the burial of a *shahid* [martyr]; the Israelis opened fire. He has a bullet within an inch of his spinal column, he has terrible pain in his back. Jamila was wounded by shrapnel while she was in the house. On November 25, I was in the neighborhood where they destroyed my house, and the Israelis fired on the taxi. My clavicle was broken and I had a fractured skull. I didn't have a weapon. One month ago, my sister's son also got a bullet in the head; he was twelve years old. I don't have anything against Israel. They destroyed my house, they wounded my children, they wounded me. I'm not upset with them; they didn't do it on purpose."

The fact that the international border cuts through Rafah is rather recent. The city used to be prosperous, a link between Egypt and the Gaza Strip. A small locality of 600 inhabitants in the 1930s, it expanded inordinately with the influx of refugees in 1948, and due to its position as the connection between the two it had a terrific commercial advantage which made it the richest place in the territory. Until 1982, when it was cut in two by the barbed wire, after Israel returned the Sinai to Egypt.

Families were separated by this insuperable but transparent barrier: they communicated by tossing back and forth letters wrapped around stones letter. Then came the Oslo Accords, in 1993, which granted the Israelis a road (called the Philadelphia Corridor) between the Gaza side of the city and the Egyptian side. The second Intifada, in 2002, inspired Israel to widen the corridor and to build a metal wall 25 feet high. The dwellings that were between the wall and the Philadelphia road were destroyed. Now, behind the wall, they've taken over a broad corridor joining Israel to the south-east and the "settlements" bordering Al-Mawassi, between Rafah and the Egyptian border. The destruction goes on and the "security zone" slices away more and more of the neighborhood, in a slow and terrifying salami approach. Houses that were thirteen rows back found themselves in the front row by mid-2004. In front of the wall, the "security zone" allows tanks and other military vehicles to do

YOUNG MEMBERS OF THE ABOU TAIR FAMILY STANDING UNDER THE PORTRAIT OF A COUSIN WHO BECAME A "MARTYR".

maneuvers. It's a no man's land where nobody ventures to go; they'd be shot. The debris from the houses that were destroyed has been hidden or cleared away in order to efface any memory of what was there. The land has been turned over, as if a mad plowman has been sowing scrap metal.

In other words, this city of 140,000 inhabitants is subjected to a pressure and fire in a relentless campaign that is without parallel anywhere in the rest of the territory. In 2002, according to a report from the UNRWA, an average of fifteen houses a month were destroyed by the Israeli army. In 2003, it was forty-seven. By mid-2004, a hundred.[3] The demolition reached its peak May 18 to 24 with "Operation Rainbow," when the IDF (Israel Defense Forces, that is, the army) occupied the city, killed forty people, and tore down 298 dwellings, throwing 710 families (3,800 people) in the street. The chief of staff, Moshe Yaalon, explained that the action was "intended to destroy the tunnels and prevent enormous quantities of sophisticated weapons from being transferred into the hands of Palestinian terrorists."[4] Since

[3] UNRWA and OCHA, Rafah Humanitarian Needs Assessment, United Nations, June 6, 2004.

[4] Quoted in "Why did Sahal have to launch 'Operation Rainbow' in Rafah?", *Israel Magazine*, July 2004.

September 2000, more than 15,000 Palestinians in Rafah were rendered homeless this way (1,500 houses).

A little way off to the west of Rafah, the town of Tel Sultan has been devastated. The road that takes us there goes past buildings on the right, and on the left — the side by the Egyptian border less than half a mile away — a kind of undefined space. The town is shaped in a sort of right angle because the boundary of the "settlements" of Gush Qatif and a watchtower come right up to the street. After making a right turn, the road goes past some buildings that form a straight line across from a long dune that separates the "settlements." The four-story building at the corner is riddled with holes; it looks like a sieve. There isn't a square yard that hasn't been hit. However, it is still inhabited: children wave to us from the windows.

In May, Tel Sultan was invaded by the army, which fired into a peaceful demonstration on May 19, killing ten people and wounding more than seventy others, many of them children. Tel Sultan is too far from the border for anyone to claim there were tunnels.

Between the houses and the dunes, this morning in January, kids are playing soccer just two hundred yards from the watchtower, to the right-hand side of which we can spy the white houses of a settlement. The house of Sami Matar, large and well built, is the third or fourth one in from the corner, between two taller buildings. The living room is decorated with a photograph of a snow-covered mountain and another of the Al-Aqsa mosque. In the room intended for sleeping, which is on the exposed side, he shows us where several rounds have hit, and the clothing in the closet has been perforated, too. Last week, a new bullet hole was inscribed in the interior wall. A few months ago, his little daughter lost an eye: she was alone in the small entry passage that runs parallel to the next house, and it isn't clear what happened. Apparently someone fired a shot, hit something, and some shards injured the young girl. She gazes at us out of her single sound eye; a glaucous ball of glass occupies her other orbit.

Every night a tank comes out and it keeps going back and

BUILDING ON THE CORNER AT TEL SULTAN, OPPOSITE THE SETTLEMENTS.

forth, shaking the house. For four years, they haven't slept in the bedroom. The family has four children and a grandmother to care for; they all roost in the living room these days. "Nobody is shooting from this neighborhood," he says. If any shots had been fired from this house, it would have been destroyed. The Israelis see everything, they have infra-red cameras." During the conversation, we hear a blast, two, three of them. Outside, the children boldly go on playing. "Sometimes," he says, "they fire nonstop. A man cannot stay on his legs, he gets down, it's too terrifying."

They'd like to move, of course, but where can they go? Sami, 34 years old and with a degree in management, has been unemployed for ten years. The building next door, which has five levels, was vacated because of the constant shootings. And then people began coming back, little by little, because they couldn't afford to live anywhere else.

We head for the short hallway that leads to the street. A towel is drying on the line. It has a hole in it — a bullet. A laugh goes up! In comes Mohammed Kilani, who has run out of ration coupons. Another misfortune! Another laugh. The mother says to her son: "Cut off your beard, maybe things will get better." And another laugh.

The Hayel Salam neighborhood (city of peace) is one of closest to the front line. Life seems normal in the wrecked streets, in front of smashed and shabby houses. But close to the wall, on the broad lunar landscape, a cloud of dust is rising. The noise of an engine is heard, and a tank appears one hundred yards away, maneuvers and prowls behind the houses. Two shots snap through the morning calm, then a third, then more. The wind is chill.

Here is where Rachel Corrie, an American peace activist, was crushed to death by the bulldozer she was standing in front of on March 16, 2003. It all seems like science fiction: the anonymous, inhuman armored tanks — you can't see who's in them — seem to advance on their own, like steel beetles. They come out of the

metal wall that hides another world, by a door that is usually closed and threatening, like a mouth that opens to let out terrifying creatures.

"We hate the night-time because then they fire in all directions," says Inass Abou Jazzar, who lives here in a shack crafted of scrap metal, protected on the bad side by a pile of cinder blocks. "There are always tank movements going on, but especially at night, when they maneuver between the houses. Sometimes they get out of the tanks and insult us. The children shriek with fear."

"I feel like I'm dying a hundred times a night," says the grandmother. Unlike horror stories, they cannot close the book — it's impossible to get away; they can only wait for morning, and hope.

Hamdan Abou Moarnar digs out some papers from a black bag that he keeps ready in case he needs to leave in a hurry when the bulldozers come. As he starts to tell us about all of his son's

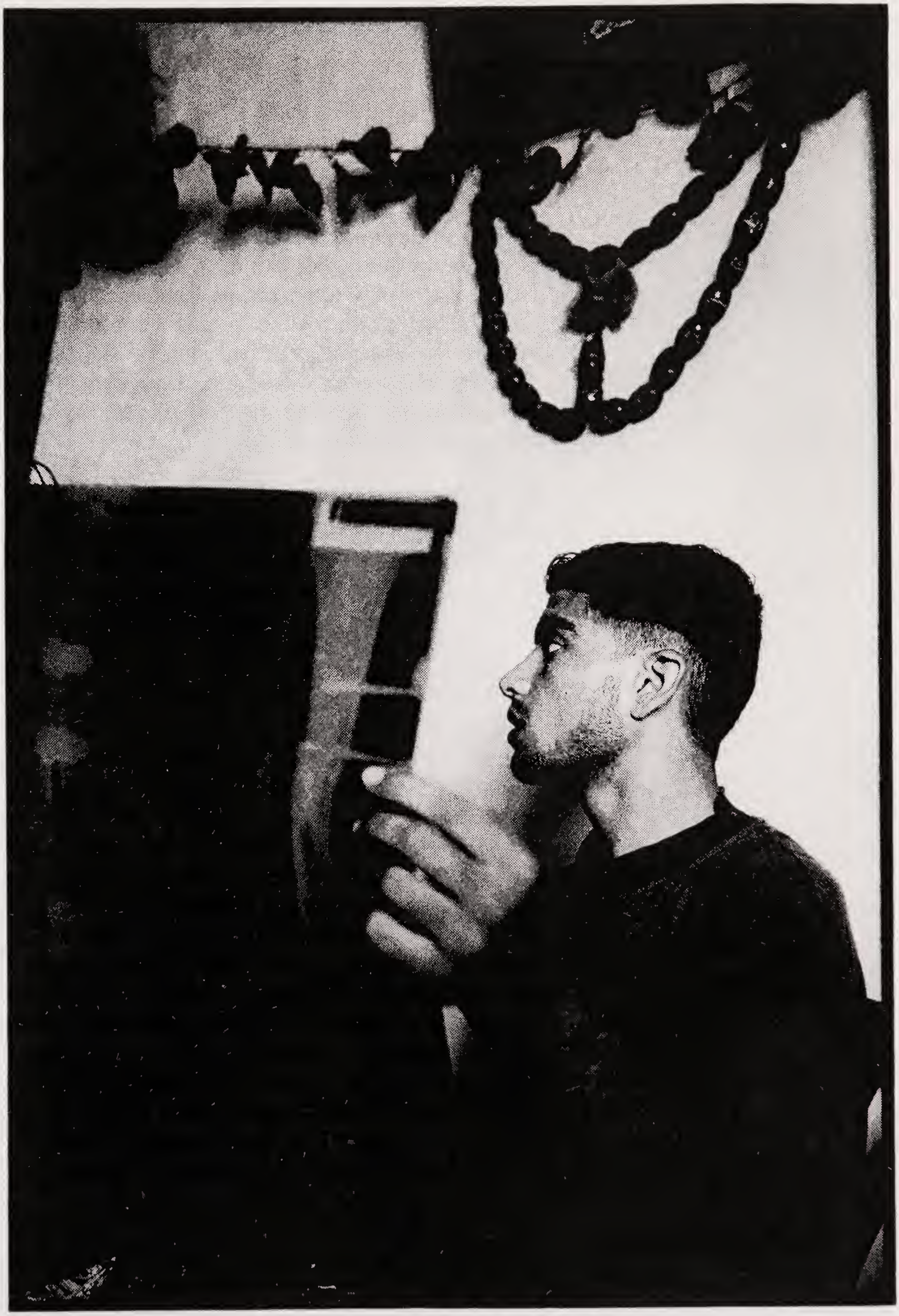
wounds, his wife begins to sob. Little by little she controls herself. She is covered with a black veil. She can't help starting to cry again. The conversation starts over, and she calms down. She takes a corner of her veil and covers her eyes. The words go on. The song of the muezzin is heard.

Mahmoud, the son, a high school graduate, was wounded several times. He was hit by shrapnel from a bomb launched by a helicopter, and he lost part of his liver, was wounded in the intestines, and has to wear a brace on his leg. He's been hit with shrapnel in the foot, the neck, the right side, in the back, in the belly, everywhere. The father shows his medical file. The last time, during the occupation in May, he was on his way out of the house — when there are incursions, the young men leave so that they are less likely to be arrested by the soldiers. Bang! a bullet. His mother shows the hole in the mauve shirt he was wearing that day.

In the Brazil district the wall comes to a stop, forms a right angle with a concrete wall, then continues as barbed wire to the east, toward the airport. "Today, it is quiet. Normally, it isn't possible to come here." But these are the days following the death of Yasser Arafat, and mourning has created, for a little while, an undeclared truce. "It's impossible to live here. Even the cats leave. They shoot at everything, the birds, the pigeons." The people who accompany us haven't been back here since they left. This is a very dangerous area. They inspect everything with the curiosity of explorers; the place is practically deserted, and exudes the strange beauty of desolation. Almost nobody lives here any more. Next door, the tallest building in Rafah, nine floors, is burned, smashed by bullets, a wreck — and is abandoned.

One guy is sitting in his window: "I still live here; this is our form of resistance." He tells the small crowd that last night, a bullet shot into his room while he was sleeping, ricocheted around the room and then shattered a vase. "I just wish it had killed my wife; then I'd be free to marry again." Everyone laughs.

MAHMOUD ABOU MOAMAR
HOLDING AN X-RAY OF HIS WOUNDED LEG.



The wife appears on the balcony right after, smiling.

The joker is named Atia Abou Naji. Bearded and bald, he must be about 55 years old and is dressed in a djellaba. The walls of his apartment are scarred with dozens of bullet holes. The couple sleeps in a corner, in a room with a concrete wall at the back. Once, for five days, soldiers occupied the second story of the building. Atia shows the openings they cut in the staircase on the side toward the city, from where the snipers could fire on the neighboring streets. "We would certainly leave," says his wife Zenap. "But then, people would come to dig tunnels under our house. We were offered money for that, but we refused."

Our car crosses the city. Girls are going home from school in their striped uniforms. Children are play stag-wheel. In a back alley, the broken down carcasses of cars are accumulating. A bicycle passes, we see greenhouses, trees, sheep huddled together in a shed. Ruins are leaning all over in the town center, far from the wall, where there can be no question of digging tunnels. On a long wall by Railroad Street is a list of the names of the city's martyrs, combatants or not. In red, on the right, the word shahid, on the left, the name of the martyr. There are dozens of them. There is still space left to add more.

The market is right next to the border line. It looks terribly desolate. Everything is empty, the stores have been wiped out and silence reigns: the wind whistles over what remains of the roofs, tossing bits of cellophane and plastic bags. There is no street anymore, only a pile of rubble, of rotten onions, scattered debris. It is a phantom city, sinister, like after an earthquake. One six-story building is still standing, but it is just a hollow core, open to the four winds, stripped: the owner has taken away the doors and windows. Suddenly, a young man comes toward us through the ruins. "I come here to rest," he explains, without laughing. Is he joking? Maybe not. The silence here is complete and the tension everywhere else is so heavy that the need to get away can be overpowering. Jamila Abou Touor said that, when he can't stand it any more, he goes and spends a long time at the

other end of Rafah.

Machine gun fire rips the silence. People go by, we hear metal striking metal, the sound of a hammer. Life goes on. Families still live in this ruined neighborhood, near the steel wall and protected from it by the gutted houses that still stand in the first row.

Here is a lane that is right in the line of sight of the watchtower. Two people were killed here this week, we are told. You stick close to the wall, and cross the lane in one jump. A man takes us along to what remains of his house, just two steps away. It is an air shaft, with a one-room maisonnette facing it, where he has set up a mattress, a cardboard box, and a small stove. His family lives in Khan Yunis, but Ibrahim Abou Anza comes here because from time to time he finds a little work as a welder in the neighborhood. So he stays here all day, on standby in case something comes up. What is now a courtyard used to be the main room of the house: it was too dangerous to live there, so anything that could be taken away has been taken, and the roof was sold.

The farther you go up Salah al-Din Street, moving away from the wall against which it terminates and from the watchtower that keeps it in its sights, things become more lively: stores are open, and more numerous, and then you reach the axis that is parallel to the border, the main street Abou Baker Al-Sedeqh, approximately 500 yards from the wall. Mercedes blow their horns and cut each other off, donkeys feed on the narrow island that separates the two lanes of the roadway, a boy pushes a cart full of onion cases, an itinerant salesman tries to sell gold watches on the sidewalk. Florists, toy stores, clothing, jewelry shops, restaurants one after another, and even a shopping center, which seems very exotic here. People are gathering over there; there's an argument going on over here; and, further along, various clusters of people discussing something, and men who smile. Everything seems eerily normal just three minutes away from the devastation and the danger of the border. Mahmoud Taha, who is introduced as "The president of the United States

THESE CHILDREN ARE BEING PUT UP IN A UNRWA SCHOOL SINCE THEIR HOUSE WAS DEMOLISHED IN "OPERATION RAINBOW" IN MAY.

of Palestine," jovially greets me from the window: "Good afternoon, good evening." Our driver Omar comments, "So many people lose their heads."

Ali Ibrahim Smaïl: "We'd already been at risk of being killed for a whole year, especially since they took down all the houses in front of us. Now we're in the first row. Every evening was a terror. Should we move? Of course, but we couldn't find a place. And then, rent is up to $150 dollars; the UNRWA couldn't pay. For a year, we didn't have more than a day or two of calm.

"On February 21, Mohammed, who is nine years old, was playing in front of the house when he was shot. Not by a tank, a machine gun. The child howled, one of my daughters ran to help him, and she was wounded. Then, my wife Boussaïna went out. Bang! another bullet, and the end of her finger was clipped off." She shows the missing phalange on the index finger of the right hand. "My sister Mouna came out next, and she was killed. Another sister, Manal, was hit in the right lung and in the back when she tried to save her sister."

Two months later, "Operation Rainbow" struck again.

Boussaïna: "It was the evening of May 16. Our house was the first to be destroyed during this incursion. So it came as a complete surprise. We were asleep. Suddenly the bulldozer was on us. As soon as the shock was heard, the children started to scream. We had only a few moments to react. We rushed to the house next door, which belonged to us too. A stone hit me and broke my arm. Slowly, in just one push, the bulldozer crushed the house. We couldn't save anything, except our souls." The following evening, the bulldozer came back and destroyed the second house.

There wasn't any tunnel in the building, he says, it too was far from the wall, almost 1000 feet. As of June, the family was camping out at a school run by the UNRWA, waiting to find a solution.

We got a chance to see one of these famous tunnels in November, in the days of calm that followed the death of Yasser Arafat. In the vicinity of Block O, a crowd was standing by and watching a Palestinian bulldozer that was working on something at the foot of the wall. Some twenty men were standing around it, and beyond them white flags were planted. Because of the torrential rains of the last days, the sand broke through on the tunnel where three men were digging, and they were trapped below. The accident was discovered just an hour ago. After coordination with the IDF, the Authority received authorization to try to rescue them.

In the vast muddy ground, several hundred men and children perched on piles of stone and soil to enjoy this singular spectacle: to be so close to the wall, all of them together, and not to be fired upon! After a moment, however, an armored tank moved forward, fired into the air, and the people moved back.

Mohammed Khani and Salah Abou Taha in front of the day care center "Child of Palestine"

Among this crowd, we start talking with a young man who speaks English. He talks to us at length about the tunnels. He says he is not involved in that himself, but he lives close to the border and appears to be quite well informed on this subject. We will call him Leon.

Leon: "The tunnels have been here since 1982, when the border was established. The first tunnel was demolished in 1983. The tunnels were dug because everything is less expensive in Egypt, even gas and electricity. There weren't many tunnels in those years because it was easier to smuggle things in by sea. In 1994, the Authority prohibited smuggling. They put people in jail for it. There was still some traffic until 2000, but it was getting too hard. The tunnels began again with the Intifada: the people in the Authority split the money with 'the kings.'

"The 'kings' are the guys who organize the digging of the tunnels. There are four or five in Rafah. They know people on the other side, members of their family whom they can trust and they end their tunnels under those people's houses. They buy a house for $20,000 to $30,000, then come with workmen and start digging. It takes three months to complete a tunnel. Earlier, in 1982-1985, the tunnels were made by hand and were about 300 feet long. Now, they can be much longer and they can use machines to drill and carry out the sand, which is solid. It's dangerous: to get air, they bore holes and run a pipe up to the surface. In 2001, two brothers died. They broke a water pipe overhead and they drowned. And then the Israelis explode grenades ten or twelve feet deep, close to the border, to weaken the ground. That's why water caved in the tunnel the other day."

Question: Why make tunnels if it is so dangerous?

Leon: "What choice do we have? There is no work. Once you're out of university, there are no jobs. And whether you dig or not, you'll be attacked and killed.

"People can go through the tunnels, I went once. You crawl on your hands and knees. Children go. In 1982, they used to traffic in heroin, but now the resistance kills anyone who is dealing in heroin. Sometimes, there's marijuana. A lot of

cigarettes: a pack costs only a half-shekel in Egypt. The tunnels are also useful for food, and even for rare animals — there was a little zoo in Rafah that was destroyed in May. All the animals had come in by the tunnels. And, why not? Weapons.

"When a tunnel makes it, they earn back in one day all that they spent to build it: a bullet sells for five dollars, even in quantity. Fifty thousand bullets, just imagine. A Kalashnikov sells for several hundred dollars. You can get 200 Kalas through in two hours. Israel doesn't mind, they are much better armed. They let them pass in order to foment civil war.

"In 2001, combatants came to our corner to fire on the watchtower. People beat them up to make them stop. Men, women and children, everyone told them not to shoot. The resistance didn't come back any more to shoot — they're too dangerous. But in 2002, the resistance dug a tunnel from this demolished house which you see on the right and they destroyed the Israeli station that you see behind the ruins — then it was rebuilt. Hamas and the Islamic Jihad cooperated with 'the kings'

ABDEL ABOU MESSIN AND ONE OF HIS SONS IN FRONT OF THEIR HOUSE IN J BLOCK. THE WINDOWS HAVE BEEN FILLED IN WITH CINDER BLOCKS TO PROTECT AGAINST BULLETS.

to learn the method. And to make connections on other side — they didn't have any. When the Egyptians discover a tunnel, they cut it and put people in prison.

"There is no 'king' in my clan. [Extended families — clans — are still well-established and can encompass several thousand members who share a sense of community and loyalty.] My family wants to live in peace. But when Israel started to demolish the houses and kill people, some of us chose to work in the tunnels because there were no other jobs.

"The Israelis don't tear down houses because of the tunnels: here, there were three tunnels. They could have knocked down three houses but they knocked down forty of them. People say to themselves: 'Since they destroy the houses no matter what, let's try to make some money before they destroy us.'"

The following day, Leon takes us to meet a tunneller whom he has managed to convince to speak to us. We meet him in the rain in front of an abandoned building in direct sight of the big watchtower at the end of the Salah al-Din road. The interview takes place in an unfinished room, full of rubble, and we sit on upside-down buckets. A keffieh mask his face; he packs a Browning in his belt. "I used to work in Israel. I've been digging tunnels to make a living since 2002. At first, I was working for a 'king'; now I'm on my own. I wear the mask so that nobody can recognize me and denounce me to the Israelis. I use axes and shovels; I don't have any machine. Machines are useful for tunnels 1000 to 1200 feet long, but not for the small ones that may be half that length. We put breathing tubes in every fifty yards. The tunnels are 20 or 30 feet deep, by 16 to 24 inches, tops. We use flashlights. Four or five men carry out the soil that has been dug out. We don't use any braces unless the ceiling is caving in.

"It takes five months to make a tunnel 1200 feet long. They are always dangerous, from start to finish. It's like building your coffin with your own hands. Sometimes, you lose more than what you invested and earned, because the tunnel is destroyed.

The investment is $15,000 to $20,000. I don't buy people's houses, the majority don't want their houses to be destroyed. We use the house of the 'king' or one of his close relations.

"The Egyptians are more severe than the Israelis if they discover a tunnel. The law calls for the death penalty. That's something new, just this year; before, the penalty was life imprisonment. The Egyptians discovered three tunnels in the past two years. They didn't come up in houses, but in the fields; and they didn't arrest anybody.

"We don't always find a place to dig from. You can wait a whole year with nothing to do. Me, I haven't done any digging since May. People don't want anybody to dig anymore, they're afraid. But the destruction Israel is doing pushes people to dig, because life is so hard. Other people may be digging these days; I don't know. Nobody talks about it. No one can trust another person, because of the Israelis. This is not a game."

A STREET IN RAFAH IN NOVEMBER

Socrate's paradise

Sitting on the roof of his house, Socrate Soussan never tires of admiring the setting sun, which fires rays of sparkling silver across the cobalt blue of the Mediterranean. "This is paradise, here, paradise." The air is soft, the birds sing, the palm trees wave beyond the dunes, and one's gaze keeps coming back to the pretty white houses surrounding the home of this short and solid man. Absolute paradise.

As long as you don't see the fence on the left that separates the Gush Qatif "settlements" from the Egyptian border, nor the watchtowers over there which look out over the Palestinian villages in Al-Mawassi, and as long as you ignore the bursts of machine gun fire that start to intrude on the quietude of the evening; as long as you can overlook the Smith and Wesson that Socrate wears in his belt. Where is paradise? The Israeli settlement of Gush Qatif.

You can cross the whole strip in just a few minutes, from the military post of Kissoufim to the settlements. Of course, you can't get there from within the Gaza Strip, you have to come from Israel, where the very mild checkpoint at Kissoufim maintains the fiction of territorial continuity between the Jewish State and what it has implanted in the territory. Here we are in Gush: a mile-and-a-half to two miles wide and five miles long, it surrounds Al-Mawassi and has 2 extensions beyond,

Preceding two pages:
View of the Sultan,
from the settlement of Rafiah Yam,
in Gush Qatif

Kfar Darom and Morag — Netzarim is isolated to the north, and has its own road out to Israel.

Now we're through the looking glass: from the bridge at Abu Houli, we had a fleeting view of the refugee camp we visited the other day at Al-Garara, the long line of cars awaiting for permission to go through, the building full of bullet holes. Crossing the bridge, we are at the same place — but on the other side. Just a few minutes away, and it is another universe.

What first strikes the eye is the multitude of greenhouses with their pale gray dirty nylon roofs. The rows of arches resemble factories from the olden days, with the clipped roofs joining one to another. And then, on the houses, the cars, the street corners, all the Israeli flags.

Gush's sixteen villages with red-tiled roofs are distributed around the central borough of Firn Dekalim (five others, including Kfar Darom, are located to the north). At the entrance to each village a little military post with a watchtower that is

THE ARMY PROTECTS SETTLERS' HOUSES HERE AT KFAR YAM.

heavily barred. The villages are separated by fences to keep Palestinian workmen from moving from one to the other.

The Dekalim Firn shopping center is the heart of social activity in Gush. It has the look of a small shopping mall in America, laid out around a plaza like an amphitheater, and there is a dry cleaner, a pizzeria, a bookshop, some clothing stores — and several abandoned shops. At a little lunch place, a group of soldiers climb out of their armored jeep to buy sandwiches. Settlers pass by, carrying M16 rifles in shoulder-harnesses. The streets are edged with grass, palm trees and flowers, but there is a pervasive sense of things being unfinished and chaotic. Chunks of concrete and metal lie abandoned here and there, weeds cover the empty lots, and litter blows through the streets. In Gadid, the little supermarket announces its imminent demise: the shelves are half empty, the wall is cracked, the freezers are old, and a broken plastic door is taped over with cardboard. Gush Qatif resembles the poor working-class suburbs outside American metropolises more than the glowing Florida with which it so likes to be compared. The palm trees and the few flowery side streets scarcely disguise the many empty houses, built but never inhabited.

If all the houses in Neve Dekalim are occupied, many remain vacant in the other little villages. Even if the settlements inside the Gaza Strip are demographically dynamic — they grew at 8% in the 1990s — they slowed down considerably since the second Intifada, which they call "the Oslo War" here. By mid-2004, there were 8,148 settlers in the "disputed" territory of Gaza, according to the Israeli Ministry of the Interior.[5]

Avraham Berrebi lives in the village of Gadid. Behind his house he has a terrace from which you can see Khan Yunis, and from the terrace outward extends an immense rank of greenhouses. Avraham and Colette came from France twenty-two years ago. A third of the inhabitants of Gush are of French origin. "In the beginning there was nothing here, just dunes and jackals. The Israelis came with bulldozers, they leveled everything, and we started to build greenhouses. The Arabs said: 'Tomatoes in houses? They're nuts, these Jews.' Now, they

[5] "There was a 5.3% increase in the number of settlers in the West Bank and Gaza this year." *AFP*, July 22, 2004.

are building them, too."

Colette: "For twenty years, we had courage, we had energy, the will to do everything. We had a goal. In the early days it was OK. In the beginning I could even go to do my shopping in Gaza, it was our city."

Avraham: "As soon as the Oslo accords were signs, the shit started. If we went into Khan Yunis, they threw stones at us."

On the second floor, the room in the corner was struck on May 21 by a rocket that was launched at one o'clock in the morning. "It sounded like a truck full of gravel had dumped its load on my roof." His fourteen-year-old daughter was sleeping in the next room. "By chance, I had told her the week before to go and sleep in another room." Avraham shows us a hole in the curtain in the living room: a stray bullet, a few months ago. It rebounded, penetrated the next room, punched a hole in the closet and ruined a tie before coming to a stop in the wall.

Two days later, Avraham calls us to say to us that a shell fell

A CAFE IN THE SHOPPING AREA OF NEVE DEKALIM

just 15 feet from his storage shed, right before the Sabbath. The army came with a robot to blow it up.

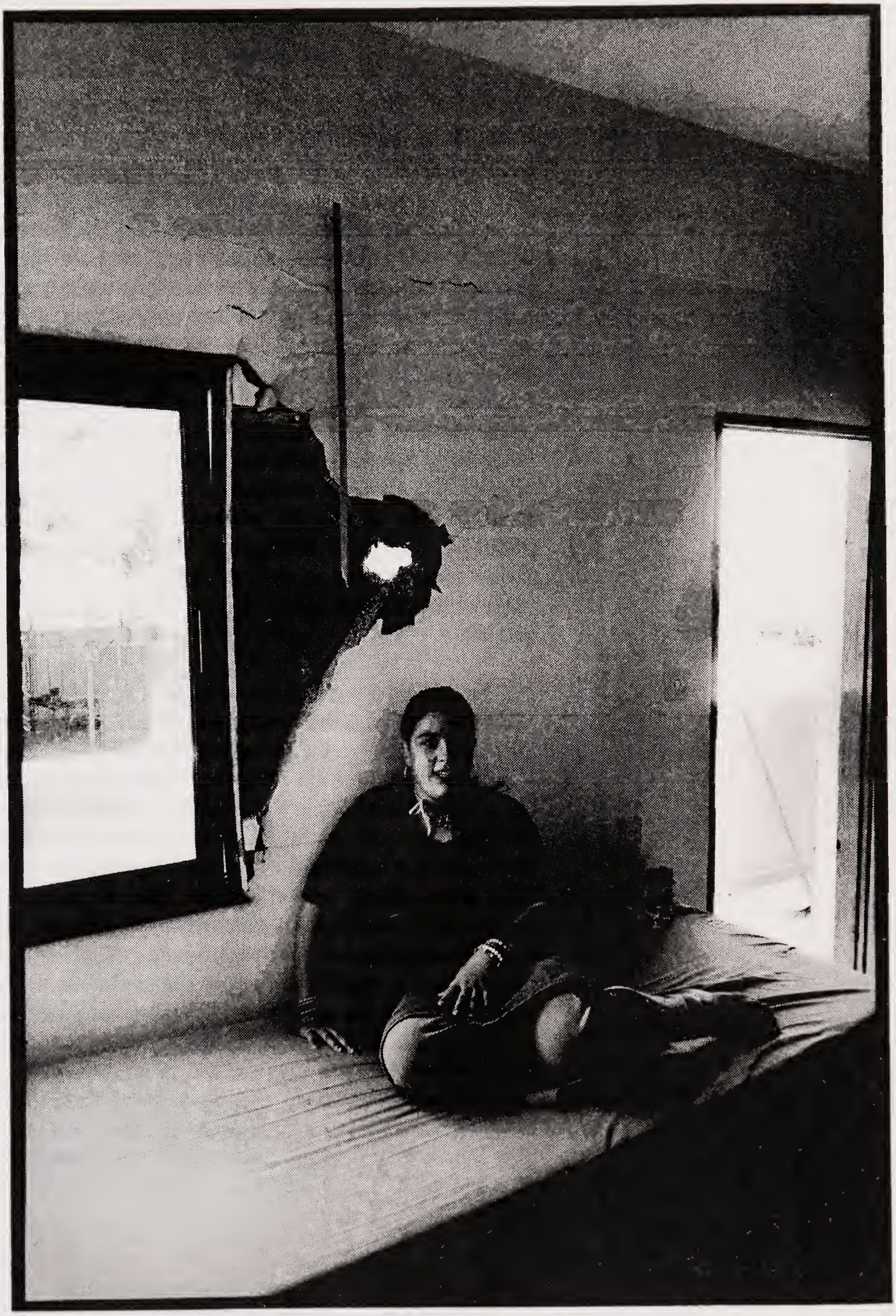
The proximity of the Arab city, and therefore danger, is constantly on their minds in this isolated enclave.

Two Thai laborers are working in a metal shed across from Socrate's greenhouse, located in an agro-industrial zone close to Rafiah Yam, the small village opposite Tel Sultan where he lives. Two little hen houses and two donkeys meditating in an enclosure give the place a pastoral, almost deserted feel on this holy Saturday. But, at the end of the paved alley, a wall of concrete slabs was installed after a driver was wounded in the stomach by a bullet. In the wall, a barred opening offers a very clear view of the buildings of Tel Sultan. We go through Socrate's greenhouse. Across the street there is a dune from which you can see the buildings of Rafah, behind an electrified fence.

Elsewhere in Rafiah Yam, the center for small businesses houses a cherry sorting enterprise, a clothing workshop and a furniture joinery. A plaque indicates that this whole zone, which is surrounded by a fence, is financed by the World Zionist Organization. Plastic bags, twists of wire, cardboard boxes blow around. Socrate doesn't let his two children out of the car: we are within shooting range of Rafah.

Like all the men in Gush, Socrate is armed and knows what to do with his gun and his rifle. He goes to shooting practice on a regular basis in a white brick enclosure facing a dune. This morning six gunners, including a woman and a soldier, stand with guns in their fists, legs apart, arms extended, and aim at the targets: brown anonymous images of helmeted soldiers. They are protected from the deafening detonations by ear protectors. An eleven-year-old child is present but he isn't allowed to shoot. And we are not allowed to photograph, for "reasons of security." The trainer has us pick up a heavy Beretta handgun, a long M16 rifle, and a Glock 17 (known as a "Jéricho").

AVRAHAM BERRIBI'S DAUGHTER IN HER ROOM, AFTER IT WAS HIT BY A PALESTINIAN ROCKET



Outside, beside his armored "Defender" Land Rover, Lechoua Kaldai explains his job. This former pastry chef from Nice is the head of security for his village. "I keep watch while the workers are coming in. We have to pay sharp attention, for example when internal security tells us that they think a workman is planning to make an attack. We also have to go out when they're firing rockets. When missiles land, we go to find out if there were any casualties. We get three or four or five a day. But, during certain periods, we get up to fifteen per day. They don't fire during the daytime, so that they don't hurt their own workmen. We cooperate with the army. You need weapons, a helmet, a bulletproof jacket. Every evening in our mochav [village], we establish a tour of duty and someone monitors the electronic barriers. From eight o'clock to midnight, then from midnight to 4:00 AM. Everybody takes about two turns a month; it depends on the number of inhabitants in the mochav. You take your 'Defender' and you patrol."

The settlers are under constant tension. On May 2, shortly before we arrived, a dramatic incident had broken their hearts: Tali Hatuel, a pregnant young woman, and her children were killed close to Abu Houli. "They were shot on the road, just after the bridge. Four children and a baby in the belly! The guy came to finish them off on the spot." True stories of settlers being assassinated are plentiful. "Two years ago, two guys from here did a stupid thing," related Socrate. "They weren't armed, and they picked up an Arab in their car. One died, he was shot in the head." As we pass close to the sea, he adds: "Thirteen or fourteen years ago a guy was living here on the land close to the beach, with his girlfriend, and his greenhouses were out back. His employees called him during the night, saying that there was a power failure. He went out, and got his throat cut."

Avraham: "That house, there, was Roni Tzalach's. He was killed on the road. And three years ago there was an attack at Kfar Darom. Two people died, and the children had to have amputations."

Actually, it is mostly the soldiers who pay the blood tribute in the war that is begin waged here. According to the statistics which the settlers gave us, 67 soldiers lost their life in the Gaza Strip between September 2000 and February 2004, as opposed to 27 civilians. There were also 11,000 attempted attacks: shootings on the road, mines, infiltrations, shells ... including 3,930 mortars, which damaged 76 houses and 200 other buildings or greenhouses.

Just after five in the morning we are waked up by the sound of a machine gun, interpolated by the incantations of a muezzin. Then boom! A few isolated rounds, surprisingly loud. We give up the idea of falling back to sleep, and try to distinguish the sounds: burst of machine gun fire, the deafening Qassams, the reverberations of the acute explosions of tank fire. Then the weapons are go silent, day breaks, and everything goes back to normal.

Socrate Soussan is in good shape, solidly built, and has the air of a man younger than his forty-eight years. He wears a cap and denim shorts, as a man who lives out of doors. Two formidable watch dogs guard his house, tied on leashes of precisely calculated length that make sure no corner of the property is out of their reach. Inside, the house is comfortable, though very cramped: the decent home of an average Frenchman. From the terrace, you can see the Egyptian post some 600 feet away, some woods, and the sea, where the sunset creates a splendid view, barely marred by the small houses that were built in 2003 but that remain uninhabited. Toward the end of the summer, thousands of storks come to roost in a nearby oasis, a nesting area replete with grass and palm trees.

"I came sixteen years ago. Not out of ideology but out of love for my wife, Brigitte, who visited Israel with her parents in 1983. I started to work as lighting engineer in Beersheba, in the east of the Gaza Strip. I didn't like to work during the night; I was this close to returning to France. But we read in the newspapers that they needed more families here. I came to take a look, and I was enchanted. We settled here in 1989."

Socrate divides his time between his greenhouses — 10 donums of tomatoes — and fishing, which gives him the greatest pleasure in life. "Free diving, I can stay down for four minutes. I love it. I go down to thirty or forty feet. There are a lot of sardines because there is a lot of plankton, and if there are sardine, there are grouper. I know the sea here like my own pocket. It's a bank account, I know all the holes and there is a grouper in every hole. When the sea is calm, I can catch eighty to a hundred pounds a day that I sell to the settlers.

"This is paradise."

Socrate is among the minority of settlers who aren't religious — "I don't actually practice, but I believe in God" and, of course, he celebrates the rite of the Sabbath.

Lauren Beziz lives in a house almost across from Avraham's. It is a comfortable place, looking out on a pleasant lawn. The spacious living room is furnished with leather settees facing a large television set. Lauren's husband Sylvain has 35 donums of greenhouses as well as a small children's apparel factory. "We've been here for eighteen years," she says. "I lived in Paris, then in Los Angeles. I came to Israel from the United States, as a twenty-year-old idealist. I went to college, then I met Sylvain. We wanted to develop an area, to create a communal life, even if we had missed out on the pioneering era of the beginning of Israel. We came here when I was twenty-five years old, in 1986. There weren't all these trees here. We drove along the sand, the asphalt road didn't come this far. The post office, the bank, were in vans. The shopping center didn't exist, there were just a few stores there.

"There were fences, like everywhere in Israel. For years, the security requirements kept getting tighter. The First Intifada was a difficult moment, several people from Gush were assassinated. And, since 2001, the situation has gone down further.

"There are ups and downs. But we are always there to support each other. Whoever has the broadest shoulders supports the others. Despite everything that we go through, our

lives are very full, and we get a lot of satisfaction. People keep their morale up, their spirit. They've come to realize that their place is here. They have a very strong faith, we've seen enormous miracles happen, we see a certain providence, and we feel that we are in the hands of God.

"I have four children. We give them a great deal of spiritual guidance. They are well developed, independent, very sure of themselves. The young people get together during the Sabbath. They go to the beach, they go surfing, they fish, they rent a van and travel around, they go to see a movie downtown."

Avraham, who is himself very pious, tells us that the Chemlas are extremists. They are agitating for "Greater Israel" and publish an exegesis of the Torah, in French: "La Sidra du Gush." We meet Roxanne Chemla by chance. Walking back up from Firn Dekalim toward Gadid, the doctor's sign plate, written in French, hanging on the gate in front of the house catches our eye. We ring the bell. Mrs. Chemla receives us on

the threshold of her house surrounded by a beautiful lawn.

"Before we married, more than eight years ago, we had decided that our future would be in Israel. As soon we got the chance, we came. We are very religious, and we wanted our children to have a well-guided education. We didn't want to settle in Gush Qatif because of these attacks, but they had an opening for a doctor. My husband came, and found the place splendid. When I came to have a look, I liked it too — it reminds me of Normandy, with all these small houses. And then I adore the sea, and here, there is nobody on the beaches.

"My husband and I are both doctors. I deal mostly with the Thai workers, while he is an emergency doctor. For the past four years we've had a lot of work, what with the attacks. Seeing so many deaths, my husband has become hardened. But we live normally, because if one dwells on the stress, life is impossible. We go to the beach, we work in our garden. Houses have been bombed, but fortunately, people don't get killed; people get killed when they drive on the exit roads. When that happens it is terrible because everybody knows each other. Less than a month ago, a woman who worked with my husband was killed, Tali Hatuel. That really shook us all.

"The Jews are being massacred in our own country. We came to fight, but I didn't think that the country couldn't defend us. It really reminds me of the Shoah: every country in the world is against us, trying to kill us. I see a world war coming, every country is dumping on us. But they won't get away with it, even if we have to pay a price. My husband lost his grandfather in Shoah; my grandfather was assassinated in Algeria by an Arab. We are going through what happened in Algeria again.

"The second language of Gush is French. Many of the families were originally French, not to mention those who come from Morocco or the Maghreb. I only speak French or English, very little Hebrew. A lot of Frenchmen come to Israel. Thanks to the anti-Semitism, there will be more of them here. The media are spreading anti-Semitism, it makes us sick. We stopped watching TV because of the anti-Semitism we heard:

'The poor Arab,' the Jewish 'murderers,' even 'Nazis'....You're journalists, you act just like you did during Shoah. And all because the Arabs are paying; they bought all the radio and all the television stations.

"We are the nicest people. What Judaism gives, is life. The Jews gave the framework, they support the whole world thanks to the Torah and the concepts conveyed by the Bible.

"You have to defend the body, you have to kill viruses, bacteria; and at this point in time, the Arabs are the viruses, the bacteria. Speaking as a doctor, when an organism is infected, you have to get rid of the bacteria."

Along this portion of the beach, the shore looks deplorable: debris, garbage, dilapidated houses or ruins, and all under the eye of the watchtowers nestled into rings of barbed wire laid on the sand. Only the sea is beautiful. An electric wire skirts the beach, held in place by wooden posts. On the other side of the road, we see a Palestinian building of plain concrete, four stories high, barred from the beach. And the beach itself, strewn with shells and cuttlefish bone, a volleyball net that is worn down to a bare cord looks like it hasn't been used for a long time. The surf rolls and thunders. I go up to a white house that looks abandoned; a flock of terns are milling about on the sand. As I step onto the cement of the terrace, two large dogs that I hadn't noticed begin to bark.

Three years ago, an attack at Kfar Darom killed two and several children had to have amputations. In retaliation, the Israelis came to live in some of the seaside cottages where, in season, people from the city of Gaza would come for vacation — those who could afford it. A little later a colonist was killed by gunshot. Then, the Israelis burned the Palestinian greenhouses, demolished the houses at the edge of the road and closed off the whole beach, forming two villages called Chiriat Hayam and Kfar Yam.

Arik Itzraki lives in Kfar Yam, which means "village by the sea," behind the fence that skirts the road and separates it from Al-Mawassi, whose fields, palm trees and gray houses are very

close by. His narrow house is full of books and African masks — Arik has traveled a lot, as a guide for tourist groups. "My house is the farthest west in the country," he boasts, "and the one closest to the sea. I came here in 1993 out of love for the woman who became my wife; she was living in a prefabricated house. I built this house. We have three children."

On the left, facing the sea, is an abandoned prefab. Not far away is a tower with two soldiers. On the right is the mobile home of a young man who doesn't live there all the time, and some other prefabs that are badly run down. The entryway, where odds and ends are stored, is enclosed by concrete blocks that form a small wall. "There is no shooting from Al-Mawassi, they are too afraid of us." A carriage drawn by a donkey and driven by two Palestinians slips along the road. On the westernmost terrace of the Israelis flies the flag with the star of David. The air is gentle, the waves roll in, the sun goes down, the flag ripples in the breeze. On this side, there is an atmosphere of serenity. On the inland side are the greenhouses, the fences and the wrecked automobiles in the Al-Mawassi fields, all the chaos of the world.

The settlers all hope that more Jews will come in from other countries, as they did in the 1980s when the influx of Russian Jews gave the State of Israel a real boost demographically. But where would you find the equivalent of the Russian Jews today? In Gush Qatif, they place great faith in the Menaches, a people of India, a few dozen of whom have settled in Neve Dekalim. The official version of the story is that the Menaches are one of the ten lost tribes of Israel, who were Christianized in the 19th century and lost the Judaism that they practiced before. Over the last ten years approximately 700 Menaches have immigrated to Israel to be housed in the settlements in Gaza and the West Bank, under the auspices of the Amishav organization ("I return," in Hebrew). In June 2003, the Knesset discussed the Menaches, with certain deputies pleading that these Indians would be safer in the "settlements" than in Kashmir, where India and Pakistan are fighting (Kashmir is

more than 900 miles from where they come from!), while others judged that these immigrants were being "cynically exploited for political aims."

We meet the in-laws of Avraham's son, who married a Menache girl, in their house in Dekalim Firn. We interview them in English.

Gideon Rei, the father-in-law: "We came from Assam and Mizoram, close to Burma. In 1972, Mizoram became an Indian state. According to our history (written in America by people who studied it), the tribe originates in the west of China, and it fled from there because the king of China was killing educated people and burying them alive. Our people then went into Burma, in Mandalay. Some of our ancestors headed south, others west, and they crossed the river that forms the border with India 350 years ago At that time, they didn't know anything about Judaism. Menaches worshiped a single God, who lived in the firmament and in the earth. There was a place

SIVAN EZRAKI ON THE BALCONY OF HER FAMILY'S HOUSE, WHICH HER FATHER SAYS IS THE FARTHEST WEST OF ALL THE HOUSES IN ISRAEL

in the area called Mount Sinai. We were autonomous, each village had its own chief.

"Ten years ago, some rabbis came and invited us to embrace the Jewish religion. At this time, 90% of the people were Christianized. My father didn't want to adopt the Jewish faith; he died in 1990. In 1989, five young people came to Israel, then a second group in 1992, and a third, of forty people, in 1993. Our family arrived in 1994 and we were converted here. The Amishav organization helped us with the visa, paid our travel expenses, then lent us 200,000 shekels to buy the house." The family found jobs in the orchards outside of the Gaza Strip or in business in Dekalim Firn.

Dina Sharon, the daughter of David Sharon, a friend of Gideon's: "We came here because we believe that it is our country, we've rejoined our fatherland."

Gideon: "It's our land."

Ezra Chhakchhuak, a young man of 23 years: "Today, there are 700 Menaches in Israel, and approximately 54 in Gush. I study the Torah at the yeshiva [religious school]. If I can, I will become a rabbi. If not, I will be a teacher or professor, for my people."

Question: "Do you speak Hebrew?"

Dina: "Among ourselves, we speak our mother tongue, Mizo."

Gideon: "Hebrew is hard."

Dina: "It's easy for the children. I'm eighteen years old; I'm not married."

Ezra: "I'm married."

Dina: "To a Mizo."

Gideon: "Only two of our women have married Israelis."

Ezra: "It's very hard for the boys to marry Israeli women."

Question: "Are you happy here?"

Dina: "In the beginning, we were frightened by the Intifada; now we've gotten used to it."

Ezra: "We came here for the religion, but we miss our family and friends in India."

Gideon: "My family, they are still Christian."

With a Menache family at Neve Dekalim
From the bottom, Gideon Ree, David Sharon, Ezra Chhakchhuak, to the right, Avraham Berrebi

Dina: "They'd like to come to Israel, but the Israeli government won't let them."

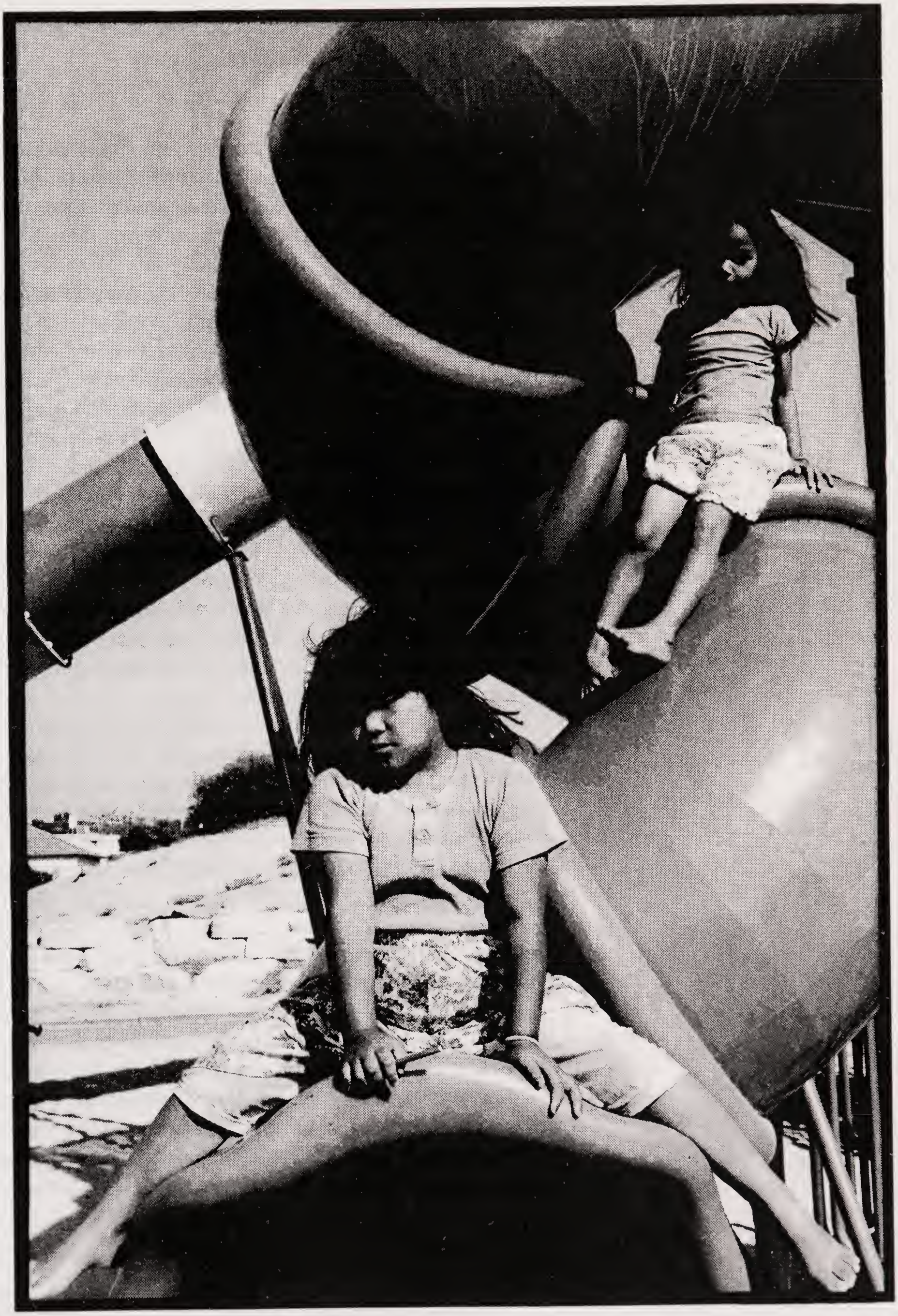
One of the saddest places in Gush is the abandoned beach hotel, Palm Beach. Its windows are broken, the staircases are rusted by the corrosive air of the sea, the roof over the swimming pool is crumbling, and the bar built of bamboo is in tatters. There is litter everywhere. An Israeli flag floats over a low wall at the end of the empty terrace, behind a closed grill and a barbed wire fence. Swings are gently squeaking in the breeze. "The hotel never did very well," says Socrate, who worked there for a time. "It was always running a deficit, even before the Intifada. People who aren't from Gush are afraid to come here." The establishment closed in 2000. Several of the small bungalows that are part of the hotel are now occupied by squatters, who are playing in their bathing suits on the balconies. New umbrellas have been installed on the roof.

It looks like some kind of predators have come in. Nothing has been cleaned. The people left, leaving the wreckage behind them, without anybody giving a thought to cleaning it all up. And the corpse slowly rots at the edge of the sparkling sea.

To the north of Gush the last settlement, Tel Katifa, has about twenty houses, mostly prefabricated but in good condition. A delightful pond surrounded by reeds is hidden in a fold of the land. At the exit of the little village, two tanks and an armored bulldozer are tucked away in a military enclosure.

Going down again toward Rafiah Yam, Socrate takes us across Al-Mawassi, which is open to the settlers. The farming is done in the open air more than in the settlements, but we also see greenhouses, smaller ones, in the midst of many palm trees. Houses of bare concrete, tin shacks, garbage, it all looks miserable. The distance seems immense between the comfortable lower-middle-class attainments of the few and the misery of the others.

We pass an ancient Peugeot 504 with a license plate showing Palestinian children singing with their mother.



Socrate stops at a kind of grocer, in a tin shack, to buy olive oil from a Palestinian. In the car, his son Dan taps on the window to tell the children who are crowding around not to press their noses to the glass. He makes a face at them.

The economy of the settlements of the Gaza Strip is based on a model that has fallen apart entirely.

That is not because of a lack of subsidies, however. Agriculture in particular was encouraged, which explains the abundance of greenhouses in which the settlers are cultivating tomatoes, cucumbers, lettuce, parsley, geraniums and other things. "Each colonist is entitled to $75,000 for agriculture — 75% as an outright grant and 25% as a ten-year loan," explains Socrate. "That enables them to set up a greenhouse; the State pays the supplier directly. The land on which you put up the greenhouse is free."

Houses are sold at a very good price (whether the settlers are farmers or not): for example 100,000 shekels ($21,300) in 1989, or twice that amount in 2003 — a similar house sells in Ashkelon more than $320,000.

Water is also subsidized: every farmer gets a certain quantity of water at a moderate price, as everywhere else in Israel: for example, 12,000 m^3 of water per annum, for 10,000 m^2 of greenhouses, at $0.17 per cubic meter. There is not enough water available locally; the precious liquid is brought in from the north by the "national aqueduct" that brings water from Lake Tiberiad.

The settlers in Gush are also granted access to the European market for their products at a preferential customs rate. Although a clause in the trade agreement between Israel and the European Union specifies that the settlements should not benefit from the exemption from customs duties, the Union never had the political will to apply the rule.

And finally, the settlers have the advantage of very cheap labor: Palestinians. For despite all the subsidies they receive, their economic activity would not be profitable without low cost workers besides. As a result, more than two hundred

Palestinians come to work every day in Gush, even though the settlers have brought in workmen from Thailand as well. They Thais are actually more expensive than the Palestinians. Avraham Berrebi does the arithmetic for us: "If we employ a Palestinian, he earns 60 shekels per day ($12-13). But if he works for a Palestinian, he gets 20. We let them pray, we're nice about it. When Arab hires an Arab, they treat them like beasts. They love each other when they die." It is true that the wages in Gaza are very low, for example 30 shekels for a day's work at a construction site. Avraham has provided a corner protected from the sun so that his workmen can sit in the shade to break their bread, and we see one of them unfolding his carpet and praying.

At any event, every morning workers arrive at a passage opposite Tel Sultan (another passage is located at Gadid, vis-à-vis Khan Yunis). They leave Rafah, pass the building on the corner that looks like a sieve, climb through the debris of the no man's land and reach the check point. There, soldiers in bulletproof vests search them, give them a pat down, inspect the plastic bags holding their lunches, and let them through — but only after taking away their identity cards, until they come back in the evening. After the passage, the workmen continue by foot to their work places, generally more than two kilometers further. If they are not working in the greenhouses but off to the side or at one of the houses in the villages, their employer has to come get them by car. The workmen have to be over twenty-eight years old and they have to have at least one or two children.

But the subsidies and the fact of having cheap manual labor cannot beat the implacable laws of economics, which hit the farmers of Gush Qatif hard. International prices for their products have fallen sharply. Avraham says: "When we came here, tomatoes were selling at $1,700 a ton. You could live on 3 donums of land. Today, the price is less than $500 a ton." The aid given to new settlers reflects this phenomenon: in the beginning, they received 2,000 m^2 of land to put up a greenhouse. This was increased to 4,000 m^2, then to 10,000 m^2.

Today, they get 15,000 to 20,000 m^2. But even that isn't enough to make a profit.

In 2004, everyone destroyed part of his harvest, whether cucumbers or tomatoes, because they couldn't get an adequate price. Avraham himself threw away ten to twelve tons of cucumbers. "This morning, my son said to me: 'You know, Dad, next year we'll be out of business.' And when other people try to plant, later, they'll end up doing the same," he said, full of disillusionment.

There isn't any other solution for those who want to earn their living through farming but to expand the greenhouses, by establishing more of them for example on the Arab Al-Mawassi lands, or by buying up or renting greenhouses from neighbors who have thrown in the towel. It is the Red Queen syndrome, typical of industrial agriculture: you have to keep running just to stay in the same place. With their agriculture that is so demanding in terms of water, fertilizer, and land, and which is not intended to meet the local needs but to supply a far away market with the help of subsidies, the settlers of Gush suffer from the same problems as all the large-scale farmers of the developed world.

The settlers started coming in the 1970s, buoyed by the euphoria of the victory in 1967, pioneers driving the stakes of Israel into what was billed as vacant land. The enthusiasm, and the subsidies, supported the expansion of the settlements until the falling agricultural prices and the violence of both Intifadas took the shine off the place. There were fewer and fewer newcomers. The community started to turn inward, growing mainly as a result of the large number of children in each family; the dynamics shifted.

And then there is the oppressing proximity of "the other," which they try to ignore, except for their own employees. They are wary of those, as well. "The other" is visible from any small rise in the ground, with his gray concrete buildings that look sinister and aggressive. "The other," whose muezzins are heard chanting every evening and every morning, and whom you

vaguely see when you make your way to Israel — fugitive silhouettes in the fields, cars on the road going the other way, houses like outposts on both sides of the road. "The other" who is ironically called to mind all the more forcibly by the military posts, the barred gates to all the villages, by the barriers even inside of Gush, by the jeeps that are constantly on patrol, by the staccato of machine gun fire and the shattering crack of shells fired every night, on a regular basis, at the shadow — real or imaginary — of the invisible attacker. Fear? Anxiety, at least, a never-ending sense of apprehension, justified by a Qassam smashing through a room or a greenhouse, by the death of someone you used to know or used to see around, a month ago, three months ago, two years ago. The community thus sees itself as being founded on the blood of martyrs. But the blood is a two-sided symbol, for it is known well, if never put into words, that it corresponds to the blood of the undeniable victims on the other side.

Can anyone really envision a future for his children, for his

grandchildren, when "the other" is already in the millions and when Sharon himself has sounded the retreat?

The settlers really don't believe it any more, since in February of 2004 when Prime Minister Ariel Sharon announced the withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. Everyone talks politics, of course, in Gush — as much as "the others" do, on the other side. This evening, in his sitting room, Socrate crosses swords with Nissim, a settler from Judaea (the West Bank).

Nissim: "The only problem with the Arabs in Gaza is that they are all poor people that the Egyptians got rid of."

Socrate: "Why? Because here is the hub to go to work in Israel.

Nissim: "The Arabs say, 'In a hundred years, the Jews will be a minority [in Israel].' As far as that goes, there are only two solutions: either to form a bloc against Arab-Muslim imperialism, or to leave."

Socrate: "No, we can make more Jews come from outside. If there is peace, if there is democracy, people will come. You want to kill the Arabs, to throw them out? The only solution is democracy. If you try to smash them, you'll have Europe and the United States all over us."

Nissim: "Follow your scenario to its logical conclusion: shall we leave Israel?"

Socrate: "If the right policies are put in place, we can stay. The world has changed since the times of historical Zionism. You can't do things like that anymore, with massacres, everything gets shown on television."

Avraham: "Yesterday evening on TV, Liebermann said that we'll have to separate Israel in two, the Arabs on one side, the Jews on the other."

Socrate: "If you always see them as enemies, we'll never get out of this. What do you do when there are a lot of flies? You live with them. We can make a deal with the moderate Arabs."

Avraham: "The real solution will only come from Him." He points a finger toward the heavens.

The settlers are lost. Like Avraham, who gets up at dawn to go and prepare the synagogue before prayers: "We came here twenty-five years ago, we made everything ourselves, and now they are telling us to leave. We are disoriented."

Socrate Soussan is no doubt a rarity among the settlers, but he knows that, to be a man, you have to leave paradise: "I don't agree with leaving," he says, "but we don't have any choice anymore. You can't put a soldier every ten yards. You can't make people suffer, even if you are in the right. The community is putting a lot of pressure on us to dig in our heels, but a lot of people want to get the hell out of here. They've had enough of watching their neighbors get killed. They see how good it is outside, it's normal, they have trouble earning a living here. Those who have money have already started to leave. And when you see empty houses, there's no point in staying any longer."

The sun goes down on Gush Qatif and night falls, punctuated by the sound of guns. The children, perhaps, dream of a more peaceful world, where one can go to the beach without passing an armored vehicle and barb wire. The adults, at the bottom of their hearts, have made their choice: they will leave.

Waging war

This morning, two men were shot to death by Israelis. Their bodies were taken to the hospital at Chifa, the main hospital in Gaza. Things are even more agitated there than usual, today. In the foyer of the mortuary, hundreds of men are waiting, talking with voices lowered and smoking cigarettes. Photographers, radio reporters and TV cameramen are there, too. In the hall, people are jamming together to get a look at the bodies, which are lying in the next room. The door to the sanctuary half-opens from time to time as close relatives come and go. The atmosphere is heavy with emotion; everyone has tears in his eyes.

A little later the bodies are carried out on stretchers hoisted on men's shoulders. They shout, almost chant, slogans, and it is a race more than a walk. At the beginning of the procession some men in black, hooded, wearing cell phones and grenades in their belts, fire occasional shots in the air. The hordes, exclusively male, descend the main thoroughfare of Gaza, Omar Al-Mokhtar Boulevard, nearly two kilometers long. They shout, tireless; the pall bearers taking turns without any direction but without missing a step. Shops are closed. The bodies are draped in the Palestinian flag. A Peugeot 504 equipped with loudspeakers leads the procession, which resembles a

PRECEDING PAGES
L: IN AL-JAYA, GAZA.
R: MEMBERS OF THE AL-AQSA MARTYRS BRIGADES IN FRONT OF THE OMAR MOSQUE, IN GAZA, DURING THE FUNERAL FOR TWO OF THEIR FELLOW COMBATANTS.

demonstration.

There is a sense of heightened emotion more than of anger: it feels less like a show of aggressiveness than the practice of a ritual, the release of energy in a customary and terrible ceremony, the crucible in which the community reinforces itself. The procession arrives at the big Omar mosque. The throngs remain crowded in the streets. At the entrance the men in black uniform wait, surrounded by flags. Inside the mosque, the two bodies are laid out in a side room. The men who have gathered here crowd together, each taking a turn to look into the livid faces of the two who were killed, touching them, kissing them. Their keffiehs cover just about the entire head, all except the eyes, the nose, the face — apparently all that was not destroyed by the bullet. In the vast building with its bare walls, lit by neon lights hung from iron bars in the stone columns, the faithful kneel on the worn red wall-to-wall carpet. They listen to the sermon; we catch a few words — America, Treblinka, Auschwitz. Then, there is silence.

The one who is leading the prayer launches from time to time into an incantation; everyone prostrates himself.

Finally, backs are straightened and the men rise and quickly step outside. The bodies are lifted and the crowd sets out again with the cries of a fast race, dashing through poorer and poorer streets, passing a horse grazing, on a lead tied to a stake, passing a sheepfold — to the outskirts of town where huts and fields are interspersed. The crowd makes a detour along a dusty lane: we have to go past the family so that one more time the mother, the sisters, the daughters can embrace the sons who died so suddenly. The stretcher doesn't wait, the mother has just time enough to place a kiss on the face of her son while the women in black, gathered on the doorstep, moan, weep, wring their hands. Then the crowd ebbs, constrained in these narrow passages, and the father, in a keffieh, with a white moustache, takes off in a car where he burrows into a handkerchief, his eyes already reddened by tears.

The procession is quiet now. It goes back down towards the fields where the cemetery is located and threads its way between the concrete houses, the trees and the cacti. At the exit of an industrial park, it winds past olive groves, rusted fences, junked cars, sheds. Finally, we all arrive at the cemetery, where a pit has just been dug. The men crowd around, their hands on the tombstone, and some of them drop handfuls of soil into the grave. Everyone squats and a man begins a prayer, which transforms into an incantation; the attendees respond, hands open in front of them. Two young men, really still teenagers, gently weep. Then everyone stands up and goes to greet the men of the family who are standing near the entrance to the cemetery, ringed by cypress trees. People are wearing their every-day clothes — the news came just a little while ago, and everyone came straight away.

The following day is the mourning ceremony. On Al-Chahâf Street, a huge tent has been set up and decorated with posters

Members of the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades in front of the Omar Mosque, Gaza, during the funeral for two combatants.

representing the martyrs, as well as posters with verses from the Koran written out in magic marker. Dozens of white plastic chairs are lined up perpendicular to the street. The members of the clan come to sit there, with friends, neighbors, people from the surrounding streets. First they stop to shake hands with the male members of the immediate family, who sit in a row on the other side of the street, against a building. Young boys pass through the tent and offer us a glass of coffee, an earthenware jar of dates, a vat of water to put the glass back into after drinking from it. Loudspeakers have been installed, and from time to time words issue forth, relatives sharing words of anger or comfort, for example, and another man who lost a son as a martyr. People sit, they wait, and they talk with their neighbors.

We learn that the two young men who were killed were members of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, the military branch of Fatah. They were on an operation, trying to get into Israel through the fence, on the side by Beit Hanoun, under the heavy

fog at dawn. But they were spotted, and shot. Ashraf Nasser Al-Mubayed was twenty-five years old; he had finished his studies in accountancy the previous year and found a job as a civil servant in the Palestinian Authority. He just got engaged two months before; he was supposed to marry soon. The photograph on the poster was taken during his engagement party. His cousin Samir Salman Al-Mubayed, 23 years old, had been out of work for three years. He hadn't gone to college. His family is totally destitute, one of his friends tells us; there are twenty of them and not one has a job.

They talk about the Israeli incursions, the feeling of helplessness and not being able to defend oneself, of the eighty people this neighborhood has lost since the beginning of the Intifada, of the trees the Israelis cut down in the surrounding area, of the shots fired at anyone who gets too close to the No man's land next to the fence. They also go into detail about the death of the two martyrs, how a tank ran over their bodies, crushing them.

The mourning goes on for three days. Only the men come here. For the women, this is a time to pay a visit to the residence of the family of the martyrs.

Thus goes the ceremony, so frequent throughout the territory. There are demonstrations when combatants are killed, but everyone who is killed by the occupiers is called a "martyr," whether they are resistance fighters or civilians. And every family has a martyr.

Everywhere, the posters of shahids catch one's eye, good-quality portraits, well drawn, and restrained in color. This popular art of Gaza is unique in the world. Painter Faïz Al-Hosni is one of its masters. He is 52., and he lives in the Shati refugee camp. "I arrived from Algeria in 1992. I studied art in Egypt; then I taught in Algeria. Before the Intifada, I made normal pictures, had exhibitions in Algeria, in Jordan, in Gaza. When the Intifada came, I decided to paint the martyrs. We

A Rafah woman at home, holding the portrait of her son who was martyred.

owe them something; these young men sacrifice themselves for the freedom of the people. It is my duty to paint them, so that they live on in the collective memory.

"Others were scratching on the walls; I was the first to make pictures there. One day, a martyr died. His friends asked me to make a picture of him; another painter had let them down and the friends asked me to do the job. That was in 2001. In the beginning, I would just do the portrait on a plain background. Then I invented a sunset, then details, some context. Sometimes, the family tells me what to put. I prefer making the decision myself; people don't have much background in this and they haven't developed their taste. I would like to draw other decorative elements, but people wouldn't understand.

"The martyr's family comes to see me; they bring an identity photograph which I use as a model. Or sometimes it is a militant group that asks me to do it, or friends. I choose the scene by listening to the story that they tell me." Two paintings are in the works in his studio, one of them just beginning to be sketched out in black. It was ordered by the Al-Aqsa Brigade, the day before yesterday. "They usually come late, a few months after, because they don't have the money to do it immediately. A large painting on the street costs $150."

Faïz is a member of Fatah. "If the artist doesn't transmit what he sees, he's not an artist."

10:25 PM. Two ambulances go by, sirens screaming. They are bringing bodies to the Chifa hospital. Cars are honking their horns, all lights blazing. An incursion has been under way since morning in the Zeitoun district. Our taxi driver turns on his flashers and blows his horn, too, looking to make it to Salah al-Din as fast as possible, where men in green vests, their faces hidden by black hoods, carry AK47s. Some of them have rocket launchers. There are also many young men on the road; cars have been burned.

An Associated Press photographer, Kevin Frayer, tells us

that he was there at eight o'clock. The tanks drove into Gaza. There was a lot of shooting, bullets and shells. Kevin was thrown face-first to the ground. We later learned that eight men died, five combatants and three civilians, this January 28.

Bloodstains spatter the grass on a lot where building materials are piled up: somebody was killed here. On the roof of an armored Land Rover belonging to a television station, a cameraman is filming. He wears a bulletproof jacket marked "PRESS," and he has a helmet hanging from his belt. One of his colleagues is wearing his helmet. Donkey carts go by. Children have come to see, drawn by curiosity, a sense of mischief and a desire to be part of whatever is going on.

We are near to the Star Co. factory. On a road that leads out to the fields, a corrugated tin shed is riddled with bullet holes. This is a furniture factory; dozens of chairs are piled up. I go up to the second floor with a group of men. Through the window, we can see the countryside, and a hill about two hundred yards

away with kids perched on top. Suddenly, they jump up and run away: military jeeps are coming up the next road. In the shed, a man hollers for us to get out. We rush down, to find the TV teams running back from the corner of street where they had been setting up to film. It's a cavalcade dashing back to the main road, everyone, combatants, journalists and youngsters, galloping in the direction of the city while the cars get into gear. I jump on the back of a moving 4 x 4 and grab Jerome, who climbs in. Three hundred yards further, everyone slows down, stops, looks back: in fact, the jeeps and tanks are not coming. A group of militants sets out again for the front, armed with a bazooka. The road is cleared, the cars go back. The crowd scatters.

Our taxi goes ahead, to the cement factory, which is still working in spite of all the excitement; trucks and concrete-mixers are coming and going. The road bears the white traces of the caterpillar treads of a tank. It was no big deal; the storm blows over as quickly as it came up. A teenager, who speaks English quite well, tells us what happened: "This morning, I was sleeping; my brother woke me up. There were an enormous number of tanks on the road, nineteen or twenty, lined up by the factory. They all fired straight ahead, not at the houses along the road. But the houses in this area are already badly damaged. I didn't move until the tanks went away, at about ten o'clock. Then I went down, and there were ambulances all over. Ten people were killed, combatants or normal people, I don't really know. People were picking up bones, flesh; I touched some of it.

"No one knows why they came. There's nothing we can do. There were two bulldozers, too, that tore up some trees. The tanks fired a shell into a metals warehouse." While he was talking, we could hear shots in the distance.

We go back to where the furniture factory is, about a half-mile back. There is a crowd. A child goes by, with an umbrella and a backpack; another one is carrying a bouquet of yellow flowers. Four armed men in hoods seem to be up to something, at

MEMBER OF A PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY SECURITY SERVICE


وداعاً
الأب القائد

the top of a hill of sand. A man sporting a white scarf sits astride a horse decked out in pompoms, bareback, and this eccentric elegance appears quite natural. Several kids come along with their bicycles, each one more decorated than the last with flags, fur, or colored tennis balls. It's over.

Early in the afternoon, a funeral procession goes down Omar Al-Mokhtar again, with black cars, loudspeakers, flags. Two bodies go by on stretchers. A little later another crowd arrives at a trot, surrounding yet another two bodies wrapped in bloody white linen.

As strange as it seems, it was not until our third trip that we really felt that this was a country at war. Between the allure of a city that has been destroyed but is still full of charm and an impressive energy, and witnessing the oppression of the population, it took us some time to perceive that these people were not only victims but that there were indeed combatants among them, supported by a population that is battered but determined to hold on — and especially since the Israeli army doesn't make a distinction between civilians and combatants. That obviously radicalizes even the most peaceful of the civilians, as Dr. Farouk Abou Samra explains in one sentence: "They are making a mistake; if they destroy the house that I worked ten years to build, they make me, a simple doctor, into a combatant."

For the population, the fact of just living normally in spite of the violence is a deliberate act. Oussama Mukhallati, an agricultural engineer with a very soft voice and who has recently given birth to a boy, Nabil, says: "I ask myself: is it the right thing to bring a child into this world? But normality is a form of resistance, and we have the right to live in this country."

It is a war. The resistance is constituted as an organized army, equipped, it is true, at a level that is almost ridiculous compared to its adversary but resisting step by step the attacks of the occupying forces and even exerting constant pressure on

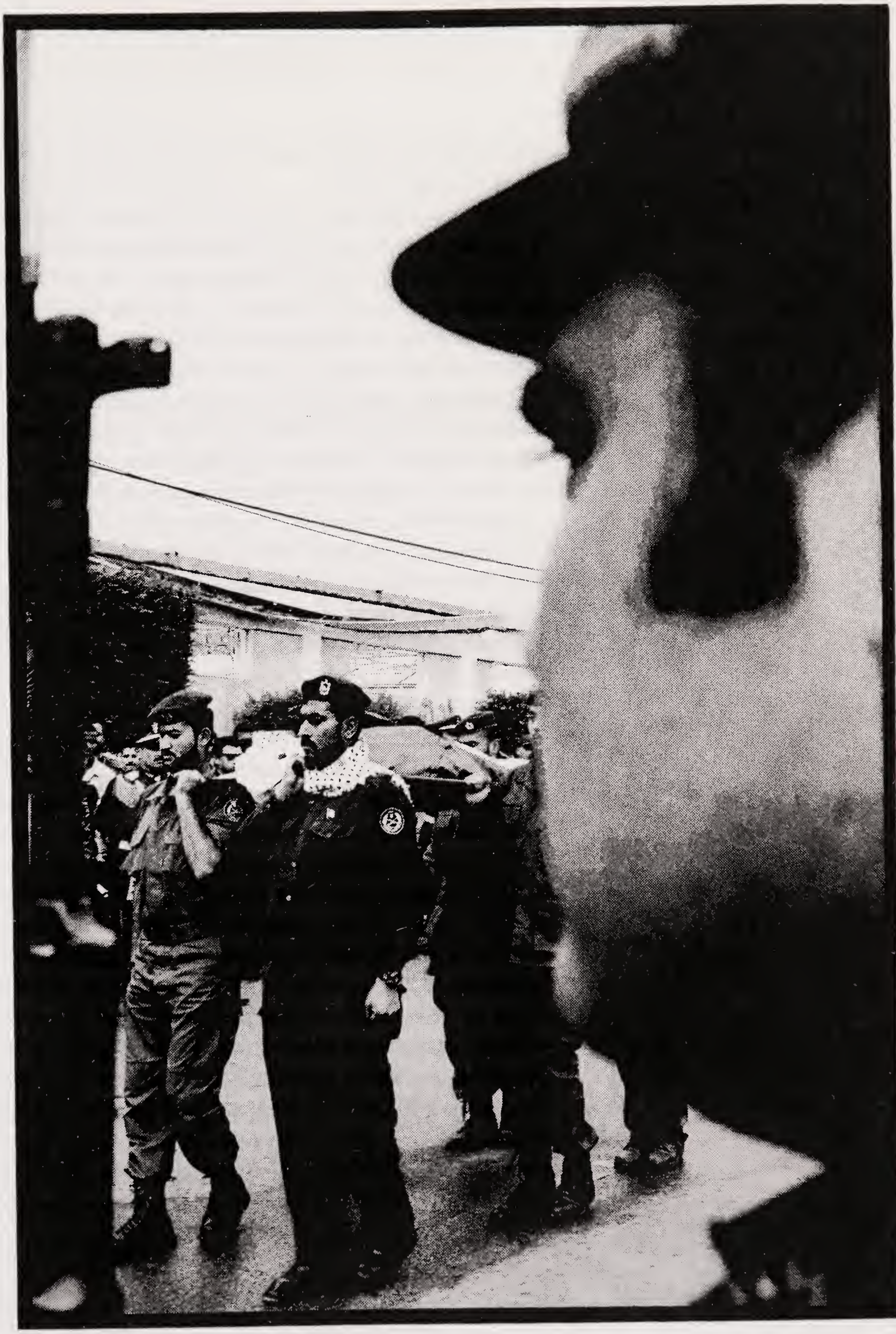
Soldiers from a Palestinian Authority security service.

the "settlements" by bombarding them with rockets with a stubborn regularity, whatever the cost. As for the occupier, it is difficult to avoid the impression that it is conducting a war of conquest — measured only in meters, perhaps, but in which he is incontestably gaining ground. In the name of "security," Israel widened all the frontiers: at Rafah, as we saw above, at Al-Mawassi, where the settlers established new greenhouses early in 2004 along the access roads leading to the settlements, thus placing more territory out of bounds, and similarly all along the border. Before the second Intifada, Israel controlled — i.e. occupied or barred access to — 17% of the 365 km² of the Gaza Strip; at the end of 2004, the proportion was close to 40%.

This war is precisely dated: it began in the aftermath of September 28, 2000, the day when Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount (Al-Aqsa) in Jerusalem. This act caused a revolt by the Palestinians, which has been called the second Intifada. But this one is very different from the first, which took place between 1987 and 1993, and during which young Palestinians mostly launched stones. As Jamila Bakroun, a blind teacher 39 years old, says, "The current Intifada is far worse than the first, because it has been militarized on both sides: there are F 16s, helicopters, that we didn't have to contend with before." And, on the side of the resistance, machine guns, mines and rocket launchers.

But they didn't have weapons right away. In the first weeks of the Intifada, the young men fought with their bare hands. Mohammed X told us: "During the Intifada, I was a leader. I threw stones in Netzarim. That went on for months, here in Netzarim, I would get back to Beit Laya by foot at around eleven o'clock or midnight. There were thousands of young men at some places, but far fewer in the front, where "the Death Club" was — that's where stone-throwers and the machine guns came together. Ninety-nine percent of it was courage. I was in the Death Club. You would find old men there, and some young people, but no kids. It touches on the dignity of being.

BURIAL FOR A MEMBER OF THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY SECURITY FORCES, NOVEMBER 15



The soldiers are afraid when they see people like that — the thief is always afraid."

But "the thief" was well armed. The only thing you could do with him was to get yourself killed. Ibrahim Oudh, a twenty-year-old, told us, "When Sharon was on Al-Aqsa, people went mad. In the first six months, I went two or three times to demonstrations to throw stones. But it was very violent, there were casualties, martyrs, five or ten died every day, it was war, I was afraid. I was especially afraid when the planes came." Fadel Rajab, twenty-five years old, said, "At the beginning of the second Intifada, we started to fight, more or less like everyone. And then we stopped: there is no way to fight against a tank or a plane. We don't have the weapons for that."

Then, the main Palestinian political groups chose the path of military resistance, and it has gone on escalating ever since. As a man we met at the used car market in (there is no place to buy a new car in Gaza) summarizes it: "We want peace. But if Sharon wants war, we do, too."

The resistance became increasingly effective. According to a statement issued by the settlers of Gush Qatif, of the 67 Israeli soldiers killed between September 2000 and February 2004, more than three-quarters were killed since the beginning of 2003. The destruction of armored vehicles, even tanks, is certainly not frequent but it is no longer extraordinary. In Jabaliya, the tank tires arrayed around the flowerbed on the median in the middle of an intersection testify to that. The resistance secured an impressive success by destroying the camp of Abu Houli in June. In December, it succeeded in severely damaging a tower in Rafah, once again by means of powerful explosives conveyed by tunnel. A journalist from Palestinian television, Mohammed Juda, based in Rafah, told us: "These two last years, the resistance in Rafah has become ferocious. They had never blown up an armored tank, but they did it in May. They have camps where they learn how to use the

RPG 7 [anti-tank rocket launchers]. They are much better organized than two years ago."

The effectiveness of the resistance explains why checking people for weapons is such an obsession of the Israeli army. Even though, at the same time, the Palestinian resistance in Gaza must be the only struggle for national liberation that has ever been so short of weapons. Vietnam depended on the USSR and China, Algeria was supplied by Egypt. The Palestinians have almost nothing, except the Kalashnikovs which they manage to bring in and whatever they can manufacture on an artisanal basis. For example, a Hamas fighter told us, "We make 150-lb mines; if they were manufactured outside, 15 lbs would be enough to create the same effect."

It's all about the tunnels of Rafah. "They try to bring in anti-aircraft weapons or Katyushas by the tunnels," says Captain Jacob Dallal, a spokesman of the Israel Defense Forces IDF, in a telephone interview in November. "Qassams are toys compared to Katyushas, which could threaten Ashkelon, at the north end of the territory. If we didn't constantly take action against the tunnels, the balance of forces would be shifted." Is it a real threat? According to Kulab, a Hamas military chief in the south, "Weapons come in by tunnel but Israelis also bring them in, especially ammunition. The arms trade is an international mafia." One of his comrades adds: "The Egyptian secret service hardly lets anything through that's bigger than bullets or a Kalashnikov, at most an RPG."

Everywhere in the territory, groups are organized to act and to fight during the Israeli incursions. They generally belong to one of the three principal armed movements — the Ezzedine Al-Qassam Brigade, the armed branch of Hamas, the Al-Qods Brigade (Al-Qods means "Jerusalem") of the Islamic Jihad and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, the armed branch of Fatah, the movement founded by Yasser Arafat. On the ground, these groups seem to collaborate rather easily, acting mostly through

local groups like the one we met in Rafah, in a very exposed corner of O Block.

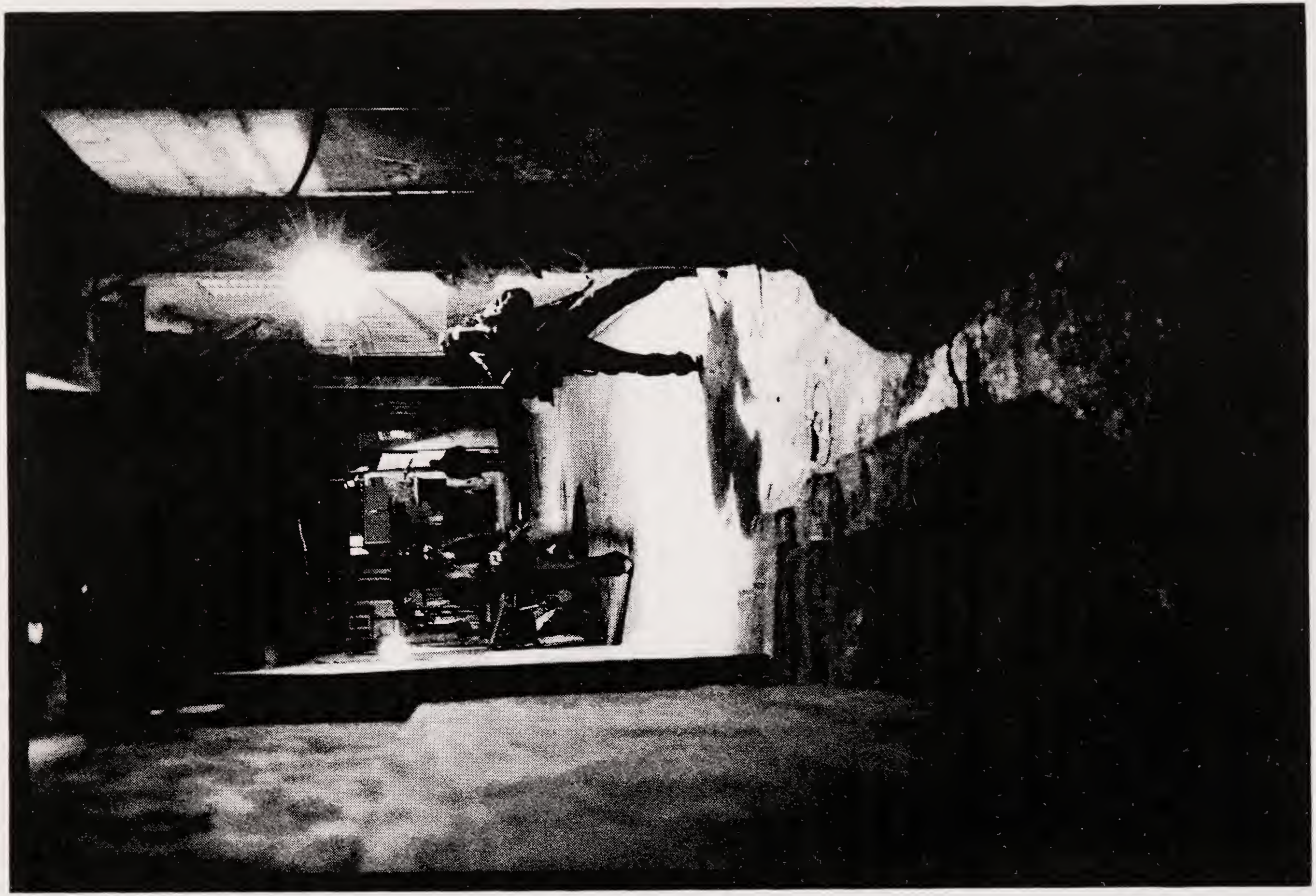
"We patrol at night," says our interlocutor in the empty apartment of a building located just a hundred yard from the wall. We don't belong to any organization; we're just ordinary citizens. It is fear for our children that impels us to make these patrols. During incursions, people try to escape, the children cry, people scream. With the young one hurt or killed, the older people cannot get away during the incursions. We decided to conduct these patrols to help people escape. If the tanks come, the combatants evacuate all the families to their relatives or to UNRWA schools. They carry the old people who cannot walk. Sometimes, they sound an alarm using the loudspeakers of the mosques.

"Some of us are armed. Others put up barricades to bar the road to tanks; and they have explosives which they manufactured. The mines are placed in front of houses that are already destroyed. When a vehicle comes, the guy connects the cable and the battery to set off the explosion. In other streets, there are two guys with explosives. The Israelis don't use the main streets; they're afraid of the mines. To avoid them, they destroy houses to clear a path. The patrols on our corner transmit information to the other districts, by cell phone. There are groups all along the border.

"This is a real war, and we are learning how to defend ourselves. When mines are placed, the other resistance fighter lure the soldiers by shooting at them. The mines are put in place when there is fog, so that no one can be seen by the spy plane. There is always fog at Rafah after three in the morning."

That evening, we join the fighters of this district. The armed and hooded men divide up and cover all lanes that radiate from a larger street. The chief of the group belongs to Islamic Jihad. A combatant is posted at the corner of a lane that is blocked at the other end by a wall of cinder blocks. Another one, across the

RAFAH, A SELF-DEFENSE PATROL IN THE VICINITY OF O BLOCK.



street, kneels and points his rifle. "Go, fast!" We hear a report, far away. "The watchtower is over that way." Several combatants lie on the ground in shooting position. Mines and Qassams are ready, the chief tells us, adding: "I don't group too many combatants together, that way we don't attract the helicopters." The lanes are dark, only dimly lit by the bulbs above the doors. We hear the television in a house. "When the situation is dangerous, we ask the families to turn out all the lights. Every night, the chief comes to inspect the fighters. It is very organized, we don't do anything on our own; we ask the chief. If there is no contact, everyone knows what he has to do." Each group has a "sinao": a walkie-talkie manufactured in Gaza. Communicating by portable phone is dangerous; one can be located and listened to. "Do you hear the tank? A tank is moving! Let's go back." A humming is heard.

In the larger street, fighters are hidden on the second floor of an abandoned house pocked by rockets. A cock sings, the moon is full, and the sky is cloudy. Hooded fighters show me photographs of martyrs on the screens of their portable telephones. We cross other lanes in the camp. A little before midnight, the chief says that he has to leave us, he has things to do. We make it back to our starting point. "Hands up!" shout the combatants in the house, before recognizing us.

The night is calm. There's some gunfire at about three o'clock, and more awakens us in the morning, when the roosters are crowing. We find out that the day before, November 23, will turn out to have been a historic day: the first since the beginning of Intifada that no one was wounded or killed on the Palestinian side.

At midnight we go to the district of Shejaia, at the gates of Gaza. The air this August night is soft. Everywhere, combatants are posted to watch for possible incursions or the Israelis who, apparently, come in unmarked police cars. We stop at a street corner, beside two men in black tee-shirts and hoods, armed with Kalashnikovs. They are looking for the chief. At the edge of

the road, Al Battar, a rocket launcher is posed on a tripod, and it looks big enough to demolish a bulldozer. The leader arrives, a bearded man in battledress, who doesn't camouflage his face: he is already well-known to the Israeli services, there's no point in disguising himself anymore. He has lost his left arm. He tells us not to take photographs; the pictures could give away their location.

We set out again, rolling quietly through the streets. Here and there, pedestrians are going home, men are having a talk on the sidewalk, sitting in chairs; a furtive shade slips into a building and lets the door slam. Another patrol stops us. One of the men taps on the hood of the car; our guide pulls out his identity card and explains. The hooded guy — he carries a Kalashnikov with a sight — make a call on his "sinao." OK, we can pass, but no photographs. "Be careful, they've announced that some Israelis would come tonight in a taxi; no need to have the combatants fire on you." Our yellow Skoda continues to drive through the night. The men from Hamas are posted in four large streets that go through the district. Black shadows, often in pairs. On another street, two armed men are sitting. They see us coming; they get up and slowly move back to the recess of a wall. People in the neighborhood are content, apparently; they feel protected. The Israelis don't come any more, or at least less. Mines are posed on Salah al-Din, attached to cables that are fed across the road; they are removed in the morning. Here is a mosque, surrounded by a vast barren land, at the top of a small rise. From there Qassams are fired; the land is vacant, so the Israelis cannot destroy houses in reprisal.

In November, we can meet some Hamas rocket launchers. Hamas became the strongest movement in the Gaza Strip. The word "Hamas" is the acronym of Harakat Al-moukawama Al-islamiya, which means "Movement of Islamic Resistance." An offshoot from the Moslem Brotherhood, it was created by sheik Yassin in December 1987. It too has a military branch, the Ezzedine Al-Qassam Brigade, named for one of first Palestinian

resistance fighters in the 1930s.

Our contact comes looking for us in his car and takes us along to another place, where he leaves us in a Volkswagen bus. Next to the driver sits a hooded man with a rifle; he is introduced as a kind of coordinator between the political and military branches of Hamas. The van backfires as we drive toward a district in the south of Gaza, not very far from the beach. We head toward an open area, very wide, and sown with young vines. Five armed and hooded men are there, in uniforms, with new boots. A cameraman with a small digital camera is to film the meeting between the foreign journalists and the combatants — probably with very disappointing results, as the light is very poor. Hamas often films its operations and broadcasts them on its Internet site, by CD, or via interested televisions. The night is cold, clear and calm. The field we are on is surrounded by buildings. The colony of Netzarim is one kilometer away, we see the military lights. Combatants are on watch every evening, ready to react to any incursion.

The leader of the group says: "We have to defend our rights and drive out the Jews off our land. We send rockets on the settlements to tell them that they will have never peace as long as they are there. We want them to feel bad. We have to do it if we want freedom, even if that has consequences for the Palestinian population."

They don't shoot, this evening.

One combatant is armed with a copy of a B7, called a "Yassin." It is a homemade anti-tank missile device. Jerome, who sees it up close, notes that it is made with wooden ends. "We have been making them here for a few months," says the coordinator. "There are five or six groups of five to seven combatants in this corner. They observers the settlements and let us know about the tank movements and their number. During the day, the combatants live a normal life, they go to the university. Those who operate the Qassams of type 1 and 2 are especially at risk. They wear hoods to protect themselves from

spies. Sometimes, one of them gets killed; it happened last month.

"The Hamas strategy," he continues in the dark, "is to build an army. Our dream is to found an Islamic State. We are autonomous. We have secret weapons manufacturers, we make Uzis [a machine gun created in Israel in 1954] and rifles. Weapons also come from Egypt, by the tunnels, and from the settlements, where the Mafia sells some and where certain settlers support our mission. We developed the Qassams 3 and 4, which have a respective range of fifteen and forty kilometers, to reach Ashdod and Tel-Aviv. They are operational. The political leadership will decide when they will be used. At the moment, we have to give diplomacy a chance. If Israel withdraws from Gaza and the West Bank, we could stop the attacks."

Back in Khan Yunis, in a building like any other, down a bumpy street. Downstairs, in the entryway, a child is sleeping on a mattress laid on the ground. We hope to meet some of the resistance fighters, and perhaps Moussa Koulab, the military head of Hamas for the southern part of the territory. Later we are told that gathering a group of resistance fighters together in the same place constitutes a risk.

Seven men are waiting for us, some on plastic armchairs, the others on mattresses. They are young, and could be anybody — except for one of them, his leg amputated and with dense, hard gaze. Behind his thick beard and pleasant smile, he looks to be the strong man of the band. At first they courteously ask us a series of questions about our work and our approach. They are curious what is Europe's opinion on Palestine. Then, each one introduces himself.

Mahmoud: "I spent six years in prison during the first Intifada. In prison, I was never depressed, because I knew that I had done my duty for my people."

Ramsi: "Me, too. I spent six years in prison. After high

school, I wanted to go on to higher education, but I didn't succeed in leaving Gaza. My fate, like that of many people here, is to get to know the world through television. I like any form of resistance against the occupation."

Mohammed: "I lost my leg for a good cause, but I am a victim of the occupation." In fact, Mohammed Naïm Siam escaped an assassination attempt on June 25, 2003. It was the first time that a drone was used during such an attack. Luckily for him, the missile struck the car behind his. Later in the evening, he has me touch his leg — it is a prosthesis.

Massoua: "I'm a teacher. There is no future for my pupils. I don't know what to say to them. All we can explain to young people is that we are occupied by a great military force, and that the only solution is to resist."

Hossam: "I'm unemployed. I can't go to Israel to work, I would be arrested, even if I didn't take part in the resistance. I was lucky to have a little land to cultivate, but it was razed."

Question: "What is the resistance called?"

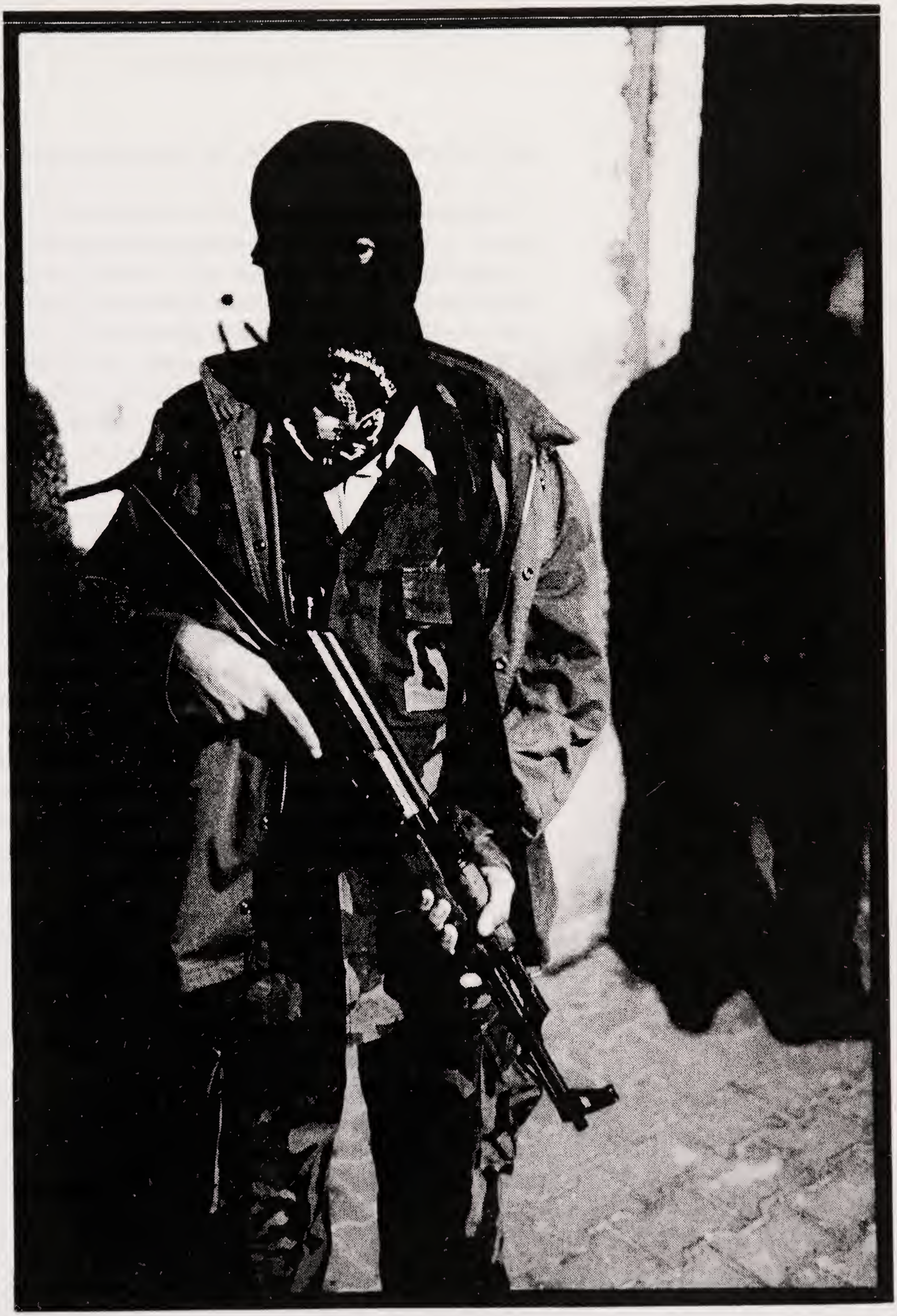
Salah: "From the religious point of view, it is Jihad [combat for God]. For the Palestinians, the situation is personal: we have the responsibility of driving out the Israeli occupiers, because nobody will help us to do it. The resistance is supported by all the Palestinians: the resistance fighters are those who are have freed themselves from the desire to stay alive and who take up weapons."

Mohammed: "There isn't any other solution, only resistance. There isn't a single house that doesn't have a martyr, a prisoner or a casualty. It has become very clear that no citizen will give in."

Massoua: "Even if they change their stripes, Israel won't change its attitude to us. Because, for them, Israel is the chosen people, and that means all the rest are slaves. We are not slaves."

The day fades. Salah brings a gas lamp. The electric light is out; there are frequent power cuts in the city. We stop after

RAFAH, A SHEET-DEFENSE PATROL IN THE VICINITY OF O BLOCK.



little while for prayer. Four or five of the men pray standing up in the next room.

Mahmoud: "I was born in 1967 in Khan Yunis, and that is where I've always lived. I started by throwing stones, then by wearing a hood. I was a student. But I couldn't go on with my studies: in 1988, they caught me at home and I spent a month in prison. In October 1989 they came again, but I got away.

They made my family get out and they destroyed the house, they crushed the whole neighborhood. I went home in the morning, and I learned that the identity cards of all the people in the neighborhood had been confiscated and that a hundred and fifty young people had been arrested. They said they would all be let go if I gave myself up; so I did. I was tortured for 23 days, at the central prison in Gaza. For example, they put us in the soldiers' hallway, our hands tied and faces covered, without eating or sleeping; when they saw us getting sleepy, they hit us. I often went in to see the security officer. Those who didn't answer correctly were sent to the cold room, arms and legs tied. We were splashed with cold or hot water; then we waited six or seven hours in the cold before being brought back to the officer. His only goal was that you confess to something. After nine days, I started to confess. At the end of seven months, I was condemned to life imprison for having attacked the Israeli army and having assassinated their collaborators. The judge asked me: 'Do you feel you guilty?' I said, 'No, absolutely not. And after I get out, I'll do it again.' Because of this, the judge added twenty-five years to my life sentence. I was released in 1994 after the Oslo accords. I went back to normal life; I worked with the Palestinian Authority, I got married, I built a house. And then this Intifada started. We've begun to fight using our own means. I belong to the Al-Aqsa Brigades, myself."

Mohammed: "A very important point that should not be overlooked is the immense force of the Israelis; we know that they have far more power than we do. But we wouldn't want to close the door of resistance to the new generations. God alone

knows when our liberation will come. But we must continue to fight until the end of our lives."

Salah: "We seven, here, we are targets. We are never perfectly at ease at home; we are careful when we get into a car; we cannot go to Gaza [City] or we risk being intercepted in Abu Houli. We have to keep an eye on who's using a cell phone, cars going by, watch who we take a ride with, make sure we're not in the line of fire from a watchtower. We know that they follow rumors."

At this moment Moussa Koulab pops up; we've been told he is the most wanted man in the southern zone. Cheerful exclamations greet his arrival. He makes a theatrical entrance, and the discussion is well underway, the room, if one may say so, has gotten quite warm. He is of average size, broad, wears a small beard, short hair, and glasses. He often smiles and speaks gently but with precision, like a man accustomed to being listened to. He is rather elegantly dressed, and his black jacket covers the holster with the Smith and Wesson that he will bring out when the time is right. After having greeted each man, he sits on a mattress beside Mohammed, who frequently rests his hand on his shoulder or his knee in an affectionate gesture among brothers in combat.

Question: "Is it useful to fire rockets on the settlements or cities in Israel, given the harshness of the reprisals?"

Moussa: "It's true, the costs are very high. In reprisal for shooting rockets on the settlements, they destroy fields and houses. But the resistance must continue, because we don't have any other choice."

Mohammed: "It's like a tax the people pay for resistance. Otherwise, what? Just cross our arms and do nothing?"

Moussa: "We've been waiting 54 years for a peaceful solution. Oslo didn't bring even the minimum of the minimum to us. Palestinian youth isn't allowed the least right to life. The suffering is enormous. The Palestinians dream of living in dignity."

Mohammed: "Listen, look at this. I just received a message on my cell phone." He leans forward and shows us his phone; the screen is lit. He reads what it says: "Are you depressed, desperate, are you in debt? Congratulations! You are 100% Palestinian."

Moussa begins again: "After Oslo, the possibility existed that we might live together on the same land. But the Israelis continued to show their teeth and to carry out policies devised to promote religious and racist causes. Thousands of houses were destroyed, children were killed."

Mohammed: "With all that we've suffered, we decreed a fatwa, which is that to kill an Israeli constitutes a prayer to God."

All: "That's right!"

Mohammed: "We should also take account of the damage on the Israeli side. What pushed Sharon to withdraw? Our attacks. Why are there divisions within the Israeli government? Because of our resistance. Our action has had positive results, and that reinforces our determination."

Question: "What did you do after the assassinations of Yassin and Rantasi?" (This was in August; the two political leaders of Hamas were assassinated in the spring.)

Mohammed: "An attack was planned on Sharon's office. A bomb was supposed to blow up in his office, but it was not the will of God; they managed to thwart the plan. Another response was to blow up the military base in the center of Gaza, which took four months of labor and required two tons of homemade explosive. That was done with very simple means: trowels. The operation should have had an even greater impact, with the kidnapping of soldiers, but, in the last two days, we had indications that the Authority had found out about it and we accelerated the plan, which meant we could not pull off the kidnapping."

Moussa: "We hate the smell of blood but, if we are obliged to, we will drink it. If the Israeli people prefer peace, let them

remove the check points, let them open the passage for sick people. Let them leave, let them leave us alone. The day they get out of here, we will break our rifles. I don't like the weapons, they weigh me down."

During the meal to which we are then invited, Moussa Koulab tells us his life story. He was born in 1971. He was a model maker in a fashion shop. His heroes are Ezzedine Al-Qassam, Abdallah Azzam (Bin Laden's professor at the University of Riyadh), Abdelkader Al-Husseini (a Palestinian leader killed in 1948), and Abou Jihad (one of the founders of Fatah). He took up weapons at the age of nineteen, and has lived since then as a fugitive. "It's become a pleasure." He is married, but doesn't have children — "it is the will of God." He's been shot in the back. He spent two and half years in the Palestinian Authority prisons, like many others, in the 1990s when the Authority hunted down the partisans while the Oslo Accords were being put in place. What he hopes for, when the day comes that "weapons will be cast into the sea," is a little house at the edge of the beach, where he will be able to fish. He reads us a poem that he wrote:

I am convinced
My destiny is that of a bird
But, Oh God, even a bird has somewhere to land,
And I am still flying
In this country that runs from the mountain to the sea
Where one sees only prisons, and guard after guard.

Working the fields

What a surprise! We had hoped for it without much believing in it — to have a chance to watch the harvest being brought in, in Gaza, just seemed too paradoxical. But here we were on May 26, at the end of the road, off to the right of the factory, an old New Holland 8080 harvester is going at it, full swing.

The machine shows its age. Its battered yellow paint is marred by rust, but it advances valiantly through the rye field bordered by sheds and palm trees. The machine is preceded by a man on foot, armed with a bill hook, who inspects the ground to remove stones or scraps of iron.

The six-hectare field belongs to a woman who lives in Egypt, we learn from Jamal Al-Hessi. He is cultivating it these days, as he kept a close eye on operations. "We started the day at eight o'clock, when the sun was already a little high in the sky. Dew isn't good for the machine. We couldn't work for three days; a belt in the engine broke and we had no way to repair it. We got one from Israel, so we were able to start working today. Last year, the field was planted in corn. We only managed to bring in a quarter of the harvest because of an Israeli incursion. We alternate crops: corn and rye. We can't use manure, it costs too much. Neither do I have the wherewithal to spread a weed

PRECEDING PAGES:
LE LENCHE BREAK.
R. TEL SULTAN. A LARGE SWATHE OF ARABLE LAND IS RENDERED INACCESSIBLE BY THE PROXIMITY OF THE SETTLEMENTS

killer; we pull the weeds by hand, but it takes a lot of time."

The plowing, done by tractor, and the sowing, which is done by hand, are done toward the end of November, a few days after the rain.

It is now 4:30. Time to stop for a meal. Jamal prays, kneeling beside the wagon where the harvested rye is collected. The others quietly talk and unpack the chicken and rice dish covered with aluminum foil. Each one has a spoon, and eats out of the common dish. They drink soda. Then the work begins again, until the sun goes down.

A harvest in Gaza. It doesn't happen frequently, but neither is it exceptional to see people picking olives, or oranges or working in the greenhouses. Contrary to the preconceived idea that we had before our visits, the Gaza territory is a land of abundance. The exuberance of its nature had struck Pierre Loti in 1894, as he came out of the Sinai desert. At the approaches to the city, he noted, "the green, the new green comes up stronger and stronger on all sides. Life is rising, rising, from everywhere at once, it surrounds us, invades us and enfolds us again, we who are arriving from the strange lands of death. In the evening, we come to the first fields sown by the hand of man, barley fields....On the way, [we walk on] veritable paths bordered with tulips, anemones and asphodels, in the midst of the barley fields which soon cover all the plains with their splendid velvet." And speaking "of the immense green plain," Loti goes on to exclaim: "One would almost think it was Beauce."[6]

One may well take the traveler's word for it; indeed, the intense agricultural activity expands as soon as the edge of the city or the "security zones" allows it. This is further confirmed by the abundance of trees and the flowers whose munificent bursts of colors in the spring, the blazing branches of the flamboyant trees spreading their color-punctured shade, the prolific hibiscus articulating a spectrum from red to orange and garnet, bougainvilleas lofting their gracious flowers toward the

[6] Pierre Loti, *Le Désert*, Paris, Christian Pirot éditeur, 2001, p. 188-190.

sky, cactus, roses, sycamores, palm trees, fig trees — there are so many plants erupting together at the street corners, climbing over the walls, encroaching the boulevards, and adorning the hamlets threatened by tanks. The Palestinians are country folk; they love flowers. The Israelis, it is tempting to say, are city folk; they like stone.

That is not to say, of course, that the countryside of Gaza is covered with vast fields as far as the eye can see, or even that it looks like a series of small farms. Open space is always strewn with houses, and ringed with sheds or factories. The countryside, here, is any space that the urban octopus hasn't caught yet, surviving in the concrete sea, here some flowers, there a field, further on an olive grove, orange trees over t here, and at the gate to a house where a man enjoys the sun in the quiet morning, watching his child playing at his side.

But neither is this pastoral aspect just a relic of days gone by: the land is cultivated with great care, providing precious food in this prison where the routes by which provisions come in may be closed from one day to the next.

Mohammed Alwan, deputy manager of an agriculture support association, PARC, gives us a statistical overview. Agriculture is vital here in this place which is among the most densely populated in the world. "Agriculture in the Gaza Strip covers 170,000 donums [that is, 17,000 ha or 170 km^2]. This land is divided into 40,000 donums of citrus fruits, 60,000 of vegetables, 15,000 of greenhouses, 17,000 of olive trees and fruits, 20,000 of non-irrigated crops like cereals, 10,000 in date palm trees, 2,000 for strawberries. The territory produces export goods — vegetables — half of the 240,000 tons collected each year.

"We also raise livestock, 15,000 head of cattle, and goats. Of course, the cattle are raised in stalls, not in pasture. We are self-sufficient in terms of milk, but we have to import meat from Israel, Australia or New Zealand. A hundred small companies

also produce a total of approximately 10 million chickens each month.

"A major problem for our farmers is the lack of water. We pump approximately 120 billion cubic meters for them per annum, that's 30 more than what the rain brings us. The ground water is overexploited, so that the sea is penetrating the aquifer and the salinity is increasing."

Gaza, indeed, depends for its water supply on the rain that replenishes the ground water. The only river in the territory is the Gaza Wadi, which flows from Mount Hebron. Years ago, when Pierre Loti was passing through, the river was "clear and sparkling." It is now more like a cesspool, due to the fact that most of the water between the source and the border is taken by Israel for its own needs. Gaza Wadi remains an important stopping place for migratory birds in the autumn — ornithologists have observed eighty bird species there.

Every time he sees us coming, Hamad Salim Rajab starts to laugh. The fact is that we stop by to say hello to him every time we are in the country, and this haphazard repetitious circumstance of the reporter's life for some reason creates a comic but always friendly effect. Hamad is a photogenic and sympathetic patriarch, whose life sums up the pastoral adventures of the territory.

Sitting on chairs in the shade of a grapevine running across a trellis at the back of his house built of metal and clay, we talk softly, in this calm corner in the east of Gaza, not far from Beit Hanoun. In the summer, we taste a bunch of white grapes cut from the vine overhead. A pale blue Peugeot 404 passes by; in the harvested field across the street, a boy is walking with a donkey; we hear birds calling, somewhere, and in the distance a rooster; palm trees wave on the horizon.

"I was born in 1935, in Beit Laya, adjacent to here. Before 1948, we had 300 donums between here and Erez. And outside of Ashdod, the family also had 500 donums; we would go there

by camel or donkey. The land was divided between five brothers when my grandfather died. My father also had five sons. When I was a child, there was no electricity, but that wasn't any problem. We grew corn and maize. We had only the rain — but it used to rain more than it does now. There wasn't enough water to do anything else; we one didn't use pumps for irrigation, at the time. There were six or seven cows, some camels to get around on and a donkey to pull the plow.

"After 1948, our lands over there, and our houses, were all destroyed by the Israelis. There was no question of discussing or negotiating anything with them; they'd kill you right away. We couldn't go to our lands anymore. We were left with nothing but the land here. We relocated to Beit Laya; we had no choice.

"Between 1949 and 1952 was the war. No farming. Any time we worked in the fields, the Israelis came and destroyed what we'd done, and they shot at us. There were skirmishes between them and the Egyptian and Saudi soldiers. We got by on food imported from Egypt. Things improved between 1952 and 1956 because the UNRWA started to help people and to distribute food.

"I learned tailoring and I was on my own from 1955 to 1960. I married at the end of 1958. My father came here, where he had land, and he dug a well. My brothers and I joined him around 1960 and we rented the land opposite, to plant orange trees. That made 40 donums, plus the 20 which were ours. We were content; everything was fine. In 1973, we each started to work on the side; my brothers left, while I stayed until 1994, when I moved to the house where I live today.

"But, for three years, we haven't been able to pay the rent for the 40 and the 20 donums are divided between brothers. We haven't got enough left to make a living. I have 4 donums remaining; sometimes I rent 2 more. My two sons work on 9 donums rented by my wife's family. The greenhouses are on my land, and the bean field, behind, is my wife's. We grow

HAMAD SALIM RAJAB WITH THE REMAINS OF HIS OLIVE GROVE THAT WAS TORN UP DURING AN ISRAELI INCURSION.

cucumber, melons, beans, corn.

"I have eight boys and two girls. The first five are married; the first has six children, the second four, the third four, the fourth four, and the fifth three. Both my daughters are married, they don't work. My eldest son works as tile-layer, the second in construction, the third is a civil servant with the Palestinian Authority, two work the land, two work here in Beit Laya with their uncles.

"In 2003, the Israelis came and destroyed the 20 donums of orange trees, trees that were forty years old. We stood in front of the tanks, but to no avail. Now, from here, we see Beit Hanoun. Before, with the trees, we didn't see any of that."

Agriculture isn't limited to the fields, it is going on everywhere, in the smallest recesses of the city. Right in the heart of Gaza, close to Yarmouk Street, a concrete gateway opens onto a path that leads to an olive grove and greenhouses, sloping downwards. It is a virtual farm right in the downtown area, including a hen house where hundreds of hens are nesting. Many are the townsmen who cultivate a garden, like Zoher Al-Kafarna, whose wounded son we met in Beit Hanoun and who shares with his brothers a garden of 1,500 m2 where they grow tomatoes and other vegetables. The refugee camp of Jabaliya, too, with its narrow lanes, is sprinkled with kitchen gardens in places you would never suspect, hidden behind iron doors. Including the one that Hussan Abou Zid shows us. He is thirty-two years old and surprisingly blond. On 500 m2, he cultivates lemons, papaws and olive trees, and a few rows of corn fenced in by a motley assembly of boards and scrap. Hassan is a carpenter but people don't have money for that sort of thing, and so he has no work. In addition there is a greenhouse (that is suffocatingly hot) installed on a terrace — one of those terraces where, besides the solar water heaters, clotheslines, water cisterns and television antennas that make up the ordinary Gaza rooftop, the dovecotes are mainly there to provide organic

waste which makes an excellent fertilizer.

Still, agriculture is badly hurt by Israeli actions. Fields and greenhouses are destroyed without any apparent gain in security: in Beit Hanoun, for example, in June 2003, the Israelis occupied the city and destroyed orange groves, olive trees, greenhouses — the remains are still there, in scrap heaps along the road. Captain Jacob Dallal, spokesman of the IDF, tells us they acted in order to remove the trees where the Qassams shooters used to hide. The trees made it too hard to use overhead observation — that is, drones and planes. It was also done in part, he admits, to put pressure on the local population. Oussama the agronomist sees things differently: "Their policy is, 'If somebody fires a rocket, we will destroy everything in the area that it was fired from.'"

We saw example after example of this devastation, which has transformed the plain in the northeast of the Gaza Strip in large part into a sad yellow carpet of sand. Not to mention the 4-hectare botanical garden that the PARC association had created a half-kilometer from Erez, near our friend Rajab's greenhouses. The garden contained 500 young trees and was intended to be a collection of all the plants of the territory, endemic or adapted. By tearing down this garden in 2003, the Israelis destroyed one of Gaza's treasures, its biodiversity, part of its future. With a careful objectivity, Oussama calmly points out that the garden was not yet completed, that the plants and trees hadn't all arrived at maturity, implying, without illusion, that the Israelis could have destroyed it thinking it was just an ordinary orchard. But there was a sign at the entrance, quite visible.

To cut down the trees, level the hillocks, destroy the orange trees, extirpate the grasses, to sterilize and transform the land into a dry and sad wasteland, a desert offered up to the blind light of an indifferent sun — faced with this afflicting and repetitive spectacle, a naive question comes to mind: how can

the Israelis make this land that they say is holy, historical, the cradle of their chosen people, into a desert?

Destroying the fields is another way to drive out those who have the bad luck to remain at the edge of this ill-defined region that the IDF regards as a "security zone." Not far from Hamad Rajab, Abdallah Moubarrak explains: "The border is nearby. We've never been allowed to go near there with the animals. Three days ago, they killed five of my sheep. They also killed five of my neighbor's cows. They don't want to see anything that moves. If anything stirs after 5:00, they shoot." He lives in fear, under the guns of the occupiers. The pressure has increased; in early autumn a fort was built five hundred yards from here. All this area was green and planted with trees; now it is barren yellow sand. The place is open, far from the hubbub of the city, and would be tranquil without the threat of this hostile fort. Abdallah survives by making charcoal from the trees stumps of the neighborhood coming from the destroyed plantations.

His neighbor, Slimi Salim Al-Sawarka, lives even closer to the place where the fort now stands. The endless shooting has persuaded him to leave. We find him and his sons, their wives and their children, in a vacant lot under make-shift huts. "There were no Qassams launched from our corner. Some of them that were fired from further west even fell on our place." The soldiers killed fifty-one of his animals, sheep and cows. The family is ruined. The immediate problem, this November, under these precarious shelters, is how to face the coming rains. A daughter-in-law, Ghifra, says: "You'll see, tomorrow, if it rains: we'll be swimming." Everyone laughs. A few days later, a pouring rain falls on Gaza.

But it would be erroneous to think that land under cultivation in Gaza is contracting so inexorably only as a result of the occupying forces' bulldozers. Even more relentless than the steel monsters that rend the earth is the demographic pressure, as more and more people require living space. "The

The family of Sheh Salim Al-Sawarka, who were chased off their lands by gunfire from the Israeli Army

farmlands are smaller and smaller," explains Mohammed Alwan of PARC. "Each generation inherits a smaller share of land, until they find themselves with 5 donums or less. When a family has just 2 or 3 donums, it is difficult to make a living. People are tempted to sell the land for construction. For example, citrus orchards covered 65,000 donums in the 1970s; today there are only 40,000 donums of them. The rest has been taken for housing developments and truck farming, which is more profitable."

Imad Okal, of the UNRWA, has five children aged four months to eleven years, and lives in a three-room flat that measures 90 by 95 m²: there is a sitting room, his bedroom, and the children's room. They scream, they make a lot of noise; it's tiresome. At the age of 38, he dreams of having a huge house: he needs to buy land. In November, Imad bought 350 m² of land east of Jabaliya, for approximately $35,000. To build a house will take at least that much again. Now he only needs to find the money.

This dream, which is shared by everyone in the territory, results in a galloping expansion of the cities, in keeping with the demographic expansion which is running at an annual growth rate higher than 4% (one of highest in the world). Wherever one goes, one has the impression of being in an endless construction zone where work doesn't always stop even on Fridays, the day of rest and prayer. All of this building changes the look of a place surprisingly quickly. When he returned to Gaza a few years ago, after spending fourteen years in Germany, Oussama Mukhallati was struck by how much the landscape had changed: before, in Zeitoun district where PARC is headquartered, there were only fields; now, the place is burgeoning with new or unfinished buildings. Even going away for a shorter period can lead to surprises: on the Salah al-Din road, half of the olive grove where Jerome had photographed a child on a swing in May has become a construction site by November.

A CEMETERY IN THE CENTER OF GAZA, A CITY WITH ONE OF THE HIGHEST RATES OF POPULATION GROWTH IN THE WORLD.

This urbanization is also changing the height of buildings. One story is no longer enough; three or more are more usual these days. Columns of concrete stems are often left exposed on the roof to allow for future expansion as the family grows or the money comes in. Indeed, it isn't only the nuclear family that lives in these places — dad, mom and the children — but the parents, their married sons, and their children: each couple having its own floor or its own rooms, and sharing the kitchen and the vegetable garden. If there are any apartments remaining available, they are occupied by other brothers, uncles, and cousins. Everywhere, the rooms are surprisingly roomy — as if the interior spaciousness could compensate for the confines outside.

There is also a long backlog that feeds this building boom. "Before 1994," we hear, "the Israelis banned any two-story houses in the refugee camps. They also banned the use of concrete. The price of land was three times higher than now. When the Authority arrived, it permitted constructions of two or three stories. So everything in the camps was rebuilt after 1994."

In 1800, the town of Gaza recorded 8,000 inhabitants. In 1880 it was up to 19,000: it was in those days the most populous city of Palestine, after Jerusalem. In 1948, at the 80,000 residents, 160,000 refugees poured into the Strip. The birthrate has been extraordinary.

By 1987 there were approximately 550,000 inhabitants, including 435,000 refugees. The growth rate of the population was then 5% per annum. At the beginning of 1994, the number of inhabitants was nearly 800,000 and in 2004, 1.4 million including 965,000 refugees. The city of Gaza, on its own, has half a million inhabitants. The population density is 3,700 inhabitants per square kilometer — in fact, considerably more, since nearly 40% of the territory is occupied or placed off limits by the Israelis.

Will this expansion slow down? At the UNRWA health clinic in Jabaliya, the director Jamil Al-Najja takes us to visit the services where veiled women wait, babies in their arms: "We have a family planning unit. Earlier, the average number of children was ten; now, it is six. Women's education is spreading and they accept information on contraception. Because of this better education, they marry later.

"What do the religious leaders say?"

"The religious authorities aren't opposed neither to oral contraception nor to family planning."

The infant mortality rate (for those under one year old) went from 4.2% ten years ago to 2.8% today, says Jamil Al-Najja. Gaza is undergoing the traditional pattern of demographic transition, in which mortality rates decrease faster than the birthrate. Before the two curves meet, the population grows vertiginously. "In fifteen years, the Gaza Strip will have 60% more inhabitants than today," says Lionel Brisson, the director of the UNRWA in the Gaza Strip. "It is already unmanageable now...."

Daughter of Palestine

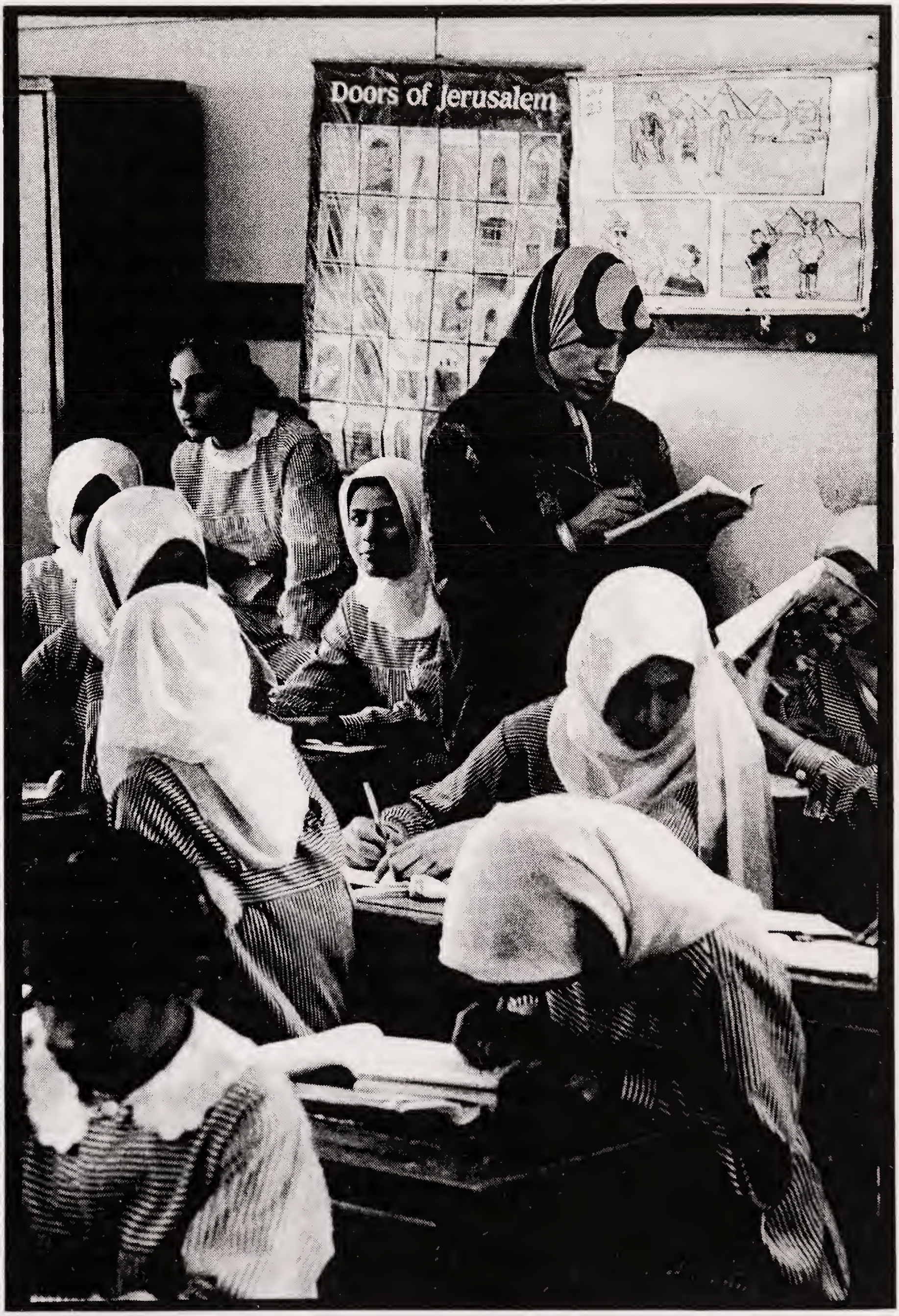
The pupils stand at attention and greet us with a thundering song of welcome. We applaud them and they applaud us before the teacher, in a head scarf, picks up the lesson where she left off. She has the girls repeat letters and words, which they chant with an impressive collective energy.

"AP-PLE!" The children shout with all the strength of six-year-olds, leaning forward on their arms on the tables. The mistress congratulates them. She draws an olive on the blackboard and asks, "What is this? — "Olive," answers one. — "All together!" The class repeats: "OL-IVE!" The mistress goes on to write on the board, "e-g-g," and the girls scream "EGG!."

All throughout the girls' primary school in Jabaliya, the classrooms arranged around a square courtyard echo with the sounds of courses in English, Arabic, arithmetic or religion. On the walls outside the classes large educational illustrations are painted: a girl working at a desk; children crossing the street at a red light; children playing in a field; children around the globe, smiling; the Al-Aqsa mosque in the pupil of an eye that is brimming with tears.

In her office at the end of a T-shaped table covered with glass, the director, Hamouda Sabah, confidently describes how

PRECEDING PAGES:
A SCENE IN GAZA
FACING PAGE
IN THE UNRWA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
FOR GIRLS, JABALIYA


Doors of Jerusalem

her school functions. Her half-school, in fact, since here as everywhere in the Gaza Strip, the number of children and the lack of buildings has led to the creation of two establishments in one: in the same buildings two groups follow one another, each with its own teaching team and its own director. At noon, the great exchange occurs, with the morning school letting out: little girls with braids, and book bags on their backs, pouring out the door just before the afternoon mob of bigger girls in the blue and white striped uniforms of the UNRWA schools engulfs the courtyard.

"The afternoon school has 991 pupils. They all come from refugee families and live nearby, in the camp. Most of them are poor, except those whose parents are civil servants — at most, 20% of them. Their fathers used to be workmen in Israel, but that is over and most of them are unemployed."

In any country in the world, the parents are concerned how their children are doing. But in Gaza, this concern reaches an unusual pitch. While we are talking with the director, we are rather brutally interrupted by a father, a robust and massive man, with a moustache, dressed in a light blue jacket, who barges into the room with his wife and his little frightened-looking little daughter, her colorful book bag on her back. The dissatisfied father has come to complain about the low marks his daughter is receiving, although she is a very good pupil. A long discussion follows during which the director, undoubtedly accustomed to such requests, maintains her poise, and calls in the teacher to join the conference. That this is only primary school does nothing to mitigate the ire of the father whose girl received a 14 in English instead of her usual 16.

The quarterly results had just been reported the day before. One little girl after another comes into the office to offer the adults one of those large boxes of chocolates or other delicacies that one sees at Christmas. The parents of the good pupils buy these delicacies to thank the teachers for their daughters' good

marks, and the goodies are shared among the teaching staff — and among the classmates, too, since there is so much to go around. In return, prizes are given out at the end of the school year, in June: the director gives the best pupils watches for first prize, toys, books, book bags, and smaller trinkets.

Classes for the second school start at 12:45. Today is a special day. Whistles are blown and the young girls line up in three squares around a cement stage two steps high and with a white roof. They raise their arms together, at a whistle. Then a young girl comes to read some passages from the Koran. More whistle blowing, and the troops tap their feet and applaud. Another girl comes to the microphone to read a text proclaiming that Palestine is an Arab country. These girls are in a maroon uniform — they are scouts — and music is playing. Now they stand at attention, arms at their sides, facing their comrades, very serious. They listen as one the girls reads the national anthem:

Float, flag of Palestine,
High in the sky.
In spite of the lack of rights and the hatred of our enemies,
Rise, with power, with blood if need be,
And you, oh faithful daughters of the people of Palestine,
Greet your symbol with honor and pride.

I, a daughter of Palestine,
Will never submit, even if they kill me.
I was born a revolutionary,
I am nothing on my own,
I swear to defend my cause.

Oh girls, let us go into combat,
Revolt, people of Palestine,

And salute with me our land,
Live, Palestine, Arab and free,
Glory and eternity to our valiant martyrs.
Palestine is ours,
We water it with our blood,
We sacrifice our hearts for it.

Then, in unison, the pupils chant slogans. Now, the sixth class comes to sing a song about human rights. More applause. Verses of the Koran are read again, then some advice about working hard for the upcoming exams, and the ceremony is complete.

This exercise of collective stimulation and bonding is impressive in its energy and discipline. It lasts approximately a quarter of an hour and takes place twice a week, Mondays and Thursdays, with a different program and different texts. All the schools have it.

Then classes begin again, including gym class. The fifth-graders are doing sports here in the yard. The teacher wears a blue djellaba and a white head scarf. She is assisted by a psychologist. The pupils walk in single file, tapping their feet, and line up in a semi-circle. They wear their uniforms. The director explains, "We used to ask them to come in a wind-breaker and sports pants, but given the economic situation, we don't require it anymore." The children play with hoops, yellow, green, orange or red; bounce basketballs; or play blind man's bluff.

Mrs. Sabah has directed this school for six years. The school is free. They try to provide books, pens, and bags. The only thing that the parents must buy is the uniform. School attendance is compulsory until the baccalaureate (tahojihi) or high school diploma. The UNRWA makes free schooling available to the children of refugees in all its 174 schools, that is to say approximately 200,000 pupils. The Palestinian Authority

supports the schools for non-refugees, approximately 140,000 children. The two school establishments aren't mixed.

The Jabaliya school can only run a limited number of field trips. One of them is to visit the small zoo created in a private school located between Jabaliya and Gaza, the pilot school Ibad Ur-Rahman. The amazed kids are overwhelmed by the birds, ducks, chickens, a wolf, some monkeys, snakes, a lynx, and rabbits. "Our zoo is small," says Nachat Al-Hamarna, the director, "but for the children it is paradise — especially the ostriches. We adults, we've seen animals in Israel, but our children are really deprived of everything."

Nachat Al-Hamarna, 38 years old, created his school all alone. The son of teachers, he set up a kindergarten in his own house, in 1987-1988, while completing graduate studies after obtaining his teaching certificate. Apparently his pedagogical approach is more pleasant than many others, and his house was soon to small for the classes. He had to keep on expanding and

A SCHOOL PERFORMANCE IN JABALIYA.

adding on, until finally he was covering every grade through high school.

The school now has more than 600 pupils. Its principal asset is that he permits a maximum of 25 pupils per class. "The children suffer in the UNRWA schools where there are 50 to 60 pupils per class. They don't pay enough attention to each child, there." Those who can pay the 1,000 to 2,000 shekels in annual fees therefore prefer his school — or other private schools in Gaza, many of them Islamic or Christian.

If the education system remains very firmly structured in Gaza, it is because the Palestinians unanimously perceive it as their primary and perhaps their only strength. "Most of the girls stick with their education," says Mrs. Sabah, "nearly 90% get their diplomas , and 50% go on to university." Twenty years ago Mrs. Sabah worked in Saudi Arabia, where few girls had access to education. In Gaza, "the girls want to study, in order to be able help their husbands later, or to educate their children properly. It is the best weapon to have an identity, to develop the economy, to live like other people." The most religious families are no less attentive than the others to education, and they too encourage their daughters to continue their studies.

School is vitally important. In Rafah, during the terrible occupation in May, the children continued to attend in spite of everything, and the examinations took place on schedule, even while tanks patrolled just two steps away.

Life is exceptionally hard for the children, however, after four years of an Intifada which has filled their imagination with war and aggression. "The problem with the boys," says Mrs. Sabah, "it is that they are violent, they hit each other, they break things." Outside the schools, one frequently sees kids fighting ferociously. The only times when we felt that there was something amiss in the territory — apart from when we were in the zones of immediate contact with the Israeli army — is when we were in contact with the pre-adolescents, who sometimes

throw stones — aiming wide, but threatening.

A considerable proportion of the children, in the exposed zones, are quite frankly ill. In Rafah, in the Hayel Salam district, Bilal, who is two years and five months old, is epileptic. Close to Abu Houli, in that house that fears its inexorable destruction, Sayed shows us his nephew: "The little one, there, Mahmoud, who is about twelve years old, he tenses up, he freezes when he hears shots. They don't have a children's culture but a military culture: they recognize the sound of different weapons, tanks, jeeps." The more protected areas are hardly free from this atmosphere. "In 2002, UNESCO organized a drawing contest," said Nachat Al-Hamarna, "and our school won the second prize. Most of the drawings spoke about the war: tanks, shootings, shells." The wife of the agronomist Monar Ahmed remarks, during the Moslem festival Eid, when people give kids gifts of money: "As you can see, all the children want to buy guns. Their only game is to play at soldiers and the resistance. All these

massacres create hatred in the children; they aren't experiencing a normal childhood."

It isn't rare for children to be the direct victims of the Israeli army. One such drama occurred on January 22, when three boys were hit by Israeli gunfire. They had gotten too close to the security fence, in the open field behind the Gaza cemetery, while chasing birds in the fields. An eleven-year-old boy died and two others were wounded. "The children know that it is dangerous to chase birds close to the line, but they enjoy it so much they lose track of where they are. There are so few ways to amuse themselves," explains Imad Okal, "there aren't any playing fields, or parks." Many children are killed or wounded in the schools themselves, and not only during the worst interventions. In Jabaliya, on September 7, a young girl was shot in her school in Khan Yunis, and she died on the 22nd at the hospital. On October 5, a thirteen-year-old girl was riddled with bullets in Rafah — it was later proven that a soldier

emptied his chamber into her corpse. Six children were wounded by a rocket on December 12 in a school in Khan Yunis. And so on.

This results in a psychological stress, as the schools are well aware. Psychologists regularly come to all the schools of the territory to offer group therapy for pupils who are most upset. In Rafah, the Preparatory A Girls School is close to the border and often suffers sudden incursions: it has established an emergency plan to evacuate the children when they occur. One morning the psychologist, Chadi Abou Seife, has ten girls join us in the school library which is decorated with pictures and bunches of flowers. The girls are 12-13 years old and wear scarves.

Chadi Abou Seife: "Let's go on with what we were doing the other day. Let's each one of us tell her story."

Girl 1: "The Israelis surrounded our house, and four or five of them were hitting my handicapped brother, they shot at his beard. I felt so sad, and I couldn't do anything. They took a razor, they cut my brother's hair off. He died later. They stayed all day and they took four of my brothers away."

Fatma: "We were outside, my brother was wounded by the Israelis." She starts to cry, then raises her head. "When my mother got home from the market, people told her that her son had died." She takes her handkerchief, wipes her eyes. "Last year, before my brother died, I was the first in my class. Now, I'm falling behind, because I think about him all the time."

Chadi: "When you tell the story, let go; don't hold anything back."

Sahar: "We live by the border. One morning, there was a huge crash. The Israelis were demolishing houses. My uncle was in one of them. The bulldozer was moving, then they put bombs in, and they told us that if we didn't leave, we would all be killed. I went back to see my uncle's house and there were dead


لا اله الا محمد رسول الله

bodies and wounded people. I looked at the scene and there was nothing I could do."

Hinas: "The Israelis were around my house, firing bombs, shooting at people. Then they left. By morning, my father's house was destroyed, and all the memories that I had there were destroyed."

Chadi: "What do you miss the most?"

Hinas: "My bed, and the toys."

Hiba: "One night, we went to take refuge at my uncle's because there was so much shooting going on. There was only one wall between the tank and us, and as soon as we left, the tank destroyed the wall and then the whole house. After that my father became ill, he has diabetes." She sobs. "I'm not doing well anymore in class, because I think about it all the time."

Cherine: "One morning, there was an attack. A missile wounded my brother and one of his buddies. A friend told me that my brother had died. I wanted to go see, but there was no way, it was too dangerous."

Chadi: "Life must go on; you can't think about it all the time."

A girl about 7 years old, in a tiny voice: "I was on my way to school when they told me that someone had shot my brother and that he had died. I couldn't believe it, I ran home. Almost every day since then, I think about him."

Chadi: "Everyone here is in an unpleasant situation; you must be an example for everybody." She has a calm, soothing voice. In just a few words the girls, one after another, continue to tell these repetitive stories of suffering and destruction, words interspersed with silences and sobs, all adding up, as one of them says, to "a sad life."

They've gone all the way around the circle now. Another girl arrives and reads a poem, then sings a song. Another pupil comes to tell a little story. A mother and her daughter are together:

A GROUP THERAPY SESSION IN A PRIMARY SCHOOL, RAFAH

The girl: "Can I sleep in your bed tonight?"

The mother: "Yes. Is there something wrong?"

"I don't feel good, I am afraid to sleep alone."

"What do you dream about?"

"Bombs, smoke, soldiers who kill us all, and destroy our country. What else do you want to know? Take care of me."

Chadi begins again: "Let's stop here for today. In this meeting, each one has described her situation. The next time, we will see that there is a solution for each of us." The girls leave.

We stay behind to talk with Chadi, Amjad Al-Jama, another psychologist, and the principal, Serria Abou Khali. Serria says: "This school is close to the border and there are shootings and destruction all the time. More than 30% of the girls show signs of psychological disorders. Six teachers had their houses destroyed."

"Do they need psychological support, too?"

Laughter.

"One of them has nervous problems."

Amjad: "I deal with boys. When they play, they fight among themselves. The problems are different for boys and girls."

Serria: "The girls stay calm, they internalize their problems. The boys act out in an aggressive way."

Amjad: "They have insomnia. Many young people wet their beds. It's a form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It shows up as acts of violence, obsessions, nail biting, nightmares."

"What is the worst case than you've observed?"

Chadi: "I can think of Niba, a girl who kept seeing the dogs that tore her brother to pieces after he had been shot. When she told us about it, all her friends cried."

Amjad: "I remember a boy who chewed his nails so much that they were down to the flesh."

Serria: "The girl that you heard, who has such a small voice, she lost her father. Then, one of her brothers was killed, then

another brother, who was handicapped, he was also shot. She can hardly speak."

Amjad: "The situation is difficult for everyone in Palestine. The children are targeted because they are weakest. But, to be sure, many adults also need psychological help, people who have lost their jobs, their houses, their close relatives. They are losing their minds."

Serria: "Nobody has gone mad in this school, but in the camps they have. They wander in the streets. Naked, sometimes. And then after awhile you don't see them anymore, because they get close to the military posts and the soldiers shoot them and kill them."

Growing up in a cage

Mohammed Zomlot and Rola Davabia celebrate their engagement one Wednesday in January in one of the most luxurious hotels in Gaza, Al-Deira, located on the seaboard. Designed by a young architect trained in France and Algeria, Rashid Abdelhamid, the hotel stands out from the other buildings along the shore for its taste, its elegant ochre facade, and its ornate interior decorated with the flourishes of an Arab palace. The celebration takes place under a vast tent on the terrace that is blazing with dozens of lamps. A carpet running down the center leads from the main hall of the hotel toward the dais at the back of the tent. Two velvet armchairs sit there like thrones, against a backdrop of white tapestry decorated with a splendid flower made of white voile and red tissue.

All the good society of the city is there: some two hundred men and women — most of the latter veiled in elegant scarves — have arrived and are seated on both sides of the central carpet at the long tables laid out at a slight diagonal so as to offer a view of the dais. The tables are laden with sodas, water, boxes of Kleenex, and ashtrays. The murmuring of the conversations suddenly stops: it is 6:30, and the fiancés enter

Preceding pages,
Chati Refugee Camp
Facing
Mohammed and Rola celebrate their
engagement.

the tent and walk up the carpet accompanied by majestic music from the sound system at the entrance. Everyone applauds, and they step forward, smiling; and then with a drum roll, the music shifts to the rhythms of rock'n'roll. Mohammed and Rola — he in the elegant suit and big square glasses of a financial consultant, she, generously built, with a glittering necklace, in a pink satin dress strewn with flowers — turn at the top of the three steps of the dais, where smoke is pouring forth. They kiss their parents, then pose in front of the video-cameraman and the photographers, arm in arm. As the music starts they descend, hold each other and dance a waltz while the smoke envelopes them: they are on a cloud, and little blue, yellow, and red projectors alternate their beams while they gently turn, taking care to smile at the cameraman, then at the photographer.

The fiancés then go up upon the dais again and sit down; a waiter brings them a drink in a red glass. They each take a sip.

Then the music changes, and woman dances in the open space which separates the dais from the tables where the guests contemplate the spectacle of happiness. This is Mohammed's mother, in a yellow dress shot with gold. No veil for her. Other women join her and sway together, their arms raised. The women close to the dais clap their hands, and men, and younger women step forward, the fiancés come down from time to time to join the dancing, a father holds his baby up over his head. Mature women in veils and girls with no head covering — a black skirt and black leather boots, a red blouse, or black trousers and a creamy white sweater — swirl on the dance floor. In the corner, a television shows what the cameraman imperturbably continues to film.

Then happy couple now circulates between the tables, dancing, greeting the guests and being applauded, while a friend follows the young woman, holding the train of her dress. Later, after a folk group has performed a traditional dance, Mohammed's mother goes from table to table, displaying the engagement rings: everyone rises and applauds at her approach, laughing and celebrating this promise of happy prosperity. Mrs. Zomlot goes back toward the dais and the young people take the rings and slip them onto each other's fingers. The immense wedding cake is brought in, which they will cut, the slices then being distributed among the guests.

The rituals of this celebration are observed in a similar fashion in every level of the society, around the main event in each person's life, his marriage. The importance that is invested in this is a symptom of the second greatest restriction Palestinian society is subjected to: in addition to being confined by the Israelis, there is a rigidity of morals stimulated by this imprisonment.

The ritual of marriage, of course, is strictly codified. The man brings a dowry whose amount depends on the social milieu, the beauty of the woman, her youth, his level of education. The

fiancée spends two thirds of the dowry on jewelry and the rest on clothes. In addition, the man provides the home.

On the fateful day, the groom and his family visit the family of the bride-to-be; the father gives his counterpart the agreed sum, wrapped in linen so that the money isn't seen. Then everyone goes to the court to register the marriage. Then the party begins, financed by the groom. It costs a good $400-500 to print the invitation cards and to rent a room for a few hours. Wealthier ones offer pastries, even a meal, in addition to the soft drinks. Everyone is invited to the party, where the men and women generally do not mix.

People will come to congratulate the new couple in the following two weeks, bringing gifts: dishes, pillows, bed-linens, everything that is necessary to furnish a home. The young couple settles in with the man's family.

The marriage seals the subordination of the woman in a society that is deeply patriarchal and at the same time deeply

unhappy. The divorce rate is a sign of the prevailing inequality. "There's a lot of fighting," says the lawyer Fatma Moukhalalati. "Because of the poverty, people are depressed. The woman asks for money, the husband refuses, he beats her, sometimes until he knocks her unconscious."

An imam who specializes in these things tries to reconcile the two spouses. If his mediation fails, he pronounces the divorce. The woman is always regarded as being in the wrong. The children are conferred on the man, who can forbid his ex-wife to see them.

The marriage contract stipulates that in the event of divorce the dowry will be divided in two, one half of which is allocated to the woman. She cannot keep anything from her home. Solitary women are rejected by society and are a shame on their family. A divorced woman will never be able to remarry, except to an old man or a man who has already been married. This explains why the wife hesitates so much before resorting to divorce. "There are very unhappy women who struggle through their whole lives with a husband whom they don't love," says our interpreter, Souhila Abou Khaoud.

"In 2002, there was a play, 'Mr. Perfect,' that was a big hit," says Nabil Diab, the public relations manager for the Red Crescent society. "The play was performed 77 times and it was seen by 14,000 schoolchildren and students. This success is undoubtedly because it speaks to a very significant topic here, divorce. People marry young, and there isn't much talk about it. Women and democracy — these are the two subjects that are taboo."

The inequality of the sexes shows up most egregiously these days in the way inheritance is passed down. According to Islamic law, the son receives twice as much as the daughter. This rule arises from the expectation that the son must provide for his parents in their old age. But the rule of the division isn't always complied with, and it frequently happens that brothers

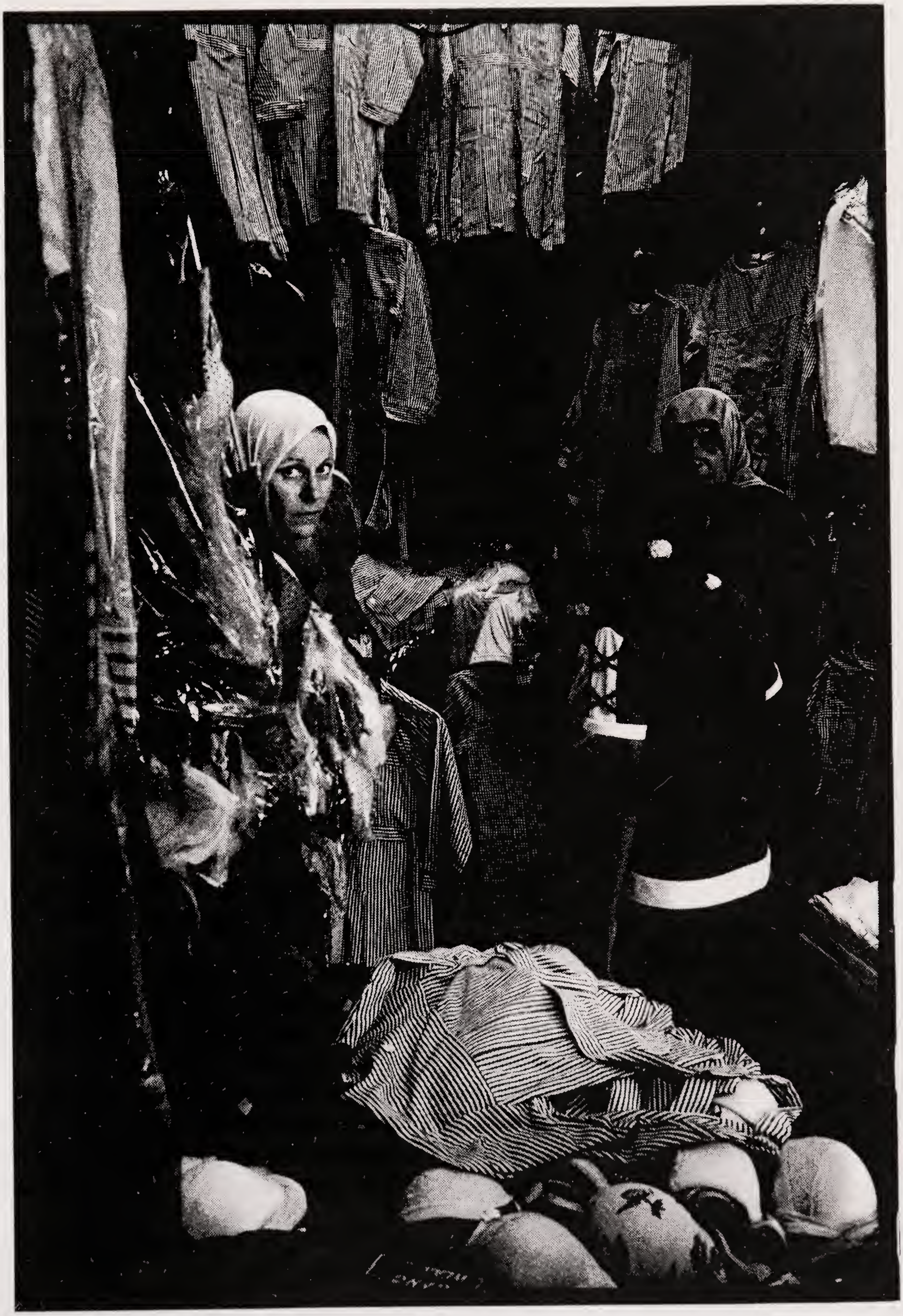
THE GOLD MARKET IN GAZA, WHERE NEWLY-WEDS COME WITH THEIR WEDDING CASH TO BUY JEWELRY

divert their sister's inheritance. Before the father dies, if he becomes ill, explains Fatma Moukhalalati, they make him sign a will excluding his daughters, or a contract of sale that they can display two or three years after the death to support a claim that the assets to be passed down had already changed hands before the demise of the parent. If a woman is married, her husband will try to ensure that her rights are respected; if she is unmarried, there is nothing she can do because she lives with the family and is entirely dependent on them, and cannot risk being thrown out.

Religion weighs heavily on a society where good grades in Islamic studies are essential to obtaining one's diploma and where it is obligatory to study the Koran several hours a week in all three universities of Gaza, regardless whether one is studying to become a journalist or a nurse. In the very rigorous version of the religion which has become current in the last ten years, the subservience of the woman is beyond any dispute. She obeys the men: if her little brother tells her not to go out, she doesn't go out. It is inconceivable that she would put up any signs of rebellion.

She has to stay out of sight. When foreigners visit the home, there are rarely any women in evidence, even if they are invited and even in educated circles. "The hip-hop group RFM has three guys and a girl," says Nabil Diab. "They gave three shows. The public was absolutely shocked by the presence of the girl." Nabil himself is married to an actress. "This is a crime, to many people. 'What, you're married to a woman who plays in the theater!'" At the American-style restaurant Big Bite that opened recently in the university district, the girls — dressed in long tunics and wearing veils — and the boys — in Western dress — spontaneously split up in the two sides of the room. At the beach, the women don't go in the water; if, as a big adventure, they venture in, they do it only while swathed in vast robes, securely covered in layers of fabric.

Any relationship between a boy and a girl is almost



impossible. Sahar Abou Touor, twenty years old, says, "I want to find a husband who respects me and who respects my family, well raised, with a degree. I would like to meet him by myself, but that is impossible in Gaza. We go through intermediaries, the family or neighbors. One may have contact with boys, for example during the internship at the hospital. But it is impossible of flirt. If somebody saw me in the street with my cousin, they wouldn't know that it is a cousin and they would tell stories."

It is difficult, moreover, to find an isolated place to meet, here where everyone is living on top of each other and everyone sees what is going on. The most resourceful may find a way to get together on the beaches to north, where it is less densely populated, but that's not far from the Israeli watchtowers; or in the apartment of an obliging friend. But they cannot make love: that is reserved for married women, wither widows or those who are willing to betray their husbands. A young denizen of Gaza City tells us: "I know a woman who is 23 years old who wants to make love because her husband is lousy in bed. My friend, who is married, gave her a cell phone, and now they call each other up when they are free and meet upstairs, above the bar where he works. Some people meet at a café, as long as it is far away from the family's home.

If the family finds out that a girl is having relations with a boy, they will correct her severely, beat her, forbid her to go out, and will try to cover it up and marry her off at the first opportunity."

Sexual life is not absolutely repressed — in certain markets of Gaza one may come across sexy underclothes, displayed without shame in the ladies' lingerie section — but it must remain strictly within the context of marriage.

As for prostitution, it is organized according to secret networks. "One man I know," a friend tells us, you can go to his place, bring some money, or drugs, beer, vodka, hashish, food, or a telephone card as a gift. He tells his wife to get ready. His

mother also is a whore. Every month, he changes his apartment for his own security." Another one tells us: "I know someone in one of the refugee camps, the brother will set you up to sleep with his sister." But any relation of this kind is also politically dangerous. "Friends," he goes on to say, "tell me that one of their buddies offered him a chance to sleep with a girl for 200 to 300 shekels. In a car. You find him by word of mouth, and contact him by cell phone. It's a girl I knew of before the Intifada. But they suspect she's linked to Mossad [the Israeli intelligence service]." Sexual temptation — and blackmail as a consequence — would indeed be the sort of method employed by the Israelis to recruit collaborators.

And that leaves marriage, the only perspective for girls by the age of fifteen and for boys by around eighteen. Usually it is arranged, like that of Nasser who married the sister of his brother's wife. As he knew the family through his brother, the discussions didn't take very long. His future mother-in-law offered her daughter to him, he took a look at her, and the matter was wrapped up quickly.

"Only 30% of marriages are by choice. And that is already incredible progress," exclaims Nabil Diab.

It is true that marriage guarantees family cohesion, and is the principal instrument of solidarity in such a dangerous and weak country; it also guarantees new bonds or the reinforcement of existing bonds, since marriages often take place between cousins. That, incidentally, increases the incidence of congenital diseases like blindness. "Sixty percent of our pupils are blind because of marriages between blood relatives," says Abdul Abou Jarbou, the principal of Al-Nour School for partially-sighted children in Gaza.

Staying single is unimaginable. By the age of twenty-five, one has to find a new position in the social order. Hamad, our twenty-four-year old driver, doesn't want to marry. Marriage is

the surest way to be tied down, whereas he still dreams of being free and he wants to travel. But his family is putting pressure on him: just yesterday at this hour, his uncle, with his father's authorization, called to tell him that he'd better get married. A few months later, he has made his choice. He tells us that he's fallen in love with a girl and he is thinking of asking for her hand in marriage. He noticed the lady of his dreams out in front of the college once, and then another time — she caught his eye, would be more like it. One day he went back and, while she was standing there with her friends, he walked up, told her that he liked her very much, and that he was a serious guy, and he gave her his cell phone number. The girl, taken by surprise, didn't want to call him but her girlfriends talked her into it, to see what would happen. She called Hamad, and things seem to be going well. Hamad is thinking of giving her a phone so that they can speak more discreetly. He hasn't asked her to marry him, yet. Clearly, he soon will. And he'll have to swallow the bitter pill and make his father happy.

As for Khaled, he was in love with one of his cousins, but his parents, who always hated her mother, didn't want anything to do with her. The plan was abandoned. Recently, he met his fiancé by Internet. They chatted together several times at a forum, and then, he says, "I went to see her at her job — she's a secretary at an import-export company. I went with my sister: if she turned out to be pretty, I would stay and my sister would leave; if not, I would leave and my sister would stay. After that, we got together again. You can't meet at a café; that would be seen in a very poor light. A man and a woman might possibly walk into a café together, but only if they want to talk about work; if it has to do with love, people would see it in their eyes. I visit my fiancée at her family's, with her sister or her mother. They might leave us alone in a room, but the door stays open. We'll marry in a year or two. My father will pay for the wedding; I don't have a job at this point."

SAYID AND JAMIL,
FLORISTS ON CHARLES-DE GAULLE STREET
IN GAZA

In a society where marriage is so important, it is terrible to be unwed. Nonetheless, many young people cannot get married because they don't have the money. Alaa tells us, "I am twenty-eight years old. I work at the Authority. My dream is to have an apartment and a wife, a home. But I have never known any women. My salary is too low for me to marry. And besides, I'm responsible for my ten brothers and sisters." Fadel is in the same position. "I'm not married because I'm broke. I have someone in mind, but there is this question of money." *Idem* for Mohammed, in Beit Laya: after a year of studies in psychology, he quit the university because he couldn't pay the tuition. He'll marry when he has the funds. While he waits, he works at his father's little farm.

But it is not only love that is missing from the lives of young people in Gaza. Every aspect of their life is an exercise in frustration, and the absence of opportunity.

Khaled, twenty-four years old, and Fadel, twenty-five, sons of the farmer Hamad Rajab, sit on a pipe that runs along the side of their greenhouse and tell us of their disappointed hopes:

Fadel: "I got my diploma in 1998. But I didn't have enough money to continue my studies, here or abroad. I would have liked to become an engineer."

Khaled: "I didn't want to go to university, I wanted to be a tradesman or a technician. I learned the trade of tile-layer at school and I worked for a year, but the situation became too difficult: I was a craftsman, but with the second Intifada, people didn't have the money for it anymore. I was only working one day out of ten."

Fadel: "So we have to work here, in my father's greenhouses."

The dream, for many people, is to leave: Hamad would like to live in the West Bank — "people are less strict, more open there." Khaled would like to go and live Canada. Sahar thinks the United Arab Emirates would be good, "I've heard they are looking for nurses." Nabil confirms our impression: "Most

young people dream of leaving." But not all: Ibrahim, twenty years old, says: "I've lived here all my life, I've adapted to this situation. I plan to stay here. But I would like to make a name for myself. Here in Gaza it is difficult to become famous. If I became a journalist, I could become a well-known radio personality."

And then, they are all bored. "Before the Intifada," remembers Nabil, "it was super: there were weddings, parties, barbecues, the beach...now, we can't go out anymore after 10:00. With everything that's going on, our morale is pretty low. It's almost indecent to have fun." Religion stands in the way of women, alcohol, movies, music clubs. Sports could at least keep them busy, but because the territory is closed there is no way to hold competitions. Some of them inevitably get involved in the resistance. Otherwise, they watch television, they pray, they drift from ere to there, and they talk — for hours. Sahar: "It's a prison, here; there is no way to go anywhere, no distraction. Talking offers a little relief. If you kept all this on your heart and didn't talk, you'd make yourself sick."

Hamad often runs into his buddies at a grocery shop, at night, not far from a crossroads where refreshment stands have been opened. On the meridian of the boulevard nearby, a donkey blinks its sleepy eye. The shopkeeper is the son of the owner. Four guys in their early- to mid-twenties pass the time laughing, drinking Coke, and talking about girls, their combines and their plans. One is selling cars from Israel; he'd like to start a business importing bottled water from Turkey. Hamad is thinking of creating an Internet coffee.

No cinema, no discotheque, of course. Concerts are extremely rare. At the end of August, a hip-hop show was cancelled — it would have taken place right during a hunger strike in support of the prisoners, and would have been totally inappropriate. But there would never be a good time. Places where you can go, where you can enjoy a feeling of being someplace else, can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

GAME PARLORS ARE ONE OF THE FEW PLACES YOUNG PEOPLE CAN GO


NAMCO
PROPCYCLE

Marna House, for example, is a trendy place. Tiled walkways lead you across a lawn to sitting areas where comfortable wicker chairs surround low coffee tables, all shaded by large blue and yellow rectangular sunshades. Two very large and beautiful fig trees spread their serene shade, and plants, shrubs and flowers enclose the garden in a pleasant intimacy. Opened in April, the terrace of Marna House is never empty. People come to enjoy the narghile, or hookah, in all sorts of flavors — banana, mango — not to mention the house recipe which is enjoying a great success, including among young women, veiled and otherwise, who come in pairs or in small groups. The place if full of life. Children, youths, couples, businessmen, and girls all merrily go about their business. Tables in a discrete corner allow for more intimate conversations. There is only one disadvantage: the prices, of course, are high, so that only the well-to-do can afford to go there.

Where else can one go to avoid boredom? The beach, where boys swim in knee-length shorts and, often, T-shirts, under the watchful eye of narghile-smoking men at the many plastic tables with their beach umbrellas. Women, fully-clothed and veiled, relax around other tables, in the hot, humid air of summer. In clear weather, the tall chimneys of the Ashdod power station and the cranes in the port of Ashkelon are clearly visible.

Then there is, above all, the Internet which, in combination with the priceless innovation of the cell phone, provides an escape route for general curiosity. One Internet café sits at the top of Omar Al-Mokhtar: it's a narrow shop with ten computer stations distributed between the ground floor and second story, which one reaches via a steep staircase. Teenagers, often with earphones, sit in front of monitors in dark blue booths and laugh, at fifty cents for 15 minutes. There's another one, called Tweety, close to the university. Hadeed, a girl of about twenty, tells us: "I come here to find information and to communicate

WHEN THE WEATHER IS GOOD,
EVERYBODY GOES TO THE BEACH.

with my parents. Gaza is a hell: when something is weighing on your heart, you can communicate it by Internet. I chat with friends abroad." And then, who knows? One might even find a kindred spirit this way, and evade the family choice. Sahar gives us an example. "All my girlfriends go on the Internet. I have a friend who found somebody that way...it turned out to be her cousin."

Finally, there are drugs — hashish, mostly, that sells at $45 for twelve grams. It is imported from Egypt through the tunnels or is grown in the south, near the border. "In Rafah," a young man tells us, "everyone used to smoke before the Intifada. Then that was cut off. Now, it's starting again, everyone smokes: young people don't have anything else to do." Officially, society is against this distraction which is perceived as an escapist diversion when a war is going on. For the lawyer Fatma Moukhalalati, "Israel is infiltrating our society by drugs, and collaborators are recruited through women or drugs. Before 1996, I was well-known for defending drug cases. They earned me a lot of money. But I stopped, after I made my pilgrimage to Mecca." By the same token, the journalist Mohammed Juda, of Rafah, thinks that "the traffickers are collaborators of Israel. Israel t in this, but it is being done to undermine us by destroying the minds of our youth." A small scale drug dealer we met in Gaza confirmed it: "This is supported by the Israelis: if a soldier finds drugs, he doesn't say anything."

Nonetheless, hashish remains a primary diversion for young people who have no other means of escape, and hardly anything else to do, except — and many of them choose that route — the armed struggle.

But, with or without drugs, none of them can forget what lies at the innermost depth of life in Gaza: oppression and the occupation.

"Young people of Gaza have only one goal: to be free," summarizes Mohammed Gharib, twenty-five years old. As the son of one of Arafat's comrades, he has lived in Lebanon and

Cyprus — and therefore has seen life in freedom. "It is the worst thing in the world: to think, and constantly think, and never get anywhere with it. Your mind rusts. It is like a prison: we cannot escape ourselves. People try to do many things, really, but they don't get anywhere with it, and they become frustrated.

"That part of life that has nothing to do with politics — looking at a tree, listening to the birds, enjoying Mozart — is beyond our reach. How can you appreciate Mozart when your friend has just been killed at the border? Our whole life is political.

"We've tried everything — resistance, the peace process, attacks — nothing works. To tell you the truth, if we don't find a way out of this soon, I'll come to a very bad end, with bombs, to prove to them that we exist."

Mohammed tells a story that reveals what the young people of Gaza aspire to most of all, what is more important than sexual satisfaction, work and fun: dignity.

"Six months ago, I made it to Egypt for medical treatment. I had a virus that had to be treated. I took advantage of the opportunity and went to see what Sharm Al-Sheik looks like. In the bus, I found myself seated beside a young man, whom I noticed was wearing a pendent with the star of David. We had a pleasant conversation about one thing and another during the trip; we got along pretty well. And then, after a while, he asked me: 'Where are you from?' 'From Palestine.' 'Palestine? Is that a country?' 'Yes.' 'No, it isn't a country. I've never heard of a State of Palestine.' I was speechless. I didn't know what to say. He was talking about international law, and from that standpoint we Palestinians have nothing, no State, no rights, not even the right to leave or go abroad to study.

"It's important that we communicate — but there, with that man, it was impossible. He spoke very coldly, as if it were a joke. When the bus came, we left. I reached out to shake hands with him. Believe it or not, but he refused to shake my hand. My, how powerful I felt. I felt what power was in my hands."

Painful memories

Gaza has had a strange fate. Its recent history, so dolorous, so painful, seems to have erased its past. The West only became conscious of the city in 1948, or even in 1987 when the first Intifada exploded in its center. It's as though its history was written on a blank page, as if Gaza had never gone through the intense dramas that it has endured for a half-century.

There are several reasons for that. Historiography has traditionally focused on the biblical Palestine and neglected this place where only the character of Samson left any imprint in sacred history. Then there is the youthfulness of a territory where more half of the inhabitants are under the age of twenty and who are far more concerned with the future than interested by the past, of which they perceive only the bitterness. In fact, three-quarters of the people here are refugees of rather recent date, which hardly predisposes them to cultivate roots in a place that they aspire to flee, since it was imposed on them. And finally, there is the absence of historical artifacts in such a crowded space. Furthermore, it has been developed into an urban environment with such extraordinary speed that it is even more difficult to bring to light any trace of previous inhabitants, almost all of which would be lost today if a French-Palestinian archaeological mission hadn't been in operation

Preceding pages:
L: The headquarters of the Fatah youth organization, Gaza.
R: A seaside wedding
Facing:
The Gaza Strip has always been a center of trade and commerce

since 1995 to preserve the memory of historical Gaza — that is, when the Israeli tanks, amusing themselves at an unpleasant game, as seen above, don't ransack the discoveries.

Thus, just as it is necessary to erase our mental image of Gaza as a desert and replace it with a view of Gaza as a green door welcoming those who come out of the arid sands, in the same way we need to reinterpret the vision of a shining city whose roots delve deep into mankind's remotest past.

This lost prosperity was founded on a simple fact: since time immemorial Gaza, at the gates to the Sinai desert, was the principal layover point on the main road connecting the two leading lights of the Arab world, Syria and Egypt. In addition, it was here that caravans coming from the depths of Arabia would come to deliver their treasures, precious stones and spices, on the Mediterranean shore. It was a crossroads, a land of trading and peace.

To be sure Al-'Azzah, to use its Arab name, was occupied many times and by all kinds of invaders — the Francs, the

Mongols, Napoleon Bonaparte — and especially by the regional powers of the time, Assyria, Rome, Egypt, then Turkey; it was occupied but almost always was granted a semi-autonomous status due to its primarily commercial nature and, one may suppose, to the conciliating talent of the leaders who represented it. It was a place too useful place to be forgotten, too peaceful to require being conquered.

The rare Jewish presence was primarily illustrated by the episode of Samson bringing down the columns of the temple of Dagon on the Philistines (Judges 16), and by the remains of a synagogue found in the south. Christianity, since the first millennium, made few inroads in a city that remained among the last in the Middle East to obstinately continue its pagan sacrifices, represented here by the worship of Marnas. In the centuries of Roman domination — Hadrian stayed there in 129 and 130 — Gaza did provide one saint, Hilarion, born in Tabatha, close to the city, who spread monachism in Palestine in the third century. This heritage would gradually be submerged by conversion to Islam, which only made sense for this city located at the confluence of Arab caravan routes. Thus the great-grandfather of the prophet Mohammed, Hashim Ibn Abd Manaf, apparently died there in the 5th century during one of his voyages to Syria or Egypt. In AD 637, the city was captured by the Arab army of Amr Ibn Al-'As, and Christianity gradually receded into the background.

This is not the place to go into the history of the city that always held an eminent but secondary position, a place of trade but not of power, dedicated to discreet prosperity without ever becoming the main prize in this tumultuous region of whose disturbance reverberations it always felt. The 14th-century traveller Ibn Battuta described it as "vast, well populated, decorated with many beautiful plazas and mosques," but did not dally there.

Napoleon didn't stay much longer; he captured the city without firing a shot in 1799 and stayed only a day or two. The house where he stopped is one of the rare old buildings of Gaza.

It is a beautifully proportioned one-storey construction. The visitor walks through empty rooms filled with a great calm. The stone is white, the windows Romanesque in form, with beautiful tiling with reason decorates the ground of the three vast rooms. Above the main entrance, a bas-relief displays a decorative tracery as fine as Arab calligraphy.

In the middle of the 19th century, Gaza was the second largest city of Palestine (after Jerusalem) and apparently it set a record: it boasted fifty mosques, that is to say one for every two hundred inhabitants.[7] In 1894, Pierre Loti, on his way in, passed "Arab merchants, who left Gaza (where we are going) seven days ago; they are on their way to the oasis of Akabah, which we just left. They pass this way every year, to supply robes and burnooses to the tribes of the desert." He arrived at Gaza, "with its houses of gray mud and its white minarets, Gaza, set amid its gardens and its woods. Almost-sumptuous Gaza, for us poor people of the desert, suddenly representing safety, comfort,

AN OLD PHOTO STILL HANGS IN THE WINDOW OF A STORE ON OMAR AL-MOKHTAR BOULEVARD, IN THE HEART OF GAZA.

[7] Elias Sanbar, *Figures du Palestinien*, Paris, Gallimard, 2004, p. 69.

communication with the rest of the world, all the forgotten modern conveniences."[8]

What a contrast! Today one sees ruins and the humming of overhead drones that might strike the traveller, the agitation and the energy of a population that never stops moving. He would hardly find any place to rest, except, perhaps to gaze out across the British cemetery which spreads out from the Salah al-Din road, between a storage building and a warehouse, displaying 10,000 white crosses commemorating soldiers who fell in 1917 in the battle against the Turks. The sod is as green as at any English cottage, and is brightened by flamboyant trees and bougainvilleas; it breathes a peaceful melancholy.

On the computer at the Morris Photography Shop, across from the Nasser movie theater (now closed), you can enjoy images of Gaza from the 1930s, still wrapped in its ancestral peace it was swallowed up by the disaster of 1948.

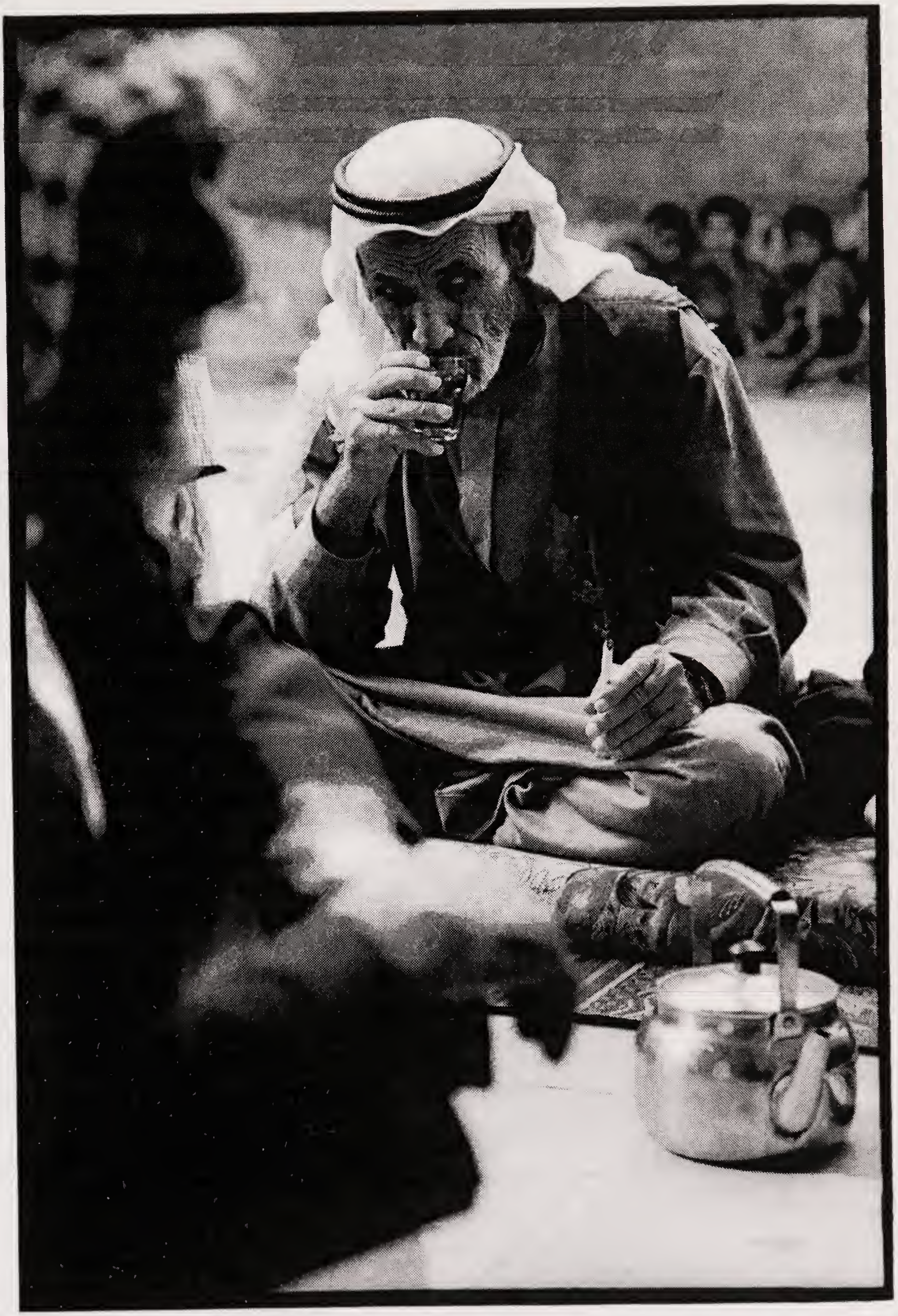
During the war, Tsahal forces failed to penetrate the Gaza Strip, which remained under Egyptian control until 1967. Refugees swarmed into the territory at the time of Naqba, "the catastrophe," which remains vividly etched as a sharp and painful memory.

We go to the *divan* of the Sawarkas, a Bedouin clan, in Jabaliya camp. Gangs of children are playing in the narrow streets, running from one tree to another; idle men watch the passing carts and rare jalopies, women dressed in black walk between the walls covered with painted slogans and hastily scratched inscriptions. Between the houses run very narrow lanes which lead to an impenetrable maze without any guideposts, a labyrinth of houses and sharp turns, and there is nestled the divan: it is a courtyard with walls of cinder blocks, about 45 feet by 30, covered in part with a sheet metal roof. Some old mattress lie on the worn tiling; there's a pile of rubble in the corner.

The place serves as a kind of forum where the clan holds its own ceremonies, weddings, the festival of Eid. This s also the

THE DIVAN OF THE SAWARKA CLAN, BEDOUINS LIVING IN JABALIYA

[8] Pierre Loti, *Le Désert*, op. cit., p. 195.



place where the clan holds discussions, resolves disputes, forges its collective conscience. The court is large and yet intimate and cordial, even if the wind drops dust and bits of rubble, and tears off a piece of the crumbling roof.

Soon after we've started to talk about the past, about Naqba, Slimane Rayth Arachaïda rises from among the gathered men and deposits himself in front of me, crouching, with a decided look in his eye. He recounts to me those fateful days with precision, like an adventure he just had yesterday: "I was twenty years old. It was Ramadan. I was out in a corn field. My father and many of the rest of us were working nearby. I saw tanks arriving and plenty of soldiers, who surrounded the broad basin where we were working. Many of us fled to the hills. I got my horse and I went to look for my father; I didn't see him. I ran to the house, where someone told me said he was going. I went back to look for him. He wanted to go out with a white flag; I talked him out of it and made him get up behind me. We got away, like many did. Those who surrendered were killed; eleven men died. After killing them, the soldiers rolled over their bodies, they burned our tents, they demolished our sheds.

"We stayed for awhile in the mountains. At night, we'd go in to pick up whatever we could, like thieves. If you were captured, it was death. Then some families headed for Hebron, others for Ashkelon where some Egyptian troops were stationed. We spent two months there. Then, the Israelis attacked the city; then they came to occupy Beit Hanoun and the north of the strip. Us, we had left Ashkelon and headed toward Gaza along the beach road, with camels and donkeys. We set up camp on the beach, and then there was a treaty between the Egyptians and the Israelis, who withdrew from Beit Hanoun and Beit Laya while the Egyptians evacuated Falluja [current Kiryat Gat]. Then the UNRWA came, they brought us tents and food, they made us maps and registered us."

The family lands were in the area of Hessi, north of Ashkelon, close to a river, Wadi Hessi. There, say the men, who

discuss the exact location, where Ariel Sharon established his farm, close to Breir. These lost fields have not faded in their memory. Mohammed Abou Jouifel says, "Before the Intifada, we used to see our lands in Israel. We took along our children to show them." Salem Mawassa: "Our houses are still there, and the wells we dug. Our parents took us there, our children were taken there, and in their turn they'll show our lands to their children."

Nama Abdel Atif Ahmed is an elderly lady of almost eighty years. She is the mother of the agronomist Monar Ahmed. We look her up in Jabaliya, on the second floor of the family building. There are two settees and some comfortable armchairs. The walls are almost bare. The apartment is modest, the wooden doors are tired, the color television is old. Before telling us her story, she makes a point of changing into the traditional dress, an embroidered black gown, the *taoub*.

Nama Abdel Atif Ahmed shows a model of the house she had to abandon in 1948 during the *Nakba*.

"We lived in Barbara, close to Mejdel. In 1948, I was 23; I'd been married for three years. My husband had 40 donums. We were very happy and we lived among our neighbors. We grew grapes and olive trees, orange trees, twelve palm trees; we had a well. The whole plain was cultivated; there were vines as far as the eye can see. The day of Naqba, during the night, the Egyptians sent the mokhtar [the wise man of the village or clan] to say that something had happened, that we had to leave, and he made people get out of their houses. At first they refused, but the Egyptians insisted, saying that the Israelis were going to come. My husband didn't want to leave. In the morning, at dawn, he went to pray. The mosque and the village were empty. Everyone had fled. His sister came to beg him to leave. She was afraid. Even the mokhtar had left the village. So we left, too. The Palestinian Resistance was fighting; we were afraid we'd be caught in the crossfire. We took a carpet, a donkey, a cow. The carpet was on the donkey, and there were two small mattresses, too, and a blanket. I took my jewelry and some clothing for my son. But all the rest, we left it behind.

"We left for Elbia; we walked a long way. I was carrying the children in my arms. We heard shots in Elbia, the place was deserted. At the exit of Elbia the Egyptian army, which was also leaving the city, accompanied us to Gaza, one day's walk. The mokhtar had said: 'When calm returns, you'll return.' The Egyptians reassured us, too, and said we would get our lands back.

"We looked for housing, we rented an apartment. There were a lot of people and not much room. We paid six pounds for one month, and fourteen of stayed in just one room for forty days; we didn't have money to stay any longer. We also needed wood to bake the bread and to cook. In Gaza, it was calm, but people kept coming. I went back to Barbara to look for some things; I closed up the house and I put the key in the hen house. We could circulate between Gaza and Barbara until the Israeli soldiers started to lay the mines on the road and people died from stepping on them. My sister-in-law's husband died

because of a mine on a road; his daughter, who was on the donkey that he was leading, was wounded in the leg; it had to be amputated.

"By then we had nothing anymore, no more money. We only ate bread. All I had left was a very large pendant, which I sold one day in order to buy 20 or 25 lbs of corn. We were getting weak, the children were thin and they cried from hunger. At the end of a year, the UNRWA came with food and medicine. They built us houses at Jabaliya; they established birth certificates, and we settled in Jabaliya and we kept quiet. We lived seven years in Gaza, under an asbestos roof that leaked when it rained.

"In 1967, the Israeli soldiers arrived. The loudspeakers ordered us to come out of the houses. People were rounded up on the plaza and the soldiers fired in the air to frighten us. They destroyed some of the houses. Every day there was a curfew, and tanks in the streets. My nephew died during this period, he was just about to get his high school diploma. So many people were killed, they had to be buried in collective graves. Once, they came at one o'clock in the morning. They came in, they said: 'Ah, what a beautiful house, what a beautiful garden!' They chased us out. I was very sad; I asked God to give us strength and patience. They made us climb into jeeps; I took one last glance at my pumpkins, and they took us away to Al-Arich, to Egypt. Many people were piled up in the trucks. My husband, who was old, was very sick, he was yellow in the face. In the house where we ended up in Al-Arich, there were rats. We stayed there six months. My elder son began studying to be a plumber. And then we had to return to Gaza. We wanted to buy land and build a house but we didn't have money, because my elder son had married. An apartment was rented. It is only in 1980 that we managed to buy a piece of land here and start to build the house."

In all the refugee families, the deeds to the stolen land are guarded like treasures. As we saw among the Obaids, so it is in Jabaliya, where Musleh's brother Ette brings us. Ette is visiting

from Dubaï where he now lives.

Ette insists that his sister-in-law Chouakar bring the documents to show us. She balks at showing them all: she's heard that foreign journalists are sometimes agents of Mossad, explains Ette, in which case it would be dangerous to show the papers. "We have kept these documents for sixty years," he says, showing a bundle of documents issued in the 1930s by the British authority. They are the property certificates for some 700 donums close to Ashdorot.

These forms, printed on fragile, yellowed paper, are inscribed with the name of the title owner, written by hand next to the printed lines.

Ette: "We'll never sell these papers in Israel, we'll pass them on to our children. They are to be kept, we never lose hope, and we don't forget."

His brother Musleh: "If America withdraws from Israel, we'll be able to take back our land."

Government of Palestine

Certificate of Registration

Land registry office of district / sub-district / town/ village

Block / lot N° _____

Category of property _____

Area donums / meters / decimeters _____

Share _____

Mukta'a [town council] _____

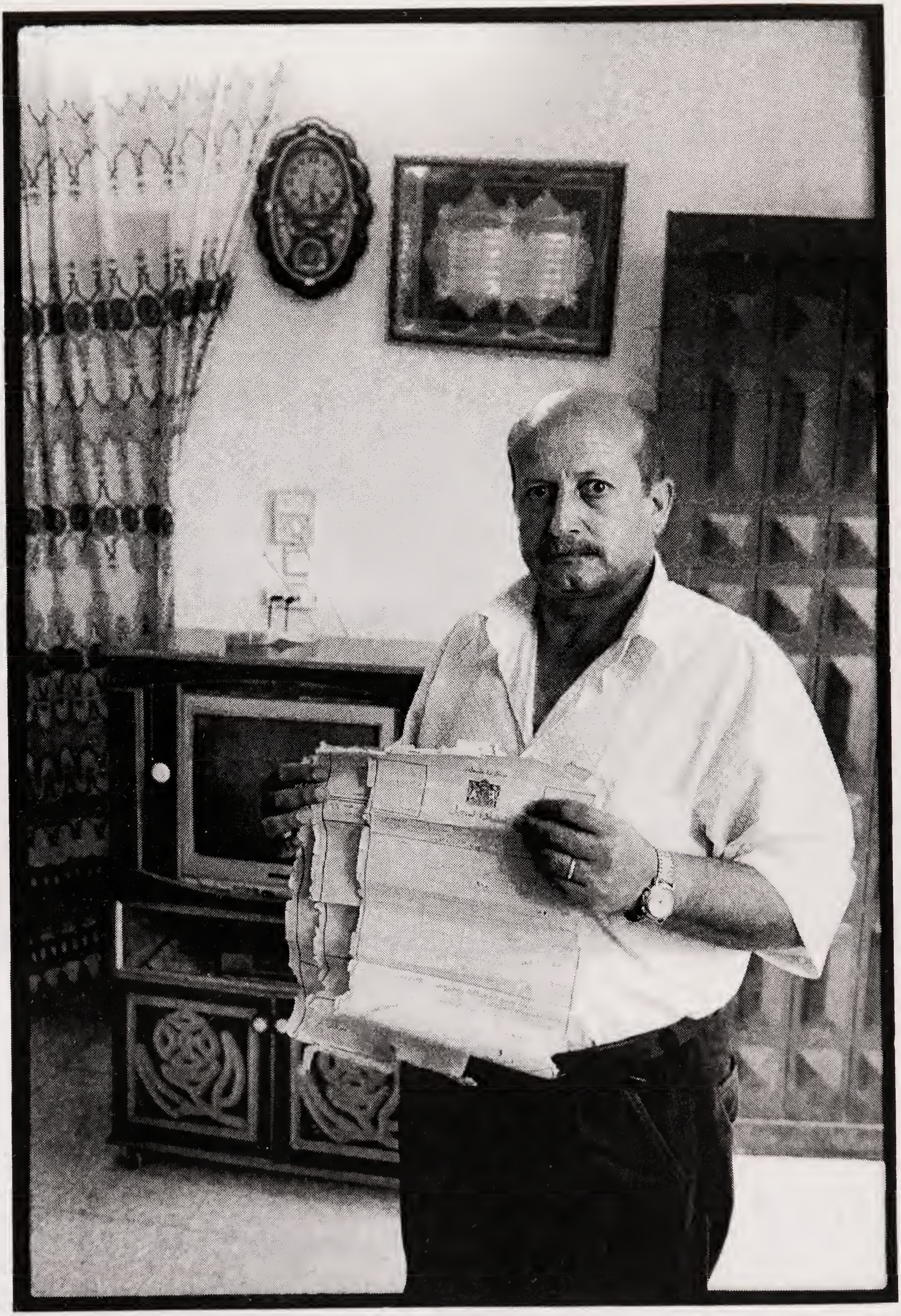
Name of form owner _____

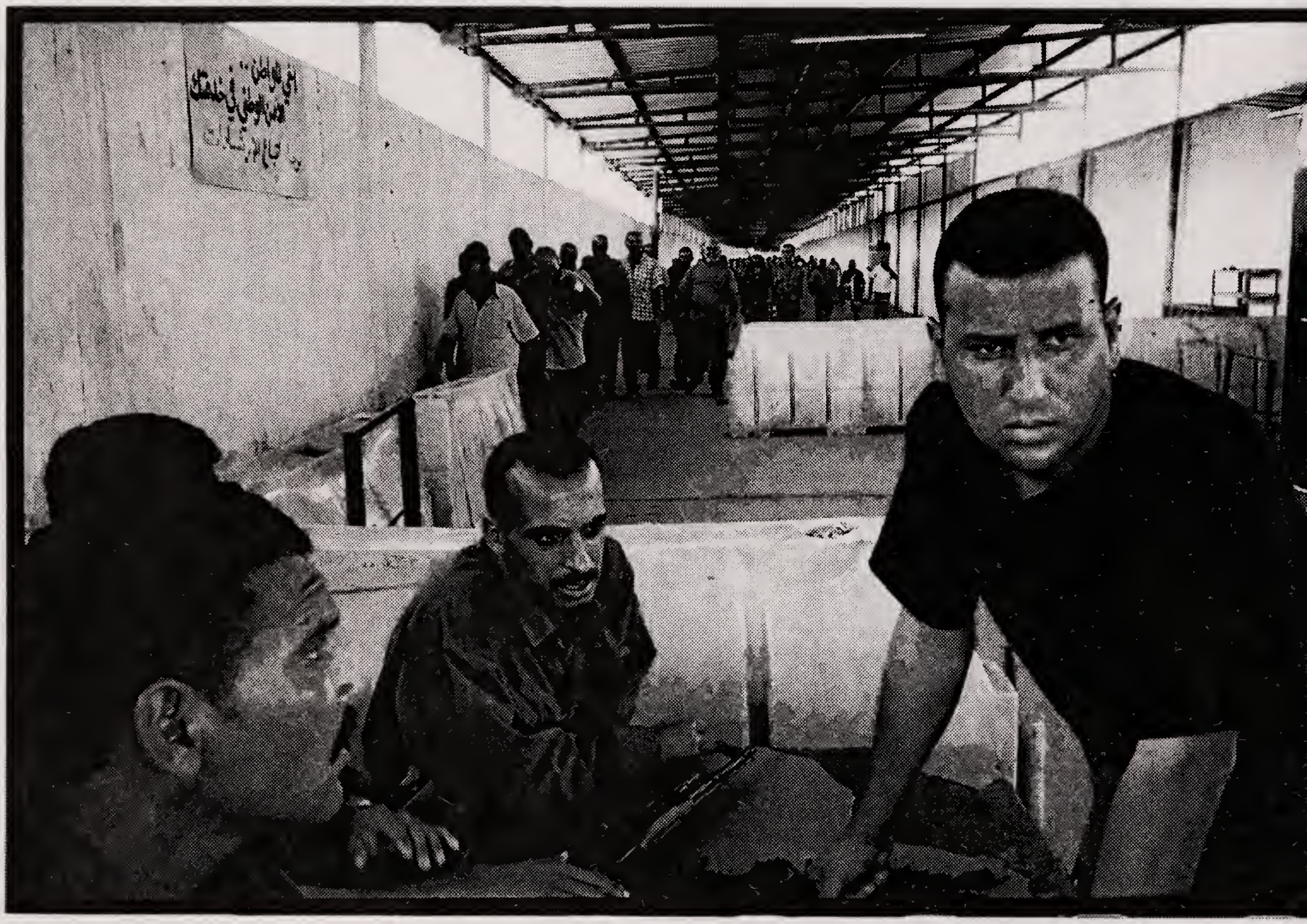
Nature of transaction _____

Consideration or price _____

This certificate is issued under the land settlement ordinance, 1928 Registrar of lands.

ETTE OBAID SHOWS THE LAND TITLES TO HIS FAMILY'S PROPERTIES





Foreigners: First they defend you, then they forget you

The workers' passage is a long packed-earth corridor, empty at this hour, and it stinks of urine. Broad and sad, it parallels the open air channel that we took in January. A white wall goes up about 15 feet, and from there some barred opening let in air. The corridor, some 25 feet wide, is covered with gray sheet metal framed in green metal strips. Two smelly toilets strewn with refuse are on the right, as well as a room for prayers where carpets are laid out.

At the exit of this passage, after having gone through metal detectors, x-rays and a frisking by the soldiers, the workers leave to the right, by corridors made of metal grids that look like cattle passages. Then they arrive at another corridor which leads to the esplanade, to the entrance to the Erez crossing post. Every morning, a bus then takes them along to their work, in Ashdod or Ashkelon.

Here we are on the Palestinian side, in August, in the afternoon, at the beginning of the corridor. Dozens of taxis and minibus wait to pick up the workers who are returning from Israel. A refreshment stand in a pushcart has been set up, as well as itinerant vendors of

PRECEDING PAGES:
L: WORKMEN AT THE EREZ PASSAGE, ON THE PALESTINIAN SIDE, ON THE WAY HOME.
R: AT THE UNRWA CENTER IN GHEVI

fruit, watches, socks; someone is preparing falafel at a table.

In the corridor, coming from Israel, dusty workers with tire faces tread heavily — badly treated workers, and poorly paid. As one group steps forward, we stop them. It is Ezet Al-Taramse who speaks first, a strapping man who smiles broadly when he sees Jerome photographing him. "We, here, are all together. We live in Gaza, in the Chafaoui district. There are some who come from the south, from Rafah. The working conditions are very difficult. I come at midnight and wait; they start to let us through at 3:00. It takes two hours to get through all the controls. There are workers who sleep in the tunnel, on cardboard they bring with them. The soldiers are real bastards. If you have a shekel in your pocket, they turn you back. You can only have bills, nothing metal. You have to pull up your shirt and keep your arms in the air. No undershirts, only a shirt. And in winter? Last winter, they said no jackets.

"From Erez to Ashdod, I take a taxi. That runs me 10 to 15 shekels. My boss screams at me when I'm late.

"I'm a plumber, I work for a private contractor. I work two to three days a week. I started again a month ago, I worked ten days. I've known my employer for ten years; he got me a pass. I'm paid 130 shekels a day [under $30]. What choice do I have? I have thirteen children, two wives, and it's almost back-to-school time. It's very hard to make ends meet. We accept the suffering, but I think the suffering is almost through with us."

The IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) justify the heavy-handedness of these procedures by the attacks on Erez: in early January, a young woman blew herself up, killing four soldiers, while in June a bomb at the end of a tunnel exploded in the terminal. Of course, there is also the concern that some suicide bomber might try to come in from Gaza. But these measures are accompanied by needless vexations and degrading humiliation.

We witnessed some of that in another context, while we were exiting Gaza by the corridor in November. So, at the end of the corridor there was a remote-controlled metal barrier, then an open

space and another barrier, behind which soldiers are standing. In this open space, you go by the x-ray detectors. We find ourselves with three Palestinians, apparently civil servants with the Authority, some women, and their children. Normally, you pass the screen and the soldiers search you. But this time, a soldier handed some translucent rubber gloves through the bars and indicated to a man and a woman that they must pat down the people they came through with. They do it, and everyone cooperates with this comedy, laughing, a little uncomfortably nevertheless. Then they had to inspect each other's bags — and pat down themselves! Finally the man pats his own chest, raises one leg after the other, feels his ankles. He passes the gloves back to the soldier. But after a few minutes, the soldier gives them back again: the search wasn't done quite up to his standards, and the involuntary inspectors, people and bags must go through this absurd and perverse scene again.

Fatigue, lack of sleep, tension, embarrassments, starvation wages — those who can endure this martyrdom without stumbling may attain the rarest treasure of Gaza: a job and an income. For ten years the economic situation has gone steadily downward in the territory, and particularly since the beginning of the second Intifada. "The recession in Palestine is among the worst in modern history," wrote the World Bank in June. This economic crisis was caused by the travel restrictions imposed on Palestinians and on merchandise."[9] Experts compare this crisis with the Great Depression of 1929 in the United States. Unemployment at the end of 2002 affected more than 50% of the workforce while more than 50% of the population was below the poverty line, which the Bank defined as a monthly budget of 1800 shekels (under $400) for a family of six. In 2003 and 2004, the situation continued to worsen and, in 2004, the Palestinian Office of Statistics estimated that 70% of the population of Gaza was below this threshold.[10]

A major reason for this steep decline into poverty is that the main pool of jobs available to people from Gaza has been drying up. Since the Palestinian State is denied the means of autonomous

[9] World Bank, *Disengagement, the Palestinian Economy and the Settlements*, June 23, 2004.

INSIDE THE CORRIDOR AT THE EREZ PASSAGE

development, Israel is the only place to go. And since 1967, the Israelis did look to Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank for manual labor; but then a reverse trend set in and in the 1990s, Israel began to bring in substitute immigrant workers, generally Thais. Almost 80,000 Palestinians were authorized to work in Israel at the beginning of the decade; this number fell to 45,000 in 2000, and a few thousand in 2004. Even this authorization isn't permanent; the Erez passage and the adjoining industrial park are often closed.

What the statistics say, the individual stories hammer home: almost all the men we met lost their jobs in the land of plenty soon after 2000. Fekri Abou Touor was earning 13,000 shekels ($2788) in his Tel-Aviv restaurant. Khaled, 8,000 a month as an automobile mechanic. A casualty of the occupation of Jabaliya, whom we met at the Chifa hospital, worked in Israel before the Intifada. Like the agronomist Monar Ahmed and the Bedouins of the Sawarka family, all are unemployed now. Hussan Abou Zid, who showed us his vegetable garden in Jabaliya, lost his job in Israel at the moment of the

[10] PCBS, *Impact of the Israeli Measures on the Economic Conditions of Palestinian Households*, April-June 2004. Cited in a UNRWA internal report.

revolt. Salem Al-Samana told us: "My brothers worked in Israel. Since Erez is blocked, they don't earn anything any more." Khaled was a workman in Israel, now he's unemployed. And so on.

Having been in their company this long, the adults of Gaza know the Israelis well, their mindset, their way of life. They are left not with hatred but regret, a more or less repressed envy for the freer morals over there and, often, an undisguised admiration for these cousins who have made it.

For example, young Hamad Chreiteh has a taxi that he was able to buy in large part due to the money he made in Israel. After high school, he worked three months in a restaurant in Tel-Aviv and then three or four months in Jerusalem, for $600 a month. He went to Gaza for a vacation on the very same day in September 2000 when Sharon made his controversial visit to Temple Mount. He looks back sadly on that time spent in Israel where he earned a good living, could drink alcohol, and see girls on the beach. He had Israeli friends; he asked them whether he could sleep with an Israeli and they answered him: "Of course, if she wants to." He even had a Jewish girlfriend, without exactly knowing where the relationship was going.

One day, he told us, he was at the beach, swimming, and all his clothes were stolen. Somebody caught the thief. His Israeli friend called the police, against his will — of course, he was afraid of them. The police came, took him along in his drawers, and everything turned out OK. He got his clothes back. But it turned out that the guy who took them was from Khan Yunis!

Breaking this bond of work and a life shared with the Israelis has had an impact on more than the economy. It also means that young people of Gaza, those under the age of fifteen — who account for about half of the population — are no longer familiar with Israel the way their elders were; they don't know its colors, customs, qualities, and attitudes, they don't know what it's like to talk with the people over there. All they know of Israel is tanks, checks-points, humiliation and blood. They don't see the occupiers in flesh and

blood; even the soldiers are almost invisible, usually hidden in tanks, jeeps, and watchtowers. For the children, the Israeli have become phantoms: an unreal, malicious and disincarnated force.

While the majority of the adults don't feel hatred towards the Israelis, but rather a kind of spite mingled with a firm will to hold strong, it would not be surprising if that hatred grew up in the hearts of the children and the teenagers.

There are no foreigners in Gaza, probably making it unique among cities in these times of globalization. The hotels are empty, tourists non-existent, businessmen a mirage, NGOs pretty much missing in action — prevented from coming by the occupiers. If you look, you might see a few diplomats, expatriates working for the UNRWA, or the rare journalist.

We never felt any hostility or animosity toward us as foreigners, except once or twice when we ran into a group of children; we walked the streets at ease, and very often on our own. In 1987, by contrast, when Gaza was under Israeli control, journalists felt very uncomfortable. "In Gaza, you can feel tension and mistrust everywhere," wrote a reporter for Géo. "In the commercial street, teeming with people, conversations would stop when a stranger passed by. Men, women, and children turn to look: what if this foreigner were one of those hated settlers? ...When a non-Palestinian walks in the streets of Gaza, he feels like he is running the gauntlet between rows of hostile eyes."11

Not in 2004, when Europeans are welcomed warmly, with hopes that they will transmit a simple message that we heard repeated so many times in different words. For example, this is how Salem expressed it: "I wish that other people would understand us and that they would help us to live in tranquility."

"Arafat was the father of the Palestinian people, the UNRWA is the mother." This nifty formula by Lionel Brisson, the director of the UNRWA in Gaza, is no exaggeration. It is remarkable the extent to which the major actor in the Israeli-Palestinian imbroglio is

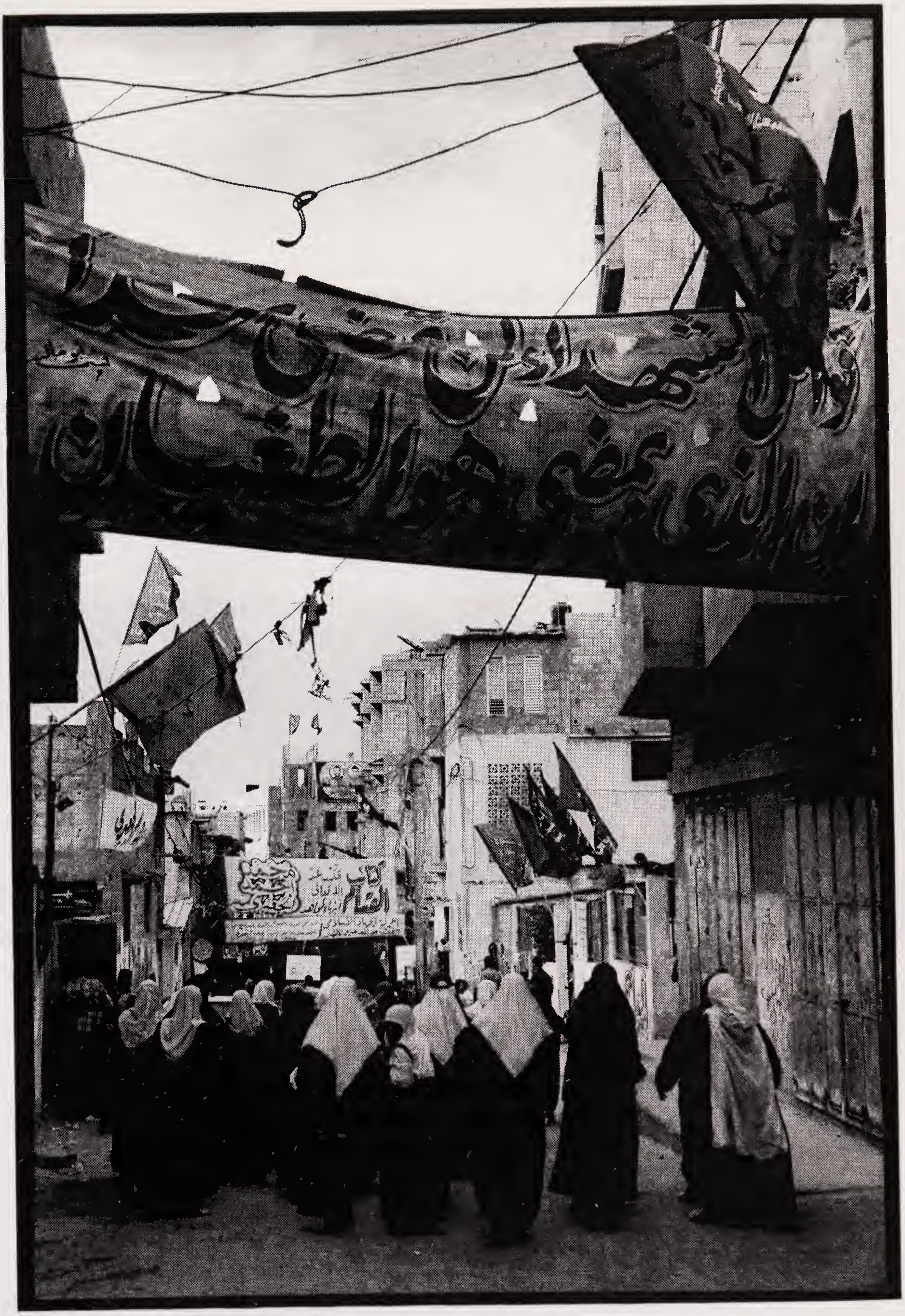
neglected. The UN agency responsible for the Palestinian refugees constitutes a quasi-state in Gaza that keeps the territory from falling into absolute dereliction. The UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) is the largest United Nations mission in the world, with 22,000 employees including 8,500 in the Gaza Strip. It takes care of the education, the health and even the survival of half of the population, while feeding more than 700,000 people.

"We provide the public services, the governmental functions," says Brisson. He is a sort of proconsul of Gaza, and his voice is simultaneously filled with weariness and passion. "The UNRWA is a factor of stability, here and in the surrounding area. In Gaza, it is the only structure that's holding up. Any destabilization of the UNRWA would be catastrophic."

The UNRWA food aid distribution center aid in the Shati camp consists of a large hangar flanked by open yards. On the smaller side, rations are distributed from the emergency program. There is a lot of activity, people carrying bags containing rations of rice, flour, sugar and lentils. In the courtyard, a cart drawn by a donkey whose forehead is decorated with a silver cross of Fatima waits to be loaded. Normally, the aid recipients must come individually in order to avoid encouraging a black market; but old women or invalids can give their coupons to men who come to pick up their rations on these carts. Piled up in the semi-darkness of the storage hangar are cases of bottled cooking oil and boxes of dried milk packets, beside large sacks of rice or flour. On the other side are counters where those who are registered with the "normal" program receive their ration in exchange for a coupon. It's all well organized, full of activity but not agitated, the people in the yard crowding together but not in a mob. At another counter in the wall, through a grill, they receive the money to which they are entitled. There is no atmosphere of humiliation nor, on the side of those making the distribution — and who are Palestinians paid by the UNRWA — any feeling of superiority; rather, on one side and the other, the feeling is that of administrative

Rashidah Street, Gaza.

[11] Henri Philippe and Andreas Wolfers, "Gaza: Next year in Palestine...," Géo, n° 105, November 1987.



operation fulfilling a duty determined by recognized rights. No giddiness, wailing or interruptions: the controlled intensity of an effective machine.

Another food distribution center, in Jabaliya. Trucks are being unloaded and sacks of flour and rice are lowered amidst the carts, while a miserable group talks of its destitution. "I don't have any other means of feeding myself"; "There is no more work in Israel, we depend on these coupons"; "Everyone is unemployed"; "Even those who have a job are underpaid. Before the Intifada, I earned 2,000 shekels per month; now, its not even 500." "I haven't had anything for two months, and my husband needs an operation. I have two children who aren't walking yet," says a lost-looking old woman, a piece of paper in her hand. "She's lost her head," explains another person, "since she lost track of her UNRWA card, she doesn't receive food anymore." Another: "I'm poor, and I cannot get the eye operation I need." A third one watched as his house was knocked down, in Jabaliya, and his son has been killed. "Palestine is rotten, there's no more money, poverty reigns."

Akram Goza'at: "I'm thirty-one years old. I have no training, and I'm unemployed. I find day labor sometimes, in the construction industry, where I earn 30 then shekels per day. I married in 2001 and I have three children. I hadn't worked in Israel, but I had some money on side. I sold vegetables, but I stopped: people don't have money to buy any more, I was selling at a loss. My father and my brothers helped me to pay the 3,000 dinars for the marriage [the Jordanian dinar is often used; 3,000 dinars would be approximately $4200].

"The future? It's shit!" The others laugh. He shows the jacket he wears, torn all over. "There is no future. If there is no work, there is no future. Our only resource is the UNRWA food."

In 1985, the Agency had decided to reduce the number of families that could benefit from the food aid. But in aftermath of the Intifada in 2000, they had to expand the distribution again very broadly.

"The UNRWA has the normal program and the emergency

THE UNRWA DISTRIBUTING FOOD AID
IN THE CHATEREEGEE CAMP

program," explains Imad Okal, chief of operations for the Agency in the northern camps. The normal program distributes food every three months to special cases identified by the social workers. Every year, the UNRWA sets the number of cases that its budget can cover and establishes the criteria of eligibility. Those take into account family size — the number of children under the age of eighteen; health — we help those who are in poor health or have a disease; and we also help the widows, the orphans, divorcees. Those who are over eighteen must prove that they're sick, cannot work, or are studying at the university. Anyone who doesn't meet these criteria has to apply to the emergency program which was set up since the Intifada. It consists of a 3-month job creation program, then distributes coupons for a year."

Each member of a family accepted in these programs has the right every quarter to 2 liters of oil, 2 kg of dried milk, 3 kg of sugar, 3 kg of rice, and 30 kg of flour, as well as 40 shekels ($8.50).

The UNRWA is the collimator of the United States and Israel — in a paradoxical way, since it allows the occupier not to pay the cost of its occupation. Indeed, the UNRWA deals with the poor people, as well as repairing the destruction perpetrated by the Israeli army: rebuilding the electricity and water supply networks, constructing houses to replace those which are destroyed in Rafah and elsewhere, housing assistance for the homeless, etc.

"For Israel, we are the enemy, we are pro-Palestinian," summarizes Jean-Philippe Laberge, a UNRWA employee from Quebec. "They thin our reports describing the situation are too critical." In concrete terms, that results in a permanent straitjacket by which the occupying army tries to limit the diplomatic privileges of the international agency. The risks incurred by its employees during the occupation of Beit Hanoun led the UNRWA in July to withdraw all but a handful of expatriates from Gaza, sending about sixty of them to its offices in Jerusalem.

IDF frequently accuses the UNRWA of being used by "the terrorists." For example, in October, the army claimed that an

Agency ambulance that evacuated casualties during the bloody occupation of Jabaliya had been carrying a Qassam rocket. A careful examination of the video broadcast by the army proved that the allegation was false. The IDF also claims that the UNRWA schools are used by the resistance forces during engagements, which leads it to fire on the schools, including during school hours, which often results in deaths of children.

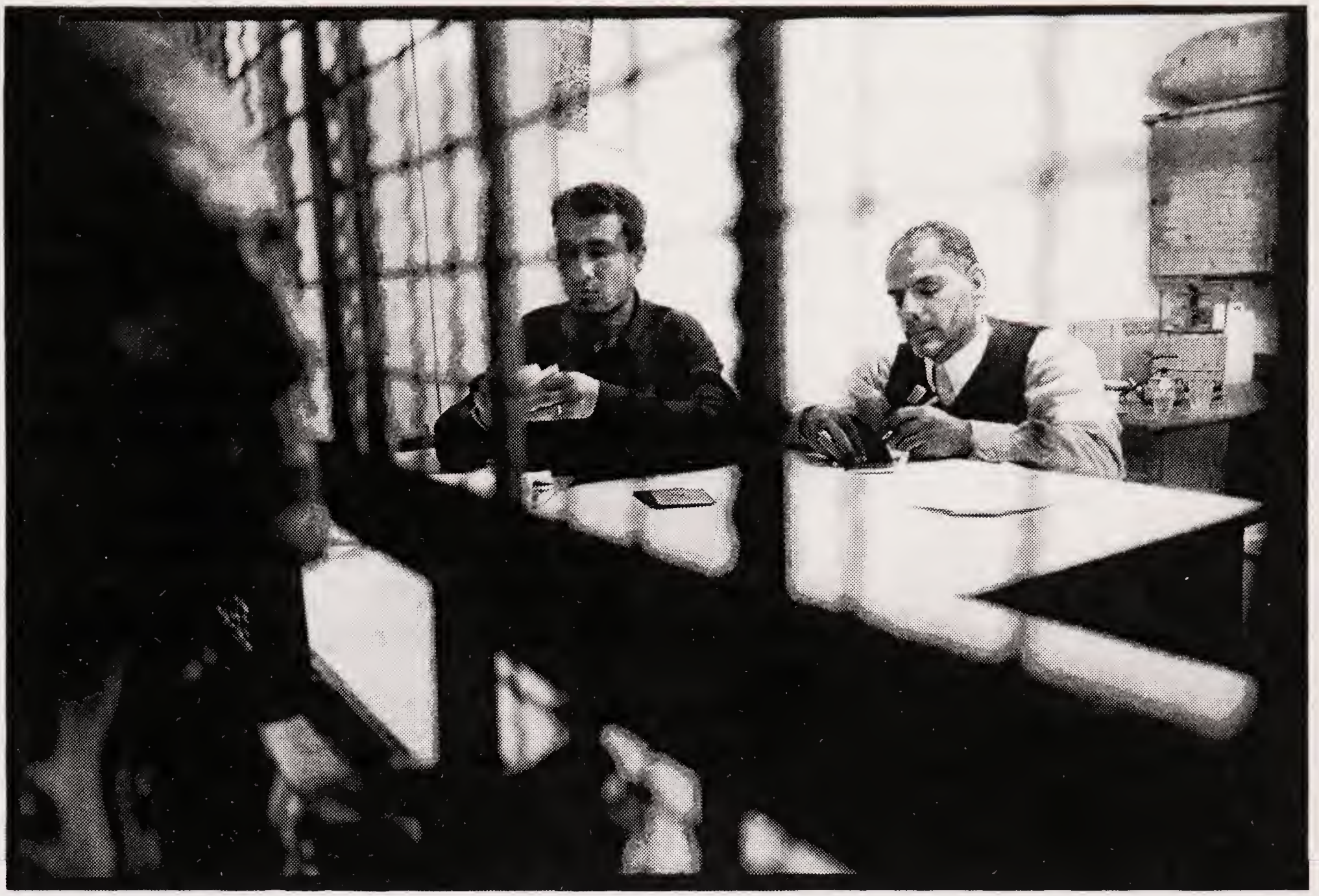
In fact, the resistance fighters are all too conscious of the vital necessity of the Agency for the population and know better than to risk its neutral status. Once, while we were passing through a neighborhood in Rafah at night with a watch patrol, the visibility was very low. Suddenly, a brightly lit garage showed up: could the combatants stand there, to take a photograph? No, we were answered firmly. It belongs to the UNRWA, no way they would step inside, with or without weapons.

AID DISTRIBUTION AT THE CHATEILLON CAMP.

External aid is not all that keeps Gaza connected to the rest of the world; there is also the diaspora. For instance, Souhila's husband has family in Qatar, in Australia, and in Spain. He did his studies in Algeria; but he didn't find a job there, and he returned to Gaza. Souhila's sister lives in Australia, where she has acquired Australian nationality. Amdi Abou Sidou, the thirty-two-year old manager of a video game parlor on Omar Al-Mokhar, came from Kuwait after a management course in Baghdad. The agronomist Oussama Mukhallati lived a long time in Germany. "I returned in 2001 after spending fourteen years there. I left in 1988 at the age of eighteen. I studied electricity for two years, under pressure from my family; I wanted to study agriculture, but they didn't think that would be good. Then I changed directions; that made me lose time. My family helped me in the beginning but I wanted to be independent, I told them that I could do without their assistance. I worked in the construction industry, agriculture, a car factory, anything and everything to pay for my studies. I obtained an agricultural diploma to qualify for the occupation of engineer at the end of 1998 and passed an exam in environmental protection in 2000. Life in Germany isn't easy for foreigners; you live as a second-class citizen."

Many Palestinians also returned from Algeria at the time of the Oslo Accords. When they were in Beirut, Arafat and the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) were in a French-speaking milieu, as well as in Tunis, where the PLO settled in 1982, and in Algeria, where a many of its activists settled down. That creates an indirect but powerful bond between France and the Palestinians of Gaza. Mohammed Kilani, Nabil Diab, Rashid Abdelhamid, Bassim, Souhila, whom we met, all come from Algeria. Nearby to the Chifa hospital, there is a beauty parlor called "Algeria" whose sign, "Ladies' Beauty Salon," is written in French.

The diaspora represents the possibility of living a normal life somewhere, but it is also exile, an imposed distance that cannot make people forget the fatherland they miss. One Friday, at the end of prayers, we find ourselves with the faithful in their djellabas. A



bald man with a moustache approached us; he spoke good English. He comes from Dubaï, where he has worked for twenty-two years as a teacher in a nursing school. He hadn't come to Gaza for five years; he was born here and his family lived here. To enter Gaza, Ette Obaid had to wait three weeks at Rafah, on the Egyptian side, with the Israelis blocking the entrance. He came by plane with his six children — three boys and three girls, between the ages of a year and half and eighteen years. Ette invites us to have a coffee, he is staying just down the street with his brother who works in the police force. Another of his brothers lives in Jabaliya, two others in the West Bank, and one in Germany, in Kassel. We settle around a table in the passage that goes around the house and leads to the street, from which it is separated by a metal door. We drink an orange soda, then a coffee with milk, while Ette introduces us to his three sons (the eldest of them is studying computer technology at the Islamic University of Gaza) and his nephew, who is studying in Cuba. Ette himself studied in Ukraine, and another member of his family learned accountancy in

The UNRWA is the largest employer in the Gaza Strip, after the Palestinian Authority
Here, office workers are distributing financial aid at Chati

Russia. A nephew had studied in Beir Zeit, but he's been in prison for seven months. He is on a hunger strike at this moment, along with the other prisoners.

A few days later, we find Ette with Jabaliya in his brother Musleh. The latter is an Arabic teacher in a UNRWA school. He built his house little by little on a piece of land he bought ten years ago from some people in Gaza.

Musleh: "I worked in Saudi Arabia for fourteen years as a teacher, then we came back to Gaza in 2000 because our contract over there had expired. My wife is a grade school teacher, and I'm a mathematics teacher. But we prefer living here, even if we earn less money."

Question: "Why?"

Musleh and his wife answer, in unison: "Because it's our country."

Things are different in Gaza today. Just a few months after our last visit the Israelis began withdrawing the settlers and the territory was freed from the torn-up roads, the blockade at Abou Houli, and the threatening watch towers that menaced farmers and passersby; and this struggling and over-populated territory regained one third of its land surface. All of this was a tremendous relief, a chance to breathe once again after years of being suffocated.

But even so, Gaza is still as we portrayed it. Inside, the fear is gone; but the gate is still securely locked. The Raffah passage is just as chancy as ever, Erez is closed, the port and airport are off limits. Karni is at the mercy of the Israelis. The military is still on guard, keeping up the pressure, the threat of strangulation is ongoing, and the helicopters still come to fire rockets at "terrorists."

There seems no escape from the grinding poverty, so that pessimism is ever present in the hearts of the younger generation. But the will to hold on is still strong, despite the never-ending confinement.

As we reflect on our experiences in Gaza, some ideas stand out:

- It is indeed a war that's going on in Palestine, a war

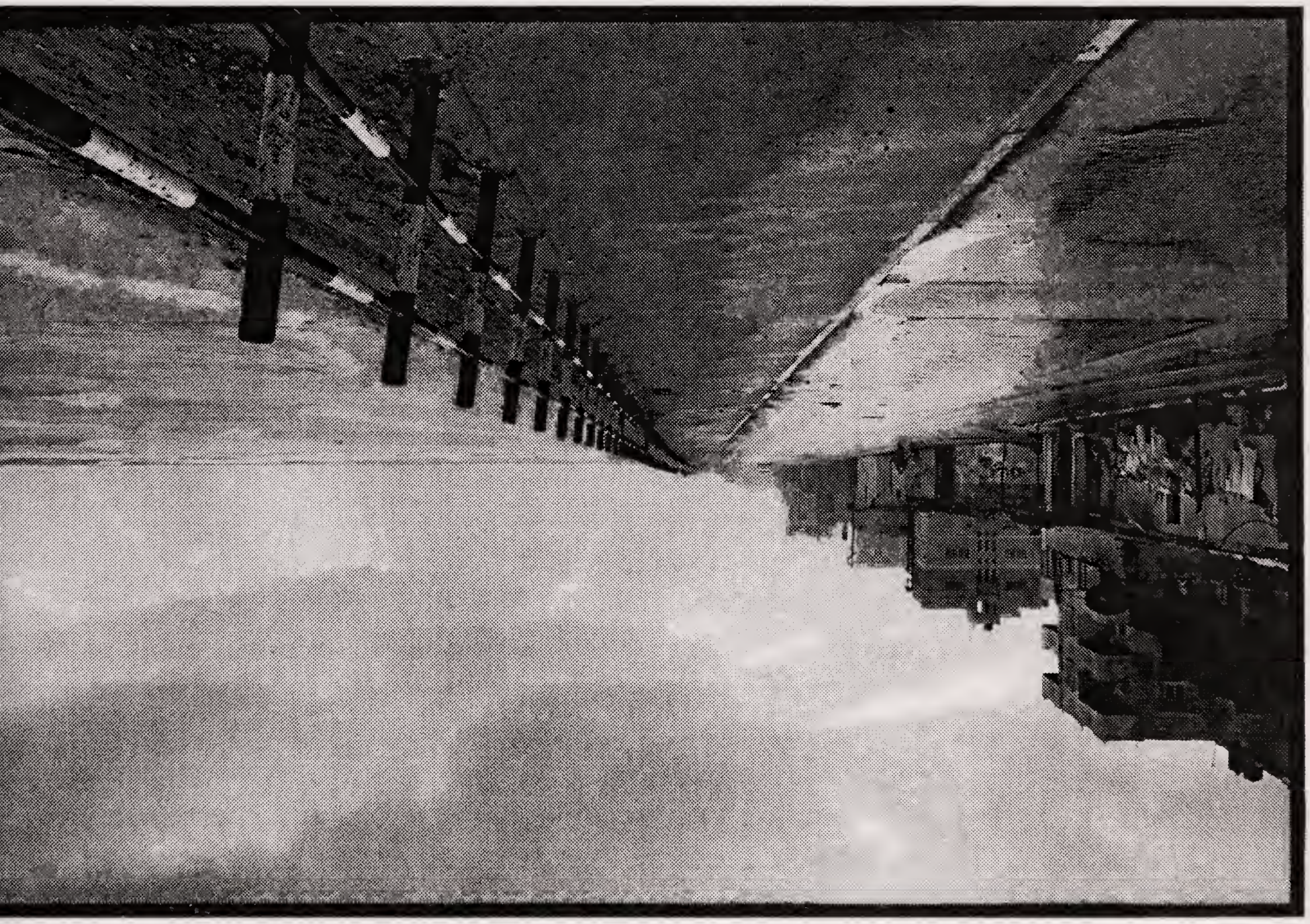
between an occupying force and a people defended by an authentic military resistance, even if the latter have only a few thousand combatants for the one and a half million inhabitants. This is not a slaughter of impotent victims.

- The people are resisting. To live normally, under such difficult conditions, is a form of resistance and they perceive it as such. The Palestinians will not leave. Their courage and tenacity are impressive. And yet, by far the vast majority do not express an unending hatred for the Jews, only a tough determination to see their rights recognized on an equal footing.
- The Israeli policy in Gaza during the Intifada was inhumane, because the army's policy is to treat the entire population as if all of them were armed combatants (which it considered "terrorists"). No distinction was made in how they treated children and adults, civilians and combatants. In their minds, the notion of "collective punishment" goes without saying. One can only wonder whether this conduct itself is not "terrorism," given that its purpose is precisely to terrorize the civilian population. Furthermore, the army over-reacts to attacks on Israel: this is not "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," but "a whole head for an eye, a whole mouth for a tooth." This attitude puts the Palestinians in an impossible position. What policy should they adopt? Should they put up a fight — although it always elicits a terrible and disproportionate counterattack — or should they try to cooperate - knowing there is no guarantee that Israel will give up on its plan, which still seems to be to extend its territory at the expense of the sovereignty of the Palestinian people?

In any event, the retreat from Gaza could be a hopeful sign, if it were the first step toward progress in other areas. But as of early 2006, all the signs suggested otherwise.

As observers, all we can do is hope; hope that people will listen, on both sides, to the messengers of peace. People like

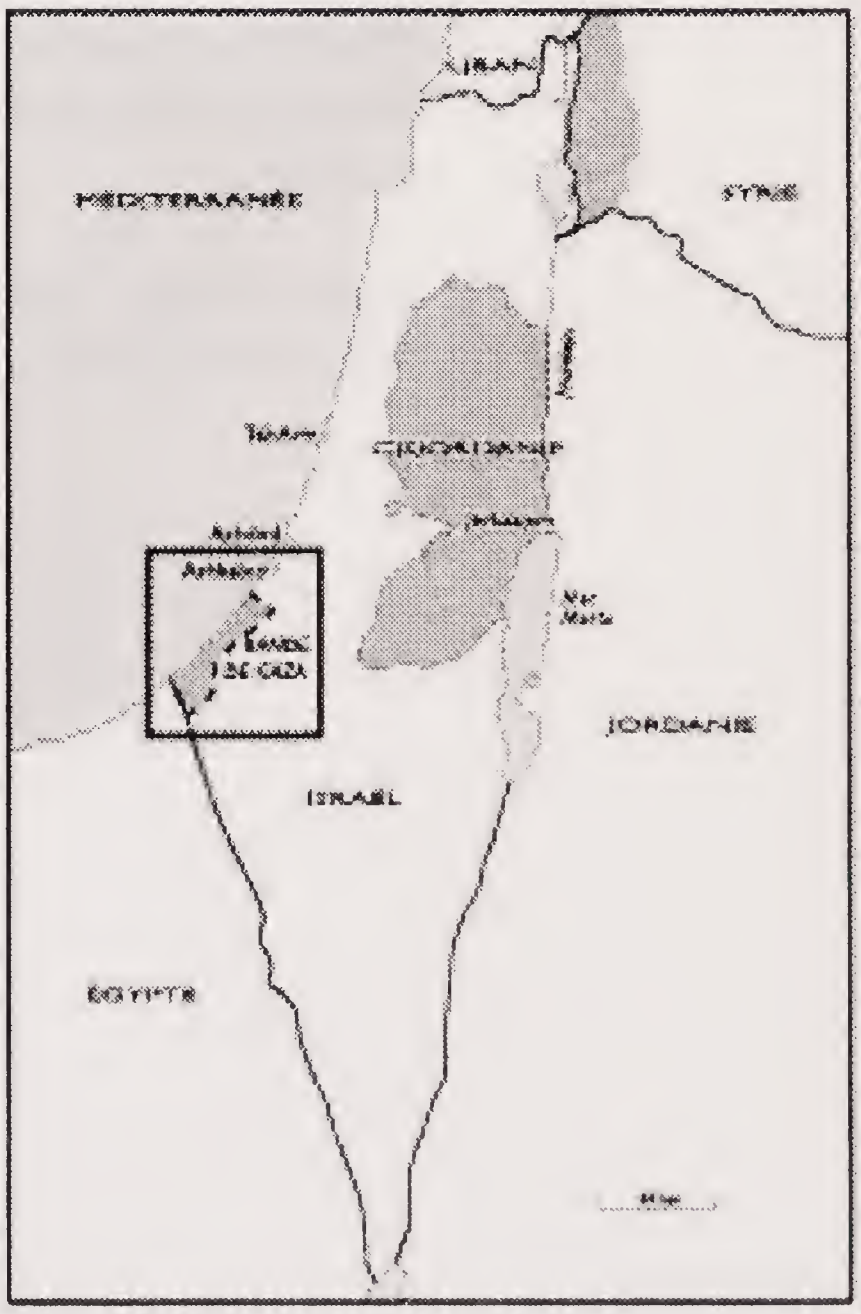
Socrate Soussan, the settler/fisherman, who observes: "We have to get along, we have no choice. The Israelis need the Palestinians as much as the Palestinians need them." And Mohammed Kilani, the social worker. "Any Israeli who was born here, whatever the circumstances, this is his home. To make peace, we have to find some way for the two peoples to work together, such as a confederation of the two states. The ideal would be to be able to live together, Palestinians and Israelis, without any problems. If we could manage the conflict, we would be setting such a good example. We would have broken something — the world would have broken something."



LA BANDE DE GAZA

Villes palestiniennes
Colonies israéliennes
Check-point (ou barrage)
Route des colons israéliens
Routes palestiniennes
No man's land
10 km

MÉDITERRANÉE
Ashkelon
Dugit
Erez
Beit Lahya
Chati
Jabalia
Gaza
Beit Hanoun
Netzarim
al-Nusirat
Passage de Karni
ISRAËL
Deir al-Balah
Abasan Houd
Kfar Darom
Gouch Katif
entrée de Kissoufim
Kfar Yam / Passage de Touh
Khan Younes
Neve Dekalim
Gadid
Rafiah Yam
Morag
Tel Sultan
Rafah
Poste-frontière de Rafah
AÉROPORT
ÉGYPTE



Printed in the United States
69755LV00004B/128

gazalifeincage00kemp

gazalifeincage00kemp

"Day after day Gaza had been in the news, but it never added up to anything more than a confused impression of violence and frenzy. The whole place seemed populated only by caricatures. It was just a place on a map, a name in the newspapers, the locus of some insoluble conflict, a place about which, fundamentally, most of us really didn't know a thing. So Jerome and I agreed we should go and get the story of the day-to-day life of the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip."

Thus curiosity and a nose for a good story led two journalists to make four 15-day visits to Gaza in 2004, during the hardest year of the second Intifada. They steered clear of political analyses and meetings with prominent figures, but visited with individuals and families from Palestinian "tunnellers" to Israeli "settlers," informally surveying the views on all sides.

Perhaps, they thought, a more human and less institutional take on this ever-so-complex and so inflamed Israeli-Palestinian conflict would be useful. In exploring the subject they were also exploring the nature of the violence that attended it. Peace, after all, can never be achieved solely on the basis of argumentation, of opposing lines of logic that each has its own legitimacy, but by stepping back, by getting a little bit of distance, that would bring a human perspective to the real people who live behind the faces.

They took their time, going back every season, seeking to get beyond the surface of appearances and, if not to understand, at least to actually get close to the essence of this story. And the adventures they shared are now their gift to the reader.

Israel withdrew its settlers in 2006. Inside Gaza, the fear is gone. But the gate is still locked and economic, military and political pressures still threaten. The hope for peace remains a hope, and a prayer.

ISBN 0-87586-440-6
52595
9 780875 864402

Algora Publishing