



AHMEND'S WALL WHEN HE LED THE CHARGE TO TOPPLE THE WEST BANK'S BERLIN WALL, HISHAM AHMED AND OTHERS IN THE PALESTINIAN CAMP FINALLY FELT FREE.

Miami Herald, The (FL) - Wednesday, January 3, 1996

Author: JOHN DONNELLY Herald Staff Writer

DEHEISHEH REFUGEE CAMP, West Bank -- For as long as the wall stood around this camp, Hisham Ahmed knew it must come down.

The wall, a mix of concrete blocks, chain-link fence and barbed wire, stood frighteningly high above the road south of Bethlehem -- topping 20 feet in sections.

The wall diminished people's psyches, Ahmed felt. It made them see themselves as animals in a zoo. Israel had built it to stem insurrections more than 15 years ago, and how could anyone take it down?

Then the moment came to him. It was only a few days before Christmas, and residents in neighboring Bethlehem were dancing in Manger Square in celebration of the last Israeli soldiers driving out of town and the first Palestinian police arriving.

Bethlehem rejoiced. But what about Deheisheh? Ahmed told his driver to go to the camp immediately.

This was a pivotal moment in his life. Ahmed -- 33 years old, blind since birth, born in Deheisheh, educated locally and later in the United States, holder of a doctorate in international relations, formerly a professor at Florida International University, ex-Fulbright fellow, collector of oral narratives -- now seized a job unlike any he had known before:

Commando of a wall destruction crew.

Ahmed found a bulldozer owner. He persuaded him to take advantage of the moment; the owner got two bulldozers out. Ahmed rode shotgun on one as it began to topple the fence, which the Israelis had erected in 1980. It was Israel's oldest security fence in all of Palestinian territory.

Hundreds, then a few thousand, joined in. Abu Ala, the chief Palestinian peace negotiator, heard about it and came to cut out one section. From his bulldozer seat, Ahmed called friends on his cellular phone and urged them to be part of the wall coming down.

In the middle of the wreckage, the bulldozer owner turned to him and said: "I never felt in my entire life the worth of my work as I see it this second." At 2:30 a.m. Dec. 22, after five hours of pulling and tearing, the bulldozer stopped. Ahmed climbed down. The barbed wire, the cement, the chain-link were smashed apart. The Berlin Wall of the West Bank was toppled, the old roads leading into the camp reopened, the residents no longer living in a cage.

Hisham Ahmed felt free.

No longer was he just the intellectual, just the observer, just Dr. Hisham the professor from the United States. He was fully one of them, a liberator of fellow Palestinians. This wasn't why he came back to his homeland.

Or was it?

*

"I came back for the sheer purpose of learning about my culture," Ahmed said one night last summer in the shaded courtyard of the American Colony Hotel in East Jerusalem. "I was away 10 years. Everything here

had changed drastically. My view on life changed. I wasn't used to the ways things were done here. Things moved too slowly for me. In all candor, it was difficult. I found myself in conflict. I found myself in the middle. Halfway between cultures."

His story of return is distinctly a Palestinian tale, but it also contains truths found in the world of refugees, including those of the Cubans of Miami who dream about going back to their roots but wonder whether their roots will still be there.

In some senses, Ahmed arrived here at an ideal time in history. Just months after his return, Israel and Palestinian leaders signed the Oslo accords in 1993, opening a path for the end of Israeli occupation in the West Bank, the return of Palestinian lands and -- almost certainly -- the birth of a Palestinian state.

But momentous events don't necessarily make matters easy. At least not for Ahmed.

Then again, his life has been one of overcoming barriers.

Born on New Year's Day in 1963 to a laborer and housewife, Ahmed grew up in the narrow, hilly streets of Deheisheh, an overcrowded camp of little hope and too much desperation. Large families often sleep in one room. Rain often carries sewage down the alleyways.

Ahmed's family stressed education. They also strived to find a cure for his blindness. Though they had almost no money, Ahmed's father took him as a young boy to Egypt to an eye specialist. The doctor couldn't help, but the trip taught a lifelong lesson for Ahmed: His family would do anything for him.

He was one of four children: Hiyam, his sister, the oldest; Hisham; Mohammed, three years younger, also born blind; and Ahlam, another sister. The two brothers displayed unusual talents. Hisham found inspiration in books, while Mohammed's interest lay in business.

As Hisham enrolled in the West Bank's premier university, Bir Zeit, Mohammed decided to open a wholesale grocery business. At 13, he bought a car, hired someone to drive it; by 18, he had one of the largest wholesale food businesses in the area.

But both brothers reached dead ends. Bir Zeit was closed more than open during the early 1980s due to Israel's war in Lebanon. The Israeli army, fearing campus uprisings, simply shut Palestinian schools for months. Hisham decided he must study abroad. He was accepted at Illinois State University.

Mohammed faced his own difficulties, several years later, again not of his doing. When the Palestinian uprising called the intifada began in 1987, his business, along with many other Palestinian enterprises, was ruined. It remains so.

One major difference between the blind brothers was that one got out and the other didn't.

But it wasn't so easy to leave. When Ahmed left, his mother Halima felt so sick with worry that she was brought to the hospital. "It was like fire boiling in my stomach," the mother said one day recently in her living room. "In those first days, his father and I would wake up every night, and I would start calling him. We kept praying to God to be with him."

Ahmed arrived at O'Hare Airport in Chicago at 8:13 p.m. Aug. 9, 1983, a Tuesday. He remembers everything exactly. The ride to the campus. The first meal, a pizza. The \$175 in his pocket.

The refugee settled into his new home.

*

Ahmed earned his bachelor's degree in political science at Illinois State; his master's and doctorate from the University of California at Santa Barbara. He used word processors that work from Braille to script, enabling him to write, edit, print documents, connect via modem with libraries. Professors marveled at his spatial sense, including one who couldn't believe the sight of Ahmed riding a five-speed bicycle on campus. But more remarkable was his ambition and his intellect. He completed his Ph.D in the shortest possible time. Immediately after he got his doctorate, FIU hired him as a visiting professor.

He taught on the North Miami campus in 1991 and 1992.

"Students loved him," said Cheryl Rubenberg, an FIU associate professor of political science who took a sabbatical in 1991 to live in Gaza. "We talked all the time about the Middle East. I didn't always see the world as he saw it. He is very pro-Palestinian. But there's no doubt about his intellect."

Ahmed then spent two years teaching at the University of North Dakota. In spring 1993, he decided to go home. He returned as a Fulbright scholar, a book project in hand to write about the militant Palestinian group Hamas.

*

He returned as a role model, an almost mystical figure. Said Ziyad Alkhateeb, a Deheisheh resident and one of Bethlehem's new police officers: "People are very proud of him; they are proud to have a professor come from the camp."

During the Hamas book project, Ahmed became taken by the stories of day-to-day life. He received a two-year fellowship from the Institute of Current World Affairs in Hanover, N.H., and decided to record life histories of ordinary Palestinians -- stories infrequently told in the media; he hopes to publish the narratives into a second book, called Portrait of Palestine. "I thought it was about time to meet with common people," he said. "It was a rich laboratory of information that hardly has been tapped. Many Palestinians have an elegant way of telling a story. People who never learned to read or write had mastered storytelling in a most organized way that shocks learned people."

At first, Ahmed tried to record the stories soon after meeting people. He met much resistance.

"They said to me, 'Why the hell do I want to interview them? Haven't I lived the story?'"

Now, he meets with people a few times before taping them.

The stories are rich in detail, and they unrelentingly reflect the difficulties in being a Palestinian. Many spent years in Israeli jails. Many lost work. Many felt the frustrations of not being able to move freely from one country to the next because they belong to no nation.

He interviewed a coffee shop owner; a refugee from Amman, Jordan; two women who work as researchers; businessmen; a political scientist. He also recorded parts of a popular Palestinian radio talk show, in which the discussion was dominated by stories of love and exchanging wives.

Jidalla "Jad" Khamashta, owner of Cafe Europe in East Jerusalem, said he talked with Ahmed because "it was a way to reflect the image of the Palestinian people, to let people know that Palestinians are human beings, that they suffered, that they tried hard. In the United States, most Americans have a wrong image of Palestinians. They think of us as being uncivilized, camel workers, Bedouins who live in tents."

Khamashta's story focuses on his lost dream of becoming a doctor. He studied in Kansas, but when he tried to enter medical school, he couldn't because he didn't have a passport. At one point, Jordanian immigration officials took his documents and didn't return them for weeks. Finally, he gave up and returned to the Jerusalem cafe.

"I never felt that my story was special," Khamashta said. "But it was kind of a relief to talk about it. I always wanted the world around me to know that I am a victim of my circumstances just because I am a Palestinian."

*

For Ahmed, the interviews continue.

But his life has become much fuller lately. He has just decided to run in the first Palestinian national elections Jan. 20. He is one of 31 people seeking four seats from Bethlehem.

His campaign theme: giving people hope for a better future. He wants better educational facilities and he

wants to participate in the final Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations.

The elections open another historic phase for Palestinians, and yet at the Deheisheh the vote pales in comparison to the tearing down of the wall.

At the Manger Square celebration that night, Ahmed couldn't understand how people had forgotten the wall.

"I thought to myself that I didn't want to celebrate until that damn barrier was torn apart piece by piece. . . . This is the easy start. The real work has yet to commence. That will take years of systematic hard work to undo despair and achieve some semblance of hope."

Will Ahmed put in the years of work? Where will the refugee now call home?

He can't answer yet. "I am a product of both societies," he said. "There's no way I can live exclusively here, or exclusively there in the States."

But he has clearly set down new roots here, prepared to serve in the first Palestinian parliament if elected. It will be difficult to leave. "I see that Palestinian society is undergoing quite a historical turning point. How can I not be involved?"

outlines

Associated Press

RUBBLE: Palestinian children watch a bulldozer clear the barrier that surrounded the Deheisheh refugee camp.

A CAGE: The wall, built to stem insurrections more than 15 years ago, diminished people's psyches, Hisham Ahmed felt.

Caption: color photo: Hisham Ahmed at the BERLIN WALL; photo: Palestinian children watch a bulldozer clear the barrier that surrounded the Deheisheh refugee camp (n)

Edition: FINAL

Section: LIVING

Page: 1E

Index Terms: BERLIN HISTORY

Record Number: 9601010259

Copyright (c) 1996 The Miami Herald