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A 'Carbonari' and Spending the Night in the Cemetery

This whirlpool was affecting me more intensely when we came close to the end-of-year-exams, which would qualify me to move to the ninth grade, 4th secondary school, and I had to prepare for them very seriously, to make up for what I missed in my long days of illness. My absence from school has caused some concern with regards to my ability to pass the exams with distinction. And achieving distinction, as opposed to just passing, was something of great importance to my family. I promised to do my best to keep my advanced position in class. And I asked my uncle's permission to let me prepare for the tests in my own way this time. I explained to him that making up for what I missed necessitates that I study with my colleagues. My uncle acquiesced, hesitantly, without giving up his caution or suspicion. So my uncle's watchful eye relaxed its gaze for a while, especially that he too was busy preparing for his law degree exams, in addition to his work in the school where he taught.

Students were usually given a few weeks before the exams, when they didn't have to attend school, in order to prepare and study. And the students who sought to escape the hustle of their homes in search of quieter areas have found, in addition to mosques, the expansive plains of Ghouta, surrounding the city. I, who used to go to the Umayyad Mosque, preferred to join the groups that went to the Ghouta, because the distance from the mosque allowed me to escape my family's supervision, and especially that of my uncle Nafeth. And so, I joined these groups that strolled in the western Ghouta and wandered in the expanses between Al Manshia park and Al Rabwah around what used to be called Beirut Road. And in this expanse, where orchards of fruit trees and most of the seven branches of the River Papyrus diverge, thousands of students spread, singles and in groups, studying, or discussing a variety of topics, or relaxing, or swimming, according to circumstances and moods and work ethic. Here, students did as they pleased, free from the watching eyes of their parents and teachers, unleashing to full extent their interests, their ambitions, and their imaginations, and even their whims that society prohibited. It was possible for anything to happen, and for any activity to be taken, without fear of reprisal or blame.

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In this space decorated with colours and ideas and activities, in this 'green island of freedom' as we called it, a new world opened up to me.

Here I met a number of friends whom I knew previously in the Amara or Qazazin neighborhoods, or in demonstrations. And those were Hayel AbdulHamid, or Hayel Al Sheikh Taha as he was known then. Hayel was a big child or a small boy. He was two or three years older than me, and he was preparing for secondary school exams. Like me, Hayel was an orphan. This was probably the thing that drew me to him the most in the beginning. Hayel's father died leaving him with a younger brother, Marwan, and a sister younger than both of them. After the death of the father, Hayel and his siblings enjoyed the loving care of their generous and understanding uncle, Abu Wael, who welcomed his nephews into his home, and cared for them in a way that exceeded at time that of his own children. Hayel had another older uncle, Abu Fathi, and I knew him to be a kind man who is generous towards anyone sent to him from relatives, friends or their relatives. They all came to Damascus as refugees from Safad. There, Abu Fathi had a respectable job. He was a tailor for men's fashion of the modern style that was becoming popular. He was also a trader of fabrics, and so he was able to find work in Damascus easily, and that is also what Abu Wael did. Then the brothers became partners with a chieftain of Safadian refugees by the name of Mustafa Naqeeb. The three opened a shop for fabrics and tailoring in Al Hareeqa market in Damascus, and from it they earned a decent living that put them in the ranks of the middle class, and enabled them to live well and educate their children, and liberated them from the financial hardships that took its toll on most refugees.

Therefore Hayel, even though an orphan, was with a family that provided him with decent living, and for that, unlike me, he was free from the complications that limited my behavior and tortured me. For some reason, possibly the influence of patriotic ideas in a family of craftsmen who became minor traders, Hayel carried on his back the weight of the Palestinian cause in its entirety. And from his early days, Hayel built an impenetrable wall around himself against the influence of Islamists, nationalists and Marxists, and he believed that Palestinians should forge their own path and rely first and foremost on themselves to regain their lost homeland. Hayel wasn't particularly against any of those influences. He believed that Palestinians could benefit from all those surrounding currents, as long as they don't dissolve in them, and he called against this dissolution. The character of the child, coming of age towards an instilled patriotic youth, alongside a very transparent romanticism, dyed with a mixture of idealism and realism made

him an idealist among pragmatists and a pragmatist amongst idealists. Hayel also was adamant on venturing into hardships and drown in great concerns. He was a pioneer amongst his peers in realizing the importance of the organization of Palestinians in a specifically Palestinian context.

Hayel had previously shared his ideas with me regarding the importance of organization, without us having the chance to discuss them on a regular basis. And because I was **entangled** in different currents and interests, occupied by the problems I had with the family and for the family, Hayel's ideas did not affect me at the time more than other ideas did. But after the expanses of the orchards brought us together and the freedom of space and time allowed us to debate, I discovered that Hayel has transformed his ideas into a specific project, and that he was resolute on building a secret organization that included likeminded students, in the hope of forming the core that would be necessary to begin an organization. The project appealed to me. Hayel, I, and other students got into serious discussions regarding the project, as serious as can be for children who prematurely became youths, dealing with issues bigger then they are, convincing themselves that that is their destiny.

The mood of secret organization was spreading in Syria, especially with the increased pressure of the dictatorship, and the increased grievances the public had towards its authoritarianism. This mood attracted many, especially students looking for their place in the future. Palestinian students were the most attracted towards secret organizations, egged on by the circumstances of the country they are in as well as their specific circumstances. And so, the circle in which Hayel spread his call included secondary and high schools.

In this circle and around it, I met many who were attracted by the same goal, the creation of a secret organization only for Palestinians, which would bring them together and strengthen their stance, and stop it from dissolving in Syrian parties and factions.

Amongst those was Anees Al Khatib, whose family came as refugees to Damascus from the village of Shafa Amro; and Subhi Arab, from Safad, a boy of my age, who was also an orphan, and who had a robust mother with no income apart from UNRWA handouts and what relatives could help her with. He lived with his family who, besides him, included another boy and three girls, all living in small two-room shared living house in Al Amin street at the edge of the Jewish neighborhood, suffering from whatever those who lived in shared-living suffered from concerns and problems and racket. There was also Jihad Issa, a son of a fabric trader from Safad named Saeed Aziz who was considered a notable of the patriotic movement, and when he arrived in Damascus got involved in the business world and achieved a status that

increased quickly until he became one of the main producers of readymade clothes. There was also, Mazen Al-Sarsour from Safad, who was from a family that owned small groceries. His father and uncle were partners in a grocery, and his other uncles were looking for better chances in the business world. Mazen was conspicuous for his love of taking centre stage and for spectacles and speeches and his premature ambition to make a name for himself. But in addition to that, he excelled in his vigorous activity and belonging to a generous family that hosted our meetings with hospitality that cannot be forgotten. Others were from families coming from Safad or the surrounding areas. And I was the only one from a family to come from the south of Palestine.

In this circle, we had the core of the organization we sought to establish. And we worked to set up the organization when our number reached a full dozen. We recruited other members to get to that number. Hayel's great zeal egged us on. We appreciated that our youth didn't qualify us to be taken seriously to take on a mission such as the liberation of Palestine, even if we felt that our motives and resources were purer than those of adults. We looked for an adult to be the face of the organization when contacting others. And we found, and I can't remember how, a young man we did not know well. He was one of Hayel's neighbors, and we discussed the idea with him, and he agreed. Ahmad A', wasn't a student like us, he was a typist in an office downtown where lawyers got their memos typed out, and so Ahmad was in contact with this world of lawyers and courts, and he gave us whatever secrets and information that fell into his hands. And when we reached the dozen that would form the core of the organization, we prepared for the establishing ceremony with all the majesty that can be conjured by youngsters who think they are opening up a new path for history.

We had learnt in school what we thought was all we needed to know about secret organizations that led great revolutions in history. And the model that we knew best, and the one that appealed to us the most, was the model of the Carbonari societies in Italy. The name Garibaldi had renown amongst students that equaled or exceeded that of the names of leaders of the great Islamic conquests. And we had heard of the stories that elders of our families and relatives told about the secret organizations and the previous forms of resistance in the homeland. We had a conclusion that seemed to us of great value back then, we decided to form the organization as a group of secret cells that does not know the leadership and did not know other cells. We also decided to give this organization an internal order and programme. I was chosen, because of my eloquence, to prepare the programme with Hayel. Eloquence was considered a sign of the intellect and presence of mind.

And here I remember, while recounting the atmosphere of this period that was filled with zeal and mystery, the seriousness of the discussions with Hayel regarding what is ought to be recorded in the programme and implemented in the structure. It wasn't only that we felt that we were rewriting history, but we were confident that we were capable of it. Our discussions lasted long hours over many days. We would pose an idea and reflect on it, so that if we decide to use it I would write it, and then read it out to Hayel, and he would either accept it or have suggestions, and then we would move on to the next idea.

In this way we made a programme that was actually part a historical expose and part ideas that express the Palestinian people's right for their homeland and slogans that expressed this desire to regain it. The main idea in the programme was the one that motivated us to form the organization, setting ourselves apart from many others who worked for the same goal in other organizations. And the idea is that Palestinians need to rely on themselves and are required to take the reins in the struggle that other Arabs should support. Apart from that, the programme had what were common ideas and judgements on the reason of the defeat of Arabs in Palestine. And in that context, the programme glorified the heroics of the people of Palestine, totally and absolutely, and criticized the Palestinian leadership for its inability to benefit from the energy of the people, as well as its reliance on Arab countries and believing the promises that were given them by those countries, and all the accusations that we leveled against leaders and governments.

As for the internal structure, we crowned it by using the name 'The voice of Palestine' and we specified the conditions for enrollment, neglecting, as is common in these things, a minimum age. Then we registered the presence of a leadership council formed of the twelve founding members, provided that the leadership rotates monthly between each of the members. We also established an order for the secret cells, whereas the one cell cannot have more than five members, and those members only know the person in charge of them. We copied, in this area, what we imagined to be a structure befitting a secret organization. The astounding thing was that the idea of elections and other ideas linked to democratic practices did not occur to any of us, even though the organization was formed, as you know, in the atmosphere of resisting the Shieshakly dictatorship and the calling for a return to a democratic state in the country. By the time we were done with the programme and structure, we thought that we had created something that was out of the ordinary.

With this ammunition, the twelve members were called to convene, and what we had written was read out and approved without any objection or suggestion. It was required, as per an article in the programme, which the members would make an oath, stating loyalty to the organization and maintaining its secrecy and readiness to sacrifice all for Palestine. The programme required that the oath be taken on the Qur'an and the sword. Getting a Qur'an was easy, of course, but getting a sword wasn't. And so the oath was put on to a later date until the issue of the sword was resolved.

The summer was almost over before any of us could find the sought-after sword. Here, Anis Al Khateeb resolved the issue. Amongst us he distinguished himself with his excessive practicality and a good sense that he often resorted to: He brought to one of the meetings a big knife, a meat cleaver actually, and then he encouraged us to use it instead of the sword. 'What's the difference' was his argument, 'Isn't what matters is that it cuts?' I objected to this, because a meat cleaver doesn't have the prestige of a sword. Also, it was a deviation from the programme we had just agreed to, and we had a facetious debate over it, until Hayel stepped in. He suggested we make the oath on whatever is available so that we do not keep postponing starting the organization, and when we find a sword, we take the oaths again.

Looking back, I see twelve boys between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, hunched over a Quran and a big knife, in a secluded space, in an orchard close to Al Rabweh, on the road that leads to Beirut. And in my memory resonates the oath that these boys took, swearing before God and country to sacrifice their lives and efforts to liberate Palestine. With this, the ceremony was complete. We agreed that Hayel should be the leader for the first month. We also agreed to meet again to put together a plan of action.

On that day, my life took a new turn. It was the first step into a lifelong commitment towards the Palestinian cause, and dedicating everything for it.

Here, I must say that we were not the only ones amongst that generation of Palestinians to be active in this way. Many others did the same. In Damascus alone, many other attempts took place simultaneously with ours, while other students chose to join Syrian parties and to work within them. The Syrian National Party and the Baath Socialist Party and the emerging Arab Nationalists all had a number of Palestinian students as members, whilst other students joined organizations like ours. I would not exaggerate if I said that every single Palestinian student at the time thought to do something similar to what we did, or to join a party, and that is regardless of whether they were able to do that, or if circumstances came in the way.

Amongst the many organizations that were started back then, in the fifties, I remember two. The first was called The Palestine Call, and the other had a name I no longer remember, something like 'The Call of Return', or 'Arab Return' or something of the sort. The first was formed of a group of students, some of whom later became well known. For example, the poet and translator of Spanish Literature Mahmoud Soboh, and a brother of his whose name I forgot. Around Mahmoud was a group of kids who were later attracted by Al Baath Party. Most of them lived in the Jewish neighborhood. The other organization was formed by a group of students, most of whom lived on the foothills of Mount Qasioun, in the Muhajireen (immigrants) neighborhood, or the neighboring Sheikh Muhyi Al Deen Neighborhood. The low prices of property and the ease of getting an empty piece of land to erect residences attracted many refugee families to live in this area. And so a high concentration of Palestinian refugees was to be found there. Its students attended several schools across the city. While the first organization was influenced by nationalist ideas of Al Baath Party, and later ended up dissolving in that party, the second was influenced by a mixture of traditional ideas on religion and patriotism and morals and the benefits of virtues of fighting and so on. Therefore it was intellectually loose, and soon enough it was fragmented into several feeble organizations that died out as its members joined the Arab Nationalists or the Muslim Brotherhood or other religious organizations.

The existence of these organizations had a direct influence on our work. We were active in the same area and competed in the same field. Our organization was criticized by the others, especially by the Palestine Call, which had a nationalist tendency. They questioned our commitment to Arab nationalism and focused their campaign against us on the grounds that we were territorial and isolationist. Others accused us of being a small group that accepts anyone amongst its members, with no respect for tradition or morals, and that our organization does not interfere with the personal behavior of its members. All of these, at that time in Syria, were harsh accusations. Because of the pressure of these accusations, we changed our name to Palestine's Arabs, under-which it became famous, and we encouraged each other to scrutinize their behaviour and to not challenge any traditions.

Between the need for collaboration, on the one hand, and the exchange of criticism and accusations, on the other, each organization went its own way. And none of the efforts to unite us came to fruition. I am probably not mistaken when I say that the efforts of those seeking to unite us were wasted and lost amongst the efforts to compete.

Any how, our school year following the setting up of the organization witnessed our wasted efforts in competing with the other organizations. But when the summer break came, we had the time to think of doing more positive things. We had already wasted a lot of time putting down a plan of action. We were held hostage to a naive perception of the plan, thinking that it had to be thorough and conclusive, specifying exactly how the liberation of Palestine was to be achieved. And with this in mind, as you can guess, we could not put down any plan.

After that, practicalities led us to specific objectives. We focused our efforts on recruiting new members. And if you keep in mind our youth and the exaggerated hopes that comes with it, you can imagine the disappointments we endured. We had thought that the mere call for the liberation of Palestine was enough to have thousands flocking to join us. And we had thought that we articulated our call in a way that does not allow for any ambiguities. But when we started forming the cells, we were overwhelmed by the discrepancies between what is planned and what is realistic. We did not spare any effort in recruiting and contacting others, but the response was limited. Some would salute and praise our intentions without objection, but insist that they do not want to join any organization. This was the majority. You speak to them about it, and they would reply by commending you, then say something to the tune of 'leave me alone'. There were also those who wanted to join an organization but were unable to because of circumstances. Those would also commend you verbally but would avoid doing anything that might make them suspect of being active in organizations. And there were those who would try to outdo everyone else in their zeal to work, but if you ask them to join they would start arguing: Who are you to be my senior or my boss? and how can I trust an organization whose leaders and members I do not know. And why this idea and not that? and why that clause and not that? and what are the guarantees for this and that? a lot of debate, kind words in front of you and harsh criticism in your back, and no action. There was also the effect of the different organization active within the same community. We spent the summer exerting tremendous efforts to expand the organization beyond the initial twelve members, but had no success. Even between us, the dozen, we had problems, some of which were difficult. Our arguments got heated, not just because of difference of character, but because of our inability to achieve our goals. As our eyes opened to the realities surrounding us and the need for self examination became more pressing, new disagreements appeared and fueled more heated discussions.

We realized, or to be more precise, some of us realized, that we could not attract our peers only with a call for liberation, and that we had to have other attractions to get others to join. We lacked the means to have these attractions, we even lacked the correct idea of what they were. Youth and its needs had a role in muddling our work. This work, according to our understanding of it, required us to behave like prophets or saints, and to be severe and serious and meticulous in the observance of how we behave and what we say. And it was difficult for boys, even if they devoted themselves to the historical mission, to constantly ignore the need for boyish behavior and deny themselves entertainment and to stop fooling around. And it would happen that a passing joke would come out of one of us during a serious discussion and the oppressed laughter would break free and the sarcastic comments would follow, and the seriousness of the situation would completely breakdown and it would be difficult to get serious again, and so the meeting would end without finishing the discussion. It would also happen that one of us would direct a snide remark to someone else, and the one at receiving end of that would answer back, and so a fight would break out and we would split into supporting one or the other or objecting to both, and so the historic mission would disappear, and the boys would become just boys. The meetings would end with us being angry, and it would take days and considerable effort to end the rifts and make the dozen get along once more. Something else more dangerous would happen; the boys would be out with another group that had nothing to do with the organization, and a disagreement would take place. And this, although it would have nothing to do on the organization, would reflect on the next meeting and cause confusion, and so the dozen would have to look into the matter, find out what the disagreement is really about, and get the antagonists to get along again.

We had agreed when we started the organization that we would pay into it what we get as allowance from our parents. We, of course, wanted to honor this severe commitment. But a boy has urges that are irresistible, and cannot avoid, forever, the seduction of candy. And so the commitment must waver every once in a while. And it was such behaviour that, if discovered by the rest of the group, would cause friction and would result in accusations of lack of responsibility and commitment, and would cause sensitivities. Also our social standings varied. Hayel for example, could afford to give the organization in the summer vacation all his time, and his uncle would not object to his nephew hosting us in his house. He would actually treat us to tea and fruit and candy. Whereas I for example, had to work and contribute to the family's budget.

And it was in this summer that a connection I had through Sheikh Abdel Razzaq helped me get work with two of his acquaintances who partnered up and started a small business at Mathanat Al Shahem, further up the Midhat Basha market towards this neighborhood. It was a soft drinks workshop and a candy store, and I had, as the Sheikh guaranteed my behaviour to get the job, to show up at the workshop at eight every day and to stay until sunset, and to do all that the partners ask of me, without specializing in one thing or the other. So one day I would work the pool, and the next I would work the fridge, and then I would distribute to street traders, or work at the store where I would help the customers and prepare the accounts, since the partner who ran the store was illiterate. Then I had to run to the Ummayad mosque that was nearby to do the dusk prayer with my grandfather and uncle. After that, I would join the study group in the mosque. And so it was only natural for me to be completely spent after such a day, and it was also natural that I would only be able to be involved in the organization late at night, where I would sneak out, or on Fridays.

You might ask me how I managed to deal with my family, especially my strict uncle, Nafeth. The truth is, being part of a secret organization, with all the mystery and intrigue that came with it made me feel involved in a major mission, and helped me lose my timidity in challenging the family. The days of the exams and preparing for them passed peacefully because it gave me the excuse to be absent from home for a long time. And then the results came showing that I was still excelling in all classes, and so everyone was happy, and especially my uncle Nafeth, whose joy was almost juvenile. He did not miss the chance to remind me that it was his strictness towards me that made me dedicate more time for study. My uncle thought that his efforts paid off in spite of me. The few weeks following my school report passed peacefully, especially that my uncle was busy preparing for his law degree examinations, and so he would spend his day and part of the night at the college's library. But this didn't last for long. As the law degree exams finished, my uncle went back to his habits, and I had to endure his watchful eye once again. It was possible of course, to make excuses and go off, but these chances came less and less, and with it my tolerance for my uncle's surveillance.

I did not tell my uncle or any other member of my family about the organization. I had several reasons not to: There was my commitment to secrecy, and my knowledge that my uncle would go berserk if he knew I was doing a secret activity, especially during that time when the authority's repression has increased and its hunt after activists of all types; there was also another reason which had to do my uncle's feelings towards Palestinians from Safad. Most of the refugees from this northern Palestinian town went to

Lebanon and Syria when they were removed from their home town. Many of them ended up in Damascus, as well as many who came from villages around Safad. Those were considered Safadians in Damascus, and so, refugees from Safad became a majority in the Syrian capital. Then it happened that the first general manager chosen by the Syrian government for its refugee institution was from Safad. And this institution had considerable power in the supervision of the affairs of refugees and their dealings with other institutions. And since the UNRWA was started, the refugee institution had to supervise the international institution, it (the former) being the representative of the host country. And since the Safadians were the majority and had influence, many of the Unrwa jobs went to people from Safad, and with that came more privilege and influence for them. That made other refugees feel left out and embittered. And in the face of the decreasing opportunities and cutthroat competition, these feelings intensified and became an ailment on the Palestinian community that resulted in many problems and quarrels that poisoned the atmosphere in the city. My uncle Nafez already had some negative preconceptions on city people; he believed they were softer and less principled than country people. And this made him take a stance against Safadians, whom he considered as city people.

My uncle used to say that Safadians are God's most corrupt people, and for some reason, my grandfather had the same feelings towards the people of Safad. Both of them used to enjoy telling a famous anecdote told by Sultan Abdel-Hamid about the people of Safad, which people used to tell to poke fun at Safadians. It was said that Sultan Adbdel Hamid used to always pray for the prosperity of Safad and the ruin of Damascus. When one of his aides noticed it and did not understand a reason for it, he asked the Sultan about his strange prayer. The Sultan explained the Damascenes were people of trade and construction, and that if it was ruined they would spread across the land taking their skills with them to other people. But Safadians are people of corruption, and so he prayed for Safad to prosper, so that they'd never have to leave. So you can only imagine how my position would have been with my uncle, had I dared to tell him I was in a secret organization, and that many of the members were from Safad!

Anyway, it wasn't long before my uncle started discovering some of my secrets. First he became suspicious of my many excuses. It was summer, and I had started working in a small shop that in reality, was one of the holes in a big covered market (khan) in the middle of the Bzouryah market. There, I had to assist the owner of the hole who took on a simple profession, cutting paper and preparing it to be used by shop owners in packing. The owner was a relative of my grandfather's wife, and it was she, Um Adnan, who elected me

to work for him during the summer vacation for one Lira a day. And the man
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