

Abu Rakaba memoirs (pp.77-83). Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.¹

We came back the next day and the dawn visitors raided us on the night of August 15. They took us off to the Abbasia barracks for questioning. There we found a number of other colleagues. They assigned us rooms on the top floor of Villa No. 7, as they called it. The rooms had no beds, chairs or blankets, and we were three to a room. We had to sleep in a triangle on the tiles, each with his head resting on his neighbour's thigh. When any one of us wanted to turn over, the others had to turn over simultaneously. The smell of dust got up our noses and the sense of humiliation rapidly eroded whatever patience and endurance we had left. What a miserable life we Arabs lead!

I was summoned for questioning by Major General Mohamed Abdel Karim in the same villa. By his side in civilian clothes stood his aide, Suleiman Nasr. It was the usual questions and he had a file on us in front of him. The general told me that my file was excellent so why was I opposed to the union. I was taken by surprise and told him that I was one of the greatest advocates of union, like all other Palestinians. I said I was so enthusiastic about the union that I had alerted the leaders in charge, in writing and in secret, to any mistakes so that we could correct them and deal with them. But I hadn't criticised the union in front of anyone, other than in my reports and in my written suggestions to my leaders, and that was with the intention of ensuring that other people didn't turn against it. Then he asked me about the books they had found in our house and I said they belonged to my colleagues in the flat and I. He asked Erfan Lustan to put his books to one side, and he gathered them together with the express intention of taking responsibility for all the socialist scientific books and claiming that they belonged to him personally to avoid any trouble, which was a generous and ethical attitude. The last question, a strange one, was about who I thought were the best three officers in the Syrian army. Afif al-Bizri, Ibrahim Farhoud and Akram Diri, I replied. He asked me about Abdel Hamid al-Sarraj and I answered that I hadn't met him personally in my military life but I had heard he was a nationalist and a unionist. At that point the questioning ended in insults and accusations of lying and they took me back to our rooms. After that I met the other detainees in the Villa No. 7 Abbasia prison, and of those I remember Colonel Hisham al-Azm, Lieutenant Colonel Mohamed Kamel Saleh the poet, Fares Zarzour the short story writer, and the officers Rashid Jarboua, Mohamed Suleiman Qauli, Mutia Mansour, Erfan Lustan, Ibrahim Muati and others whose names I don't recall. The interrogation was over for me and then

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for my colleagues, and after a few days they gradually brought us mattresses to put on the floor, then blankets, then pillows, with ful and felafil sandwiches in the morning, at noon and in the evening. Once when I was being taken to the bathroom, I chanced upon Muntasser, our servant in the Heliopolis flat, in conversation with Lieutenant Colonel Hassan Eleish the intelligence officer. Mansour was in the uniform of an Egyptian sergeant and when he caught sight of me he started acting innocent and only then did I realise that the intelligence people had planted him on us. When they relaxed the isolation measures we started to gather on the long balcony of the villa and exchange information, such as the fact that Akram Diri had visited the villa prison while we were being questioned and he was seeking revenge on Mohamed Kamel Saleh. As far as I remember, there were thirteen of us officers and we all asked for a judicial inquiry and a trial to prove that we had done nothing wrong and had not committed any crime, but there was no response to our appeal because respect for the rights of officers was at a low ebb at the time.

Around this time we found out from one of our guards that Sergeant Muntasser, our servant, had bugged our flat with recording devices but they didn't work and didn't record anything. After that we also saw an improvement in the way we were treated: our food came from the officers' mess in the Abbasia barracks and we started talking about our imprisonment with Hassan Eleish and some of the officials. We asked how long we would be held and what the outcome would be, but we didn't receive any answer.

Suddenly Hisham al-Azm, Rashid Jarbua and I were summoned to the prison office, and they told us we would be moved from that prison so we should pack up our belongings. The next day they moved us to Cairo airport, then to Syria and then straight to Mezze prison, where we were each put in separate cells on the ground floor. I was in cell 2, which was 2.5 by 1.5 metres with its own toilet, a steel door with a small opening at the top that was always closed. When food was brought, the steel door opened and the food was placed on the floor and then kicked into the cell.

I remember that when we reached the Mezze prison the prison governor was given our bags with our clothes and other possessions, and we never saw him again and no one met us to question us. When I asked the guard in the cell to tell the governor that I wanted to be questioned and that I was so-and-so and my rank was such and such, the governor came to me for the first time to ask me not to cause any trouble or make any requests and not to reveal my name or rank to the guards if I wanted to preserve my dignity. He said that the interrogators knew that I was there and if they wanted to question me they

would ask to see me. He said that in the prison my name was just *Number 2* based on the number of the cell and I had no other name. I got the message and I waited. At night I could hear the screams of people being tortured on the other side of the lower floor and once I heard a man marching in a military manner. I sneaked a look at him through the edges of the little window in the door and thought it was probably Misbah al-Budeiri. About two hours later I heard the swishing noise of someone moving along the floor and I again took a peek. I saw the same person being dragged towards his cell with his feet covered in cotton wool because he couldn't walk after a severe beating.

I spent thirty whole days in the Mezze prison without a hot or cold bath, without a shave or a haircut, without taking a walk in the sun, even a short one, and without knowing what was happening in the prison or in the world outside. I amused myself by reading what previous prisoners had written on the cell wall, maybe with the edge of a spoon or a metal cup or some other object. One of them had written:

*Darkness of prison, descend,
We love darkness.
After prison there is only
A dawn of glory rising.*

Another one, optimistically and to keep us optimistic, had written:

If it was still someone else's, it wouldn't have become yours

And a third prisoner, apparently a pious Islamist, had written:

*Rise towards His protection and rejoice
Oh my Lord, hasten our solace*

And sometimes I amused myself by collecting the crumb from inside the army bread, kneading it with water, breaking it up into small blocks and then starting to build a coffee shop and a restaurant that I imagined myself building in the square opposite the main gate of the prison in Acre. I remember that the commander of the military police at the time, Abdel Moula al-Hujja from Homs, was inspecting the prison. He opened the little window into the cell while I was busy building and he gave a malicious smile, or maybe a gloating smile or a smile of satisfaction that this prisoner had started to lose his mental faculties.

After a full month of waiting the prison governor came to see me with the barber and told me I was going to leave the prison in the morning, without any interrogation. Overjoyed, I started organising my schedule for the following day, when I would go downtown in Damascus to have some *hummus fatta* in the Sehhi restaurant opposite the officers' club, then go to Homs to see my father and my brothers. But early the next day they woke me up and gave me my clothes bag at the prison gate. They did the same with Rashid Jarbua. As for Hisham al-Azm, the third person in our group, they told us he had been released before us. Full of optimism, we got into a military police vehicle bound for Damascus but then we were surprised to find that the vehicle was heading towards the Mezze military airport. Then they put us on a military plane that was taking several officers to Cairo, where they took us back to the Abbasia barracks and to Villa No. 7, where we rejoined the colleagues we had left there a month earlier. I realised later that all my personal military papers and documents had disappeared from my bag.

There were no new developments on the interrogation front or on going back to Syria, so we decided to go on a hunger strike. But it didn't lead anywhere except that we heard from some fellow prisoners that Hassan Aleish had tried to persuade them to break the strike, and that he told them, "If it's just the Palestinian officers who are on hunger strike, then let's not interfere and let's let them die." The strike was broken with a promise that the army command would expedite its handling of our case.

Around this time it happened that I managed to have a shisha pipe and accessories brought to the prison from my sister's house in Cairo by bribing one of the guards. I also complained to the Egyptian intelligence officer, Hassan Aleish, that life in prison was dull for us, men in the prime of our youth who had male and female friends. He offered to help in any way possible and we reached an agreement that we were allowed to visit friends by military vehicle. The vehicle would take us anywhere and then come back to the same place two hours later to take us back to the prison. While I was making a phone call from the prison governor's office to arrange a visit, I was surprised to find the telephone directory in the office was the same as the one that had been in our house in Heliopolis. It had some names and numbers handwritten on it the cover, including the name Riyadh Kilani. Sometimes we would ask to have a dental check-up and Sergeant Salah would take us there by military vehicle, then agree to cancel the dentist's appointment because there was no urgent need for it, and we would just sit in Groppi's in Suleiman Pasha Street to have a cold drink and eat some cake. He would get a suitable present, and all this probably happened with the consent of his superiors. But

nothing stays the way it is for long, and we heard from some of the prison officers that they had nothing against us and it was just that Abdel Hamid al-Sarraj did not want us to go back to Syria. So we decided to starve ourselves to death in protest. We started our hunger strike but no one took any interest. We continued to send back all the food they sent us and made do with just water until on the sixth day one of us, Fares Zarzour, fainted and was taken to hospital. On the seventh day Ibrahim Muati fainted too and was also taken to hospital, and on the ninth day Mohamed Kamel Saleh fainted. After first aid in the form of a spoonful of sugar in a glass of water, he was taken to hospital, where we later found out that he and his colleagues had made a scene in the military hospital. He had shouted that they were Syrian officers who were being prevented from going back to Syria, that they were on hunger strike and willing to die, that they had made the union with Egypt for noble nationalist reasons and that they shouldn't be treated in this way.

All this seems to have prompted a reaction from the management of the military prison and some intelligence officers came to ask us to call off the hunger strike. We had a meeting and agreed to call off the strike as a goodwill gesture on the understanding that we would then be released. This is what happened in fact: a medical team came to examine us and give us advice on how to return gradually to a normal eating pattern. If we wanted they allowed us to stay under observation in certain hotels in Cairo, provided we didn't leave the hotels or Cairo. Some of us agreed to that arrangement while others stayed in prison. Rashid Jarbua, Mohamed Qauli and I chose to stay in the Scarabee Hotel in Fouad Street in central Cairo, where we had guards at the doors to our rooms and at the hotel doors. This upset Rashid Jarbua, who then went back to Villa No. 7 at his own request. He and his colleagues were released from Villa No. 7 while we stayed in our hotel prison at our own expense some time longer, until we were all released on condition that we stayed in Cairo and gave our addresses to the intelligence people.