
Volume 14

Issue 2 *Spring-Summer: Writing From the World:
Selections from the International Writing Program
1977-1983*

Article 34

1984

Exile

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Recommended Citation

Telpaz, Gideon. "Exile." *The Iowa Review* 14.2 (1984): 108-113. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.3027>

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EXILE

I FIRST CAME ACROSS them one bright morning a few days after my arrival to Safad. They were walking down one of the alleys, three tall, swarthy Bedouins clad in black robes, white *kaffiyehs* and fancy headbands; a sullen stare gleaming in their eyes. The young one walked in the middle, the two older ones closed in on him on either side. They trod on in silence, impervious to passers-by, seemingly trapped in the narrow, cobbled streets of the old Kabbalistic town. That morning I didn't notice the young Bedouin's limp, so well did he manage to conceal it. But the next day, when the three Bedouins again crossed my path it caught my eyes immediately. He was nimbly drawing up his right leg, shod with a thick-soled, orthopedic shoe, and I was amazed to see such a sophisticated shoe on a Bedouin's feet.

I was making my way in the maze of Safad's alleys toward the ruins of an old Arab neighborhood facing Mount Canaan. Nettles and briars grew chest-high between the shrivelled olive, carob, and fig trees and around the darkened pits, where jackals, bats, and owls lurked. The heavy silence was undisturbed by the twittering of birds, the cooing of wild doves, and the clatter of stones slipping and skittering underfoot. Suddenly I heard an odd sound. I stopped and looked around. There was silence again. Then, muffled and as though borne by the wind from afar, the sound resumed, brief yet insistent, an effacing furlgle, quickly dying. Listening more intently, I was able to distinguish a constant buzzing, which I knew was neither the sougning of the wind nor the chirping of crickets from the nearby field. I followed the sounds till I came to the yard of one of the ruins, less destroyed than the others; its lawn was weeded and its trees pruned. The two elder Bedouins sat in the yard on wooden crates, their robes gathered up between their knees, revealing their spindly legs and the shabby shoes they wore without socks. They were smoking cigarettes, taking long puffs, sitting silently the way of people who have huddled together innumerable hours and have already said all that was to be said. I wasn't sure if the voices that had drawn me here were of conversation or the ruminations which each thought outloud to himself. I intentionally shuffled my shoes on the stones, but the two didn't turn their heads. They sat motionless, two old owls immersed in their own reminiscences.

While I was standing wondering whether to enter or to turn and go on, the young Bedouin came out of the ruined house. Seeing me he stopped short. The glasses of tea which he held shook and his thick lips quivered. He was about to say something but reconsidered and remained silent.

"Marhaba Hawajya," I greeted him in Arabic.

"Shalom," he replied in Hebrew. "Please come in."

I stepped into the yard. The faces the two older Bedouins raised towards me were intriguingly remote. The young Bedouin limped across the yard and placed the glasses before them.

"You can speak Hebrew to me," he said, pulling his Bedouin robe down over his right leg to hide his deformity. "I speak Hebrew."

"Are you guarding the area?"

"No."

"You work in the quarries?"

"No. We live here."

He glanced at me without meeting my eyes.

"You don't look like the villagers from around here," I said.

His smile bared his gums. I saw he was pleased I knew of his superior descent. One of the elder Bedouins turned to me with a cordial gleam in his bleary eyes. He hurriedly turned his head away, and his face was again remote and opaque.

"We're having tea," the young Bedouin said. "You drink with us?"

"Gladly."

I thought him to be about twenty-three, but one can never tell with Bedouins. He looked older than his years.

"My father, my uncle," he introduced the two old Bedouins.

They stood up and welcomed me in Arabic:

"Ahalan v'Sahalan."

They waited for me to enter. The room we entered was high and narrow, the plaster peeling and the ceiling cracked. It was the only room left intact in the house. There were three rusty beds without linens, rags piled on each one. In an alcove in the wall was a wooden shelf with jars of tea and sugar, and on the floor in the center of the room stood the source of the buzzing I had heard: a big oil burner with a smoke-blackened tea pot on it.

The young Bedouin dragged one of the crates inside and asked me to sit down. The other two sank onto their beds, holding the steaming glasses between both hands, and leaning forward to blow on the tea. The

young Bedouin poured me some tea into a thick glass, adding almost an inch of sugar. Then he planted himself on the third bed.

"You like a cigarette?" he said.

"Why don't you try mine?"

I got up and passed my pack around. Each of them drew out a cigarette, held it to his forehead and his chest as a sign of gratitude, and lit it with his own lighter.

The young Bedouin glanced outside. "We're from Be'er Sheva."

"Be'er Sheva?"

"From the Negev." He turned on the big transistor radio which lay on his bed to an Arabic station. "We're now living in Safad."

"You speak Hebrew pretty well."

His face softened with a shy smile. He was enjoying my interest in him, enjoying the mystery in which he veiled himself. The two elder Bedouins sat without uttering a sound. From time to time their heads dropped, and they appeared to be like camel drivers having dozed off during a long ride. The young Bedouin switched off the radio.

"They say I killed my cousin," he said suddenly.

"Who says?"

"The police."

"His son?" I pointed to the man sitting on the right.

"No. The son of another uncle."

"And that's why you're here?"

"There was a trial."

"Did you kill him?"

"The police say so."

"Why do they say so?"

"Because I was in Be'er Sheva then."

"How did you kill him?"

The young Bedouin looked straight at me. "I didn't."

"No?"

"No." He shook his head. "I didn't kill him."

"Then who did?"

"He was stabbed with a knife. In the street. In Be'er Sheva."

"By whom?"

Once again he turned on the radio. Doleful music, the wailing of an Arabic singer. He said:

"Are you from a newspaper?"

"No."

He glanced at me intensely, then turned his head aside.

"I didn't kill him."

He was at a loss to explain things. He said:

"The police came to search the camp. They questioned people. They took me and my father and uncle. They kept us in jail a month. Then they sent us here."

He stared at the orthopedic shoe visible beneath his robe.

"We got a year's exile," he said.

"And them?" I pointed to his father and uncle. "What are they guilty of?"

"They don't believe them."

"Who doesn't?"

"The police say they know I'm the murderer and would not testify."

He turned down the radio and glanced my way as if expecting me to say something. I said:

"At least it's better than jail."

"No," he shook his head. "Wrong."

I looked at him.

"Jail didn't cost us anything. Here we not only pay rent, we also have to buy food and cook. And that's not all."

"What else?"

"We can't see our family. And that's not all."

"What else?"

"Twice a day we have to go downtown to the police station to write our names. And if we were in jail we'd have friends. Here, what do we have here? I buy a newspaper and listen to the radio. All day long the radio blares."

Irritated, he turned the radio off. In the sudden silence all I heard was the buzz of the burner. The wind from the mountains swept the tang of the Bedouins, the aroma of sharp spices, burnt-out camp fires and camel's dust. The young Bedouin, regretting his display of emotion, turned on the radio again. Throbbing jazz rhythms, something from distant New Orleans. Uneasiness returned to his eyes.

"You can go to the movies," I said.

A wry smile fluttered on his lips. He turned to his father and uncle and explained in Arabic what I had said. They listened attentively, grunted some sort of phrase and resumed their reveries.

"They say movies are no good for me."

"They are in quite a fix because of you."

He looked at me. His face was blank.

"I didn't kill him. They think I did but I didn't. He was walking in the street and was stabbed."

"Why was he stabbed?"

"There was a score to be settled."

"A score?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Something between Bedouins."

I stubbed out my cigarette. He switched to another station.

"Look at my father and uncle. Once they were able to go anywhere. Wherever they wanted to go they went. Now look at them. My father and my uncle. Goners. This isn't a year's exile, it's for life. When they leave here there'll be nowhere for them to go. We're Bedouins with no luck. You heard about us?"

I shook my head.

"During the drought we asked permission to cross over with our flocks into Jordan. The Jews agreed, also the Jordanians. We folded up the tents, rounded up the animals, and went to the border. We crossed over and went searching for grazing land. Suddenly the soldiers surrounded us, put us in trucks and took us to a faraway place. They ordered us to pitch our tents in a circle and guarded us day and night."

He no longer attempted to conceal the humiliation and shame in his voice.

"They took us for spies. It was no good for us. The flocks started to die. We asked to return. Since we've returned, the Jews don't trust us either. No one trusts us anymore."

He fell silent.

Exile, I thought, this too was one of its faces, and in the recesses of my mind the cogwheels had started to revolve, glittering lines spun into colors. The obscure paintbrush in me espied an ochre desert, a rising storm, wheels of wind, and jets of fire in fiery gouache colors; an afternoon of rubicund heat, golden scintillations, and dazzling flares; soft, verdant sand and the fan-shaped portents of a blazing sun. And in the distance, a caravan of camels, nomads of the wasteland, knife-wielding Bedouins, a floating ancient synagogue and hovering Kabbalists, their eyes aglow and their sid-locks scattered in the east wind. A surrealistic composition painted in subdued, incandescent colors, the colors of repressed impulses.

Was this the composition I had sought among the ruins?

The young Bedouin glanced at me, knitting his eyebrows in puzzle-

ment. Something about me bothered him. His face darkened. He grew impatient. He jabbered a short sentence into the ears of the two older Bedouins. They turned their faces and rose. All three of them saw me to the door.

I gave the young Bedouin the address of the studio where I was working, and asked him to drop by with his father and uncle. Then I left.

Two whole days I locked myself away, trying to put on canvas the picture I had seen so well in my mind's eye. But with every brush-stroke it grew more elusive. Finally I threw down my paintbrush, got up from the canvas, and walked out.

As I walked out of the studio, I met the three Bedouins. I greeted them, expecting to strike up a conversation. They looked but didn't see me and walked on without stopping. Tall, swarthy, and painfully silent, they went down the street, their eyes impervious to passers, by homes, storefronts. I stood and watched them as they slowly disappeared into the azure alleys.