

Phone Call to Beirut

This story was written by a Yugoslavian friend, Vesna Al Masharifa, who was in the Palestinian refugee camps in Syria at the time of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, 1982.

West Beirut was besieged. These were very critical days for Palestinian history. The Israeli army was continuously shelling. The number of casualties was increasing rapidly.

Every family had a few men fighting in Lebanon. It was difficult, almost impossible, to be in touch with them. People were desperate and helpless, for they had had no news about their relatives since the beginning of the war. Searching for consolation, they paid visits to other families, sharing their fears and grief. It happened that uncertain information reached some families that their sons had perished in Lebanon. They were despondent and trying to find out the truth. Usually, they came to military headquarters in the camps to check if their sons were registered on the list of martyrs.

That morning the office was very crowded with people who had come to inquire about their relatives and friends. People were standing in a line in front of Comrade Khaled's table. The comrade had the list of martyrs in front of him. It was very quiet in the room. One could only hear the voice of somebody saying in a quivering voice the name of the relative inquired about, and again silence, while he or she waited intensely for the answer. Comrade Khaled was passing over the paper with visible uneasiness.

«No, he is not listed,» he said with relief. «Please people, listen to me. Why don't you go to your homes? You know that if anything happens to your relatives, you will definitely receive a cable, even on the same day we do. It's our duty to inform you. You know that.» He tried to persuade them.

Then that silent room became a beehive. At the same time everybody tried to explain their reasons and to speak about the uncertainty with which they had lived from the time the war commenced.

«Okay, okay,» Khaled gave up. «We will continue. It was just a suggestion. If you don't agree, we won't discuss it anymore.»

People were satisfied that he had changed his mind. Again they formed a line and went on as before.

The first dash was over. The office was vacant. Khaled wiped the sweat from his forehead. Then, at the door appeared

a middle-aged woman with a child about five years old. She wore the traditional Palestinian dress. It was a very beautiful, long, black dress with embroidered violet flowers which covered the chest, sleeves and bottom edge. A white cotton scarf, which almost touched the floor, concealed her hair. The dress was fastened at the waist by a Palestinian kuffiyeh. Her figure was erect and robust, her movements vigorous. She held the child's hand firmly.

«Comrade, I received a letter from my husband. He's in Beirut,» she said with discomfort when they reached Khaled's table.

«Yes?» Khaled gave her a questioning look. She resumed: «He loves our son very much. In the last letter, he joked that he will phone him to check if he is still being a good boy... You know, this is our first son, after five daughters.»

«So, may he be hale and hearty,» smiled Khaled and then turned towards the child, asking him squarely: «Do you want to be a fighter like your father?»

The child was watching him with distrust, unsure whether to hide himself behind his mother, or to accept the conversation. Then he made up his mind to do the second: «Yes, of course, I dream about that,» he answered finally.

«Bravo, bravo... Then, since you are so brave, tell me what is your name?» Khaled asked in a mollifying voice.

«Yusef,» the child replied more freely.

«Ahlan wa sahan, Yusef,» Khaled welcomed him.

Yusef nestled close to his mother with childlike coyness. For a moment no one spoke. Then his mother broke the silence, relieved, for Khaled was so kind and friendly.

«You know, comrade, I would ask you to let him speak on the telephone. He took his father's joke seriously. For two days he has been crying and asking to talk to him. I don't know what to do, so I brought him here,» she finally ended, saying what had been tormenting her. Khaled accepted the game.

«So you want to talk to your father?» he asked the child.

«Oh yes, I do,» answered Yusef brightly.

«Then I will call him now, and you will speak. But don't forget that you can't hear him. Okay?» Khaled gave a short explanation.

«Yes,» the boy agreed, thrilled. Khaled dialed zeros and then began shouting, «Beirut! Beirut? Is that Beirut? Come, Yusef, come quickly. Here it is!»

The child took the receiver and started crying. «Papa, do you hear me? I know that you do! How are you? We miss you.