

## **A War Memoir by Richelle Shem-Tov**

### **November 2023**

We are now at war – yet another, but this is perhaps the worst I have experienced in all my years here. It is this war that set me back to writing this memoir of a life, for sure a good one, but one lived in the shadow of war. I also write it as I find that many friends – most of them, Jewish S Africans, know very little of the Arab/Palestinian narrative and cannot really understand the intense hatred existing between many of our two peoples.

**Israel. It is the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 2023.** I am eighty-four years old. I have lived in Israel for nearly sixty-two years. For sixty of those years, I lived together with a beloved partner and father of my four children, Sabih Shem-Tov. Now for over a year I live alone with the memories of that man who died, at nearly ninety on Erev Rosh Hashanah 2022. I live alone but am not really alone – I have four children, their partners and ten grandchildren; I have dear friends (or rather, I had. many have gone); I am surrounded with care and love but he who became part of my being is here now only as a memory and no longer as a physical breathing person. Until this recent and most horrific of wars, we lived through all these wars and conflict together. Now I need to handle this, as all else, on my own. And so, though not alone, yet alone.

I came from South Africa on February 1962. I left a South Africa that I loved then and do today but that South Africa, though boasting most magnificent natural beauty, was an ‘ugly’ apartheid country, heavily clouded by racism. Today, though not without clouds, is a democratic land. I grew up in a comfortable and loving home with a family of the best parents – Jack and Sadie Hirschmann and two brothers, Herman and David who remained close to me and mine until both died in 2017. My parents died many years before. We lived in a town called Pietersburg, now Polokwane in the far Northern Province of Limpopo.

I came to Israel in 1962 after qualifying as a physiotherapist at Wits University in Johannesburg. Such a profession was a natural choice as I came from a home where caring for human beings was a guiding light. Coming to live in Israel too was a natural choice as in our home, Zionism was our religion. Zionism, as we understood it, did not clash with universal values. Israel became my homeland and I loved it then as I do today but I have come to know that here too it is heavily clouded.

War, where man is at his worst (and sometimes at his best), has always been in the background of my life. Though I myself can only claim good fortune and happiness and have hardly been

personally endangered by these most horrific of events, it has always been there as a shadow, not far from me and mine. I was born in October 1939 at the very beginning of the Second World War with all this has meant ever since. I grew up as a child at the time of the Israeli war of Independence in 1948 which though we were in S.A., was very much part of our lives. We lived it; we breathed it, almost as if we were actually in Israel. Of course, at that time, we were only told part of the story. We only knew of our own narrative.

It is hardly possible to write a "War Memoir" or even anything, regarding living in Israel without going into the wars, the politics, the on-going conflict between Jews and Palestinians. I will not attempt to write all the hundreds of relevant events in chronological order, but allow my mind to go back as it chooses and tell of memories and thoughts as they come back to me.

In 1957, after the Sinai campaign, while I was still at varsity in SA, my brother Herman, at the age of eighteen, two years older than I, volunteered and joined the IDF fighting forces. He was accidentally shot in the head during training. Herman was a stout-hearted lad and his rehabilitation was nothing less than miraculous, including studying and qualifying as an optometrist. He worked both in Israel and SA. He did marry but it didn't work and he divorced, remaining without a family of his own. There can be no doubt that his head injury contributed much to this unhappy state. He was, in fact left with serious disabilities for the remainder of his life. Despite this he maintained independence until, after turning fifty, his condition deteriorated. Thereafter he lived, wheel-chair bound, with me and my family for nearly 30 years until his death in 2017. Throughout his life our family was deeply affected by this tragic event, particularly my parents. Herman's injury was but one of so many similar-type and other more horrific tragedies amongst so many living in our region.

Sabih also fought with the IDF in that war. He had come to Israel with his family, four years earlier from Iraq at the age of nineteen. Their story as new immigrants living in a *ma'abara* (transit camp), were hugely difficult and challenging, unlike my own. Years later, after we met, he gave me a broader and less rosy picture of what went on during that war and, sadly, of the cruel behavior of many of our soldiers to the POWS and the defeated peoples. He told me of an incident when one of our soldiers was about to shoot a small Gazan boy and only the intervention of another soldier, threatening the man at gun-point, prevented this from happening. I began to understand that such behavior and indeed much worse was not uncommon under the cover of war.

I came here in 1962, after the 1956 Sinai campaign and before the Six-Day war of 1967. I was twenty-two. This was a time when I went to an Ulpan on Kibbutz Ma'agan Michael where I remained for a most exciting year. I met a guy, fell in love, moved to the Tel Aviv area, worked as a physiotherapist at Beilinson hospital and married Sabih. By then and until he went on pension in 1998, he was employed by El Al airlines, eventually becoming shift leader in the Department of Transport. After marrying we settled in the charming, at that time, village, of Kiryat Ono; gave birth to loel and Ayelet, my first two children. We moved from a tiny two roomed flat to our home in Rehov Hatamar 5/3, where I still live to this day. Life was far from easy for a South African who had lived in most comfortable conditions. I was however, so enamored with my new country and the realization of my Zionist dream that I handled my life easily. However, it was then that I began to learn that our new homeland was not without problems and complications - discontent, poverty, inequality, corruption and yes – racism. Worse than all this was the on-going and possibly insolvable Palestinian/Jewish conflict – the root of all the wars before and since in this war-torn land. I say this though I did and do know that there was and is much good in many of both peoples and in much that has been done and achieved. But the ever-present conflict and war have kept us in an ever-lasting crippling reality.

Going back to **the Six Day war in 1967**, a huge fear – real or imagined, of an Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian invasion, descended on Israel. But then, after a pre-emptive air strike, it was a walk-over and our army reached the Suez Canal, conquered the Golan Heights and marched into East Jerusalem and the whole West Bank in only six days. At first it was frightening but soon we celebrated our amazing victory and believed ourselves to be invincible. I remember well the first two nights when we heard the gunfire on our Eastern borders. Sabih was called up to reserve duty, I with my two small children – loel, three years old and Ayelet, a toddler eleven months younger, sat with our neighbours of 5 Rehov Hatamar in a trench we had dug in our neighbour's garden. It was part scary and part adventure. In later days when it became clear that we had achieved a world acclaimed military victory together with territorial conquests, the country simply rejoiced and lost all perspective of the horrors of war. That is of course except for those who had lost dear ones or who remained maimed and traumatized. I remember that even then, I was not sure that ruling over another nation could be good for us. I had seen what it had done in South Africa. But, at that time, most did not agree with me.

This war changed the face of Israel. Apart from an unhealthy feeling of military superiority and self-confidence - we believed we could not be beaten; we became the occupiers of vast tracts of land filled with a population of Palestinians, many of whom were refugees from within the

'Green line', expelled in 1948. Others were new refugees since the Six-Day war. Many still dreamed of returning to their ancestral homes. 1948 was our War of Independence; it was their "Naqba" (their word for the expulsion or dispossession of their nation from Palestine). Most were Muslims but there was also a strong Christian presence as in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Not only did our country change geographically but politically as well. The relatively small and moderate National Religious Party became a powerful nationalist and messianic movement with territorial aspirations based on biblical and religious teachings. They have gained much success, establishing many new settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, stirring up much latent hatred amongst the Palestinian people and making a possible peace agreement well nigh impossible. We have not officially annexed most of these territories, but have remained as unwanted military occupiers for the last fifty-six years.

**Until 1973** (the next major war), we lived in our happy bubble. (In fact, we still do). We had another little girl, Tami and the three went to kindergarten and school. I worked as a physiotherapist, on and off in between having and bringing up the kids. We enjoyed a good and full social life with family, friends and neighbours; we travelled in Israel, including the Occupied Territories where Sabih was always well liked by the people living there. He could speak Arabic fluently (and read and write). We flew to my family in South Africa almost every year as well as to several other countries. This was only possible as Sabih was an El Al employee. Not many travelled overseas in those days. We did in fact travel widely until recent years where health problems limited our trips abroad. My kids to this day are still totally addicted to travel – here in Israel and overseas.

### **The War of Attrition:**

During the period between the '67 and the '73 wars there was only "relative peace". A Cease fire was drawn up but in fact a war of attrition between us and our Arab neighbours, especially Egypt, took place. It is now known that, sometime during that period, Sadat, the leader of Egypt offered to discuss peace terms with our Golda Meir and her government, but to no avail.

Perhaps this could have saved thousands of lives. What stands out in my memory of that period was the frequent sound of helicopters flying overhead, carrying wounded soldiers from the borders to Tel Hashomer hospital, situated not far from our home.

### **The Yom Kippur or October War: 1973**

And then, 50 years ago, on the **6<sup>th</sup> of October, 1973**, Saturday morning, Yom Kippur day, me – heavily pregnant – (Ami, our 4<sup>th</sup>, was born on the 13<sup>th</sup>) we were attacked – totally surprised, totally unprepared, totally horrified - by massive armed armies from Egypt across the Suez canal on the south, and Syria across the Golan heights in the north. How dare they attack our most powerful and mighty country? The entire population of Israel reeled.

I remember well that Yom Kippur, Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> October 1973. In all the years I had lived here, Yom Kippur in Israel was and is indeed a “Holy day”. There is no traffic, except for the children on their bicycles riding on the car-free streets; many people are in shul; others going about their business quietly, plus a few on the beaches. No open stores, no radio or TV of course. On that particular morning it became uncharacteristically noisy – a car here and there, people talking noisily outside; a neighbour who was an officer was fetched from his home; people were saying that there might be some enemy activity. At two o'clock p.m., the public radio went on – unheard of in Israel on Yom Kippur. We had been attacked on all borders by the neighbouring countries. At that stage we believed that it wouldn't take much time before they would retreat, totally defeated. Little did we know that their troops and tanks had crossed into Israel, nearly reaching Tiberius; crossed the Suez Canal; were killing and capturing our soldiers; were heavily bombarding Jerusalem and were actually downing our planes. Heavy battles followed for weeks after and our forces fought fiercely and bravely for the very survival of our country, but at a huge price. I think that nearly 3000 of our boys were killed; very many others wounded, taken capture and far more than is known remained with post traumatic syndrome. I think it was months before there was a peace treaty. Sabih was called up about three weeks after the outbreak of hostilities, as a truck driver, travelling back and forth in the Sinai and later, across the Suez into the land of Goshen in the north of Egypt. This was after Ami's birth on the 13<sup>th</sup> October and his Brit Mila which we held in our garden. My mom and dad visited after it became clear that all the fighting was far away. They were with us for a few weeks. Thereafter I was on my own with my four kids, Sabih getting leave from time to time. He remained as a reserve soldier for nearly 6 months. I did have my neighbour and best friend Haya, then as always at my side. The situation and news from the war front got better and the Israeli army entered Northern Egypt. Syria was also eventually defeated. The war ended with both sides claiming victory. (I knew then as I do now that there are only losers in wars). It was a sorrowful and angry period and the severe loss of life weighed heavily on all. The blame for such a surprise attack was put on the army. Many people however blamed the government of Golda Meir and

Moshe Dayan and after a second or perhaps a third election, the Labour party lost the government to the Herut (later Likud) under Menachem Begin. There were of course other reasons but that war was surely one of them.

That war will always be connected to Ami's birth. We named him "Ami", meaning "my people" because he was born when our very survival was at stake. I clearly remember driving with Sabih at night to Beilinson hospital in total darkness - we even had to paint the headlights dark blue so as not to be seen by enemy planes. At the hospital, we had no choice but to ignore the air-raid sirens but I knew that at home my older three kids went in their pajamas to a supposed shelter at a Kupat Holim clinic opposite our home. Herman was visiting from SA at the time and to the surprised delight of the kids, decided to ignore the sirens and stay in bed. I well remember before and after Ami's Brith and after Sabih was called up, how every evening, I with my neighbour, sat glued to the TV - watching the news and the songs of War and Peace. Haya was a wonderful friend throughout my life at Rehov Hatamar and we brought up our children together. She died of cancer at the young age of fifty, sometime in the 1990s. To this day, I miss her dearly.

A year after Ami was born, I took a job as a physiotherapist at the Sharon hospital in Petah Tikva. I remained there till 2000 when I went on pension. I loved every minute of my work there. The hospitals throughout the country are one place where there is true co-existence between Jews and Arabs – if as patients or on the staff. We worked together in harmony irrespective of personal, political or national differences. My work place gave me an environment where I could treat and rehabilitate without any racial discrimination.

### **The Peace Treaty 1979**

FROM google [Egypt–Israel peace treaty<sup>\[1\]</sup>](#) was signed in [Washington, D.C., United States](#), on 26 March 1979, following the 1978 [Camp David Accords](#). The Egypt–Israel treaty was signed by [Anwar Sadat, President of Egypt](#), and [Menachem Begin, Prime Minister of Israel](#), and witnessed by [Jimmy Carter, President of the United States](#).<sup>[2]</sup>

The peace treaty between [Egypt](#) and [Israel](#) was signed 16 months after Egyptian president [Anwar Sadat's visit to Israel in 1977](#), after intense negotiations. The main features of the treaty were mutual recognition, cessation of the state of war that had existed since the [1948 Arab–Israeli War](#), normalization of relations and the withdrawal by Israel of its armed forces and civilians from the [Sinai Peninsula](#), which Israel had captured during the [Six-Day War](#) in 1967.

Egypt agreed to leave the Sinai Peninsula demilitarized. The agreement provided for free passage of Israeli ships through the [Suez Canal](#), and recognition of the [Strait of Tiran](#) and the [Gulf of Aqaba](#) as international waterways, which had been blockaded by Egypt in 1967. The agreement also called for an end to Israeli military rule over the [Israeli-occupied territories](#) and the establishment of full autonomy for the Palestinian inhabitants of the territories, **terms that were not implemented but which became the basis for the [Oslo Accords](#).**

This was a huge step forward – at last recognition and a peace agreement between Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat – the president of Egypt and the man who had architected that huge “victory”. Certainly Egypt felt that they had restored their honour and could allow themselves to come to terms with us and the existence of a Jewish State in the Middle East. We needed to return the whole of Sinai to Egypt. I believe – I think, that Sadat and Carter also hoped that a Palestinian State would be enabled; but this was not to be. What exciting times those were. We were filled with optimism for a peaceful future – to live and bring up children in a land of peace and good will. How wrong we were. I must add that during this period we found on our travels that Israel was hugely popular. This leads me to believe that the pro-Palestinian wave in many international communities, prevalent in present times, has more to it than pure anti-Semitism.

Since the war of 1973, many wars have taken place between our peoples. In addition, violence, terrorism has always been around the corner. This and an oppressive occupation of the territories - the West Bank and Gaza, conquered during the ‘67 war. The threat of the hate and resentment of a large Palestinian population, many of whom remained living in refugee camps – either in the territories or in neighbouring countries; the threat from other Arab and middle Eastern countries who supported these people and objected to the Jewish state in their midst; the necessity of maintaining our newly found independence after centuries of exile and persecution and of course the Holocaust, lead us to the development of a hugely powerful and sophisticated military machine – a people’s army where nearly all able bodied men and women have to serve for up to three years at least. In fact, this has been the case ever since the establishment of the State in 1948. Though this, on the one hand drained the nation in many ways; on the other hand, it has contributed to a dedicated patriotism, not only in Israel but amongst most Jews world-wide. It is doubtful whether we could have survived the enmity without such an army and unquestioned loyalty. However, the thought arises that this may also have lead to a loss of human compassion for the other – for the Palestinians living under our military control. This too is a heavy price to pay.

To quote the Israeli Author, David Grossman *“---I fear that after decades of spending most our energies, our thoughts and attention and inventiveness, our blood and our life and our financial means on protecting our external borders, fortifying and safeguarding them more and more- after all this, we may be very close to becoming like a suit of armour that no longer contains a knight, no longer contains a human.”*

In the many years between these two wars, that of 1967 and the one of now, we lived through many wars, battles and acts of violence between our two nations. I can only remember some of these events -acts of terror, buses blown up, restaurants, hotels, stabbing and shooting, in all towns and areas in our country and fierce retribution and cruel occupation in the Palestinian territories.

Thank goodness, me and mine were not usually directly involved. I do clearly remember one incident, sometime after the '73 war, when Ami was still an infant: I went with my four children on an El Al bus tour to the Golan Heights to see and play in the snow there. The sun was shining when the three kids took the cable-car to the upper cable station. A sudden snow storm forced everyone to come down the cable-way in great haste, while I, at the bottom with a baby in my arms, waited in terror until the kids got down safely. We travelled back to our home on the main coastal road into the night. Little did we know that our plight on the Golan Heights was a relatively minor incident. On that same evening and on the same road, a bus was blown up, killing many of the passengers. Sabih and his fellow workers were frantic with worry until we arrived back home safe and sound. (There were no mobile phones in those days). At that time it was reported that three terrorists responsible for this act had been killed. Later it was discovered that they were captured alive and shot dead by Israeli secret service men. There was a whole big legal palaver thereafter; they were charged but released by our then president Haim Herzog. An incident of that nature, where Palestinian terrorists were shot after being arrested, in today's Israel, would probably be supported by many..

Since 1967, the Palestinians, living under Israeli rule, are divided into three groups – those living within the 'green' line or pre '67 borders; those living in the West Bank taken from Jordan; and those living in Gaza taken from Egypt. The Israeli Palestinian citizens who live in cities and villages in Israel-proper, no doubt strongly sympathize with their own people, but have, to a large extent integrated into all walks of society. There are many such people amongst our physicians, nurses, physiotherapists, chemists, dentists, lawyers, and many other professional and academic occupations. They also constitute many the builders, bus drivers, agricultural



labourers and whatever you name. But they do still include many of the most poverty-stricken populations, unemployed with an ever-increasing crime rate. They form over 20% of the total Israeli population but are, to this day, burdened with undeniable discrimination. They are though, generally far better off than most of their fellow countrymen, the non-citizens living in the West Bank and Gaza, many of whom were exiled after the 1948 war and others after the '67 war. There are also countless numbers of Palestinians living in neighbouring Arab countries, many in refugee camps. Of course, there are those who have made their homes in the Diaspora.

While holidaying in Spain some years back we made friends with a Palestinian family living in Dubai. She was an engineer working in their government and I think he ran a business there. She came from Haifa and told us that her mother was still there living in a Jewish neighbourhood. In the 1948 war when our troops occupied Haifa and expelled huge numbers of Arabs, her mother was protected by her long-standing Jewish neighbours who refused to allow the soldiers to remove her from her home. He came from East Jerusalem and we understood from him that ever since he left as a young student to study in England, he lost his Israeli citizenship and it became extremely difficult to come back to visit his family.

The West Bank and Gaza are two different entities. In the West Bank they are ruled under military occupation and have no legal or political rights. The West Bank or "Yehuda and Shomron" as it is now known, has a growing number of Jewish settlers living both legally and illegally in settlements – gradually and purposefully taking over more and more territory. Today there are more than a half a million Jews living there and nearly three million Palestinians, many whom come into "Israel proper", to find work, mainly in agriculture and the building industry. Some parts of these territories have been officially annexed by Israel, mainly around the old Green Line borders and of course what was once East Jerusalem and the walled city. East Jerusalem with the Mosque of Aksa, the Wailing Wall, and many more places of worship for Jews, Muslims and Christians; the large remaining Arab population; an ever-increasing number of Jewish neighbourhoods have all complicated the situation considerably. Since 1967, perhaps more than before, our country (and theirs) has been plagued with violence, terrorism and oppression arising from this conflict. I will speak of Gaza in a later paragraph.

The Golan Heights, taken from Syria in the Six Day War has also been annexed.

Before going into all this I will briefly relate of some of the battles and wars and there were many, between our two nations after the October war of 1973. Because of the peace treaty with

Egypt our actual existence was no longer under threat and a complicated autonomy was created in the occupied territories.

The Lebanese wars:

From Google [The 1982 Lebanon War](#) began on 6 June 1982, when the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) invaded southern Lebanon. The invasion followed *a series of attacks and counter-attacks between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) operating in southern Lebanon and the IDF* that had caused civilian casualties on both sides of the border.<sup>[10][11][12]</sup> (This well before the Oslo accords)

In Lebanon we fought two long and painful wars – the first with Palestinians living there in huge numbers, many in refugee camps, under the PLO (Fatah) headed by Yasser Arafat, then an arch enemy. This took place from 1982. I remember the year as my son loel, at the age of 18, was then serving in a tank unit of the IDF and fought in that war where hundreds of young Israeli soldiers were killed - God knows how many Lebanese and Palestinians - both civilians and fighters. It was a most traumatic experience for my son. He would tell of suffering severe headaches whenever they crossed the border into Lebanon; of the shooting there – “like the Wild West”. He also told us of how our soldiers – yes – soldiers of our own Jewish army would torture and humiliate enemy prisoners. We lived then in constant fear for his safety. When he first registered into the IDF, as was demanded of almost all our children, reaching his age, I often thought of the Bible story of Abraham being commanded by God to sacrifice his own son. I was left horrified at what we accepted without question; in fact what we were doing to our children. My other son and two daughters all completed their military service, but not in combat units. – Thank God!

After loel completed his military service, the Israeli army remained in Lebanon for another 14 years, both inflicting and suffering heavy losses and destruction. During this period Sabih also served as a reserve soldier, driver and translator for a senior officer. He was centered at a military headquarters building in a Lebanese town which at some stage was blown up, killing all residents. Another soldier had requested to take his place that weekend and Sabih had come home on leave. It was a frightening and very disturbing event.

During that war we bombed Beirut to smithereens causing widespread destruction, death and disaster. Another tragic incident was a massive pogrom in the refugee camp of Sabra and Shatila where soldiers belonging to a Christian Lebanese militia – our allies, entered, committed horrific

atrocities and brutally murdered hundreds of Palestinian refugees- (does this remind us of other similar events?) This under our watchful and, sad to say – approving eyes. The whole world stood up in arms. I must say to our credit that we were different then. We held a huge protest demonstration, the President Yitzhak Navon set up a committee of inquiry, and Arik Sharon, who was found most responsible, was removed from his position as Minister of Defense. The war ended when the Palestinian leadership was permitted to leave the country for Tunisia. Our army remained on in Lebanon, and many soldiers lost their lives. Eventually, after massive anti-war demonstrations, Ehud Barak as the then Prime Minister, moved all Israeli forces out of Lebanon. Peace did not reign thereafter but at least our army was no longer in Lebanon.

### **Many years later in 2006, a second war took place in Lebanon**

From Google The **2006 Lebanon War**, also called the **2006 Israel–Hezbollah War**<sup>[39]</sup> and known in Lebanon as the **July War**<sup>[1]</sup> (Arabic: حرب تموز, *Ḥarb Tammūz*) and in Israel as the **Second Lebanon War** (Hebrew: מלחמת לבנון השנייה, *Milhemet Levanon HaShniya*),<sup>[40]</sup> was a 34-day military conflict in Lebanon, northern Israel and the Golan Heights. The principal parties were Hezbollah paramilitary forces and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The conflict started on 12 July 2006, and continued until a United Nations-brokered ceasefire went into effect in the morning on 14 August 2006, though it formally ended on 8 September 2006 when Israel lifted its naval blockade of Lebanon.

– I can't remember when and why. I know it has been considered by many, as a tragic failure with a loss of many lives. But I think it only lasted a few weeks. This war was accompanied by rocket attacks into Israel reaching as far south as Hadera, causing destruction and huge forest fires in the North. By that time the war took place between Israel and a powerful Shi-ite political organization, the Hezbollah, fighting, they maintain, for the Palestinian rights. My family were no longer directly involved.

### **The Oslo Accords: 1993 and 1995**

Taken from Google: The **Oslo Accords** are a pair of agreements between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO): the Oslo I Accord, signed in Washington, D.C., in 1993,<sup>[1]</sup> and the Oslo II Accord, signed in Taba, Egypt, in 1995.<sup>[2]</sup> They marked the start of the **Oslo process**, a peace process aimed at achieving a peace treaty based on Resolution 242 and Resolution 338 of the United Nations Security Council, and at fulfilling the "right of the Palestinian people to self-determination". The Oslo process began after secret negotiations in Oslo,

Norway, resulting in both the recognition of Israel by the PLO and the recognition by Israel of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and as a partner in bilateral negotiations.

Somewhere along the line, for a few short years, real progress was made toward peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Under the leadership of Yitzhak Rabin – a past military leader – the man who led the victorious war of 1967; after extensive negotiations, the Oslo Peace Accords were reached with the Palestine Liberation Organization led by Yasser Arafat. They were to be given much of the territories taken in the '67 war including both Gaza and the West Bank - first as an autonomy (later intended to become their own country). This in 1993 and 1995. There were many tricky issues which were to be solved in the future, (sadly, until now – unsolved). We, like many, were excited and optimistic as never before. On both sides, not all supported but a majority felt as we did. The period was fraught with tension. On one hand there were huge anti-govt, anti peace demonstrations from our right wing, religious nationalist and messianic opposition while on the other, terrorist attacks including horrific bus explosions from the Palestinian rejectionists.

Nevertheless, the agreement went forward and was followed by a deal with Jordan. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 1995, a huge peace demonstration took place at what is now known as “the Rabin Square” in Tel Aviv. We watched on TV with great excitement. And then a young Jewish man, Yigal Amir, a member of the National Religious Party, shot and assassinated our Prime Minister, Rabin – a tragic and never to be forgiven act. With that, the Oslo agreement was also “assassinated”. We could never forget that night.

#### **The Intifadas:**

There were two “Intifadas (Uprisings)” in the West Bank. (Sabih would say – “the greater the oppression, the greater the intifada”. I often think of that remark – proved to this day to be so true). They were crushed by our army after heavy losses on both sides. The Oslo agreement is partly still in practice but the West bank is far from an independent state and riddled with violent conflict between the Palestinians and the Jewish Settlers who, I regret to say, are usually backed by the army.

#### **The Gaza Wars:**

Taken from Google The [Gaza–Israel conflict](#) is a localized part of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The conflict originated with the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. Following the withdrawal,

Hamas won the 2006 Palestinian legislative election, and a civil war between Hamas and Fatah in 2007 culminated in Hamas gaining control over Gaza.<sup>[13][14]</sup> In response to Hamas's takeover, Egypt and Israel imposed an extensive blockade of the Gaza Strip that devastated Gaza's economy.<sup>[15]</sup> International rights groups have decried the blockade as a form of collective punishment,<sup>[16]</sup> while Israel defended it as necessary to prevent weapons and dual-use goods from entering the territory.<sup>[17][18]</sup> Since 2006, Hamas and Israel have fought five wars, the most recent in 2023.<sup>[19]</sup>

Gaza, also almost totally populated by Palestinians, many the children and grandchildren of thousands of refugees expelled from Israel – from cities like Jaffa and Ashkelon and countless other villages. Today they remember from where their forefathers come and yearn to return, even as did our own people. It is a small strip of land, heavily populated and poverty stricken.

Gaza was part of the Palestinian territory captured from Egyptian control in 1967. Jewish settlers also established settlements along the coast in Gaza. According to the Oslo agreement, Gaza was at first also under the PLO. The Jewish settlements there were a thorn in the side of the Palestinians and the army had to keep tight control. Arik Sharon, then the Prime Minister decided to move the Jewish settlements out of Gaza — a one sided action, not coordinated with the Palestinians. This relocation of the Jewish settlers from Gaza was strongly resented by our right wing and settlement parties. We, Sabih and I, supported this move, though would have preferred the Palestinians to participate in this decision. Sabih would say” “Unless they are truly part of this deal it won't work”. Again, he was right. Soon after, the Hamas group overpowered and defeated the PLO in an election in Gaza and have remained in power there ever since. However, though Israel withdrew from Gaza and it is supposedly an independent entity, they are completely blockaded and controlled by Israeli military forces and are largely dependent for their requirements on the State of Israel.

Many years back Sabih and I visited a man living on Kibbutz Be-eri, the now famous kibbutz on the Gazan Border, which had been hit so badly on that black 7<sup>th</sup> of October this year. I think Sabih did some of his military training there. The man there had been a friend during his military service. I remember it as being a lovely outing and visit to a charming family in a beautiful and peaceful area. Who could have imagined the horrific events which took place there so many years later.

About ten years ago I did a guided tour with my brother Herman in the Western Negev and while there, near the Be-eri kibbutz, we climbed up a hill overlooking Gaza. We saw this stretch

of land covered with smog and filled to the brim with run-down homes. Herman said to me “It looks like Ghetto Gaza”. Indeed it did.

The Hamas reject any recognition of the Jewish State and aim to restore the whole country – “From the river to the sea” to the Palestinian people. This unlike the official PLO policy which aims to live in a separate state, side by side with our people. They, the PLO, have achieved very little, are considered to be widely corrupt and are not liked by our right wing government or, for that matter by a large number of Palestinians while the more extreme Hamas has gained ever-growing popularity in the occupied territories. Tragically, the extremists on both sides are gaining ground.

Originally the Hamas was an Islamic movement providing food, education and charity amongst the poor in the occupied territories. They were in fact patronized and developed by the Israeli leadership, particularly under right wing governments. This was done with the idea to counter the influence of the PLO and to halt any progress towards a peace agreement involving territorial concession in the West Bank. They grew in power and number, becoming a strong militant anti-Israel and anti- peace movement with the removal of all Israeli settlement in Gaza; they then defeated the PLO in an election held in Gaza and took control of a population of about 2 million, crowded into a narrow strip of land. Although I say “control” – it was totally under the yolk of our government and army. They have resisted all attempts of reconciliation by performing acts of terror, border skirmishes and rocket attacks into Israel. Those who have suffered the most from their aggressive reaction over these years were our towns, and villages close to the Gaza Strip. The Gazans themselves have had their fair share of suffering from heavy Israeli retaliation. Both militants and civilians have been repeatedly bombed, destroying their homes and killing thousands. *Are bombing hundreds of non-military civilians and destroying homes and infra-structure more moral than other means of warfare?*

I personally clearly remember three of these wars. I think they lasted a few weeks until bombed into submission. In one of the wars, our soldiers moved in and sadly many of them lost their lives. As happens, in each of these wars, countless numbers of their people were killed before an arrangement was reached leading to a cease fire. Our government kept them under a “suffocating blockade” while in fact enabling them to receive a degree of financial aid from Qatar. This, as was re-iterated in a recent speech by our Prime Minister, Netanyahu, was meant to weaken Fatah (the PLO) with whom hope of a two-state solution existed.

During these wars with Gaza, Israel suffered widespread rocket attacks – no doubt severely threatening. Fortunately, Israel has developed the Iron Dome – an anti-rocket weapon, which since put into use, has proved to be a miraculous defensive missile, blocking most rockets and, up to now, usually protecting us from what could have been devastating. They have also been successfully used in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lebanese war.

### **The Gulf Wars: 1990-1991; 2003- 2008.**

We have also lived through two wars between the U.S. and allied countries and Iraq- the Gulf Wars. We did not actively participate but in the first were rained with rockets which were frightening, particularly as we were told that they might contain biological and chemical material. We were instructed to wear masks and take many precautions. (This was later shown to be totally false). At that time there were no Iron Domes. We stuck tapes on our window panes. This simple procedure proved to be most effective as a rocket that fell in Savyon led to a shattering of the front windows throughout our neighbourhood. During that war I worked as a physiotherapist at the Sharon hospital, where we worked shifts. At the hospital we were taught how to treat patients struck by chemical weapons? This was quite terrifying to say the least. However, it passed without any real harm to our people. No threatening chemical or biological weapons were used or even found at all. Although we were left unscathed, many American soldiers paid dearly and thousands of Iraqi people were killed (collateral damage, they called it).

The second Gulf War was protracted and to those involved, horrific. At that time, Sabih was in hospital undergoing a major heart operation, my children grown up, I was on pension and had little time or mind to bother. Also, if I remember correctly, no rockets actually fell on Israel during that war.

There is much more but let this suffice.

Throughout all these tragic events our country flourished, and there is today a population of nine million, more than seven million of Jewish origin. Another about seven million Palestinians, all counted, live in Israel and the occupied territories. There is in our country, considerable political, ethnic, economic and religious dispute and indeed until this recent war there were widespread demonstrations protesting our shocking government. Far more shocking was the total failure at protecting our people on that Black Saturday – the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, this year, 2023 when so many were murdered and brutally attacked by Hamas terrorists, so many hostages

taken, so much destruction and acts of atrocity. There was no military or police protection. This cannot be forgotten or forgiven ever! But now, for better or for worse all has been put aside for this new and fearful war.

Sabih would often say that the Arab/Israeli conflict is what keeps our nation together. When there is quiet and certainly if there will be peace, there will be self destructive struggles between the different groups of Jews with different cultures – religious, national, ethnic. This has been proved so true during this recent war in Gaza which has brought together a nation of people so divided that they were on the verge of civil war. The war eliminated completely the massive pre-war protest movement taking place in our streets. This of course may and probably will change - in fact is changing.

Internationally we are severely criticized, though at the first reports of the brutal attack on the Israeli settlements and towns by the Hamas, the reaction was of justifiably wide spread horror. Of course, we reacted with fear and hatred. Some, I believe due to a desire for revenge – partly for the horrific cruelty we suffered but also in response to the humiliation at what had been achieved by this group of terrorists. Of course we also reacted with fierce anger at our government and army for leaving our own citizens around Gaza so completely unprotected.

We have since driven the enemy out of Israeli territory and our military forces are wreaking havoc and destruction in Gaza – killing literally thousands of men, women and children. Of course the international community – at least many of them are no longer sympathetic towards Israel. Is this all just anti- Semitism? I think only partly; I think we, the Israelis were regarded highly after the Oslo Accords when we tried Peace; I think the unending and cruel occupation of the West bank and the Blockade of Gaza is definitely part of the reason for the massive pro-Palestinian movement. For sure the pictures of the horrific suffering and destruction in Gaza cannot arouse sympathy for our cause.

Our own suffering is also far from over – our soldiers are being killed and injured daily; many hostages still in tunnels in Gaza; large populations evacuated from their homes; our government as useless as ever and the future – a huge and frightening unknown factor. My own Israeli children who hold differing opinions regarding the state of affairs; who have always been loyal citizens are now fearful for the future of their children.

And despite all this, our family have lived well on all fronts. We have been greatly blessed and I have no cause for personal complaint. I do though feel deep sorrow for the suffering of both our



peoples. Many of us who left an Apartheid South Africa to come to a new land of promise have in many ways been deeply disappointed. This is not the country we had dreamed of. I still remain hopeful that this will end and peace will come; that at least my grandchildren will live to see that day.

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**A War Memoir written by Richelle Shem-Tov in January 2024**

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