

Transcript

00:00:00 Speaker 1

welcome all.

00:00:02 Speaker 1

It's kind of fun to be in an intimate crowd on a Monday night, celebrating the start of second week of the Trinity term together.

00:00:10 Speaker 1

And we were presented with an opportunity that we could simply not miss, which was when the illustrious professor from Brown University, Katharina Galloa, offered to come and speak about what is a very personal book, tracing the story of a friendship

00:00:28 Speaker 1

that one almost despairs of surviving the violence that's been done to Gaza in the years since the 7th of October, 2023.

00:00:39 Speaker 1

But this is a story with deeper roots.

00:00:41 Speaker 1

It goes further back.

00:00:42 Speaker 1

But let me tell you, Katrina Gallor is Associate Teaching Professor of Judaic Studies at Brown University.

00:00:47 Speaker 1

Born in Germany, where her parents fled from communist Romania, Gallor was educated in Germany, France, and Israel, and then the United States.

00:00:57 Speaker 1

She's the author or co-author of four books, including *The Moral Triangle*, *Germans, Israelis, Palestinians*, with Saad Achan, and writes for or appears in various media outlets, including *The Foreword*, *Die Zeit*, NPR, Israeli TV, National Geographic, and the Discovery Channel.

00:01:20 Speaker 1

So *Out of Gaza*, the subject of tonight's book, is the story of Dina Mansour,

00:01:26 Speaker 1

a young Palestinian who suffers hardship growing up in Jordan and Gaza during the Gaza War of 2014.

00:01:35 Speaker 1

Later escaping to be with a man she loves in Belgium, where she's held in detention in a center for illegal immigrants.

00:01:44 Speaker 1

Her harrowing story is told by Katrina, an Israeli-Jewish scholar who forms a close and unexpected friendship with Mansour.

00:01:52 Speaker 1

Despite the profound asymmetry,

00:01:55 Speaker 1

that defines the geopolitical context of their lives, one marked by Palestinian loss and exile, the other by Jewish trauma and persecution.

00:02:05 Speaker 1

Their bond uncovers surprising parallels in their shared experiences of displacement and survival.

00:02:12 Speaker 1

And I should give a plug to Katharina's lecture tomorrow at Wolfson College for the Life Writing Seminar.

00:02:19 Speaker 1

While there may be some degree of overlap since it's coming from the same book,

00:02:24 Speaker 1

the life writing emphasis of tomorrow's lecture will depart from what she's doing tonight.

00:02:29 Speaker 1

And for those of you-- come on down, Miriam, come on down-- interested in life writing yourself, then you'll be familiar with the seminar, and you'll want to get a double-header this week.

00:02:42 Speaker 1

But without further delay, if I could welcome Professor Galloa to the podium to address us, I'm going to take a front row seat and enjoy the talk.

00:02:52 Speaker 2

Thank you so much.

00:02:54 Speaker 2

Gene Brogan for this very generous invitation and introduction.

00:03:00 Speaker 2

And thank you to the Middle East Center at St.

00:03:03 Speaker 2

Anthony's College for hosting this conversation.

00:03:06 Speaker 2

And thank you also to Jen Williams for making the logistics of this visit so pleasant and smooth.

00:03:15 Speaker 2

And as we earlier discussed, it's very meaningful for me to present this book here, particularly at the moment.

00:03:24 Speaker 2

when sustained academic conversation about Israel-Palestine has become increasingly difficult to maintain within academia, much more so, of course, in the United States than here in the UK and other European countries, and that really makes spaces like this and opportunities to engage the region and related issues all the more important.

00:03:53 Speaker 2

Out of Gaza was published last year, and the cover you see here brings together the central figures of the narrative.

00:04:02 Speaker 2

At its core, the book is really about friendship between myself and Israeli Jew and Dima, a Palestinian refugee, and also about how intimate life unfolds under conditions shaped by statelessness

00:04:22 Speaker 2

political violence and war.

00:04:24 Speaker 2

But the story is also situated within longer historical trajectories.

00:04:30 Speaker 2

It touches on several forms of 20th and 21st century displacement, Jewish exile in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Palestinian displacement following the creation of Israel in 1948, and also contemporary

00:04:50 Speaker 2

regimes governing asylum and migration in Europe.

00:04:57 Speaker 2

And the identities that emerge from these histories, Jewish, Muslim, Palestinian, Israeli, are not abstract categories.

00:05:07 Speaker 2

They are shaped by attachment to land.

00:05:12 Speaker 2

by collective memory, by inherited trauma, and by political structures that regulate experiences of loss and aspirations of belonging.

00:05:23 Speaker 2

And in my own life, Jewish identity has been informed primarily by the legacy of the Holocaust and also by a strong Zionist education that presented Israel as refuge and restoration.

00:05:41 Speaker 2

In Dima's life, Palestinian identity has been shaped by the Nakba, by exile, and by the transmission of loss across several generations.

00:05:53 Speaker 2

The book does not attempt to equate these histories, but it places them in conversation, not as symmetrical experiences, but as historically entangled

00:06:06 Speaker 2

memories that continue to structure our lives, the way we think, dream, but also the way we live under extremely different conditions.

00:06:16 Speaker 2

And in that sense, this is a friendship across a very deep divide, not only political, but historical and existential.

00:06:26 Speaker 2

I've written previously on Israel-Palestine in the past, but

00:06:31 Speaker 2

really almost exclusively in scholarly form.

00:06:35 Speaker 2

And that kind of work, as you all know, typically circulates within relatively small academic audiences.

00:06:43 Speaker 2

And given the increasing urgency of the topics I engage, I very much wanted to reach a broader readership to bring the unit scale of displacement and

00:06:56 Speaker 2

statelessness into public conversation rather than engaging injustices through an academic lens of abstraction.

00:07:06 Speaker 2

So the book is therefore written as narrative rather than policy analysis.

00:07:13 Speaker 2

But although it is not a scholarly monograph, the experiences it recounts raised structural questions are deeply relevant to

00:07:23 Speaker 2

research, questions about citizenship, refugee regimes, belonging, and the relationship between private life and state power.

00:07:34 Speaker 2

In more concrete ways and at its core, the book addresses several questions, what it means to be born stateless, how displacement can and has become intergenerational, how attachments to Israel or Palestine persist,

00:07:53 Speaker 2

across exile, and what happens when legal regimes intersect with marriage, education, and family life?

00:08:03 Speaker 2

And those questions really form the analytical backbone of the story.

00:08:09 Speaker 2

And let me briefly situate the setting before turning to the personal narrative.

00:08:14 Speaker 2

So for Palestinians, the land is often understood as historic Palestine, the territory from the river to the sea.

00:08:22 Speaker 2

and that phrase carries very different meanings depending on who uses it.

00:08:26 Speaker 2

For some, it expresses rejection of Israel as a Jewish state.

00:08:30 Speaker 2

For others, including many Palestinian scholars and activists, it articulates a demand for equal political and human rights within a shared territorial framework.

00:08:45 Speaker 2

For Palestinians, however, regardless of the exact meaning of these words, it remains

00:08:51 Speaker 2

an aspiration articulated without the existence of a sovereign state power.

00:08:58 Speaker 2

On the Israeli side, the territorial imagination encompassing the very same geography between the river and the sea operates differently because it is backed by an autonomous national force, terms such as Eretz Yisrael,

00:09:15 Speaker 2

Greater Israel or the administrative designation Judea and Samaria reflect not only claims, but at least for the most part, internationally recognized ownership.

00:09:28 Speaker 2

In other words, we are dealing with a sovereign state capable of translating territorial visions into administrative and legal reality.

00:09:41 Speaker 2

Since 1967, layered onto the political transformation that began in 1948, settlement expansion differentiated legal systems in the West Bank, the expansion of Israeli civil

law to settlers, and annexation measures such as the incorporation of East Jerusalem together with many observers, with what many observers describes,

00:10:09 Speaker 2

as the de facto annexation of parts of the West Bank have really progressively reshaped the entire landscape.

00:10:18 Speaker 2

So this is not only a space imagined differently, it is a space structured differently, materially, legally, and politically, depending on who inhabits it and under which legal status.

00:10:38 Speaker 2

And that asymmetry forms a structural backdrop of the story I'm telling.

00:10:44 Speaker 2

And I should add, though, that the narrative does not remain confined to this region.

00:10:50 Speaker 2

It extends across the Mediterranean and into Europe, following displacement through Egypt and Turkey, the crossing into Greece, and onward through European refugee routes until Belgium, where asylum law and detention become very central to the story.

00:11:08 Speaker 2

My own trajectory intersects this map very differently.

00:11:13 Speaker 2

I was born in Germany to Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe whose lives were shaped by the Holocaust of post-war exile.

00:11:21 Speaker 2

And like many refugees of that generation, my parents experienced statelessness and displacement.

00:11:28 Speaker 2

But by the time I was born, my own statelessness was only temporary.

00:11:34 Speaker 2

Citizenship was restored within

00:11:38 Speaker 2

one generation.

00:11:39 Speaker 2

And when I later migrated to Israel or made aliyah, that was not an active flight but a political and ideological choice.

00:11:50 Speaker 2

And also my subsequent moves to France and the United States were my choices enabled by passports, academic mobility, and the privileges of citizenship.

00:12:02 Speaker 2

So while both Dima and I inhabit histories marked by exile and statelessness, the conditions of our lives are not symmetrical, and our attachments to this land are very different.

00:12:15 Speaker 2

We're both told that this is our homeland.

00:12:18 Speaker 2

Dima's parents and grandparents were originally from Palestine.

00:12:22 Speaker 2

My family came from Eastern Europe.

00:12:26 Speaker 2

And furthermore, Dima's trajectory is marked by legal

00:12:30 Speaker 2

precarity and constraint, mine ultimately, by mobility made possible through citizenship.

00:12:38 Speaker 2

And that difference obviously matters and really frames the ethical and political tension within this friendship.

00:12:48 Speaker 2

So this image shows Istaman, specifically Iskam Kuismet, the neighborhood where Dima grew up.

00:12:55 Speaker 2

It is also where she was living when I first

00:12:57 Speaker 2

met her online during the early months of the COVID pandemic, when much of life had moved into virtual space.

00:13:06 Speaker 2

And at that time, she appeared on my screen as my Arabic teacher, and what actually began as language lessons gradually opened into much deeper conversations.

00:13:17 Speaker 2

But again, before turning to that friendship,

00:13:21 Speaker 2

It is important to understand the legal and political structure that shaped Dima's life in this place.

00:13:29 Speaker 2

Jordan hosts one of the largest Palestinian refugee populations in the world.

00:13:35 Speaker 2

More than 2.3 million Palestinians registered as refugees live there today.

00:13:41 Speaker 2

Most among them hold Jordanian citizenship, and Palestinians are, in fact, the country's majority population.

00:13:50 Speaker 2

Palestinians from a refugee background with citizenship are formally integrated into the state, while at the same time remaining registered as refugees with ANAWA, which means that they are citizens in civic terms, even as their refugee identity continues to exist as a historical and institutional condition.

00:14:20 Speaker 2

Palestinians whose families came from the Gaza Strip, however, as Dima's family, did occupy a very different legal category after the 1967 war when Israel occupied Gaza and the West Bank, roughly 140,000 Palestinians fled to Amman.

00:14:40 Speaker 2

And unlike Palestinians who had previously lived in the West Bank and then later

00:14:46 Speaker 2

became Jordanian citizens, Palestinians refugees from Gaza were not granted citizenship.

00:14:55 Speaker 2

Jordan today maintains 13 Palestinian refugee camps, although many refugees live outside the camps in various urban neighborhoods, such as the one shown here.

00:15:08 Speaker 2

And in the language of political theory, statelessness is a situation in which a person is not recognized

00:15:15 Speaker 2

as a national by any state under the operation of its laws.

00:15:22 Speaker 2

Hannah Arendt once described this condition as the loss of what she called the right to have rights.

00:15:29 Speaker 2

And what she meant was that many of the protections we take for granted in modern societies ultimately depend on belonging to a political community that recognizes you.

00:15:44 Speaker 2

as a citizen.

00:15:47 Speaker 2

And it is from this neighborhood and within that legal status that Dima appeared on my computer screen in 2020, offering to teach classical Arabic and Palestinian dialect.

00:15:59 Speaker 2

But the story of the book does not begin here.

00:16:02 Speaker 2

It actually opens in a detention center in Bruges, visible in this photograph.

00:16:07 Speaker 2

And this is where Dima was being held while the Belgian authorities were reviewing her

00:16:13 Speaker 2

asylum application and across Europe facilities like this form part of the administrative infrastructure through which migration and asylum are governed.

00:16:27 Speaker 2

They're used to detain people whose legal status remains uncertain or unresolved, individuals awaiting an asylum decision, identity verification or quite often deportation.

00:16:42 Speaker 2

So legally, these centers are not classified as prisons.

00:16:47 Speaker 2

They are administrative institutions established to manage migration procedures.

00:16:56 Speaker 2

But the reality inside them is unmistakable.

00:17:00 Speaker 2

Equally carceral people are locked inside.

00:17:04 Speaker 2

Movement is tightly restricted.

00:17:05 Speaker 2

Guards monitor daily life and controls when doors

00:17:10 Speaker 2

open and close, when lights go on and off, when people eat, and where they are allowed to move.

00:17:17 Speaker 2

Surveillance is constant, even the most private ones are not really private.

00:17:23 Speaker 2

For stateless people, the situation can become especially precarious because deportation normally requires a state willing to receive the individual.

00:17:34 Speaker 2

But when a person is not recognized as a citizen by any state,

00:17:40 Speaker 2

authorities often do not know where that person can legally be sent to.

00:17:45 Speaker 2

So as a result, some stateless migrants remain detained for very long periods while governments attempt to determine whether removable is at all possible.

00:17:56 Speaker 2

In some cases, they're detained several times in a row for months at a time and sometimes over the course of years.

00:18:06 Speaker 2

So this is where the narrative of the book really begins.

00:18:09 Speaker 2

And let me read the opening passage of the first chapter.

00:18:17 Speaker 2

So the first chapter is called From Amman and Gaza to Brussels.

00:18:23 Speaker 2

As usual, she didn't answer my call right away, but she sent a text letting me know that she was busy in the kitchen.

00:18:29 Speaker 2

And she reached me after she and her fellow inmates had finished dinner.

00:18:34 Speaker 2

Her situation was grim, but I could sense over the line me in Providence, Rhode Island, Dima in a lockup for illegal immigrants in Bruges, Belgium, her effort to control her voice and emotions.

00:18:47 Speaker 2

She was happy, I called, she said, but there was nothing good to report.

00:18:51 Speaker 2

There was the usual daily routine from time to time, a change of guards or movement of convicts.

00:18:57 Speaker 2

Some of them had more difficult stories than others.

00:19:01 Speaker 2

A few seemed friendly, but then turned depressed and unpleasant.

00:19:05 Speaker 2

Most were kind and sensitive, but tired of being locked up, not knowing what the future would bring.

00:19:12 Speaker 2

Dima spoke in her usual tone, mixing kindness with humor, but also hopelessness, telling me about one really lunatic woman who had come to the detention center that day.

00:19:24 Speaker 2

The woman was a mother of five, each child from a different father, none of whom appeared to be in the picture.

00:19:31 Speaker 2

a sex worker who had turned out later had good lawyers.

00:19:34 Speaker 2

She did nothing but scream and utter gibberish.

00:19:38 Speaker 2

Once she rolled on the cold floor, holding on to some documents.

00:19:43 Speaker 2

The inmates were scared of her, and so were the guards, who seemed to know her from previous visits.

00:19:50 Speaker 2

The eccentric woman was released from the center 4 hours after she arrived, but her screams, her suffering and misfortune

00:19:59 Speaker 2

continued to resonate long after her awkward presence.

00:20:04 Speaker 2

Why was it, Dima had to wonder, that she, whose entire life had been shaped by virtue, modesty, and piety, remained under arrest in the detention center, while a deranged person acting out was allowed to leave?

00:20:19 Speaker 2

I feel my entire life is upside down, she told me.

00:20:22 Speaker 2

When strange things would happen to me in Jordan or in Gaza, I could somehow understand.

00:20:28 Speaker 2

understood the context, I knew how to read and recognize the codes.

00:20:33 Speaker 2

Here, since I'm in prison, I have lost all my usual references and nothing makes sense anymore.

00:20:39 Speaker 2

I realize that my values don't count here.

00:20:42 Speaker 2

People have different beliefs, different traditions.

00:20:45 Speaker 2

This poor woman, her crazy behavior and how then she's gifted with being released so quickly is so confusing to me, Kati.

00:20:54 Speaker 2

I'm surrounded by so many strange people and so many weird things, and some of what is shocking to me seems to be normal to others.

00:21:03 Speaker 2

But perhaps it's just the fact of losing my freedom that makes me think the world, my world, has lost its sense.

00:21:12 Speaker 2

I was happy to hear Dima's voice despite her distress.

00:21:15 Speaker 2

It was almost as if I had called her to reassure me.

00:21:19 Speaker 2

I'd never been to Gaza myself, and my only knowledge of the CIB, the Centre Purile Gaud de Bruges, came from my conversations with Dima and a website containing only the directions to their facility and the capacity for women detainees held within its confines.

00:21:38 Speaker 2

I knew, as Dima did, the gamble she had taken in going to Belgium could end badly, and I didn't want to burden her with my fears.

00:21:48 Speaker 2

So what should I

00:21:49 Speaker 2

say I couldn't give her my news, tell her about my travels to southern France, my dinner parties with friends, my son's wedding plans, and my upcoming trip to Israel-Palestine.

00:22:01 Speaker 2

How could that cheer her up?

00:22:03 Speaker 2

It would only make her more aware of her misery.

00:22:07 Speaker 2

I was free and mobile.

00:22:09 Speaker 2

Dima was under arrest, and no one knew for how long.

00:22:11 Speaker 2

And no one could predict whether in the next minute she'd be told she was being deported back

00:22:18 Speaker 2

To Gaza or Jordan, I try to imagine Dima's beautiful face framed by a black or brown or bluey job with her dark.

00:22:28 Speaker 2

large dark eyes and her expression exuding nothing but kindness.

00:22:32 Speaker 2

She had always looked so proper, so appealing, so put together.

00:22:36 Speaker 2

I wondered what living in a jail had done to her appearance.

00:22:40 Speaker 2

It was just a couple of weeks after her 28th birthday.

00:22:44 Speaker 2

She was beyond the average age when a Palestinian woman from a traditional background is supposed to be married and have children.

00:22:52 Speaker 2

True, she was married, but only on paper, and according to a document written by Sheikh, the Belgians refused to recognize.

00:23:00 Speaker 2

But she had never been physically intimate with her husband, despite their now seven-year-long relationship.

00:23:08 Speaker 2

The CIB opened in 1995 in the buildings of the former prison for women, previously known as the Refuge.

00:23:17 Speaker 2

located on the fringes of Bruges, which for most people, including people like me, is a kind of fairy tale medieval town.

00:23:25 Speaker 2

Nothing of the CIB, of course, a fairy tale like to Dima, even though she had achieved one of her longtime goals or a dream of sorts.

00:23:35 Speaker 2

She finally was in the same country as Amir, the man she had fallen in love with when she lived in Gaza.

00:23:41 Speaker 2

But she was an illegal entity in Belgium, a number.

00:23:46 Speaker 2

She was, too, a refugee without a name or a home, caged with other women, each of whom had her own story of despair.

00:24:01 Speaker 2

So soon after the passage I just read, the story moves actually back in time.

00:24:08 Speaker 2

And this photograph was actually taken by a cousin of Dima's who teaches gymnastics and acrobatics to children in Gaza.

00:24:16 Speaker 2

It shows one of the

00:24:17 Speaker 2

his students practicing in the narrow alleyway in front of the house where Dima lived during her university years.

00:24:25 Speaker 2

And I show this image for two reasons.

00:24:29 Speaker 2

First, it offers a rare visual glimpse into the everyday urban environment in which Dima lived during that period of her life.

00:24:37 Speaker 2

As an Israeli citizen, I could never actually enter the Gaza Strip as a civilian.

00:24:42 Speaker 2

That was not always the case between 1967 and Israel's disengagement in 2005.

00:24:50 Speaker 2

Israeli settlers lived in Gaza and moved through it under Israeli military rule.

00:24:59 Speaker 2

Since the disengagement, however, Israeli civilians have generally been prohibited from entering Gaza.

00:25:05 Speaker 2

Only the military and occasionally journalists or humanitarian personnel under special authorization have been able to enter.

00:25:14 Speaker 2

And what makes this separation particularly striking is the extraordinary geographic proximity.

00:25:23 Speaker 2

I remember just recently

00:25:24 Speaker 2

standing in Sederot, an Israeli town immediately adjacent to the Gaza border, and the fence was right there before my eyes, only meters away from where I stood.

00:25:36 Speaker 2

So Gaza was physically very close and yet completely inaccessible to me.

00:25:41 Speaker 2

And before I met Dima, most of what I knew about Gaza came through media coverage and through scholarship.

00:25:50 Speaker 2

And when we began speaking, that understanding really gradually shifted.

00:25:55 Speaker 2

Over the course of our friendship, the place became present to me through her own firsthand descriptions.

00:26:02 Speaker 2

And during the course of hundreds of hours of conversations, Dima described the spaces in which she had lived.

00:26:10 Speaker 2

And so through these conversations, I, little by little, constructed a mental

00:26:17 Speaker 2

geography of the place, geography composed not only of streets and buildings, but also of sensory impressions and everyday routines.

00:26:28 Speaker 2

And this photograph really became one of the very few visual anchors I have for a place that I know primarily through Dimas' voice.

00:26:37 Speaker 2

Among the many images she shared with me over time was really the only photograph

00:26:42 Speaker 2

she had that captures the very street and the entrance towards the house where she lived for several years while studying in Gaza.

00:26:51 Speaker 2

You will not be surprised to hear, but of course the house and the surrounding neighborhood of Jabaya camp have since been destroyed.

00:27:01 Speaker 2

To situate the broader context, the Sant Gaza Strip covers about 365 square kilometers, and before the current war, it was home to roughly 2.2 million people, making one of the most densely populated territories in the world.

00:27:17 Speaker 2

More than 70% of its population consists of refugees or descendants of refugees from the 1948 war.

00:27:28 Speaker 2

These demographic conditions

00:27:30 Speaker 2

have shaped Gaza's urban fabric.

00:27:33 Speaker 2

Many neighborhoods developed rapidly under conditions of land scarcity and political restriction, producing very crowded residential environments with very narrow alleyways and very limited public space to breathe.

00:27:49 Speaker 2

The alleyway visible in this photograph is very typical of that kind of urban landscape.

00:27:56 Speaker 2

Spaces like this often function

00:27:58 Speaker 2

simultaneously as circulation booths, social spaces, and playground for children.

00:28:06 Speaker 2

So Dima went to Gaza in 2011 to study at Al-Azhar University, and her decision was very much shaped in part by the legal status of Palestinians of Gazan origin living in Jordan.

00:28:22 Speaker 2

Because they do not hold citizenship access

00:28:26 Speaker 2

to Jordanian public universities can be financially and administratively difficult.

00:28:32 Speaker 2

Tuition fees for non-citizens are significantly higher, and some professional tracks are effectively restricted.

00:28:41 Speaker 2

And as you probably all know, education occupies a very central place in Palestinian social life, particularly among refugee families when citizenship is uncertain.

00:28:53 Speaker 2

Mobility controlled and property easily lost.

00:28:56 Speaker 2

Education becomes one of the few forms of capital that can travel with a person across borders and generations.

00:29:06 Speaker 2

And this emphasis is also visible in the data.

00:29:09 Speaker 2

Palestinian literacy rates are among the highest in the region.

00:29:13 Speaker 2

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, the illiteracy rate in 2023 was about 2.1%.

00:29:21 Speaker 2

percent among people age 15 and older.

00:29:27 Speaker 2

And for many Palestinian families, education is therefore understood not only as a path to employment, but also as dignity, resilience, and the possibility of social mobility under conditions of prolonged political uncertainty.

00:29:43 Speaker 2

And for Dima's parents, sending her to Gaza was there for both a practical and also symbolic decision, economically feasible, and at the same time a return in some sense to a place that remained part of their family's historical geography.

00:30:00 Speaker 2

So we're still in chapter one, but at this point the story goes back a few years in time.

00:30:07 Speaker 2

And let me read to you the passage describing the moment when

00:30:14 Speaker 2

Dima moves to Gaza.

00:30:18 Speaker 2

So her other more feasible option was to study in Gaza, where she could stay with members of her extended family.

00:30:24 Speaker 2

She had at least a couple of options to choose from.

00:30:28 Speaker 2

There were her uncles, Jamal, Abu Haytam, and Salah, Abu Musa, her mother's brothers, who lived with their respective families in the building they shared in Jabal Yakam.

00:30:38 Speaker 2

This was the very house Dima's mother, Lubna, had grown up in.

00:30:42 Speaker 2

The other possibility was living with Uncle Mahmoud Ablissa and his family in Beit Lahya, a city north of Jabalia, also within the north Gaza governorate.

00:30:53 Speaker 2

And so Gaza it would be.

00:30:55 Speaker 2

Dima's parents made quick arrangements for her to move there.

00:30:59 Speaker 2

This was in 2011.

00:31:01 Speaker 2

It would be the first time that Dima would live far from her immediate family, but she was

00:31:06 Speaker 2

enchanted nonetheless, not because she wanted to be away from her parents and siblings, but because going to Gaza in a way meant a kind of going home.

00:31:17 Speaker 2

Gaza, after all, was the place her parents were from, even if displaced from a former, more permanent home in what is now Israel.

00:31:27 Speaker 2

I remember my excitement, Dima told me.

00:31:29 Speaker 2

I was going to discover a new world.

00:31:32 Speaker 2

It was my first experience of independence, or at least so I thought.

00:31:36 Speaker 2

and growing up in a country that is not really your home, where you are an outsider, not quite worthy of the others, of those who are given the gift of citizenship, I felt like I was given the privilege of returning to a place that I could really claim as my home, the home of my parents, the place we came from, Palestine.

00:31:58 Speaker 2

Clutching A suitcase containing all her worldly possessions, saying goodbye to her parents,

00:32:03 Speaker 2

who came with her to the Queen Alia Airport in Amman.

00:32:07 Speaker 2

Wearing her gray jeans, a black blouse, and a black and white hijab, Dima flew to Cairo, the first airplane ride of her life.

00:32:15 Speaker 2

The hour and a half flight went by quickly.

00:32:18 Speaker 2

It was a short and sweet taste of living in the clouds, both in a real and in a metaphoric sense.

00:32:25 Speaker 2

Little did I know what was waiting for me in my new life.

00:32:29 Speaker 2

Her cousin Ali met her at Cairo International Airport and drove with her in a cab, the 200 and something miles north to Rafael, the sole legal crossing point between Egypt and Gaza.

00:32:43 Speaker 2

By the time they got there, it was 7.30 P.m., so they spent the night at a hotel in El Arish, the largest city of the Sinai Peninsula.

00:32:54 Speaker 2

Sitting behind Ali and the driver, Dima, watched

00:32:57 Speaker 2

the rugged landscape was wandered.

00:33:00 Speaker 2

As they drove to Rafah al-Masariya, the Egyptian part of Rafah, the next morning, the hot desert baroness ultimately gave way to a road flanked by tall trees.

00:33:11 Speaker 2

When they reached the border, they found a chaotic scene.

00:33:15 Speaker 2

Since Ali would not enter Gaza with Dima, the border officials allowed her, as a young woman traveling by herself, to cross ahead of the people standing in long lines.

00:33:26 Speaker 2

For now,

00:33:27 Speaker 2

Providence continued to move in her favor.

00:33:35 Speaker 2

So this image represents one strand of 20th century Jewish exile.

00:33:41 Speaker 2

It shows my parents with my older sister, who was born three years before me.

00:33:46 Speaker 2

The photograph was taken in Belgium, where they too were living as refugees at the time.

00:33:53 Speaker 2

My parents left communist Romania in 1963,

00:33:57 Speaker 2

As political refugees, and my father had survived Auschwitz, about 95% of my extended family who were deported during the Holocaust did not survive.

00:34:08 Speaker 2

In other words, my parents had already experienced profound loss before leaving the country.

00:34:17 Speaker 2

And their story belongs to a much larger history of Jewish displacement in 20th century Europe.

00:34:24 Speaker 2

Before the Second World War, Romania was home to one of the largest Jewish communities on the continent, roughly three-quarters of a million people.

00:34:34 Speaker 2

The Holocaust, deportations, border changes, and post-war immigration profoundly reshaped that world.

00:34:42 Speaker 2

By the early 1960s, only a small fraction of the community remained.

00:34:50 Speaker 2

So liberation in 1945 did not immediately resolve the condition of exile for many survivors.

00:34:56 Speaker 2

The post-war years, therefore, became a prolonged period of movement, uncertainty and waiting, a search for a place where legal belonging could be restored.

00:35:08 Speaker 2

And my parents' trajectory unfolded within

00:35:12 Speaker 2

that broader historical landscape.

00:35:14 Speaker 2

After leaving Romania, they moved through France and Belgium before eventually settling in Germany.

00:35:19 Speaker 2

And in Western Europe, they were registered as asylum seekers, and for a period of time, they were stateless before ultimately obtaining citizenship.

00:35:29 Speaker 2

In other words, exile for my family ended here, at least legally, within a single generation, and that difference will matter when we return to Dimas.

00:35:41 Speaker 2

story.

00:35:42 Speaker 2

But let me first go back even further in time.

00:35:45 Speaker 2

This photograph represents an earlier moment of Jewish exile.

00:35:49 Speaker 2

It shows a school class at the Lyseille de Genevie in Brussels in 1939, a French-language girls' secondary school.

00:35:58 Speaker 2

And by that time, Brussels had already become an important place of refuge for Jewish families who had left Nazi Germany during the 1930s.

00:36:07 Speaker 2

After Hitler came to power, legal discrimination, economic exclusion, and political persecution pushed increasing numbers of German Jews to leave the country, and many of those families first moved to neighboring European countries.

00:36:22 Speaker 2

Belgium became one of those nearby destinations.

00:36:26 Speaker 2

So between 1933 and 1940, approximately 30,000 Jews emigrated from Germany to Belgium, and by the time

00:36:36 Speaker 2

Germany invaded Belgium in May 1940.

00:36:39 Speaker 2

Most Jews living there were refugees or recent immigrants.

00:36:45 Speaker 2

But exile in Europe in the 1930s remained precarious, immigration restrictions tightened across the continent, and there was still no international system capable of offering stable protection to these

00:37:01 Speaker 2

immigrants.

00:37:02 Speaker 2

So my husband's mother, Suzanne, was in this class.

00:37:05 Speaker 2

Her family had left Germany in 1933, the year Hitler came to power and settled in Brussels together with many other Jewish families who were leaving Germany at that time.

00:37:19 Speaker 2

At first, they did not necessarily experience themselves as refugees in the legal sense we used to date.

00:37:25 Speaker 2

Many families believe their departure

00:37:27 Speaker 2

would be temporary or hope conditions in Germany would ultimately improve or change entirely.

00:37:34 Speaker 2

But the safety that Belgium seemed to promise to my mother-in-law's family was short-lived.

00:37:39 Speaker 2

In May 1940, Germany invaded Belgium, and families who had already fled once were forced to flee again.

00:37:48 Speaker 2

And when I place this photograph next to the image of my parents, I see different trajectories of a shared Jewish exile,

00:37:55 Speaker 2

shaped by the Holocaust era and its aftermath passing through Belgium.

00:38:00 Speaker 2

And then decades later, Belgium appears once again in a very different historical context when Dima seeks asylum there.

00:38:09 Speaker 2

So Edward Said actually once described Palestinians as the refugees of the refugees, pointing to the way one history of displacement can emerge from the aftermath

00:38:24 Speaker 2

of another.

00:38:26 Speaker 2

And it is that very intersection of histories that this book explores.

00:38:32 Speaker 2

And let me move briefly to the postscript of the book.

00:38:35 Speaker 2

This image shows survivors walking through the destruction surrounding Shifa Hospital in Gaza City on April 1st, 2024.

00:38:46 Speaker 2

Shifa was located in the part of Gaza City where Dima spent much of her time when she lived there.

00:38:52 Speaker 2

It was part of

00:38:53 Speaker 2

everyday geography of the city she knew well.

00:38:56 Speaker 2

Her cousin Amiya worked there as a pharmacist.

00:39:00 Speaker 2

Before the war, al-Shifa was the largest hospital complex in Gaza and one of the central medical institutions in the territory.

00:39:10 Speaker 2

Yet before the genocide, there were more than 30 hospitals serving the population.

00:39:17 Speaker 2

And since October 7, most of them were damaged or rendered non-functional at

00:39:23 Speaker 2

different stages of the war.

00:39:26 Speaker 2

The destruction has extended far beyond the health system.

00:39:30 Speaker 2

Gaza also had 17 universities and other institutions of higher education, serving 10s of thousands of students.

00:39:39 Speaker 2

And by the spring of 2020, 40, nearly all of these campuses had been damaged or destroyed entirely.

00:39:47 Speaker 2

Large portions of residential housing and basic civilian infrastructure have also been devastated.

00:39:53 Speaker 2

The human cost has been even more devastating.

00:39:55 Speaker 2

More than 70,000 people in Gaza have been killed since October 2023, including many thousands of children and well over 100,000 have been injured.

00:40:06 Speaker 2

Entire families and neighborhoods have disappeared.

00:40:11 Speaker 2

So the core narrative of this book ends before October 7.

00:40:16 Speaker 2

Only this postscript was written afterward, but the postscript inevitably

00:40:23 Speaker 2

changes how the earlier chapters are read.

00:40:26 Speaker 2

The Gaza that appears in the story, the hospital where Amia worked, the university where Adima studied, the buildings where she lived is a world that in large measure no longer exists.

00:40:38 Speaker 2

What the book therefore preserves is not only a personal story, it preserves the memory of the lived environment, institutions, neighborhoods, and routines.

00:40:49 Speaker 2

that has now largely been reduced to rubble.

00:40:52 Speaker 2

And once that everyday world disappears in the most ordinary places, a hospital, pharmacy, university classroom, a family apartment, become part of the historical record of how life was actually lived there.

00:41:09 Speaker 2

And I want to end with a question of authorship.

00:41:13 Speaker 2

Why did I write this book and not Dima?

00:41:17 Speaker 2

We discussed this question at length before I began writing.

00:41:22 Speaker 2

I would not have written the book without her explicit consent and more than consent without her encouragement.

00:41:29 Speaker 2

She had tried many times to write her own story and found herself unable to do so.

00:41:36 Speaker 2

And I understood that difficulty.

00:41:37 Speaker 2

My sister and I tried for years to write down our father's accounts of Auschwitz.

00:41:43 Speaker 2

We never succeeded.

00:41:45 Speaker 2

Scholars of testimony have long observed that traumatic experience often resists narration.

00:41:53 Speaker 2

And the closer one stands to an event, the harder it can be to translate it into language.

00:42:01 Speaker 2

And Dima told me something very similar.

00:42:04 Speaker 2

She said that when she tried to put it all on paper or type it all up, the memories closed in on her.

00:42:11 Speaker 2

But she also told me that she wanted her story to exist in written form.

00:42:17 Speaker 2

She wanted a trace, something that would endure beyond the circumstances that had shaped her life.

00:42:25 Speaker 2

So we made a decision together.

00:42:26 Speaker 2

This book is the result of hundreds of hours of conversations between us.

00:42:31 Speaker 2

Dima read every chapter.

00:42:34 Speaker 2

She corrected, clarified, and proofed the manuscript.

00:42:37 Speaker 2

All Palestinian names are pseudonyms chosen for protection.

00:42:41 Speaker 2

I actually take photographs of every place I give lectures to and share with her.

00:42:46 Speaker 2

She knows I'm here.

00:42:48 Speaker 2

Still, the question remains, what does it mean for a Jewish Israeli woman to write about the life of a Palestinian refugee?

00:42:56 Speaker 2

I'm aware of the inequality, the asymmetry.

00:42:58 Speaker 2

I'm aware of the risks that come with speaking across

00:43:03 Speaker 2

historical and political difference, but the book does not claim to speak for Palestinians.

00:43:10 Speaker 2

It speaks from the perspective of my own identity, my position of responsibility, the responsibility of a person who's witnessing injustice, discrimination, inhumanity.

00:43:22 Speaker 2

It also speaks from inside a relationship, a relationship marked by a trust

00:43:29 Speaker 2

love, vulnerability, but by very similar values and perceptions of the conflict, the war, but also the recognition that our histories, Jewish and Palestinian, are entangled in ways that are both painful but also unavoidable.

00:43:46 Speaker 2

And in that sense, the book is neither neutral nor detached.

00:43:51 Speaker 2

It is an attempt at accountable narration, accountable first to the person whose story it tells.

00:43:59 Speaker 2

and second to the historical realities that have shaped both of our lives.

00:44:05 Speaker 2

My hope is simply that the book allows readers to encounter one Palestinian life not as an abstraction, but as a human presence, complex, contradictory, and irreducible to political categories.

00:44:24 Speaker 2

Because sometimes the only way certain stories

00:44:27 Speaker 2

can be told at all is across the very divides that history has produced.

00:44:35 Speaker 2

And sometimes it is precisely those encounters, fragile, imperfect, and deeply contingent, that allow history to become visible in the life of another person.

00:44:47 Speaker 2

Thank you so much for listening.