Excerpt from

LE CHIAVI DI CASA

Un diario da Gaza

(Lit. “ THE HOUSE KEYS – A Journal from Gaza”)

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Two comfortable armchairs under a wide window and, between them, a coffee table where I placed an ashtray. That is where I started my days, sipping coffee and listening to the news. Then, I would smoke my first cigarette. That corner has been destroyed by now, and I miss it more than anything. I have a photograph with me. I look at it every day.

The house key

I decide to take my family away and abandon our home at dawn on October 13, one week after the Hamas attack on Israel. It is Friday, a holiday for us. A few hours earlier, a friend who works for a foreign NGO called me to tell me that Israel's army was making strange phone calls to the people living in Northern Gaza. They choose the numbers at random – they will keep on doing it throughout the entire conflict – and a voice on the phone repeats the same message: "You need to leave, the bombing is starting soon. We are coming." I don't doubt for an instant that the information is true. But how urgently should we evacuate? And where should we go? I can't get any sleep that night. I pace up and down in my apartment, barely three rooms, touching everything.

It isn't a rented home in just any apartment building, but a house that was built by my family, literally brick by brick. My parents Mohamed and Aisha, 87 and 82 years old, live on the ground floor. My brother Ahmed, 55 years old, is the only one who works as a taxi driver like our father; he lives on the first floor with his wife and their four children. I am the third of eight siblings, but also the oldest male; I live on the second floor with my nineteen-year-old daughters, the twins Ruba and Bisan. My other brother Hassan, 42 years old, lives on the top floor with his wife and their five children. He is the manager of the Al-Quds Hospital, which is run by the Red Crescent Society, a Palestinian humanitarian organization that is part of the International Red Cross network. I realize how much every object around me tells a story, represents a moment of my life, and is connected to my family: Bedouins from the Negev Desert, originally from Beersheba, the large city in the desert that was occupied by Israel in 1948. Grandfather Hassan reached Gaza in 1953 after moving several times and settled with his six children in the Jabalia Refugee Camp. At first, they lived in a tent, which then turned into a shack, and finally into a brick house. I was born there, on February 14, 1967: Valentine's Day (which we also celebrate as the day of love) in the tragic year of the *al-Naksa*, "the defeat" of the Six-Day War. At the time, there was another exodus and my entire clan, 400 families,

came to Jabalia. There were so many that the street was given a new name: Ajrami Street. This is where, in 1991, we built the building where we live.

Having always lived in Gaza, my entire life is stored between the walls of my home. It is full: there are souvenirs from the places I visited, gifts from friends, photos, my books, and the collection of perfumes, my weakness. Along with the things that my daughters cherish.

At five in the morning, my fears are confirmed. An official statement appears on the Facebook page of Avichay Adraee, the Arabic-language spokesperson of Israel's army: he invites all Palestinians in the North to evacuate below the Wadi Gaza Nature Reserve, in the middle of the Strip. There, he writes, we will be safe: "The ground invasion is about to start."

Like every Palestinian in times of war, I am ready. I get our documents – identity cards, passports, birth certificates, the deed to the house – and I wake up my daughters and my parents, instructing them to take only the most important things. We have to hurry, I want to leave as soon as possible. The girls don't object. As they fill their bags, they only ask one question: if they can bring their violins, the instrument they are studying. "No, only essential items," I reply. The five of us, plus our dog Milo and our cat Noga, have to squeeze into my red Opel Corsa. "Bring warm clothes," I recommend. It is a warm October but winter is coming. When Ruba (who is always the one who speaks, even for her sister) says in a very low voice "We are ready," we leave. I double-lock the door and put the key in my pocket. History repeats itself, I think to myself. As my grandparents abandoned their houses and lands bringing only the house keys with them, hoping to one day reclaim their right to return, I also leave clutching a key in my hand, already dreaming of being able to return. "Don't look back," I whisper to the girls. We go downstairs to my parents. My mother, wearing her usual Bedouin clothes, is confused. She doesn't want to leave the home where she has lived for over thirty years. I load the car, help my sick father to climb in and fasten his seatbelt. We all take our seats, but I hesitate once more. I ask them for the umpteenth time: "Did you get everything?"

The last day of peace

And to think that just one week ago, on October 6 – also a Friday, a holiday to spend with family – we were serene, dare I say happy. It was a politically calm period. I was convinced there wouldn't be any new wars, so in June I bought a farm in the far north of the Gaza Strip. Five-hundred square meters of arable land, in an area called Sudania, one kilometer away from the Israeli border. It was my dream: you could see the Mediterranean from there. I wanted to build a house with a large window to look far into the distance. I certainly couldn't imagine that it would be our last day of peace, and I invited my brother Hassan and his family to show it to him.

The house still had to be constructed, there were only the markings that I had drawn on the ground. I had already built with my own hands a bathroom with a shower for cooling off during the construction work. I remember that we spoke at length about practical things: where to place the new plants and how to build an efficient irrigation system. There were already some orange trees on the plot, their fruit was almost ripe. We would have had our first harvest in just a few days. My daughters were enthusiastic, they were playing with their cousins: "Don't you dare touch them..." Meanwhile, our neighbor was planting strawberries. I asked him if we could pick some as well, knowing how different the ones plucked from the ground taste compared to the ones sold in baskets at the market. We exchanged several jokes. We ate, we laughed, we worked. Basically, we spent a simple day of joy and manual labor, completing the electrical system and hanging lights that allowed us to stay late into the evening. We got back home at ten on that warm and quiet night. I wasn't sleepy so I stayed up chatting with my brother in the kitchen until two in the morning. We couldn't imagine the world in which we would find ourselves a few hours later.

October 7, 2023

A really loud noise suddenly wakes me up. The first light of dawn is coming through the window: it might have been around six in the morning. It is a terrifying sound, close enough to make everything shake. I run to the balcony to try to see something, but I don't catch sight of anything. It is Saturday, a day of rest in Israel, and it is also Simchat Torah, the last day of the festival of Sukkot. I turn on the computer and scroll through the news. They are still the same news stories from the previous evening. There is nothing new on Palestinian radio channels and Israeli television, either. But our chat group of Gaza journalists, 640 in total, starts to come alive. We ask each other what is happening but nobody knows anything. Until one of us mentions that he just saw a Facebook post with a strange photo uploaded by one of his neighbors: it shows men from Hamas crossing the border.

The image shocks me. I start following that profile too: the man (who was later arrested and disappeared) is with the militants who are inside Israel, something inconceivable. The more I look at his photos, the more I realize that something momentous is happening. For the people in Gaza, crossing the border is unimaginable, given all the sensors that can activate unmanned weapons. It happened often when animals passed through it; and some farmers were also killed for getting too close with their spades.

I see shocking images on social media. Some of my colleagues instinctively rush to the site with their cameras and post what is happening live. They will win a Pulitzer Prize for that promptness, but Israel will accuse them of being embedded with the terrorists, of already knowing about the events. A serious insinuation because they are the ones who let the world know about the enormity of the event. I can't fathom why the Israelis take so long to intervene, letting the militiamen operate freely. They attack unimpeded for hours, killing 1,200 people. Nobody intervenes until 10:30 a.m. The more I grasp the gravity of the attack, the more I realize that the response will be long and painful.

I leave the house only in the afternoon. Some people are celebrating in the streets, claiming that what happened was revenge for the many humiliations suffered. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict, after all, has undergone several levels of conflict over the years. But the past seventeen years have been the worst. Ever since Hamas seized power, the Gaza Strip has been held prisoner by an extremely tight Israeli blockade, which left us in dire straits. The unemployment level, especially among young people, reached unprecedented levels. Gaza's economy rapidly collapsed. Anger towards Israel grew among the frustrated and impoverished people. Society became more conservative and many joined the armed groups of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad. Therefore, in the wake of October 7, many people see that attack as revenge and proof that popular resistance alone is not enough to stop the occupation.

Others, however, are concerned and ask me what I think. In the neighborhood, they call me the "political analyst," because I am a journalist and I speak Hebrew well. I learned it on my own when I was twelve, when the Israeli settlers were in Gaza, because I wanted to understand what they said to each other. I bought a book called *Hebrew Without Teachers*, discovering that I had a knack for languages. I then perfected it in Tel Aviv in the Eighties, along with my English, by working for a construction company.

Later on, in 1999, those language skills actually allowed me to join the diplomatic staff of the Palestinian National Authority as an interpreter and "Israeli affairs analyst." I worked for the following five years at the Negotiations Department, which was led at the time by Mahmoud Abbas, later known as Abu Mazen. When he became prime minister, I joined the Wafa News Agency, Palestine's official news agency. Then Hamas came to power in 2007 and fired all the employees of the Palestinian Authority. So I started to write for the Israeli newspaper *Maariv* (imposing two conditions: I would never call Israel's army "Defense Forces," nor define Palestinians as "terrorists"). Soon, collaborations with Israeli papers were also outlawed. I got by as a fixer, accompanying foreign journalists to Gaza. At the time, I became a correspondent for various newspapers and press agencies, including the German daily *Berliner Zeitung* and the Italian news agency ANSA.

That is why they turn to me. They want help to understand what is about to happen. "The response will be tough," I reflect. "But I will be able to tell you more only during the second month of war." They get agitated. "Will the war really last two months?" they ask

incredulously, since the longest war in Gaza lasted “barely” fifty-one days and that is the limit in their minds.

“It will last *at least* two months. This war is not like the others.”

Israel's wrath

Israel doesn't take long to respond. The bombs start falling on Gaza at sunset on that same tragic day. First, they hit the fourteen floors of the Watan Tower, the hub for local internet providers, shutting down the Web. An expected move: Israel always picks up the war where it interrupted it the previous time, and last time it stopped at skyscrapers. The tallest buildings are therefore its first targets.

The mosques are next: Ali's Mosque, near my home, is destroyed with the Imam still inside. The body of that short and quiet man, affiliated to the Islamic Jihad, will be recovered days later.

These are frenzied hours. Nobody can sleep, fear and the constant noise make it impossible: the rumble of planes, the roar of bombs, the whizzing sound of missiles, the hum of drones, the cries of despair. At three in the morning, someone in Gaza City raises a new alarm after receiving a call from the army and shouts from the speakers of the Al-Sousi Mosque: "Evacuate immediately." Shortly thereafter, the mosque is bombed along with the five-story residential building next to it.

At dawn on October 8, most of Gaza is already razed to the ground. The skyscrapers of major companies. The commercial district. The universities. Exhausted men and women pour into the streets at first light, anxious to get provisions and barricade themselves in their homes, waiting for events to unfold. Long lines form in front of bakeries, supermarkets, and gas stations.

At noon, without any warning, a building in Jabalia (a house belonging to a family called Shekeian) is targeted: apparently there are four hostages and some Hamas militants inside. The house overlooks the parking lot of the largest supermarket in the area, which is very crowded at that time of day. It is the first massacre. A rain of fire rattles the earth, raising a wall of dust and smoke that makes fleeing impossible. Many of us run to the scene and, when that solid fog dissipates, we are confronted with a horrific scene. Blood and body parts are one with the debris of the destroyed buildings. There are 50 dead bodies and 150 injured people lying on the ground. Many of them are children.

Rescue workers arrive immediately. Stunned, we stare at their movements as they work to pull survivors out of the rubble. Everyone wonders why that specific house was bombed with such force, destroying everything around it: wouldn't a targeted operation suffice? What does Israel want, to defeat Hamas and save the hostages or to destroy Gaza? I still wonder.

In those same hours, a little further north, there is another attack on the village of Beit Hanoun, barely six kilometers from the Israeli city of Sderot. That is where the militias launched their Qassam rockets on Israel in the early 2000s. It doesn't come as a surprise that it is targeted. After the bombs, the 50,000 inhabitants, mainly farmers, are forced to leave. They start pouring into Jabalia, a former refugee camp that was already overflowing under normal conditions, a hive of 170,000 people forced to live on top of each other. Women and children fill the streets and camp out on the sidewalks while the heads of their households seek shelter with relatives or places to rent. By evening, there isn't a single spare apartment left between Jabalia and Gaza City.

Meanwhile, in the chat rooms used by Gaza's various ministries to communicate with journalists, the first grim headcount appears; we would soon get accustomed to seeing them: in one day, there have been 600 casualties, a third of which were children; 16 skyscrapers have been destroyed, along with over 100 houses, and dozens of mosques. There are dead bodies and rubble everywhere. Israel also cuts off the electricity supply. We are in the dark.

Still excited from the previous day's attack, the men of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military arm of Hamas, are shooting rockets on Tel Aviv. They even issue an ultimatum to show that they are firmly in power: "If you continue the air strikes, we will kill the hostages," they say alluding to the 242 people kidnapped and brought into the Gaza Strip. The warning falls on deaf ears.