



Letter from Jerusalem

'Dear Sir,

I am writing . . . to express to you our growing uneasiness, and sense of shame, at the many reports which are reaching us, and our friends, of the cruelty shown by our troops and police in Palestine to the innocent Arab inhabitants of the villages.

We hear from good authority . . . that our troops are allowed to . . . deliberately terrorise the hundreds of peasants – most of whom are undoubtedly quite innocent – by beating them senseless – killing those who try to escape, blowing up their houses and destroying their property. The young men of these villages, maddened by the scenes of bullying and destruction . . . then go off to join the so-called “brigands” – who are largely recruited from an ordinarily peace-loving community. These words, mailed from the ur-English address of Rose Farm House in Mapledurham by a worried British citizen, Margaret V. Travers, on 23 October 1938, sent a weird (i.e., fate-driven) feeling through me as I absorbed them in seat number 16E of the National Archives in Kew. I had come to England to comb British Mandate-era records for a biography that I am writing, and had stumbled on to Mrs Travers's lines as though through a time warp.

But the peculiar sensations brought on by my encounter with her letter, typed in blocky print and addressed to her MP, were not confined to the sudden telescoping of almost three-quarters of a century. Sitting and poring over this and other papers packed into worn folders at the Archives, I was also aware of the odd collapse of *space* that had taken place around me. Here I was, more than two thousand miles from Jerusalem, in a setting that appeared – on the orderly, mild-mannered face of it – to exist on another planet from the chaotic, hot-tempered place where I live. And yet, reading Mrs Travers's quietly agitated epistle, very much like letters that I myself have considered writing for this column, it seemed that London – and even, perhaps, Mapledurham – and Jerusalem had begun to fuse: not only was her concern at the actions of ‘our troops’ eerily familiar; so was the curt retort by the Colonial Secretary at the time, who dismissed Travers's complaint as a ‘propaganda production’.

The yawning differences between Jerusalem and Kew had not escaped me. There are, it seems, things that Israel has learned from the British and things that it hasn't. Researching my book, I have logged a good deal of time

in the Israel State Archive, and though I have managed to unearth several genuine treasures there, I have also been forced to scramble through an obstacle course that is as perverse as it is exhausting. While the gruff demeanour of the Jerusalem archivists hardly came as a surprise, I suppose I was once naïve enough to think that the keepers of the nation's documentary legacy would somehow be eager to maintain it well and to assist others in examining its contents.

In fact, the ISA lacks a centralized cataloguing system, many of its employees seem amused by their total lack of knowledge, and almost every file and each Xerox must be bargained for, argued over, won as though in a wrestling match. The sorry situation in the archive is not, in other words, a mere matter of the workers' surly collective manner – and as such part and parcel of the notoriously churlish national mien – but is indicative of a much more ominous and systemic lack of pride. At the risk of unfair generalization, I would say that Israelis love to gesture grandly toward History-with-a-capital-H – it is one of the country's chief exports – but when it comes to preserving with patience and care the crumbling onion skin pages that constitute so much of history-with-a-lower-case-h, they are doing a terrible job. (The same principle, or lack of principle, is turning the once-beautiful stone neighbourhoods of downtown Jerusalem into grimy, overlooked slums.)

The National Archives could not, on this score, be farther away. Attention to and respect for English heritage – warts and all, to judge from the files I found there – permeate the handsomely appointed, swan-surrounded place, and in my time there everyone, from the security guards to the research assistants, copy-room attendants and other readers, carried themselves with dignity, seriousness and a good-natured sense of purpose.

Facing a document like the one written that late autumn day in Mapledurham all those decades ago, however, I was confronted with the other currents – darker and crueller – that often churn beneath the placid British surface. ‘It is difficult for the ordinary person,’ wrote the lucid Mrs Travers, ‘to stand calmly by . . .’ And it still is. From the vantage point of Seat 16E, I found Oxfordshire 1938 and Jerusalem 2005 had blurred into one – as, now, have my own and Mrs Travers's letters. 

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