evenings while he stayed at home quietly reading. When she came back, she made sure that we went to bed early, having first washed our feet. This was a strict rule which was never to be explained or disobeyed.

It was partly to get away from her rigid discipline that we loved to go to Tulkarm to see our family. This happened principally on the occasion of the two Eids, the major Muslim festivals. These trips were thrilling from beginning to end because they started with an exciting journey on the train which took us from Jerusalem to Tulkarm, all dressed up in our new Eid clothes. Once arrived, we were met by a variety of uncles and cousins at the station who walked or carried us to our grandfather's house. He had died in 1935, leaving our grandmother, our uncle Hussein (who was my father's twin) and his family, and our unmarried aunt Zubeida, all living in the house. It was crowded but we never minded because it was so different from the relative solitude of our own house in Jerusalem.

Although our relatives were always coming to stay with us, sometimes for weeks or even months (much to my mother's annoyance), it was not the same. The houses in Tulkarm were nothing like those in Jerusalem. They were domed and made of grey mud-bricks. The streets were really alleyways that ran between the houses, and where goats, hens and donkeys often roamed. This was not surprising, since Tulkarm was in the midst of a heavily agricultural area and its people were almost all engaged in farming.

Because there was little room at our grandmother's, we children stayed at our aunt Souad's house. This had a flat roof and when it was summer and very hot, our greatest pleasure was to sleep on the roof. Ziyad and I fought hard to be allowed to do this, since there was not enough room for everyone. It was cool on the roof at night and one could lie down and look at the stars shining in the clear sky and smell the jasmine tree which grew against the wall. We chattered and told

stories to our cousins until, tired out, one by one, we fell asleep. Our family was so large and our aunts, uncles and cousins so numerous that there was a seemingly inexhaustible supply of playmates. And most important of all, our mother could not make us wash our feet or sleep early or perform any of the other rituals we had to observe at home.

When I was nearly six, I started to go to school. This was in September 1945, at about the same time that my father left for England once more. He would be going to London for another training course and was to stay away longer on this occasion, until the next summer. We did not mind so much when he said he would come back with wonderful English presents for us, and I was in any case too excited about going to school for the first time to think of much else. My school was the same al-Ma'mouniyya which my sister already attended. We would wake up at seven in the morning while our mother was still asleep and make a packed lunch to take with us. Ziyad went to the Umariyya school by the bus station, not far from the King David Hotel. Siham and I had to take two buses to reach our school, first a number 4 to the Old City and then a number 33 to Sheikh Jarrah.

School started at eight and ended at half past three, and as I came out before Siham did, I would wait for her at the school gate and then we would take our two buses back home. Unknown to us then, this process would repeat itself in London, both of us going to the same school, leaving our mother in bed in the morning and returning home together for lunch. I liked my school in Jerusalem where we played more than we did anything else. Our teachers were all young, except for Miss Zuleikha. She was an elderly, forbidding lady who waved her arms around when she got cross which made the loose folds of skin on her upper arms sway back and forth most alarmingly.

I loved it when my sister and I came back home in the afternoons. On days when Fatima wasn't there, Siham would wash the floor of the sitting room while our parents were sleeping. I am not sure why she

My mother, Siham, Ziyad and I in our Qatamon house and (right) with my classmates at al-Ma'mouniyya school, around 1946

did this; perhaps my mother, who was not fond of housework, asked her to. While she cleaned the floor, she often taught me how to do simple sums and how to read. I recited back what she taught me and got to be so proficient that they let me skip a class at school. Some twenty years later in London, when I was studying for my specialist medical exams, I remember revising out loud to her as she sat sewing in the bedroom at home. I knew she could not understand my subject, but reading it to her was evocative of that time and somehow comforting and familiar.

I suppose Siham acted like a little mother to me during my childhood, and I loved her devotedly in return, second only to Fatima. It was a role she would assume even more after we left Jerusalem because, being the eldest, she took responsibility for me and Ziyad. This was not an uncommon arrangement in Arab families in that the eldest children were expected to look after their younger siblings. Presumably, it originated in the fact that people had large families where the mothers could not have coped without some such arrangement. The burden usually fell on the eldest daughter who became her mother's deputy in the family. My father for example, being one of thirteen children, was brought up by his elder sister, my aunt Souad.

From the age of five, when Ziyad was born, Siham had had to help look after him. And when I was born, she was eight and she started to look after both of us. This remained her role for all of my childhood and adolescence and I often wondered whether she herself had had much of a childhood.

I suppose that the illusion of tranquillity we lived under during those final years abruptly came to an end in the summer of 1946. It was not that nothing at all was happening until then, but rather that it had seemed remote from our part of Jerusalem. Not only that, but the Jewish "terrorists", as the British called them, were more engaged at that stage in fighting the British authorities than the Arab population. The Jewish forces in Palestine consisted of the Haganah, the underground army, and the dissident Jewish groups – most notably the Irgun Zvei Leumi and the Lehi (better known as the Stern Gang). These last two organisations were known in Palestine as the terrorists and were responsible for a spectacular campaign of violence against anyone who stood in the way of their aims. (It is ironic to think that the term "terrorist", which has now become virtually synonymous with Arabs, especially Muslims, started life as an appellation for Jewish groups in Palestine.) Despite the illegal character of the Irgun and Stern groups, the Haganah participated in a number of their operations, although it was always careful to disown them afterwards. To many Arabs, however, all the Jewish forces in the country were tarred with the same brush and they did not often distinguish the one from the other.

From the beginning of the year, the terrorists had been attacking British military jeeps and trucks with bombs and flame-throwers. Many roads used by the army were mined, British buildings and installations were bombed, and the bridges over the Jordan river were blown up. My father wrote from London that none of this had gone unnoticed in England. "It's very strange," he said in a letter to my mother, "I feel sometimes as if I were still in Palestine because people here talk about the events just as we do. I went into a pub yesterday (which is like a coffee-house, I'll explain to you when I get back), and ordinary people were saying that it was time to pull the army out of Palestine. They said it wasn't fair because the Jews were killing British soldiers. And the British newspapers are full of it as well. Nearly every day, there is some story about Palestine."

One day in March, Jewish terrorists held up a military train carrying British soldiers' pay and seized £30,000. "I can't understand these Jews," said Khalil Sakakini to my father when he returned from London. "You should have seen what they've been up to, fighting the very people who let them come into the country and gave them ideas about staying here. They should be dancing in the streets, not biting the hand that feeds them."

Though terrible, these incidents were for us more topics of conversation than anything else. They did not touch us personally – until the day that terror struck closer to home. It happened during the school holidays in July. We were out playing in the garden under the trees because it was the middle of the day and very hot. Rex was lying down with his tongue hanging out, clearly overheated. "Come on Rexy," my brother kept calling out, "come on, lazy dog!" And Rex, making no effort to get up, acknowledged my brother's invitation with a slow thump of his tail on the ground. Suddenly, we heard a dull thud in the distance and minutes later our mother, who had been out visiting, came running home. She shouted out to Siham who was inside the house, saying she'd seen smoke in the distance which seemed to be coming from Mamillah, close to the office where my father worked.

"I know something terrible's happened," she said. "Switch on the radio." The neighbours rushed in saying there was an explosion in the centre and God knows who had died or what the damage was. Shortly afterwards, the radio announced that bombs had exploded in the King David Hotel and many people were killed. "Please God your father's not gone there for some business or other," said our mother. The King David Hotel was the headquarters of the British government in Palestine and it was always bustling with people who went there for

all kinds of business. My father had once worked in the translation bureau on the ground floor of the hotel in 1937 when he helped translate the Peel Commission report on the conflict in Palestine into Arabic.

By the end of that day, the full story became clear. Jewish terrorists had blown up a whole wing of the hotel by posing as Arab delivery men and smuggling explosives hidden in milk cans into the basement. My father saw the fire and smoke from his office. He went out onto the balcony of the building and into a great cloud of dust which had drifted across from the site of the explosion. Nearly one hundred people, mostly Arabs but also British, and a small number of Jews, were killed. The dead included a number of our neighbours or acquaintances, since Jerusalem society was small and most families knew each other. "Poor Hilda," my mother said. "Her poor, poor parents." Hilda Azzam was a young secretary employed at the King David Hotel who was pretty and well thought of at work and my parents knew her family. She had perished in the explosion, as had Mr Thompson, an English official who worked for the British authorities at the hotel and lived in the next street to ours. "Diabolical," exclaimed old Mr Jouzeh, our next door neighbour. "These people aren't human. They're devils from hell!"

All those who came to our house spoke of nothing else for what seemed like weeks. They said it took four days to dig out and move the bodies of the dead and wounded to the government hospital in the Russian Compound, right next to the maternity hospital where I was born. Those who were Jewish went to their own hospitals. There were funerals in Jerusalem for weeks afterwards, five or six a day, as some of the wounded joined the ranks of those who had died in the initial explosion. The social customs over bereavement, which were already elaborate in our society, became more so in the aftermath of these deaths. The women in our street, my mother amongst them,

were all busy visiting the relatives of those who had died after the incident. Poor Mrs Thompson, who was Greek and used to visit us from time to time, became utterly distraught after her husband's death in the explosion and would often come weeping to our house.

For the men who visited my father it became the major topic of conversation. "They say it was the Jews taking revenge on the British." At the end of June, just before my father came back from England, the army had tried to control Jewish terrorism by clamping down on all Jewish settlements in the country. They were closed off, placed under curfew and their telephone lines cut. From all accounts, the army found a huge quantity of arms, explosives and mortar bombs, and they arrested about two thousand people, members of the illegal terrorist groups, but also of the Haganah. The Arabs looked on bemused. "Let's hope it stops these lunatics," people said. But Mr Thompson, describing the British anti-terrorist campaign to my father on his return, had shaken his head at the time and said, "I am very afraid that it won't work. I think they'll strike back." "Poor man," said my father later. "As it turned out, he was only too right."

Nothing was the same after the King David incident. The authorities were furious and instituted a huge search operation for the terrorists centred on Tel Aviv. This made my father and his Palestinian colleagues at work feel slightly better, for, as employees of the British administration, they had also begun to feel hunted. There were soldiers everywhere and a big detention camp went up outside Jerusalem where hundreds of Jewish suspects were held. My father said that the British were determined to stamp out Jewish terrorism because they were worried that the Arabs would be tempted to join in the fight against the Jews. "Better for the Arabs to stay out of it," said my uncle Abu Salma who was on a visit from Haifa. "Knowing the mess they make of everything, they'd be guaranteed to turn the British pro-Jewish again." It was noted that the British soldiers had become

more and more hostile to the Jewish population as the attacks on them increased.

"It's funny, Mr Karmi," said Philip's father. "If anything, we were all rather sympathetic to the Zionists when we first came here. But now most of us feel quite differently, some would say even anti-semitic." Abu Suleiman, the grocer whose shop was in the road behind ours next to the Semiramis Hotel, said that the soldiers sometimes dropped in to buy something from him. "You're all right, you Arabs," they used to tell him, "not like the other lot."[1]

When in London, my father had made friends with a certain Henry Dodds who lived in the same building in Sussex Gardens where my father was staying. It so happened that he had a nephew in the Palestine police whom we had never met because he was stationed in Haifa. Henry Dodds introduced my father to London life, took him to the pub and generally helped him to settle in. After my father's return to Palestine, they wrote to each other from time to time. In the wake of the King David Hotel bombing, Henry Dodds wrote anxiously to enquire after our well-being. He said that the whole of England had been rocked by the event. The House of Commons had met in emergency session and, for the first time, members had begun to speak of a British withdrawal from Palestine. "You are not alone. People here are disgusted with the violence in Palestine," he wrote. "The press is full of it, they've even begun to compare the Jewish gangsters to the Nazis. But others, more charitable perhaps, are saying that what the Jews suffered in the war has deranged their minds. Who knows? I can only hope that you and your family may escape the worst of it."

[1] It was no secret that the British army and the British-staffed Palestine police were generally pro-Palestinian while the government and its administrators were pro-Zionist. Many Palestinians thought to exploit this division in British ranks by making contacts within the army and police. Their efforts were of limited value, however, against the implacably pro-Zionist policy of the government.

He ended by saying that he was thinking of us and also of his nephew who had so far escaped the attentions of the terrorists.

For a while, there were no further incidents of that magnitude close to us, people were on their guard, and the authorities were determined to take no chances. The government divided Jerusalem, Haifa and Tel Aviv into security zones, A, B and C, with checkpoints at each. Area A, which was the British zone, was especially well guarded with high walls and barbed wire. You had to have a special permit and your papers checked by the soldiers before you could enter. This was because the government had to protect its buildings and personnel from further attack by the Jewish terrorists. The latter regarded the zones with contempt and referred to them as "Bevingrads", after the British Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, who had drawn up the policy.

There was a checkpoint at the bottom of our hill, past the Wahbehs' house, which led to a security zone and was manned by British soldiers. We were told never to go there, but of course this made us want to all the more. So one day after lunch while everyone was asleep, my friend Randa and I walked down the hill until we came up close to the checkpoint. There was only one soldier on duty and he was bending down to do up his bootlace. We crept up on him so quietly that he did not hear us, but we could see his red neck below his beret. Suddenly he straightened and spotted us. He was fair haired and had bright blue eyes which lit up in a smile. "Hallo!" he said, shifting the barrel of his rifle away from our direction. We giggled and ran away as fast as we could and once safely over the top of the hill, we shouted, "Hallo! Hallo!" back at him.

To our delight, we found when we returned that no one had discovered our little escapade. And so we started to visit the young soldier on other afternoons when everyone was asleep and he was on duty. His name was Jack and he would smile a lot and say things we could not understand. But we knew they were friendly. And then one

time, he asked us where we lived. We knew what he meant by the gestures, and we said, "Come and visit us," covering our faces with our hands and giggling as we said it. We thought he understood because he nodded hard and smiled at us. And we wondered what we would say at home, if he really did come. But nothing happened and we did not see him again until the day Randa and I went to Abu Samir's shop. And there he was with another soldier, buying cigarettes. He saw Randa first and said, "Hallo!" and bent down to pat her head.

Abu Samir looked amazed. "That's my friend Jack," he said. "How do you two know him?" We were covered in confusion, but we explained and begged him not to tell our parents. "It won't matter very much anyway now," he said. "Jack's going to leave us. Aren't you?" Jack's friend, who knew some Arabic, translated. "That's right," said our Jack, as we had begun to think of him, "*khalas*, finished, had enough."

"We've all had enough," repeated the other soldier to Abu Samir.

"But we are friends," said the latter. "We like you. Why go?"

Both men shook their heads. "We like you too, Mr Abu. If it was up to us, it wouldn't be like this, believe me." And Jack nodded. "It's a shame what's happening in this country. It shouldn't be allowed, but no one listens to us. We don't make the rules, only wish we did. That's our government does that. And they say you've got to live with the Jews, like it or not."

"We don't like it," said Abu Samir. Jack's friend clapped him on the shoulder and said he was sorry. And then Jack bought Randa and me some sweets and, to our great excitement, shook our hands. "Goodbye, young ladies," he said, gravely. "We probably won't meet again". We didn't know what to answer, but his friend smiled and told us what he had said. And then we felt sad and wished we could have spoken English.

That autumn, I went back to school on my own because my sister had left and gone to Dar al-Mu'allimat, the government secondary school. She would stay here until her matriculation exam, something akin to the old English School Certificate. It was strange going to school without her and I used to hang around a little in the morning, hoping that Rex would follow me, even though he was not supposed to. But when he slipped out of the garden gate behind me, more often than not he abandoned me soon after and took himself off for a walk round our road instead. Those few people who kept dogs were not in the habit of walking them outside the house, and when my brother was not there to take Rex out with him, which he did as often as he could, Rex was expected to get his exercise by running around in our large garden. But from early on he took matters into his own hands and simply went off whenever anyone left the garden gate open. Then, after having completed his walk, which consisted of sniffing round other people's gardens and barking at other animals he met on the way, he would return home wagging his tail and asking to be let in.

Rex was the only one to remain unaffected by the atmosphere in Jerusalem as the year drew to a close. It was not that anyone at that stage experienced the panic and insecurity which were yet to come, but things had definitely changed. My father's friends talked incessantly about the political situation and even my mother's coffee mornings and *istiqbals* were overshadowed by the events. The British army continued its operations against Jewish targets with searches and arms seizures, one of them in the Montefiore district of Jerusalem, not far from Qatamon. But nothing seemed to have any effect on the terrorists who went on attacking buildings and kidnapping British soldiers. And then, as the new year came in, Mr and Mrs Clayton came to see us. Visits from English people to our house were exceptional because my mother did not speak English and my father

confined his contact with them to the office. So, when they came over one evening, we knew something was up.

"My wife has come to say goodbye," said Mr Clayton. "She's going back to England with the children. We want to thank you for looking after Philip so well."

"Why do they have to go?" my mother asked through my father.

"The situation isn't safe here," he told her. "It doesn't look to us as if the terrorists are going to stop and anyone British is fair game to them, you know. I can't have my family threatened like that. I mean it's dangerous to let the boys out to play or to let my wife go anywhere in case she gets caught up in some awful attack."

"All the other wives are leaving," said Mrs Clayton. "It's very sad, we didn't want to go like this." She smiled warmly at my mother and told my father to explain that she had been very happy in Palestine. "I'll never forget the kindness and hospitality of people here. We've made so many wonderful friends." She suddenly burst into tears. "It's awful, awful what the Jews are doing."

That January, all British wives, children and other people whose presence in Palestine was not considered essential were evacuated back to England. This would give the authorities greater freedom to control terrorism, it was said. "But you know," commented my uncle Abu Salma who was staying with us at that time, "it also means that the English" – or, as he put it, *al-Ingleez*, which was the usual way Palestinians referred to the British authorities – "are expecting much more trouble from the Jews." My father agreed. He said one could tell that from the general air of apprehension in his office. "But the Jews are jubilant, you know," he informed my uncle. "I know a German Jew at work, Roth, who says that the Jewish irregulars are celebrating because they think they've got the English on the run. He's not much happier about this than we are. He says 'you Arabs can't tell the difference between us and them.'"

By "us", my father explained, he had meant the Jewish Agency and the Haganah, as opposed to the Irgun and the Stern Gang. "That's because they're all the same," retorted my uncle. "Everyone knows that Ben-Gurion approved the King David Hotel bombing [David Ben-Gurion was the head of the Jewish Agency in Palestine] and most of the other incidents as well. They pretend to be shocked every time an atrocity occurs and deny they had anything to do with it, just as they did after the King David. But take it from me, secretly they're all dogs in collusion with each other."

My father said that at least the Jews were not aiming their aggression at the Arabs. Many of them in fact went out of their way to say that they had nothing against us, it was the British they were after. And indeed in the very next month, February, and following the evacuation of civilians, the terrorists increased their campaign of bombings and sabotage against the British military. The worst of this was the effect on the railway system. The terrorists saw to it that most of the routes were mined which meant that the trains could not travel and all rail transport in the country was paralysed. The army put out all its men to clear the mines and patrol the train lines. But it was difficult to keep them protected at all times, so the government tried to enlist Arab help.

My aunt Zubeida who came to see us from Tulkarm said some of the villagers had been approached by British army officers offering rewards for information about Jewish terrorists. There were two major Jewish settlements in the vicinity of Tulkarm, Hadera and Petah Tikva, which might harbour them. Fatima also came saying that some of the people in her village had been approached with the same request. "And are they going to do it?" my mother asked her. "Well," replied Fatima, "they're not rich and they could do with the money."

By the end of the month, the British Mandate government calculated that it had lost nearly half a million pounds due to the damage to

the railways and the loss of traffic. And as soon as the danger from mines abated, the Irgun and Stern terrorists turned their attention to attacking British army vehicles. Gangs sped by in fast-moving stolen cars lobbing bombs at army trucks. "Like those American gangster films," people said. "No wonder the English can't cope." Indeed, the British authorities seemed overwhelmed by the ferocity of the Jewish assault on them. They tried to bring in a requirement on all vehicles to display the name and photograph of their drivers on the windscreen. But it was widely ignored and had to be abandoned. Then, at the beginning of March, there was another major bombing in Jerusalem carried out by the Irgun. Goldsmith House, the radio announced, had been bombed and the whole building reduced to rubble. There were many casualties, between fifty and eighty dead and wounded it was thought, all British.

Now Goldsmith House was the British officers' club and an important centre for army personnel. It stood inside the British security zone and should have been safe from attack. Nevertheless, a terrorist unit had managed to get in, no one quite knew how, and throw explosives through the windows of the club. The British took this attack very hard, especially back in England. My father's office was buzzing with talk that the view from there was of an incompetent Mandate government, unable to control the situation. "Trying to handle the terrorists with kid gloves instead of applying the law of the Old Testament," British newspapers were saying. "An eye for an eye, that's what they understand." In desperation, the government, we learned, had declared martial law in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. This was centred on the Jewish areas, where the terrorists were presumed to be. They were cordoned off and guarded by soldiers. Under the new law, the Jews who lived there would lose all government services and henceforth would have no postal deliveries, no law court sittings, no tax collection, no working telephones and hardly any

traffic in and out. Food distribution was under the control of the army.

Everyone said we Arabs were not the target of these measures, but life in Jerusalem was badly disrupted. By 1947, there was a great deal of mixing between Arabs and Jews, not socially, but in terms of commerce and professional services. The sight of so many soldiers on the streets – by then the British army in Palestine amounted to 100,000 men – all heavily armed, was quite frightening. They were grim and business-like and very few looked like our nice smiling guard at the Qatamon checkpoint. It was said that they had started to hate it in Palestine and just wanted to go home. Life in the city was not normal, and no one knew when it would become so again. In fact, as it happened, it was only to last for two weeks. Martial law was lifted, having failed miserably to stop the terrorists from striking again; far from it, at least twenty operations were mounted against British targets during the two weeks when it was in force.

"What idiots these English are!" our neighbours commented. "They managed to terrorise all of us in the Great Strike and now they can't control a bunch of Jews?"

Because my father worked for a government department, many people came to ask what he thought was really going on. Increasingly, we children sensed that important matters were afoot though we did not know what they were exactly. Though I understood little of what I heard when people came to see us, it was not the content of what they said but their manner and expression which I noticed. But I was merely intrigued and occasionally concerned. Not for a moment did I think it could touch me or Rex or our home.

"What is the matter with them?" Rashid Khayyat asked my father. He and his wife lived nearby and were frequent visitors to our house. Everyone that evening was talking about the Irgun's recent attacks on the British. "What do they want?"

"It's not a mystery," replied my father. "They want the English to get out of Palestine. They think that if they make life here bad enough for them, they'll be forced to leave."

"They must be mad if they think that a bunch of Jewish lunatics can get the whole of the British government and British army to move out!" scoffed my mother's friend, Emily.

"I'm not sure," said my father. "Don't forget the English moved their wives and children out in January and they've now turned the subject of Palestine over to the United Nations", he went on. "And there are calls in England for them to pull out of the country altogether."

"But what about us?" asked Vladimir Wahbeh, who came from a Greek Orthodox Arab family. "What's supposed to happen if they leave us with the Jews here?"

No one knew. But everyone decided that the Jews couldn't throw the English out and the English were not going to leave us just like that. "It simply isn't possible," they said.

But as matters between the Jews and the British continued to deteriorate, it was impossible not to think the unthinkable. Acts of revenge and counter-revenge accelerated in an underground war of attrition which seemed to get more and more violent. Even though the Arabs were not directly involved in any of this and did not have much sympathy for either side – "one oppressor fighting another", as they put it – they nevertheless felt a sense of unease.

In July, another terrible incident took place which was to have far-reaching effects. The radio broadcast its details day by day, almost as if it might have been a thriller. It all started with a British decision to execute three Jewish terrorists, all members of the Irgun, for their part in breaking into the maximum security government prison at Acre. Whereupon, the Irgun kidnapped two British soldiers and threatened to execute them in retaliation. The authorities refused to give in to

what they saw as blackmail and the terrorists were duly hanged. At this, the more moderate Jewish Agency and Haganah tried to deter the Irgun from carrying out the revenge hanging of the British soldiers. They urged the Irgun's commander, Menachem Begin, to exercise caution, but to no avail. The two sergeants were strangled and then strung up on trees. When the army came to cut down the bodies, they did not realise that the area had been booby-trapped by the Irgun who hoped in this way to increase British casualties. One of the bodies exploded right in the face of the soldier who was trying to bring it down.

All the English we knew were in a state of shock. The Arabs said, "It's got nothing to do with us. They let them in and now they're paying the price. Let them fight it out." In the next week, we had a letter from Henry Dodds, my father's friend from London. "This has really done it," he wrote. "The country is in an uproar. You should see what is happening here. People are saying that the Jews are Nazis, and Jewish shops and Jewish homes have been attacked up and down the country. I don't defend that myself, but I do feel disgusted about the booby-trapping of the bodies. Everyone here is saying that our boys will have to get out of Palestine." In the aftermath of the hanging, the army could not control the furious reaction of many of its soldiers. They smashed Jewish shops and Jewish buses in Tel Aviv and even shot at Jews from armoured cars. Our neighbours the Kramers said they were only too glad that they did not live there.

"You know, most of us don't approve of what the dissidents are doing," Mr Kramer said to my father. "Dissidents" was the term the Jewish community used to describe what everyone else called terrorists. "If they go on like this, they will destroy everything we have worked so hard to create here. Actually, the Haganah leadership has called on everyone in the Yishuv [the Jewish community in Palestine] to work against them."

My father told this story the next evening to a group of his men friends. "It's their insolence that annoys me," Vladimir Wahbeh commented. He worked as a civil engineer in the Jerusalem municipality. "I mean, this man Kramer talks about what the Jews created here, as if they were doing it for us."

"Or," Hatim Kamal, another good friend of my father, added, "as if this was their own country they were building."

"But they think it is," said my father, who had been hearing such things from the Jews he came across at work.

No one could accept this. "Really?" Hatim laughed. "All those Poles and Russians and Germans, in all shapes and sizes, jabbering in all sorts of languages – making out this is their country? What a joke!"

"They want much more," said Vladimir. "From what I hear at the municipality, they won't give up until they've taken over the country for themselves."

"Well, it won't happen," Abu Ahmad asserted with finality. "First of all, the English are in power, and second there's all of us living here. How are they going to get rid of us and of the English government? It's a nonsense." Everyone agreed vigorously. "Mark my words," he continued, "this will blow over. The English are back in control now and they will sort out the mess."

To me, that summer was chiefly memorable for the business of the "doll-babies". Before school had ended for the holidays, one of the girls in my class, Hala by name, had come to say that she had an exciting secret which could only be shared with a chosen few. I was not one of these and had to wait until given the information second hand. It turned out that Hala knew of a place where they had "doll-babies", small living toys which looked like babies. They did not talk

or cry but they had to be fed and washed and put to sleep like real babies. As children we were all abundantly familiar with babies because there were so many of them around us. But one could rarely play with them because they always started to cry and their mothers invariably took them away when they did. So the idea that there was a kind of baby which never cried and one could keep for one's own was irresistibly attractive.

We all wanted to know how to get one and Hala took our orders. She said they came in all sorts of hair and eye colours, from blond to black. I wanted one of the blond and blue-eyed variety, as did most of the others. This was because, even at that age, we had already adopted the prevailing Arab prejudice against brunettes. Blondes were unusual amongst a predominantly dark people and were considered highly desirable. So, girls longed to be fair-skinned and have light-coloured eyes. Because my sister Siham was the darkest of us all, my mother used to make her drink lots of milk in the hope that her colour would lighten. When Hala said that she would get a doll-baby of the required description for me during the holidays, I was overjoyed. I could see it already, about a foot and a half long, swaddled in a white blanket, with a head of pretty blond curls and two bright blue eyes, like those of the English soldiers. I told Fatima all about it one hot afternoon when she was trying to have her siesta on the veranda.

"And Fatima," I said excitedly, "it's like a nice quiet baby, just lies there and looks at you. I'm going to look after it and it's going to love me." Fatima nodded with her eyes closed. "Fatima, you're not listening. Wake up, wake up." And then Fatima opened her eyes and smiled. "Yes, my darling, yes," she said soothingly. I waited all that summer for the doll-baby to arrive. I dreamed about it at night and often during the day. But the holidays came to an end and the doll-baby never arrived. And when I went back to school in September it

was to find that Hala had left because her family had moved out of Jerusalem, leaving me with an anguished sense of loss.

Meanwhile, the conflict in the country was beginning to change direction as the Arabs prepared to join in. It was not that they had been wholly inactive throughout the months of anti-British terrorism. But their resistance was relatively muted, not least because they were divided amongst themselves. Although their aim was supposed to be the fight against Jewish immigration into the country, in reality the power struggle to secure leadership of the resistance movement sapped much of their energy. Only very late in the day, at the beginning of 1947, did a more united front emerge in the shape of the Arab Higher Committee, the AHC. This was predictably headed by Hajj Amin al-Husseini and brought together the various Arab parties which had until then been fighting independently. Many complained that it was dominated by the leading Jerusalem families and in particular by the Husseini clan and as such did not represent the ordinary people of Palestine. But no one took any notice.

As talk of a UN decision on the future of the Mandate increased throughout the summer of 1947 and the unthinkable – a British withdrawal from Palestine – began to be whispered aloud, Arab resistance came to the fore. In September 1947, just a few weeks after we all went back to school, the British made a stunning announcement. The UN special committee on Palestine had found the Mandate to be unworkable, it said, and recommended that it should end. In response, the British declared that they had accepted the UN verdict and would terminate their rule in Palestine in May 1948. At the same time, a new and dreaded word entered the political vocabulary: partition.

Partition meant that the country might be divided into Jewish and Arab parts. "God forbid!" everybody in the neighbourhood said as soon as they heard it. "No, no. It can't happen. The English can't

leave, whatever they say now. It's a long time to next May and by then God may create what we do not know." This was a well-known saying taken from the Quran, "And God creates that which you know and that of which you have no knowledge yet". My father said very little at this time. But we could see that he was worried. When my mother pressed him, he said he was thinking about the future of his job if the Mandate were to end. At the beginning of the year, he had been approached by Abdul-Majid Shuman, the head of the Arab Bank, with an offer of a job. He had invited him to become director of the bank in Amman, a well-paid job with a commercial future. But my father had hesitated to make such a move which would not only take us away from Jerusalem but also direct him towards a very different career. So he asked his head of department, a man called De Bunsen whom he had first met during his second spell in England and whom he trusted, what he should do. "I don't advise you to take it up," De Bunsen had replied without hesitation. "Stay with us because I can promise you we have you in mind for a substantial promotion."

My father must have wondered what would happen to that promise. Many others who worked with him were also worried. Sometimes they came to our house and spoke in low voices. Always they came to the conclusion that the British could not possibly leave. This was reinforced by government officials who stated repeatedly that they would settle the conflict before making any move. And it was not only Palestine which was perturbed, other Arab countries became involved. When in October their leaders met to consider sending troops to Palestine's borders in case the partition plan was ever adopted, my mother refused to be downhearted and behaved as normal, and life continued in the same way.

Not for long though. In November of that year, when I had just turned eight, the bombshell exploded. It was announced over the radio early one morning that the UN had met in New York and decided on

partition. Palestine would be divided into two states, Jewish and Arab. Jerusalem would become an international city under UN trusteeship and not part of either the Arab or the Jewish state. The effect on the Palestinians was electric. Siham went to school to find a scene of grief verging on hysteria. Many of the teachers and girls were crying and classes were suspended. Because our parents were not in the habit of explaining political events to us – what we knew about the situation around us was picked up from overhearing snatches of conversation – she was unsure about the significance of what she had heard over the radio. She knew it was something serious and that it involved the creation of a Jewish state, but little else. So she asked what was the matter with everyone.

"We all know the Jews have taken lots of our land," she said. "Surely it's only a way of recognising that they have?" Siham did not really understand the issues and was trying to work it out for herself.

"Are you a traitor or just stupid?" demanded her teacher angrily. "It's a good thing I know who your family is or I would have suspected your loyalty. Don't you understand that our country is being destroyed?" And her other teacher said, "You live in Qatamon, next to the Jews, don't you? Didn't you hear them singing and dancing all night?" Indeed we had not, but over the next few days our friends spoke of scenes of wild jubilation in the Jewish areas as they celebrated the news from New York. "We have a state! We have a state!" they sang.

Ziyad came back from his school, saying that everyone seemed short tempered. The atmosphere all around us had changed and we knew that terrible, frightening things were happening. As soon as partition had been announced, Arab snipers were out onto the streets shooting at Jews and attacking Jewish shops and cars. The Jews were shooting back and in some places no one seemed to be in control. My uncle Abu Salma, who had come to see us, said that in Haifa, which

had a large Jewish population, it was just the same. We normally looked forward to his visits because he was the merriest and wittiest member of our family. He was an attractive man who had quite an eye for the women and was a well-known flirt. Even when heatedly discussing the most serious political topics, he could always be distracted if a pretty woman came into the room.

People excused his flirtatiousness because he was a poet and they said that poets were romantic and could not help themselves. It was after all through his love sonnets that he had won his wife, who had not wanted to marry him. She was the daughter of the mayor of Acre and a beautiful, cultivated woman who played the piano and spoke French. Before meeting him, she had decided never to marry anyone, and strenuously resisted his advances at first.

But on this visit, my uncle was not his usual merry self, and my father and he fell into an intense and serious conversation almost immediately on his arrival.

My father wanted to know what was happening on the Arab side.

"You know that the AHC have ordered the whole country to come out on strike, so that we can be free to fight against partition," replied my uncle. "They've set up local committees in all the towns to coordinate activities."

My father was afraid it would merely be a repeat of the shambles of 1936, and worse, since the leader was directing operations from Cairo. (Hajj Amin al-Husseini had been banished from Palestine by the British authorities in 1946 and lived in Egypt.)

"And the rest are more interested in settling scores against each other than in fighting the Zionists," said my uncle.

"At this rate," said my father, "things can only get worse."

"Well of course. What can you expect when we don't rule over our own country?" demanded my uncle. "When we are ruled by people who promote our enemies?" My father took this to be an allusion to

his government post, as if my uncle were accusing him of colluding with our oppressors. This was a sensitive issue for all those who worked for the British administration, and a source of shame. "What else could I have done?" he said angrily. "There was no other administration, no other structure here to work for except the English. How could I or you have known that they would do this to us? How could anyone imagine that they would want to give half of our country to immigrants?" The UN had decided to accord the proposed Jewish state 55 per cent of the land and the Arab one the remaining 45 per cent, although Jews made up only one third of the population. "I mean it isn't conceivable by any standard of fairness or human behaviour. All right, we accepted a Jewish homeland. But this?"

As children we had often heard them talk of the so-called Balfour Declaration. The British had promised the Zionists to help set up a "Jewish homeland" in Palestine. This was apparently the basis of the problem in Palestine. By doing that, the British government had in effect promised to give away the land of one people to another when it did not own that land. Even we, as children, could see what a bitter bone of contention it was between the Arabs and the British that the people of Palestine, who were to host this Jewish homeland, were never consulted nor their agreement obtained.

"What was a 'homeland' but an excuse to create a Jewish state here?" said my uncle bitterly. "The English are treacherous bastards. They never had me fooled!"

My father was stung. He must have resented the implication that he was either stupid or worse, that those who worked with the authorities were tarred with the same brush. "Of course it's always satisfying to be wise after the event," he snapped.

They had started to quarrel. My mother came in and intervened. "Now stop it, you two," she said. "That's how the Arabs always end up, fighting each other. That won't help us now, and I still say that the English don't mean it. They must have some plan but they're not telling us everything."

The word betrayal was on everyone's lips. People were saying, "The English tricked us. They must have planned this all along." When my father went to the office, he found himself faced with a smiling Mr Roth, the very same man who only a few years before had wanted to convert to Islam. Roth tried to be friendly but my father could not bring himself to speak to the man. "We don't have to fall out over this, Karmi," he said. "You know, the Jewish state we're going to have will really be shared between us and you. I mean we're only a third of the population. There aren't enough of us to go round." "And", said my father afterwards, "he had the insolence to laugh. As if I didn't know that they've no intention of leaving it at that." Everyone around us was saying that the Jews were after a state devoid of Arabs and were unhappy with the UN offer as it stood. My father heard that David Ben-Gurion had made a speech to his party soon after the partition plan was announced in which he did not hide his anxiety about the number of Arabs in the state to be allotted to the Jews.

When people heard about this, there was much alarm and wild speculation. The riots got worse. Throughout December, central Jerusalem became a battleground for angry mobs who burned and attacked Jewish buildings and property and Jewish militias who responded with shootings and bombings. The British army kept a noticeably low profile, except for the imposition of curfews. Suddenly, shrill sirens would sound over the city and everyone who could scurried indoors. Increasingly, as this happened while we were at school, they would despatch us home as soon as the curfew was announced. And I would rush back anxiously, longing to be in the house in the warm with Fatima with the door closed, roasting chestnuts and letting Rex into the *liwan* with us.

The curfews could happen at any time and we never knew when we left in the mornings whether we would be home as usual or not. Sometimes, it meant that Fatima could not come to us, or if she did, she could not return. On the days she did not turn up, I would feel desolate. What if a sniper had got her as she walked along the road? I started to think like this after Randa said that people in lower Qatamon had seen a man shot dead in front of their house. If I said as much to Siham or to my mother, they said, "God forbid, don't say such things." Getting to the shops was becoming difficult, and the village women who used to come to our house selling vegetables often did not appear. My mother complained about having to cook without the proper ingredients, but we managed. And amazingly, all three of us still struggled to school every day, although I retained nothing of the lessons we were taught. All the time we heard at school of the conflict spreading; every town centre was disrupted and the villages became bases for Arab fighters and irregulars, soon joined by volunteers from neighbouring Arab countries.

The unrest continued until we broke up for the winter holidays. At the end of the term it was announced that all government schools were to close until further notice, as the situation was too hazardous for children to be out in the streets. Some people relocated their children to other, usually private, schools nearer home, but we could not afford that. So we were all grounded at home "until the troubles die down". But no one knew when that would be, since the situation was deteriorating day by day. The Rex Cinema, where my mother used to take us, was set on fire by the Haganah. "My God, we could have been there," she said. Shortly after that, the Irgun gang threw bombs at a crowd in front of the Damascus Gate of the Old City, killing four Arabs. All that day, the neighbours were desperate for the names of the dead in case they included someone we knew. The Irgun likewise bombed Arab cafes in Jaffa and Haifa. Villages were attacked; at al-

Tireh just outside Haifa, twelve villagers were shot dead. Meanwhile, the Arabs had managed to cut off the major roads leading to Jewish settlements and Jewish transport was severely affected. The traffic going from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv was so disrupted it had to take diversionary routes to avoid the Arab attackers. The British army sometimes provided protection for Jewish convoys, but in general they seemed content to leave the protagonists to it.

"Do you think the Arab riots will die down soon?" asked Mr Kramer. "I mean, we" – by which he meant the Haganah leadership – "think that it might be just a repeat of the 1936 Arab riots which eventually came to an end. We hope there will be no war."

"Perhaps you are right," replied my father without elaborating. "Why should I tell him anything?" he said afterwards. "Let them think it's a only a minor matter and will soon disappear." But the Haganah were not sanguine for long. As the Arab fighters looked to have got the upper hand in the struggle, the Haganah unleashed its forces on civilians. They blew up Arab houses in towns and villages and attacked Arab transport, including a bus in Haifa full of women and children.

My aunt Zubeida, who often used to come and stay with us, could no longer make the journey from Tulkarm. Nor could anyone else of our family because the roads were too dangerous. We missed them, especially our aunts, because they were so different from any of the people in Jerusalem. I think my mother was never too pleased to have to entertain them, as they never came in ones and twos, but always with a variety of small children in tow. My aunt Zubeida frequently brought my two cousins Sharif and Sawsan, the children of my uncle Hussein. Sharif was a pale, skinny three-year old and Sawsan was a year younger. They both whined a lot and my aunt, who had no children of her own and looked as if she never would, spoilt them. I used to end up having to play with them, since Ziyad quickly made himself scarce as soon as they arrived.

Domestic telephones were few and far between at that time and we had no news from Tulkarm for weeks. And then, Abu Jasir, a distant relative of my aunt Souad's husband, came to see us. He had come in a hired car through Nablus and the journey had not been easy. "Don't expect to see anyone from Tulkarm for a while," he said. He had only come to Jerusalem because he had urgent business there; otherwise, he would never have taken the risk. My aunt Souad had sent him with a message for us which she insisted he deliver to my father in person. "She says that you and the family should leave Jerusalem and come to Tulkarm as soon as possible. She has a room furnished and ready for all of you." My father smiled one of his rare warm smiles. He and my aunt Souad were very close. She had brought him up and he considered her the most intelligent of his sisters. He used always to bemoan her lack of education, forced on her by the prevailing social custom in her youth when girls were not allowed any schooling. If she had been educated, there's no knowing what she could have achieved, he used to say.

Abu Jasir advised my father to take up the offer. "Tulkarm will be safer than here," he said. "You see, we've had assurances from the Jews." There had been meetings between some of the *mukhtars*, the village heads, and Jews from the Hadera Jewish settlement just north of Tulkarm. "The *mukhtars* told the Jews we didn't want any trouble, just to be left alone. We only want peace and to stay good neighbours. And you remember," he added, "we never had a problem with them in the past when your father Sheikh Said was alive. They didn't bother us and no one ever bothered about them. There was never any of this fighting and shooting."

"And what did the Jews say?" asked my father.

"Well, they said they would keep the peace as long as we did. But some of our men from Tulkarm didn't agree with talking to the Jews and they tried to stop the *mukhtars* from going to the meeting. 'What,

begging Jews for mercy? The Jews will kill all of you when the time comes, and God will be the witness,' they said. But they couldn't stop them and the meeting went ahead. I didn't go, but they said there were people from the Jewish Agency there as well and they said that the Jews in Hadera would give us flour and other things if we ran short because of the troubles."

"And you believe them?" asked my father. Abu Jasir shrugged his shoulders, "Well, it's still better than being here right on top of the volcano," he said. But my father shook his head. "Thank my sister Souad and tell her from me that, if anything, it will be Tulkarm which will fall to the Jews first and Jerusalem will stay."

December, which was a nice month usually because it was the time when we broke up for the holidays, was a sad one that year. Ziyad and I had initially been excited by the prospect of not returning to school, but that soon evaporated. The atmosphere at home was tense and my mother was worried each time my father went to work. There were so many incidents and so much hostility with the Jews that no one felt safe. Even so, it was unimaginable to us that our father was in any real danger; to think that would have been to demolish the very foundation of our existence. Fathers in our culture were crucially important. They were the central figures of authority, the source of the family's reputation, the sole means of economic survival and the basis of identity. When people were introduced to each other, almost the first question was "whose son or daughter are you?" And the nature of the ensuing relationship was often determined by that information. In our case, both our father and grandfather were figures of public esteem and admiration. And so, we could not think that our father was seriously threatened. Nevertheless, we could not help but be influenced by the general uncertainty and unease.

Among the very few good things about that time was the fact that Fatima had begun to stay with us more frequently as the danger on the

roads increased. She slept on the floor in our room. Although she got up early every morning to pray, long before we were awake, having her there all through the night was comforting. My mother, who was distracted and worried, provided no comfort or reassurance; my father was preoccupied with the news. He spent his time at home either listening to the radio or reading the newspapers. So Fatima became our anchor.

The other good thing was that we started to let Rex into the house most of the time because my mother was out and we stayed at home. As if Rex knew that we were doing him a favour, he was more affectionate than usual. Ziyad and I played games together sitting on the floor and Rex tried to join in. But he usually managed to knock things over with his tail, which he wagged vigorously to show his approval of the whole arrangement. I associate those early months of 1948 with Rex and with Fatima who had become full members of our family and who were now as important to me as my parents or Siham and Ziyad. Life was unthinkable without them.

It was cold that year and it began to snow in early January. The summer, when we played in the garden and ran out to the shop for sweets, seemed to belong to another century. Despite the prevailing gloom, the neighbours prepared for Christmas on January 7. This is the date when the Eastern Orthodox church celebrates Christmas, not on December 25. Because hardly any of our neighbours belonged to the converted Christian sects, such as Anglicanism or Roman Catholicism, Christmas was always in January. They usually had a Christmas tree and made special cakes, *ma'moul*, round or oblong shapes of baked semolina stuffed with dates and nuts. We also made *ma'moul* during our Eid, but my mother started to make them at Christmas time too, because she did not want us to feel left out. Ziyad and I went next door to the Jouzehs' house and offered to help decorate their tree. We got there by crossing over from our garden to

theirs at the back because it was too dangerous to go on the road. As it happened, they had already decorated the tree, but they were pleased to see us and as we were leaving, they said to make sure to come back on Christmas day. It was the custom in Palestine for Muslims to call on Christians on their feast days and the other way around.

As it turned out, however, no one would be celebrating anything on January 7.

Three

On the night of January 4, 1948, three days before Christmas, we went to sleep as usual. It was raining heavily with occasional bursts of thunder and lightning. Fatima was staying with us that night and was sleeping on her mattress on the floor of our bedroom. Suddenly, at some time in the night, I awoke from a deep sleep and found myself in the middle of a nightmare crashing with thunder and lightning. For a few seconds, I could not distinguish dream from reality. The bedroom seemed to be full of strangers until I realised that they were my parents. There was a tremendous noise of shattering glass, shootings and explosions which seemed to be coming from our back garden. Rex was barking wildly. My mother dragged me off the bed and sat me up with Ziyad against the bedroom wall. The floor was cold against my warm body. She sat in front of us, her back pushing against our knees. The room was strangely lit up and as I twisted round towards the window I saw that the sky was orange, glowing and dancing. "Is it dawn?" I asked. "Is that the sun?" No one answered and I could feel my mother's body shaking in her nightdress. My father was on the

other side of Ziyad, sitting against the wall with Siham and Fatima squeezed in next to him. They all stared ahead and Fatima was intoning in a whisper the words of the *Fatiha*, the opening chapter of the Quran, over and over again:

> In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Praise be to the God of the worlds, the Merciful, the Compassionate, Lord of the Day of Judgement. You do we worship and to You do we turn for help. Guide us to the true path, the path of those whom You have favoured. Not those who have incurred Your wrath. Nor those who have strayed. Amen.

I thought that my mother was whispering something too, but I did not know what it was. A shattering bang shook the windows as a great clap of thunder exploded overhead. And then I knew that I was afraid, more afraid than I had ever been in my life before. As Ziyad turned his face towards the window, I saw that his eyes were enormous but he never made a sound. After who knows how long, the noise outside began to abate. And with that, my mother started to move forward. "Stop!" my father hissed. "There may be another explosion." He made us wait a little longer until the sky stopped being so red. It now had a far-away glow, like the embers in our charcoal stove. My leg was numb and the palm of my hand hurt where I had pressed it against the floor. We got up and groped our way out into the *liwan*. It was about two o'clock in the morning. Torrential rain lashed against the shutters. Fatima made coffee, but neither I nor Ziyad wanted anything, and our mother made us go back to bed. Siham followed soon after, but I don't think our parents slept at all the rest of that night.

By morning, when we got up, jaded and tired, we found no one in the house and the street looked deserted too. Everybody had gone to the scene of last night's explosion, the Semiramis Hotel in the road

directly behind ours. This hotel was owned by a Palestinian Greek and had been fully occupied on the night when it was blown up. We decided to go and see for ourselves, walking through the wet, slippery streets in a howling icy wind with Rex close on our heels. The windows of several houses in the vicinity gaped, their glass shattered by the explosion of the night before. There was a great crowd around the devastated building which was still smoking and there was a strong smell of kerosene. Their faces were cold and pinched and many people were crying.

Municipal workers and British soldiers were trying to clear the rubble and still dragging bodies out. Some of these were very dark-skinned, Sudanese kitchen workers. As the crowed surged forward to see the bodies, in case there was a relative or friend amongst them, the soldiers pushed them back. Because Ziyad and I were small, we had got right to the front and they shouted at us to go back home. All the dead and wounded who were accessible had been taken away in the small hours, but the search was now on for others still buried beneath the slabs of concrete and stone and unlikely to be alive. An elderly couple next to where we were standing pressed forward repeatedly to get close to the digging. "They must find him," the man kept saying. But she said, "No. It's no use, he's gone. He could have been alive, standing and watching just like these people, but he's not."

We pulled away to go back and noticed for the first time that amongst the debris on the ground was a large quantity of headed hotel stationery, some of it grubby, and stacks of wet envelopes. Ziyad bent down and started to pick it up and I followed suit. "Stop that!" cried Siham but we kept hold of what we had picked up. Neither of us could take in the enormity of what we had just seen; to us this was an opportunity for play and mischief. But the images would remain to haunt us one day. Later that morning, it emerged that it was the Haganah which had planted the bombs in the hotel, thinking that it

was being used as a base for an AHC unit, "a hotbed of armed Arabs", as they called it.

In fact, this was not the case, although Arab journalists were in the habit of staying at the Semiramis and it was a well-known meeting place for activists of all political persuasions. Some thirty people perished in the bombing, amongst them the hotel owner and the Spanish consul. The rest included several families all of whose members were killed, except in one case where the parents died and their three children lived. We saw them wandering about in the rubble looking dazed.

The Haganah command expressed condemnation of the incident and regret and said that it had been carried out without its knowledge by a splinter group. But everyone around us said, "Liars and sons of dogs!" People demanded that greater protection be provided by the AHC or from the Jaysh al-Inqath (the army of salvation), which consisted of volunteer soldiers from Arab states recruited by the Arab League. The AHC had national committees in the towns all over the country, but the defence of Jerusalem was part of a special force. A unit of this force arrived in Qatamon at the beginning of the year and took up residence in Abu Ahmad's house in the road above ours, which had stood empty ever since he and his family had left for Egypt.

It was headed by a man called Ibrahim Abu Dayyeh who had a reputation for bravery, but the men he commanded were few in number and poorly armed. Jewish soldiers, who were better armed and better trained, frequently chased them around and, though they assured everyone that they would defend us against all odds, it was obvious to everyone that they did not have the capacity. One evening, we even found one of them hiding in our garden shed, having been chased by an armed Jewish unit. He was very young, not much older than Siham, and trembling with fright. "It's no good. We can't compete with the Jews. They've got more men, more arms and more money," everyone said.

We heard that the men of the area met at the house of Khalil Sakakini to discuss what security measures ought to be taken. After the devastating attack on the Semiramis, it was clear to everyone that we were vulnerable and alone. The men decided to put up barricades at both ends of the roads and to have them manned. But only five people had guns and the rest did not know how to use weapons. There was consternation and in the end they drew up a rota of the people with weapons whose job it would be to guard the defence posts every night. Our father did not share in this rota, but he and others who did not take part paid a monthly fee towards the costs. This effort did not last long, however, for one night, Jewish gunmen shot and killed the man on duty.

There was terrific shock and mourning and then recriminations. "For God's sake, who is there left to guard anyway?" asked Daud Jouzeh sadly. He said this because in the days which followed the bombing of the Semiramis, there was a panic exodus from Qatamon. The months of instability and fear, culminating in this incident, had finally broken people's resistance. Those of the Arabs who were still holding out murmured, "They ought to be ashamed of themselves. They're doing just what the Jews want them to." The National Committee tried to persuade them not to go. They had received orders from the AHC on no account to allow anyone to leave. "If you go, the Mufti will only order you to return," they warned. "Or he will bring in Arab fighters to take your place. So, better for you to stay."

Whether because people heeded this or not, they first tried moving only from one part of Qatamon to another, hoping it would be safer, but others like my mother's friend Emily went to the Old City for the same reason. Yet others went out of Jerusalem or Palestine altogether, and often in such cases the women and children were evacuated first and the men stayed behind. But as the danger grew without any visible support from anyone, least of all the AHC and its local committees, many of the men followed their families and the majority left Palestine. "Fine for them to talk, but who will care when our children get killed?" they said as they came to say goodbye to us. "Still, it won't be for long. Just until the troubles die down."

But far from dying down, the troubles continued to get worse. It was as if the Jewish forces no longer felt restrained from unleashing all-out attacks against our neighbourhood after the small number of Jews who had lived amongst us departed. The Kramers went to Tel Aviv at the end of 1947 in the wake of the turbulence which followed the partition resolution, but the Jewish doctor hung on into the new year. When Arab snipers shot at him as he walked along the road soon after the Semiramis bombing, he left for Tel Aviv too.

At the end of January, the Haganah blew up another building in our vicinity, this time the big Shahin house on the edge of Qatamon. The Shahins were a wealthy family and had a beautiful villa standing in open ground at the top of Qatamon; no one could think why they had been targeted, except perhaps that the house might have been used at one point as a base by Arab snipers. Ever since one such sniper had shot dead a Jewish cyclist in Rehavia, the Haganah had instituted a policy of blowing up any Arab house which they suspected of harbouring gunmen. As February came, the sound of gunfire in the air was a frequent occurrence. From time to time, it was punctuated by explosions which vividly brought back the memory of the Semiramis. We had found this difficult to forget and whenever anyone even banged a door shut in the house, Siham would jump and start trembling.

Word came to my father at his office from a family friend of ours in Tulkarm, Hamdan Samara, urging him to move his books out of Jerusalem. "I will store them for you in Jenin where they can be safe," he wrote. Jenin was a town to the north of Tulkarm. "You may be forced to leave your house, and you never know, the Jews might

pillage your library." My father had an extensive and unusual collection of books in Arabic and English, lovingly bought over the years, which he treasured. "Will you take up his offer?" my mother asked. "No," he laughed. "We're not going to be leaving and no one is going to harm my books."

By now, Ziyad and I were told not to go out onto the road because it was too dangerous. He and his friends took no notice of this, however; they found the whole thing rather exciting, especially when they went out on patrol with Abu Dayyeh's men like real soldiers looking for Jewish snipers. They never found any, but usually came back with a collection of the spent cartridges and used bullets which had been fired by the snipers. These had foreign markings, Belgian, French, Czech and others, and Ziyad would line them up excitedly according to shape and place of origin. "What do you want with those horrible things?" our mother said. "Get rid of them!"

At other times, he went out on his own with Rex in tow, apparently unafraid. On one such jaunt, he ventured as far as Talbiyya which was a mixed Arab-Jewish neighbourhood. As he walked down a street which, unknown to him, was mostly inhabited by Jews, he saw a foreign-looking man on a balcony above him suddenly spring up and aim a rifle directly towards him. Rex started to jump up, barking and growling, and the man shouted out in broken Arabic, "Go away! Get out!" He was so threatening, and the street so empty, that Ziyad turned and ran off as fast as he could. He arrived home, panting with fear. After that, he never tried going to Talbiyya again.

The assault on our part of town was especially concentrated because, in company with other West Jerusalem neighbourhoods like Talbiyya, Sheikh Jarrah, Romema and Lifta, we formed the "seam" with the Jewish areas to the west of us and thus came under repeated attack by the Jewish forces. All these districts were either mixed or predominantly Arab, and the news which reached us from there was

all grim. Because of the attacks, people were frightened and were starting to leave their homes. All through January and February, long queues of cars packed with people and luggage filed out of the streets on their way to safer places. The AHC were worried; they issued threats through the local committees and imposed punishments against anyone leaving. But as had happened in Qatamon, no one took any notice. What was a verbal threat from the AHC compared with the reality of a Jewish sniper shooting at you from the rooftops as you walked along the street? Or with the Haganah van which toured your neighbourhood, as happened in Talbiyya, with loudspeakers blaring, urging you to leave or you and your house would be blown up?

All the while, the Arabs retaliated by attacking the Jews and trying to cut off their supplies, and the more they did this the more inflamed the situation grew. The Jewish neighbourhoods had been the object of Arab snipers for months. The Jews complained bitterly about us in Qatamon from where their neighbourhood of Rehavia was under attack. They also protested about Sheikh Jarrah because the Arabs fired on Jewish traffic going to the Hebrew university or to the Jewish Hadassah hospital from there.

My mother had friends in Sheikh Jarrah, the Mansour family, whom she used to visit frequently. The father, Abu Ya'qub, was elderly and sick, but before he died in January of that year, he would sit up in his bed and call out to his children, "Get me my rifle from under the bed!" He had had this old rifle since Ottoman days and it was rusty from disuse. "By God, I'm going to get up and shoot those Jews myself!" After his death, his sons, as if not to let him down, used to stick pumpkins on tall poles which they covered with a *kuffiyya*, the traditional Arab head-dress. They would then hold these pumpkins aloft and juggle them about, as if to make out that they were men. This invariably fooled the Jewish snipers on the other side who would start to shoot frantically at the pumpkins and, it was hoped, exhaust their ammunition.

In response to Arab sniping from Sheikh Jarrah, the Jews used armour-plated vehicles to get their patients and students through, but it was still unsafe. So the Haganah invaded the area and terrorised the Arab residents, more of whom now prepared to leave. The British ordered the Jewish army to withdraw on the promise that they would forbid Arab fighters from re-entering Sheikh Jarrah. But the Haganah complained that the British reneged on their promise and that the Arabs were back in no time. Both sides accused the British of helping the opposing camp. In our neighbours' house, they said the same, but Mr Wahbeh said, "I tell you the British don't care about us or them. All they want now is to get out and then they'll leave us to it. Look at them, all they do is keep the route to Haifa open for their troops to clear out when the time comes."

Since the start of the new year, everyone had finally begun to face the unthinkable, that we would indeed be abandoned by the British without proper arms or a proper army. What a tragic turnabout, that those who had been oppressors were now seen as saviours, the malady and its cure rolled into one. And even then, they would betray us again. That, I suppose, was the essence of what it meant to be colonised.

"They say the Arab League is sending in a big army," said my mother hopefully.

No one was impressed. "If you mean that small band of irregulars from Syria," said our neighbour, "I don't call that an army." In January, several hundred Arab volunteers under the leadership of the Syrian commander, Fawzi al-Qawaqji, had come across the Syrian border into Palestine in order to help in the resistance against the Jews. People thought highly of Qawaqji and of the Syrians. They believed in him and said that he would save the situation. His forces joined local Palestinian troops which by then had begun to organise better than had been the case before. They had now formed themselves into three separate groups with headquarters in Jaffa, Jerusalem and Gaza. But they had no proper arms, no training and little idea how to organise effectively.

It was no secret that the weaponry possessed by our side was out of date and far smaller in quantity than that of the Jews. There were no Arab weapons factories in Palestine and no way of making anything other than simple bombs. The Haganah, by contrast, had several arms factories producing bullets, grenades, sub-machine-guns and mortars. When, in addition, the Jewish forces later received shipments of modern arms from Czechoslovakia, everyone looked on in envy and alarm. There was a belated attempt to organise a country-wide Arab defence. The AHC's network of national defence committees, which functioned in towns and cities, should have provided a coherent organisation. But it was undermined by the fact that each locality had its own militia which usually ignored AHC orders and behaved autonomously. Likewise, the Palestinian villages had their own armed defence bands, untrained and acting independently of each other. To make matters worse, the whole arrangement was constantly undermined by internal feuding and rivalry.

"Well, you can't blame people for taking matters into their own hands," said Mr Jouzeh on one occasion when he and his wife had come across to our house for coffee. "The Jews are trying to take over the country, that's all there's to it and we can't rely on anyone. Everyone has let us down."

"Even if the Jews succeed – and they haven't yet –" said his wife, "they won't last long in this land. Look at what happened to the crusaders. They stayed in Palestine for a long time, but in the end, they were thrown out. And that's what's going to happen to the Jews now if they try it."

"And who's going to get rid of them?" asked her husband.

"Oh, all the Arabs and all the Muslims together," she answered

firmly, looking at us, since we were the only Muslims in the gathering. My parents fidgeted uneasily and looked away.

But as February slipped into March with no sign of relief for our plight, hopes that the Arab states were going to leap to our defence were dwindling fast. Everyone said that the Mufti had received volunteers and arms from Egypt to continue the war effort, but we saw no change in our lives, which remained as isolated and defenceless as before. The rumour was rife that the Arab League had no real intention of helping to rescue the Palestinians, but only wanted to control the future of Palestine for its own ends. The exodus from Qatamon continued relentlessly, as from elsewhere in the country. By March, people had fled from large parts of the coastal plain area between Tel Aviv and Hadera, north of Tulkarm. Everywhere the story was the same, that the Jewish army and the Jewish irregulars attacked the peasants, village by village, and threatened them with worse. So they ran for their lives either in the immediate aftermath of a Jewish attack or because they feared that their turn would be next.

They poured into Tulkarm and its vicinity, since this was the first safe haven they could find. The panic they brought with them infected the people of Tulkarm, some of whom began to fear that the Jewish advance would not stop at Haifa. There was no one to tell people what was happening, why the Jews were on the attack and who, if anyone, would defend them. My aunt Souad gave refuge to one family from a village outside Haifa who came saying that Jewish soldiers had suddenly entered their village, shooting at anyone they saw. No one had any arms and so they fled. They never knew how many people had been killed. These and similar stories fuelled the terror in Tulkarm, and some began to flee towards the villages further inland. News from our family was increasingly hard to get, but we heard that the Bedouin outside the town brought out their machine-guns, which had been with their fathers since the days of the Ottoman Empire, in readiness

for the Jewish attack. They were soon joined by Bedouin from Wadi al-Hawarith, a village by the coast near to Tulkarm, who had fled before the Jewish forces. The situation was said to be chaotic.

"To think", my cousin Aziza said afterwards, "that those Jews in Hadera who were our neighbours in good faith, as we thought, should have turned on us like that. We should have remembered that the Jews can never be trusted. Did they not betray the Prophet himself?" Aziza was referring to that time in Arab history when Muhammad made an alliance with the Jewish tribes to ensure their neutrality, an agreement which they then broke, going to the aid of his adversaries. Neither Aziza's mother nor that generation would ever have said such a thing. But after Israel's creation, such anti-Jewish sentiments became common amongst Muslim Palestinians in a futile attempt to find explanations for their defeat.

Hadera was a rural Jewish settlement, established at the end of the nineteenth century, which lay to the north-west of Tulkarm and whose lands adjoined those of Aziza's family. "We never thought of them as enemies until then. And then we began to be afraid of them when we saw how they were putting up the barbed wire fences around their land and bringing in arms and big dogs."

Matters got worse and there was shooting in the streets of Tulkarm. The old people were bewildered by it. They remembered how it was in the Great War and thought it was happening all over again. "But even the Great War came to an end," they said, "and so will this. The Jews will leave us alone." But no one else believed that. Talk was rife that the Jews wanted to take over the whole of Palestine. Our cousins bought rifles, which they did not know how to use, in readiness to defend the town against the Jews. My mother and father worried a great deal about our family in Tulkarm but were powerless to help.

The news from my uncle Abu Salma in Haifa brought no relief either. Here, the battle for the city had been raging ever since the

beginning of the year. Many people had already left because of it, perhaps 20,000 or more. Businesses and shops were closing down and being eagerly bought up by Jews at a fraction of their true value. My uncle said that the Jewish terrorists had started a campaign of intimidation. This and the constant sniping, bombing and demolition frightened people so much that they were leaving in panic.

He himself did not know how long he and my aunt could hold out. He was disgusted with the Arab defence forces in the city because they were disunited and undisciplined. The National Committee could not control the irregulars who did not obey orders and attacked Jewish targets in an unruly and impulsive fashion. The Jewish attacks, by contrast, were organised and effective. And each time the Jews struck, they caused a fresh wave of flight from the city. The AHC were not firm enough in telling people to stay where they were, even though they knew the Jews were aiming to seize Haifa for themselves.

In Jerusalem, we were feeling more and more besieged. By March, the neighbourhoods in our vicinity were emptying fast. People had left in large numbers from Romema, Lifta, Sheikh Jarrah, Musrara and Talbiyya, and many among these were friends or acquaintances. My mother put her head in her hands. "Oh God, they say the Jews are taking over all the empty houses." The villages on the outskirts of Jerusalem, Beit Safafa, Abu Dis, al-Aizariyya and Beit Sahour, were also being evacuated as people fled. Sometimes at night, when there was a thunderstorm and we imagined that the Semiramis bombing was happening all over again, Fatima would shake her head and say, "I wonder which poor village the Jews are attacking now."

My father came home and told us that the Jewish leaders were celebrating "the new Jerusalem". You can go through the western part of the city, they were saying, without meeting a single Arab, thank God. "Surely that's not true," Siham said. "What about us then?" We were still hanging on, but it was dismal to realise that so

many people we knew had already left. Our road seemed more and more deserted. The Khayyats had gone just after the Semiramis bombing, and so had my mother's old friend Um Samir al-Sharkas. Emily and her family had gone too. Before they left for the Old City they gave us the keys to their house and told us to stay there if we needed to. This was because it stood inside the British zone and as such was more secure than where we lived, exposed to direct attack. Emily and my mother embraced and hung on each other weeping, as if they would never meet again.

"It will be over," said Emily to my mother. "It must end soon, and we'll be back." Randa and I did not hug each other or cry, I think because we did not fully comprehend what was happening. The Old City was not far away and it was not such a long time since we had gone there to see my aunt Khadija. It did not seem possible that we would not be going there again. And Randa's departure in the bewildering and extraordinary situation of our lives at that time did not seem especially dramatic. More worrying was the fact that Abu Samir, the grocer to whose shop we went for sweets and nuts and drinks, closed down. Many of the houses on the opposite side of our street were now empty.

Ziyad and I had nowhere to go and few friends to play with any more. In March, even the Jouzehs, our neighbours for all the time we had lived in that house in Qatamon, finally left. They cried when they went, for leaving their home and for leaving us. "How much longer do you dare stay?" they asked. "The Jews are not going to drive me out of my house," my mother declared staunchly, but she said this only afterwards in order not to upset them. "Others may go if they like, but we're not giving in."

The only people to agree with her were the young couple who had moved into the old Muscovite's house next door to us on the other side. This was a truly amazing event, given that everyone was

deserting Qatamon as fast as they could. The couple who bought the house came from the village of Ain Karim, just outside Jerusalem, and, strangely enough, were also called Karmi, but written differently to our surname in Arabic, with a long "a". No one could credit such a purchase in the dangerous, besieged place that Qatamon had become. But they had got it for a very low price and were delighted. My mother said to them, "How can anyone buy in Qatamon at a time like this?" But they were unperturbed. "It's a good investment. People say that the Jews are going to take over Qatamon, but it won't happen, wait and see." And my mother felt vindicated in her own view.

One evening not long afterwards, we were sitting in the *liwan* after dinner. The radio was on, and both our parents were listening intently as usual. It was the only link we had with outside events, since most roads from Jerusalem and even from Qatamon were dangerous or impassable. Suddenly, Rex started to bark and there was a sound of scuffling at the back of the house. All our shutters were tightly closed, as had become our habit since the Semiramis bombing, and so no one could see out. But my parents froze and my mother turned the radio off. We sat absolutely still, listening. There was no doubt about it, someone was in our garden. There was a sound of heavy running feet, and as we sat scarcely breathing, the silence was shattered by a loud bang of gunshot followed by shouting. Fatima, who came up behind me where I was sitting on the floor, put her hands tightly over my ears and curled my head over my chest. But this frightened me even more and I wriggled out of her grasp. My father sprang up towards the door and my mother called out, "No! Please, no!"

By now there was a sound of running feet everywhere, as if an army had descended on our house. Although it seemed close, in fact the sound came from behind the wall at the back of the garden. There was a great deal of shouting which we could now make out as something like, "Not that way! There, over the wall!" The running

sound seemed to change direction. It came alarmingly close to the side of our house and then moved towards the garden gate. My father went to the front door and began opening it cautiously. And as he did so, I noticed with sudden anxiety that Rex was not barking any more. I rushed to the door and tried to look into the dark outside. "Sst!" my mother shouted and pulled me back. "But Rex . . . " I implored. "Is this a time to worry about dogs?" she demanded.

A while later, as we tried to calm down, Abu Dayyeh from the Defence Committee came to see us. He said that a few of his men had been pursuing a group of Jewish irregulars who ran into the garden – "like the cowards they are" – behind the Jouzehs' house. From there they had crossed into our garden where the Arab soldiers caught up with them, and that was what we had heard. He said he was sorry for the disturbance it had caused us, but it was necessary in the war against the Jews, and he wondered what my father was doing, letting his family stay on in the house. The AHC had now advised everyone in the neighbourhood to evacuate all women, children and old people. Did we realise that Jewish snipers had been occupying the empty houses on the opposite side of our road from where they were preparing to shoot at people? To me, this instantly conjured up a nightmare image of menacing shadows lurking unseen behind the dark windows of Abu Samir's deserted shop. "And will your men evict them?" asked my father. "Of course," Abu Dayyeh answered confidently, "you and your family can be assured of that". As soon as he went, my father said, "Hmm, I wonder who was chasing who." On several occasions in the last few weeks we had almost got used to the sight of Abu Dayyeh's men being pursued by armed Jewish men who ran through our garden and even onto our veranda, as if our house were a public highway. We found these pursuits terrifying, but they usually happened in the daytime and no shots were fired.

The very next morning, as if the Jewish snipers had heard Abu

Dayyeh's boast, a Bedouin walking along the road was shot dead right in front of our house. He was one of the dwindling numbers of street peddlers that still braved the danger to come round the houses, selling foodstuffs. The chaotic conditions prevailing in the country had hit the poor hardest of all, and they were obliged to continue what trading they could despite the hazards. This Bedouin had come into our street with a great sack over his shoulder, the kind his people usually used to carry their wares: yoghurt, *samn* and goat cheese. In the time before the troubles, my mother had always bought such things from the Bedouin, which she said were the tastiest of all. We were out on the veranda and Fatima was hanging out the washing at the back when it happened. He was rather dusty and bedraggled, wearing a brown cloak and *kufiyya* on his head and he walked in the middle of the road as there were very few cars about. As he drew level with our gate, shots rang out from the houses opposite and, as if the two events were unconnected, he suddenly crumpled up and fell down hunched over his sack. There was screaming from somewhere, perhaps from our house. Someone, I think Fatima, dragged me and Ziyad back inside and closed the door tight.

That night, we decided to start sleeping at Emily's house in "the zone", as the British sector was usually known. Although it was not far away in terms of distance, getting there seemed interminable. We tried not to walk along the road as far as possible and crossed over the gardens behind the houses. Most of these were deserted and it was a strange, ghostly experience to see them so dark and still and to remember how noisy and full of people they had been. When we arrived, it was to find a cold, unheated house, its shutters closed and the carpets all rolled up, not covering the floors like ours. The place had a look of complete abandonment which my mother and Fatima tried to dispel by lighting the fire and turning on the radio and bustling about. Emily's house, where Randa had lived and where we had had such fun, now filled me with gloom. I hated going there, especially as we had to leave Rex behind. Every time we left in the evening, he leaped up all over me and Ziyad. "Silly Rex," Ziyad would tell him and ruffle the fur around his neck and ears, "don't worry, we'll see you tomorrow." And each time we returned home, he would be standing behind the garden gate, waiting for us to appear. And each time he would realise too late that we were coming through the garden route and not the road and would run around maniacally, as if to hide his embarrassment.

Throughout this turbulent time, Siham was trying to study for her examinations. She was nearly eighteen and in her final matriculation year. The government decided that students like her should not be deprived of completing their education, even though the situation made normal schooling difficult. They further decided that the matriculation exam would be brought forward to April from its normal date in June. This was because the British Mandate would be ending in May and no one could guarantee what might happen after that. From the beginning of the year, she and her classmates started to go for their lessons to the British Council which was in the German Colony and relatively safe. To get there, she walked through the back gardens to avoid the open road. She became quite adept at finding a sheltered route, along which Rex occasionally followed her until she shooed him back, and for a while never came across any danger.

However, by the end of March, many parts of Jerusalem had become too unsafe to travel through, and the government arranged for all those taking the matriculation to become boarders until they sat for the exam. This was to be held in al-Ma'mouniyya, our old school, which, being in Wadi al-Joz, was in the Arab zone and hence considered safer than either the British or Jewish zones. The students were to board in a nearby house which had been rented for the purpose. She packed a small bag with her clothes and her books went