

Sailing To Gaza

A personal diary (excerpt)

I'm writing from my dirty prison cell. I do not know what kind of prison, where the prison is located. *Givat what?* I didn't repeat my question to the drivers, *lo ichpat li*, it doesn't really matter. What matters is that I write down what happened as soon as possible in order to save as much as possible from the images, words and impressions before they get lost or inaccurate in my memory.

I'm sitting on a dirty broken plastic chair, staring at the lattice of the big blue iron door from where loud noises are coming. *Go on writing, don't get disturbed.* But there is still the rocking from the waves and a strange tiredness. *Lie down on your bed, rest a while. Rest and write, rest and write.*

I'm looking for the lines that I scrawled down during the last hours on board the ship. Here they are:

Tuesday morning. We are entering Gaza waters. Bad news: the toilet doesn't function any more. And I haven't been there since yesterday. The men are fastening the banners and hoisting the sail. The peace flags! We have to hurry, they're coming. „They are coming“ were the last words in the diary of a German resistance fighter before he was taken to his execution. I feel we are not going to die.

I was calm and confident. Some agitation, yes, we had to get the flags up swiftly. *Itamar suggests to bundle them. Lillian and I protest, they have to be hoisted up, one by one. Glyn, Lillian and I connect them to the ropes. We run out of strings, how to fasten the rest of the flags? We look into every corner, into our bags for more strings and we succeed. They're all up now, all 42 flags with 84 doves and more than a hundred names of persons that wanted to accompany us. The boat looks beautiful! An old used-up vessel blossoming many-coloured in the calm blue waters. Vish and Eli are circling round the boat in the dinghy to take pictures. Everybody is fascinated.*

9.30 One navy boat appears at the horizon in the north. We put our life-vests on and get seated backboard with our personal belongings and a bottle of water. The two media guys are going to the left and right respectively to document the events that are awaiting us. I'm sitting beside the engine room. Glyn explains to me how to switch the motor off, in order to be ready if he tells me to do so.

10.00 A second boat sighted, doesn't seem to move, maybe waiting for us.

10.30 Lillian is coming from the obstructed loo. Nervousness affects the bladder. „Geh du auch Pipi machen!“

Lillian speaks the Hessian dialect of her parents, she had to leave Germany as an 18-months-old. It's easier for the men. Securing balance with one hand in another man's they can pee over board.

10.45 War ships are coming towards us. Somebody shouts „eight ships“. They're swiftly coming closer. I can discern their faces, young faces, some handsome. I try to study them. Unrest is growing around me. Reuven is coming over to me to sit down in the shadow. The sun is too hot on the side that the soldiers are approaching rapidly. Itamar is standing there talking to them. He is speaking the prepared words in Hebrew and English. I hear him saying, „we are peace activist“. Reuven (who is now sitting on the engine room) is shouting „ivrit, ivrit“. He tries to talk to the soldiers, shouting, he's lost his calmness.

I see Lillian getting uncomfortable and ask Yonathan to change places with her, so she can sit on my left. We hook arms as was settled. I do not hook arms with Reuven, because he is going to play the harmonica. I wonder if he will be able to. His hurt soul can only shout. „Nobody is listening to him“, observes Lillian.

Nor have they listened to Itamar. The soldiers were performing like robots. They did not seem to be able to listen. Shema Israel.

Yonathan signals to Reuven, to play the harmonica, but I realize, Reuven is no more able to. So I start singing We shall overcome, with Yonathan, Lillian and others joining me. We get to the second stanza, „We are not afraid, we are not afraid“.

There is a beautiful Hebrew song, „The whole world is but a small bridge and the main thing is, ha-ikar, lo l-fached, not to be afraid.

Lillian cries, „look what they are doing to poor Glyn!“.

Lillian could not believe her eyes. „It’s a dream, a bad dream, it’s not reality“, she said to me later when we were sitting in the police car.

They are forcefully pushing Glyn from the helm into the cabin. I cannot see what is happening to him from my position.

While I tried to calm Reuven I watched something unbelievable. *I see Itamar lying bent on the floor of the opposite warship, in restraint. „Handcuffed“, I should write, as he was, but in the image that occurred to me, the image of the „kelbl oifn furl“, he appeared „gebundn mit a shtrik“.*

And I watched something even more cruel. *I suddenly hear a penetrating cry and see Yonathan on the floor opposite to me writhing in pain. What is happening?*

This was quite unexplicable. Later, when the atmosphere cooled down, I asked Rami and he explained to me that Yonathan got electroshocks. I didn’t even know such macabre things existed in the army (though I know them from my former experience as a nurse in psychiatry).

Reuven is getting distraught when he sees his harmonicas spread on the floor, surrounded by heavy soldiers’ boots. He cannot sit any more, he has to get up. I can’t keep him back. I am worried that his emotion will inflame the atmosphere and lead to violence. I therefore address the soldier standing next to him: „he’s nervous, he’s a Holocaust survivor“.

Maybe silly naive words, but they brought about a turning point in the atmosphere. *The somewhat helpless looking young soldier nods, when our eyes meet. A slight touch of a timeless meeting.*

Reuven is collecting the scattered harmonicas into a plastic bag. He sits down beside Rami and is soon calming down. Rami and I exchange relieved glances. Rami, a quiet character with a solid body has a soothing effect on all of us.

Another soldier asks me, „would you not rather sit inside?“ „No“, I reply, „I have to watch what is going on. I have to look into your faces, to assure myself that you are human beings. Isn’t it crazy that we are afraid of each other?“ This soldier, he too, nods (did I hear a „yes“?) and I see his face changing from a rather rigid expression to a more relaxed one.

I’m looking around the boat, trying to retain the incredible image, the tremendous display of force: eight warships, some with cannon balls, approximately 7-10 soldiers on each boat, our backboard crowded with around seven soldiers besides us (where only five passengers were allowed to sit), and a mighty warship in the distance – to encounter nine peaceful activists.

*What madness! If people in Germany, the EU and the US would only know that they are also financially attributing to this insanity! (And to much much worse atrocities!) Where are the true friends to take Israel – sick from the Holocaust and hundreds of years of suffering – by the hand, guide her to the mirror and tell her to take off that insane nasty cruel mask; help her to be *Israel ha-jaffa*?*

Edith Lutz