

IMPOSSIBLE SINAI

by MAX AUB

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A Preliminary Note

These writings were found in the pockets and backpacks of Arabs and Jews who died in the so-called "Six Day War" in 1967. The translations are due, in great part, to my students. I am indebted to them.

I take no sides here; I have only chosen for publication with the kind help of Alastair Reid those that seem to me to be the most representative.

THE EVENTS. June, 1967 (from the 5th to the 10th.)

The First Day, Monday

Israeli aircraft cross the border at dawn and destroy the Egyptian air force on the ground. Similar incursions occur simultaneously in Jordan, Syria and Iraq while the Algerian air force is lured into occupied airports and disarmed.

The Arab countries begin their attack through the Gaza Strip, Jerusalem and the north of Galilee. Syrian and Iraqi airplanes bomb Haifa, Tel Aviv, Netanya; Jordanian artillery shells the border from Qalquiliya.

Israeli tank columns cut through the Gaza Strip and advance across the Sinai Desert, capturing El Arish. Israeli paratroops land in Sharm el Sheikh, on the Red Sea, while in Jerusalem bloody fighting takes place (some at bayonet point) resulting in the Jordanian capture of Mt. Scopus, to the north of the city, under the command of Hussein.

Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Algeria, Sudan and Kuwait declare war on Israel. Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Yemen and Tunis promise aid.

General Dayan, the Israeli Defense Minister, declares that Israel has no territorial designs.

De Gaulle suspends the shipment of war material to Israel.

The USSR states that it will not intervene unless the US does. The United States promises to be neutral in "thought, word and deed."

The Second Day, Tuesday

Israeli tanks advance towards the Suez Canal. Another armored column succeeds in over running Kuntilla and turns towards Sharm el Sheikh to reinforce the positions taken by the paratroops.

The coast at Tel Aviv is shelled by Egyptian warships, and in the north of Galilee the Syrians succeed in penetrating Israeli territory.

An Israeli offensive along the Jordanian border results in the silencing of the enemy artillery and the taking of Jenin and Qalqilaya. In Jerusalem the air force bombs the Jordanian positions.

Nasser accuses the United States and Great Britain of taking part in the air operations on behalf of Israel, breaks diplomatic relations with the United States and closes the Suez Canal.

The US and Great Britain deny Nasser's accusations. Syria and Iraq break diplomatic relations with the US and Great Britain. Algeria also breaks with the US and nationalizes the oil companies while Kuwait and Iraq hold back all deliveries of petroleum to North America and England.

England suspends shipment of arms to the Arab countries, while Germany offers a shipment of gas masks (!) to Israel. The USSR says that Israel is the aggressor and demands the withdrawal of troops from Egyptian territory. In the UN a resolution is passed unanimously calling for the cessation of hostilities.

The Third Day, Wednesday

Israeli forces enter Gaza and continue toward the Canal in the North, taking Romani, and towards the Mitla Pass in the South where they are engaged by the Arabs near Prot Taufiq. Landing forces complete the capture of Sharm el Sheikh, as well as of the islands in the Straits of Tiran.

In Galilee the Syrians are thrown back from their positions. Israeli forces conquer Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ramallah and Jericho, thus occupying the entire east bank of the Jordan River.

Israel and Jordan accept the cease fire called for by the UN. Egypt refuses.

The USSR threatens Israel with the rupture of diplomatic relations if it doesn't observe the cease fire.

Jordan accuses Israel of violating the cease fire.

Yemen, the Sudan, and Mauritania break relations with the US.

The Fourth Day, Thursday

When an Israeli column comes within sight of the Suez Canal in the North, the Egyptians counter attack in the area of Bir Gafgafa, along the main line of march. There is a great tank battle in which the Israelis crush the Egyptians.

In Galilee the Syrians withstand the thrust of the Jews, who are now reinforced due to the end of resistance on the Jordanian border; the war ends on the Sinai front.

Israel broadcasts a recording of a telephone conversation between Nasser and Hussein in which they agree to accuse the United States and Great Britain of participating in the air attacks.

Egypt and Syria accept the cease fire.

The Fifth Day, Friday

Israeli airplanes bomb the Syrian positions, silencing their artillery and allowing the advance of their own troops toward the interior of Syria where they occupy the heights near the sea of Galilee.

Part of the forces of the UAR which are surrounded in Bir Gafgafa are able to break out and retreat to the African side of the Canal. Those remaining scatter and wander, without arms or equipment until they are taken prisoners by the Jews.

Nasser, in an emotional speech, resigns as the President of the UAR, accepts responsibility for the disaster and puts himself at the service of his country as a private citizen. His resignation is refused by the National Assembly and produces, paradoxically, an upsurge in popularity of the Rais, with demonstrations in the streets of Cairo.

The Sixth Day, Saturday

The Israelis cross into Syria all along the border. There are air bales near Damascus.

Israel and Syria agree on a cease-fire.

The USSR breaks diplomatic relations with Israel.

With the cessation of the fighting on the Syrian front, at 6:30 PM Middle East time) the Arab-Israeli War is over. As they say.

Ali Fakum Nazzar

Born in 1942, in Alexandria, I could find out nothing about him; either they don't remember, or they shrug their shoulders. Some men go through life like that, undeservedly, it goes without saying. He died on the last day.

A man says: *sweet*
and he understands.

A man says: *salt*
and he understands.

A man says: *cock*
and he understands.

A man says: *God*
and he understands.

But when he says: *death*
not one understands.

And it lies before and behind.

Anonymous Palestinian Song

I am neither Arab nor Jew

I am of Palestine.

May not one remain.

I lived in the desert

and here I will die.

May not one remain.

Ours is the desert: ours

is the earth and the sky:

deserts the two.

May not one remain

Here I lived

and here I will die.

May not one remain.

These fair haired Jews

are well put together

for skeletons;

many are better than few.

May not one remain.

May not one remain. (rep)

I don't believe in Allah.

I don't believe in anything.

But the desert

is ours.

I am neither Arab nor Jew.

I am of Palestine.

May not one remain.

Amin Ibn Ibrahim Al Attar

One of those whose fanaticism knows no limits, a fervent believer in his faith and a propitiatory victim to his own bull-headed zealotry. He does not believe in weapons; he does not believe in the superiority of one kind of airplane over another; his one belief is that only the One True God is capable of granting victory. Into this greatest of all blindnesses (not nationalist) we can see that humankind will once again fall, now that tolerance of maturity seem to have passed. Amin Ibn Ibramin Al Attar was born in Cairo in 1948. He died on the second day. He was a celebrated poet in a few select circles and little interested in revealing his true feelings. All the poems of his "divan" have reference to people that would seem to be foreign to him.

The Fool

Let them say what they want: I lived on this land. Call it anything you want; it has lots of names; it doesn't matter to me. Here I lived. Here I was born. Here discovered woman. Here my children were born. Here I had a garden. Here I had my goats. Here I had my house. Here I had my wife. One day some men came (it matters nothing to me who they were) and told me to leave. Then others came who spoke to me of justice and of getting my own land back. Of the first I know nothing, of the second, much: I remember very well what it was like. And now they tell me I can only get it back by gambling my life.

How strange: My life is worth nothing. My house is.

Salomon Chavsky

A soldier in the Signal Corps, a witty young man and fond of practical jokes; he could run like a gazelle and they called him "Kangaroo." Happily without any culture, but a very capable broadcaster. A fine performer of popular songs. He was born in a kibbutz near Genezaret. He died on the fifth day near Bir Gafgafa.

Night time still.

Sand.

Horses.

Sheep.

Soldiers

Camels

asleep.

Dark skinned

Bedouins.

Tanks!

Radio!

Too late!

Surrounded!

Poor Arabs,

Arab poor.

Which is the adjective,
which the substantive?

Who is responsible
for this disaster?

If you don't tell anyone
in part it is...

Manoce Mohrenwitz

A traveling salesman, witty and coarse, a good story teller; no one ever knew where he came from during that period, shortly after 1948. During the war he was a cook, more than anything else. Dark featured, with curly hair, he talked to himself. He died on the fifth day. Originally from Alto Adigio (thought that is not certain), some thought he was an Egyptian spy. There is no proof of that and I don't think it is true.

I have come this far. Not even God himself can make me take another step. If they were to tell I was fighting for you I would go on till I died, but to die just for the sake of dying is more absurd than having been born a Jew.

I became a Jew little by little, because I wanted to, but without believing in Synagogues, or Fridays, or Holy Saturdays, or in Abraham or in Jehovah or in David. Only in you Israel.

I worked for others with a passion; I became a man for them and for you and I helped to build a homeland, as far as it was possible; a homeland for you, something to shelter you in. I will go no farther to kill Arabs who have nothing to do with you, who know nothing of you, who do not know you exist and who --it is said-- believe in Allah or in Jehovah; because there are Arab Jews and Jewish Arabs who have nothing to do with you or with me. "We are blond and we speak Yiddish." Why must I keep on and kill more Arabs who look like Jews, or Jews who believe in Allah? I have no interest in Politics: I love the land, the sun, good coffee; I love you as much as all of these but that does not justify having to kill this father or my that mother. I will not go on. Shoot me if you wish. And that crime will have a name because I don't believe in God, and neither do any of you, and so it will have our own names. I didn't come here to defend Him. Nor did you. I am an atheist. You are an atheist. he is an atheist. If all of this were to convince the Arabs to become atheists in any way we might it is possible that I would take a few steps more. But it is not to do this... Then, let them do with me as they wish. I will be just as good dead as alive if I am not at your side. I have given my whole heart. Because I no longer trust it and cannot move the weight from it; it is going from me.

But here I shall rest in the earth.

Sigmund Baginsky

Of Lithuanian origin, he was born in a boat in the Dardenelles and was 8 days old when he was disembarked in Haifa in 1947. He never wanted to listen to anyone. The little he did learn was because he was forced to. Cowardly, and in love with American movies, "My kingdom for a horse!" could be the title of the following lines which I here translate because they demonstrate a strange feature of the Orthodox, and not only the Mosaic.

Jehovah, if you exist, make the earth turn faster so I can see the sun rise one more day.

Only this I ask: let me die by daylight, don't choke my breath off now, at night. I only ask to see the light being born, to close my eyes in the light of the sun, not in the candle light!

Jehovah, if you exist, don't forget that I have died for you. Keep me conscious till dawn, so I may see the upper corner of this window edged in gold just one more time...!

Jehovah, I would trade you for a piece of dawn!

I never lied to anyone; so what am I doing here?
I only do it out of duty, not of pleasure.
But duty must be borne
so Israel may be.

That's what my parents say, my wife, the Rabbi and my neighbor.
They didn't force me to it, no. I chose. I am.
I never lied to anyone, not even to me.
So I don't know why I'm here.
I'm going to die
for you
even though I don't know who you are, Israel.
Oh may you be, one day, the land
of milk and honey!
Remember me!
I never lied to anyone
Will you never lie to me?
The heavens say no.
The heavens say yes.

A Dialog, Translated from Ladino

An old woman who used to live near the mill that is still standing, near Sion, told this to me.

"It might interest you."

We were friends. I took down what she said to me in her Spanish from Salonica. When she was 74 years old she went to school to learn Hebrew. She died on the fourth day from a stray bullet. The text refers to the 1948 war, I suppose.

"We can argue about whether I am a Jew or an Israeli and whether you are an Arab or a Muslim."

"One is the same as the other."

"In this war, is it Jews against Israelis and Arabs against Muslims?"

"What are we doing here?"

"Let's go up to this cave. Help me. Hold me up. Let's talk for a while: you and I are from here. What are all these Russians, these Germans, these Poles, these North Americans doing here?"

"You are a Jew, I am a Muslim. Neither of us were hurting the other."
Both Semites, both dark featured, four black eyes, curly hair.

"Now we are both dead: dark featured, white eyed, curly haired.
If they changed uniforms on us..."

"Besides that, frankly, it isn't worth the trouble:
Russians here and there; all these Englishmen or Turks;
North Americans, there and here.
I am a Moslem and an Israeli.
You are a Jew and a Syrian."

"Who is waiting out there?"

"No one, the night."

"I'm glad we are dead."

"Let's go."

"Where to?"

"To where they say the dead go."

"Do you know where that is?"

"No."

"How do we get there?"

"I don't know that either."

Dawn came.

Frances H. Melziner

Born in New York on the 4th of June, 1945, the son of a famous Talmudic Scholar. Brought up to honor the Torah, his loss of faith coincided with puberty. His parents sent him to Israel fifteen days before the commencement of the hostilities, the conclusion to which he would not see, on the day he turned 21. He had a fine sense of humor and constant headaches which nothing was able to relieve. Blond, tall, curly hair, small, fat, waxy colored lips, chin without even peach fuzz yet. He died of a heart attack during the first bombing raid.

The 39 Prohibitions for Saturday

(Shabbat 73a VII,2)

The primary labors are forty less one: sowing, ploughing, reaping, binding of sheaves, threshing, winnowing, selecting, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking; shearing wool, bleaching, carding, dyeing, spinning, stretching the threads, making two meshes, weaving two threads, dividing two threads, tying, untying, sewing two stitches, tearing out in order to sew two stitches; hunting for deer, slaughtering, flaying, salting, curing the hide, scraping it, cutting it up into pieces, writing two letters, erasing in order to write two more letters; building, tearing down, extinguishing, kindling, forging, carrying from one place to another.

These are the primary labors less one. On the other hand you can also try: shooting, stoning, wounding, mutilating, throwing of cliffs, stilettoing hanging, choking to death, blinding, castrating, poisoning, slitting throats, shooting with arrows, randomly killing, slaughtering like pigs, killing by mobs, amputating, disemboweling, putting an end to, impaling, tormenting, garroting, hanging, shackling, pillorying, whipping, torturing, crucifying, beheading, beating, crushing, thrashing, jabbing, biting, stabbing, lacerating, slashing faces, beating to a pulp, machine gunning, and always to men, from Friday through Saturday, from first star to last. These are the forty primary labors less one.

The Mirror

Here is death before me
looking like nothing I have seen.
Be nothing, you, be nothing.
Here I am, faced with Death,
face to face, at the front.
Is it yours? Or mine?
What does it look like?
Day time or night time?
What does it seem like? What color?
Is it black? Why must it be so?
It must be
just like the desert,
but more so;
like life itself
only bigger.
Perhaps dead with fear
seeing itself in a mirror
as I am here.

Selomo Weitzel (Jasper Reid)

He was born in Trieste, in 1927. Took part in the French Resistance before immigrating to the United States in 1948. Well thought of as a reporter, he went to Havana in 1960. He went to Israel on the eve of the war, only partly for professional reasons. Wounded on the fifth day, he died two weeks later.

To Yevgeny Yevtushenko

Do you not remember now, Yevgeny, the night you read your "Poem for Babi Yar" to me?

Do you not remember now, how excited you became when Shostakovitch said he would use it as the inspiration for a symphony?

Do you not remember now, fire breather?

Do you not remember now, how you shouted: "Today I am a Hebrew!", Yevgeny?

Because, how could you be one, if your leaders say that we are acting like imperialists?

The odd thing is, we were in Cuba and you said you felt yourself to be a Jew, although you said:
"I have no Jewish blood in me."

I didn't notice then, but, do "true Russians" believe there are "true Jews," or "Jewish blood?"

You will say to me that time does not pass in vain. Sadly that is true: I feel very old today, as though I were at Babi Yar, in the pit, at the bottom of the trench and were listening to the wind for Yevgeny Yevtushenko's answer.

It sounded different then.

But you, are you the same?

They didn't let us, those of Babi Yar,
be even refugees,
nor those in Dachau, nor in Belsen
nor in Mauthausen nor in Babbi Yar.
It makes me want to cry,
not to think of Babi Yar
but just because of you, Yevgeny Yevtushenko,
with this piece of Russian steel
that has torn my heart from me.

Gustav Fleishman

Born near Ramle, died in Hebron on the second day. The dates are his. Uglier than a camel; I say this because of his huge under lip, because when it comes to ears he beats them. A very good violinist and very fond of sour cucumber.

BALLAD OF A SABRA

I don't know who is right,
if Eshkol or Ben Gurion;
it matters not to me:
I know that I was born
on the kibbutz
where my parents work,
and I will tell you, I am twenty,
I studied at the university,
Hebrew is my language
and this, my land and strength.
It matters not to me
who is right or wrong.
For me Ben Gurion will do as well
as the other one, Eshkol.
This is my home
I will defend it as best as I'm able
and if for its defense
we must attack then attack I will, because I was born here
and no one will take me
from my land
unless they tear me from it by the roots.

Eliahn Kimron

The following was written on the eve of the first day. He was 19 years old. I don't think this is a poem, as are some of the other pieces gathered here. Or perhaps it is. Or it could be a letter. If it is, it wasn't addressed to anyone but just stuck in a blank envelope. Kimron was born on a kibbutz in Galilee where his parents are still working; Lithuanians. He died on the second day.

The night is falling, filtering in from Jordan, as clear as the rest of the sky.

The sun ignites the other side.

The evening star is shining.

Tomorrow morning, early, the same
will happen, on the other side.

It will be another day. But not for me.

It will be true night for me.

I must cross the border,

cut some wires,

lay some mines.

I won't return.

I don't know why I know this.

But I know.

I volunteered to go. I don't know why.

I thought it wouldn't matter to me.

I thought that and I did it. I didn't think I was a hero.

You didn't either my life.

Now as I see the last of the light I think I did a foolish thing.

If I lose my life for something foolish is that to be twice
foolish?

Possibly yes, possibly no.

I only know I love you

and you will never be mine.

I will go.

The night is falling.

It's like any other day for all the others:

tomorrow will be another day.

But not for me.

Ibn Al Arrafat

Born on the slopes of Mt. Ararat, he lived from early youth in Jerusalem. He was a guard at the Rockefeller Museum, where he took the place of an Uncle of his who had been wounded, just days before his own death. He could mangle both English and French. He died in the garden of the museum on the first day.

What am I? A stone? Grass? A snail? The sky? He who will sing to Jerusalem. I will now sing to Jerusalem. I will sing of my dreams but I am not me but somebody else.

Iron, rubber, bottle or hottle, a little shoe button or little rose button. Or am I, all of those things at the same time: flour, clove, odor, grass, stone or piece of lead knocked off that drainpipe by a bullet my brother shot? Or am I a bush in the museum garden? Or some frying pan fruit from one of Jerusalem's gates? Or am I a bit of stale bread? The bakers are carrying their rifles hung in their slings instead of kneading the dough. Gone with the wind, gone with a dream. Say nothing to no one, Noemi.

I am hungry. I would eat you, Noemi. Yes, you.
I sing, I sing, I who have no voice,
I, who am no one: iron and rubber, bottle and hottle, button...
Or am I someone, from now on?
And if I am, who am I?
No one knows. Are the stones singing
as though they were wind?
I think they are. No. No one is singing.
Everything's dark.

But I am hungry, Noemi.
Hungry for you, but hunger, nothing more,
hunger alone and gnawing,
to eat you piece by piece
to begin with your lips
to eat you piece by piece
and then to your tongue
to eat you sleeping, as I am sleeping.

But I am only here to kill."

Issac Kaplan

At the Office of Foreign Affairs they knew perfectly well who I was talking about but they refused, courteously, to give me any details concerning his life and miracles. I was assured that he worked in the UN from 1945-1946 as part of the British Delegation. I know nothing more than that he went to Israel in 1948.

They offered us some of the finest sites in the world. The English first of all, as is their custom: Uganda, Africa. (No one remembers what Max Nordau told them.) Hitler, generous as always, thought of Madagascar, beautiful island. But there is more (and less is known.)

It makes a nice story:
Mr Truman was a great admirer
of the Jews of North America
they have many votes, many, many thousands, thousands!
and in 1946
declared himself for us.
But he wanted to have it a nearby state
and the closest one was: California,
in Mexico, and if not that then further south,
the Amazon, for example, green
between Brazil, Peru, Columbia. There is proof.
And he sent Cordell Hull to the United Nations
to tell this to the only diplomat
from South America
with a vote on the Council. In the end
he said
he would agree to Palestine
"If there is no other solution, of course."
When that was known Mexico took
all precautions necessary.
And neither was it possible in South America.
(Hitler, by then, had died.)
How much they all love us! It was
for the best:
We got Palestine that way, I swear.
And if they later say America
supported Israel
they know why now:
one Jew, one vote
Republican or Democrat;
'can or 'crat, 'crat or 'can.
But if I were North American
what a vote they'd get!

* * *

General de Gaulle
received them standing.
He asked Abba Eban:
"Alors, Messieurs, nous attlaquons?•"

The earth swallowed them up
(The ambassador was there)
they have not yet returned. This is what they call
having a Secret Service.
In May it was, Abba Eban,
in May.

Ibn Musa Amir

A Bedouin. He was in a tank, his corpse half burned, about twenty meters from the highway, two hundred kilometers to the south of Gaza. I don't know, of course, the day of his death.

Yes, certainly the land you offer me is better, richer than my own.

But it's not the same.

Every piece of land is different: some have water, some have none, some are high and some are low, some are steep and some are level, good for sheep and bad for goats, close to the sea and far away, hot and cold.

But none of this matters.

There are only two kinds of land: mine and all the rest.

You can offer Paradise to me; what I want is the desert I was born in and which you stole from me.

You can give me a palace made of richly colored marble. What I want is the tent where my two horses and three camels gave birth.

Don't give up yet. Kill me, so my dust can return with the wind and mix with the desert sand.