

Miri Stern interviewed by Lotte Müller
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By the last days of 2048, most Israeli citizens had left their country in one of the most massive transfers of population in the 21st century. The relocation of the Israeli government in Brooklyn, as well as the creation of the New State of Israel (Israel Hakhadasha) in Uganda are now well known. Miri Stern, a scientist and founder of the Eretz Hoven kibboutz, spoke to journalist Lotte Müller about the ordeal of the Exodus 2048 and her own experience on board.

Lotte Müller

20 years after the events of December 2047, I would like to recall the chain of events. You are among the active witnesses of the time...

Miri Stern

That's true, these months now seem very close and far at the same time. In retrospect, it's hard to believe that I had to leave my country forever. We always take countries for granted, hence the shock when one ceases to exist.

LM

Can you tell me in which conditions you left Israel ?

MS

The situation had been very explosive since September and the beginning of the Grand Jihad. In November came the take-over of the Sinai and the bombings of Haifa and Tel Aviv. But most Israelis were living as ever, oblivious to the what was happening. A few weeks later came rumors, saying that Arabs were about to take over all of Israel. At one point, they took all of Jerusalem's neighbourhoods, went back to the Green Line, then moved on West. They were getting closer to Tel Aviv and we had to go, quickly. It was like a steam-roller that couldn't be stopped. We didn't have much time to think about what we should do.

LM

What eventually convinced you to leave ?

MS

Fear. The rumors were getting more persistent and we grew really scared. As informed and liberal as we were, there was a level of fear that could not be withstood. When you hear stories of Arabs taking over Jewish houses and entire neighbourhoods over and over again, you start believing in them, they gain currency.

LM

You followed a basic instinct for survival.

MS

In hindsight, I know that the whole country deserted upon a mere rumor. We had the news, but never saw actual fighting. It was ridiculous, yet very powerful. Nothing contaminates faster than fear. We were all scared, and the fear of one fed the fear of the other. The whole country sensed a danger and was frantically running away. Everyone was thinking that only the fastest ones would be able to leave... And I was no different, I admit it. I wanted to save my children above all. The rest I didn't think too much about. We all thought we'd be back shortly.

LM

When you read the accounts in the press of that time, it's hard to build an opinion, to

understand what was really going on.

MS

As in any war, the media become a mere vector of propaganda. They use the situation for other purposes. They don't really report. It has always been the case, but in the last decade it became extremely sophisticated, with the help of technology. At the same time, war became more and more brutal and sophisticated.

LM

So you didn't witness fighting in Tel Aviv ?

MS

No, I didn't. I know it sounds crazy today, that we left without fighting, just by hear-say. But it's how it happened. I could hear remote gunshots and fire exchange, but it was relatively light, and never too close to the city center – we lived on Allenby at Rosenblum.

LM

And bombings ?

MS

Aside of the Haifa bombing in September, we took Iranian threats very seriously. They had hundreds of missiles aimed at us and no one was protecting us anymore. Remember that the US had entirely given up any form of support after the Dubai treaty. But the fact is that Iran never launched the missiles and I was never sure, for a couple of years, whether they were bluffing or not.

LM

Do you remember the exact circumstances of your departure ?

MS

It was Decemebr 15 I think, a Tuesday. This I remember because I had had a dentist appointment for a long time, it's one of these insignificant facts that enter your memory for no reason. The Friday before, I thought that I should cancel it. Finally, I decided to go but the office was closed and the building apparently empty. The area [Allenby at Bialik], normally very lively, was even calmer than on Saturdays. It was surreal. That's what scared me. I called my children – David was 13 and Leah 15 at the time – and summoned them home. In school, the teachers were calling parents to come and collect their children, they didn't want to let them go on their own as usual. At this point, there was no more sense of normality. Everywhere you could see people loading cars. I didn't fully understand what was going on, events were sliding on the surface of my conscience. We packed just a bag each and left – I had always heard from my parents that life was more precious than commodities. We closed the door as if we'd return the day after. It's the last time I was there.

LM

What were your thoughts then ?

MS

I can only remember that I was thinking of my dentist appointment, and that it was a shame I missed it.

LM

Didn't you think of fighting back instead of leaving ?

MS

No one was fighting... Of course, there was a military solution and Israel had a good record in trying to solve political problems by force. But what was failing us was a moral drive. We had basically oppressed Arabs for a century, and there's no way you can negate that. The whole country was oblivious to the facts, but deep down, you knew that what you'd done, or what had been done in your name, was not in line with the moral standards you would have liked to live up to. From South Africa to Israel, a regime that has no moral legitimacy can not last forever. We had fought the Arabs for a hundred years, but we knew that one day we'd have to account for the hardships inflicted upon them. So yes, we simply left, we all deserted ...

LM

Can you describe what happened after you left your house, how you managed to get out of the country ?

MS

It was a huge mess, and I must have forgotten most details. I had heard that Lod had already fallen, so I thought that trying to reach the airport would be suicidal. I knew that the UN was negotiating a humanitarian corridor, but in Israel we had grown skeptical of UN initiatives. So instead, my children and I attempted to reach the harbour in Jaffa, which was walking distance from the apartment. We were a bit anxious because of the Arab population there, but there was nowhere a safe and ideal situation. Buses were not running and taxis were all stuffed with people and luggage, so walking was best. On the way to Jaffa, we discovered that many others had had the same idea – the harbour was packed and in total chaos.

LM

And how was the situation in the city of Jaffa, outside the harbour ?

MS

Very confusing. The news were very contradictory. For people with a double identity, and double to a point of total schizophrenia like in the case of most Israeli Arabs, it must have been a terrible moment – to choose one side at the expense of the other. Some of them were parading and chanting victory, but on our way to the harbour, we also saw many families preparing to leave, as anxious as everyone else.

LM

What happened once you had reached the harbour ?

MS

It was packed with tens of thousands of people, unbelievable ! The Jewish Agency and KKL were there with volunteers, trying to organize. People were attributed numbers and places on ships that were supposed to come. But there were few docks and the harbour was not equipped for docking large ships, which slowed down the whole evacuation process and led to a major balagan. Since nothing was happening, we tried to find an alternative. Leah talked to people who were in touch with a fisherman. We ended up paying GBL\$ 4.000 per

person and embarked on a fishing ship, bound to Cyprus. The trip was horrendous, I really thought we would die at sea. The weather was bad and the boat loaded way beyond its maximum capacity. But we landed the next day, exhausted but alive.

LM
Why Cyprus ?

MS
I suppose it was the only destination possible with a small ship. Egypt, Lebanon, Syria were ruled out, and friendly countries were too far. Cyprus had always been special for Israelis – as the closest part of the 'Free World', as they used to say – and then turned into the major hub for Israeli refugees.

LM
Did you then embark on the Exodus 2048 right away ?

MS
Not right away, but it didn't take too long. The UNHCR and a variety of NGOs were there, trying to organize chaos, apparently more efficiently than the Jewish Agency and KKL in Jaffa. In Larnaca, the dramatic balagan of Jaffa turned into a refugee machine. It was a huge camp organized like a little army - and guarded like a prison. And refugees were pouring in continuously, night and day. I've read that 80% of Israel's population transited in Larnaca within a couple of weeks. Apparently there had been a deal made with Cyprus, that no refugee would exit the harbour area. Most of the refugees quickly embarked on cargos, ferries and requisitioned cruise ships headed towards Lybia, where a humanitarian corridor to Uganda had been negotiated.

LM
Did you know at the time that Israel Hakhadasha had been inaugurated in Uganda, after Herzl's plan of 1903 ?

MS
That was the main discussion topic among refugees and there were very heated debates !

LM
What was your position on that ?

MS
You can't just relocate like that, establishing a state is more complex than writing the myth of its creation. And the official government, at this time, had just relocated to Brooklyn, so there was a real confusion about authority and legitimacy. I personally believe that the split between Uganda and Brooklyn was the very end of Israel, not the Palestinian take-over. You can not physically save a country which has already vanished in its essence. And everyone was responsible for that – the Ashkenazim with their class racism, and the Mizrahi themselves, who were happy to be rid of the Ashkenazim. It's the old story, you know...

LM
In spite of that, have you been tempted by Uganda ?

MS

I have, but I thought that Europe would offer my children a better future. There was nothing in Uganda. The Jewish Agency purchased the land in part with government funds, but everything had to be done, from scratch. I felt I was too old for a new utopia, I needed safety more than the prospect of a new society I didn't really believe in. Since I and my children also had a EU passport, there was no visa issue – at least we thought so.

LM

That's why you were allowed to board the Exodus 2048, which was reserved for dual EU-Israeli citizens and visa holders ?

MS

I suppose. What we didn't know though, was that EU authorities would consider us Israeli citizens only and deny us any of the rights of EU citizens !

LM

On which grounds ? This must have been illegal.

MS

It was illegal indeed. But the EU and local governments quickly tailored laws that legalized our treatment.

LM

Was the Exodus 2048 initially bound to a EU city ?

MS

Yes, to Bari. But we didn't even approach the harbour. Police speed-boats were surrounding us and preventing the ship to reach the dock. We were forced to drop anchor at good distance from the shore. The morale started to decline. The next day, we saw demonstrators chanting « Italians in Italia, Jews in Uganda » on TV. We realized we were pariahs, no one wanted to see us, have us. It's that evening that I had a long argument with Leah. She was very upset at inheriting our mess, and she basically blamed the entire situation on my generation. We had been incapable of remembering our ideals and had, with the previous generations, produced a great country which had gone badly astray. That was her point, and she was not entirely wrong...

LM

Maybe these arguments simply revealed the level of tension ?... For how long were you stuck in Bari ?

MS

It seemed very long, maybe two weeks ? There were negotiations going on, but no good negotiator who could impose a compromise was present. Every party was, as ever, protecting one's own selfish interests with no understanding or compassion whatsoever.

LM

How was life onboard ?

MS

The ship was decent when we embarked in Larnaca, it originally was a cruise ship. But it loaded 4.500 people for an allowance of 1.400. So hygiene and living conditions deteriorated quickly. Food was sparse and of declining quality, water got contaminated, there were not enough toilets... We were in a cabin for 6, with 6 other people in the beginning, and then more and more came. Life in the cabin itself was hellish, but outside it was even worse. People were lying across the corridors everywhere, it was difficult to move to or from the cabin, the smell was horrendous... Leah was very combative and optimistic, she was probably the strongest of us three. But David went into depression, he would just lie anywhere and do nothing. That really worried me.

Everyone hoped to disembark quickly, because we all knew that the situation would only get worse, but we couldn't do much about it.

LM

So you weren't allowed to disembark in Bari, right ?

MS

Right, neither in Bari nor elsewhere. No country was willing to make an effort. European leaders and public opinion thought that we had somehow deserved our fate, that we had planted the seed, the product of which we were now harvesting. We could sense a great deal of Schadenfreude. Then there was a final round of negotiations and France accepted that the ship would dock in Marseilles.

LM

How was the news received onboard ?

MS

The main thing was to dock, where was secondary. I think the French government did that to lift the first round of negotiations, but had no intention of letting us in. So when we arrived in Marseilles, it was the same old song again. This time we docked, but we were not allowed to disembark. The French government had passed a law while we were en route, preventing any people carrying diseases to enter the country. Only a few people in poor health and with good connections were taken to hospitals, in spite of the new law. As for the dead, they were kept in the ship's freezers.

LM

But everyone knew that the sanitary situation would only get worse...

MS

Absolutely. But that's how people in charge think, they want to get rid of the problem at the expense of a weaker partner. It doesn't matter if it gets worse, as long as someone else ends up taking care of it. But to us, it was devastating. Living conditions were deteriorating every day, it was now a matter of survival. In Marseilles, there were already breakouts of scurvy and tuberculosis. The toilets were in such a state that we couldn't use them anymore. And most of us were very depressed.

LM

What happened next ?

MS

We were re-routed towards Valletta, Malta. But when we reached Malta, the ship went back right away. Malta was threatening to sue the EU if the ship approached their coast. That's what all EU countries wanted to do, but it was not acceptable to say it bluntly. So we came back to Marseilles, as if we hadn't left.

LM

Is it when the uprising took place ?

MS

Yes, it was. Refugees had elected a board to represent them, and the board decided that we should seize the ship, which we did, quite easily. The crew members were upset with the situation and somehow happy to be forced to disembark.

LM

Was it the board who took the decision to head to Kingston-upon-Hull ?

MS

The board put the question to the vote and won with an overwhelming majority. There was a rumor onboard, that only the UK could take us, that they had a better record with immigration – which was a hoax ! I remember the Exodus leaving Marseilles escorted by hundreds of police speed-boats. They left only once we had reached international waters. But in Hull, guess what : the same thing happened again. We were used to it at this point. We were pariahs everywhere, carrying diseases and little hope. But, at the same time, we were also becoming a source for EU embarrassment, they needed to solve the issue and have us disappear from the headlines. We had been on the Exodus 2048 for almost three months...

LM

Is it why the Istanbul meeting was called ?

MS

The Turkish government took the measure of the disaster, both morally and politically, and decided to call an extraordinary meeting of EU's Crime and Immigration Ministers. In her opening speech, Gülsün Dink, Turkey's Prime Minister, said that no one would leave the premises before an agreement was reached. A motion was later put to vote, which forced the Netherlands to let the ship dock and take care of the refugees.

LM

Why the Netherlands ?

MS

Apparently because they had the biggest debt in the EU budget, and other countries were annoyed with their constant vetos on many issues. In addition, it was close to Hull and Rotterdam was equipped with quarantine piers and quarters.

LM

So you docked in Rotterdam.

MS

Yes, and in the beginning, the same thing happened. This time, we would be allowed to disembark, but only after a quarantine period. There were obviously very heated debates within Dutch society and Parliament, and a group of opposition representatives managed to freeze the Istanbul process. But we were at our wits end and had to take a groundbreaking initiative to force our entry into the country. That's when most of us went on hunger strike. The general feeling onboard was that we had to pressure the EU with guilt, our only weapon...

After three weeks or so, the Queen decided to end the nightmare and treat us like they used to treat refugees in the 20th century. We called off the hunger strike then, and that was the end of almost four months onboard the Exodus 2048. It was an odd impression to walk on firm ground again.

LM

What were your thoughts then ? Did you see it as a victory ?

MS

We were all too wrecked to think of a victory, it was rather a relief. Also because upon disembarking, we were in the care of a medical team. After a week, we started feeling much better, even though I had no idea what would happen to us in a world that had no place for us. Yet the exhausting journey was over, and we were very happy. Hope was possible again.

The interview was conducted in English and published in a Dutch translation. Above is an excerpt of the original transcript.

Miri Stern was born in Tel Aviv in 2007. After studies at Haifa University and Oxford, UK, she devoted her time to research and teaching, both in Israel and abroad. She was the founder of the Department of Particle Physics of Tel Aviv University and the author of numerous articles. Since the collapse of the State of Israel, Stern has been associated with institutions both in Europe and North America. She was also one of the founders of the Eretz Hoven kibboutz, the first kibboutz on European soil. She lives in Eindhoven and New York.

Lotte Müller is a writer and journalist. She recently published Rise And Fall Of The Jewish Utopia – A Critical Reader, MacMillan, New York-Shanghai, 2067.