

Abu Khaled



By Bettina Ezbidy

about six or seven years ago, I bought ten plastic containers of *za'atar* at Qalandiya checkpoint. I needed gifts for friends and family abroad and also bought one for us. But my husband prefers the recipe from the north, prepared by his family (and purely with thyme and sesame), over the *za'atar* from Ramallah, where all kinds of other herbs are added. So even though the *za'atar* vendor always rushes over to me when he sees me, hoping that I'll buy more, I have not bought anything from him since. I have often felt guilty about it because I deeply respect this man whom I see again and again on the streets of Ramallah selling homemade food that ranges from *za'atar* to pickles and *shatta* (spicy hot pepper sauce). He always seems to be smiling and radiating a positive mood.

When I read the theme for this issue, I thought of him.

During the last few weeks I had been hoping to spot him, and a few days ago I saw him in town. The first thing he told me when I tried, in imperfect Arabic, to explain my intention and asked for his phone number, was: "I am married. I have a wife and three children." "Yes, yes," I said. I assured him that I was really only interested in writing an article and that I would like an interview so that I could write about him in a magazine. I tried to make him understand how impressed I am by his perseverance and positive spirit.

But in fact, this was the first time that I had seen him clearly upset. He had a shopping cart full of cherries packed in small plastic bags. "Five for ten shekels," he called out. Still not his usual smiling self, he told me that down the street he had just been told to leave; apparently they had not been nice about it. I bought some cherries, gave him a copy of the most recent issue on start-ups, and we agreed to talk soon.



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When we met, he insisted on buying me coffee, but I soon realized that he was desperately hoping to receive some aid that I could not offer. In fact, he was not the way I had expected or seemed to remember. There was neither resilience nor positive spirit.

"My name is Abu Khaled, and I am from a village near Tulkarem," he began. "For fourteen years I have been coming to Ramallah. I go home to see my children every ten days or so, other nights I sleep here. I have two girls and one boy, ages five, six, and eight. My mother and father both have diabetes, my mother also has high blood pressure and my father a bad heart. But I take care of them. It is very difficult for me. Wherever I go, the people, the police send me away because I cannot afford to buy a license. In Tulkarem it is cheaper, but I cannot sell enough. In Ramallah, a license costs 800 shekels. I just do not earn enough to be able to afford it. Making a living is so very difficult!"

I am not sure if by radiating a positive spirit he ever expressed his true feelings. Was it rather the desperate game he had to play in order to attract customers? Maybe he just let his guard down when I took the time to speak with him. And certainly the rapidly deteriorating economic situation must take its toll on him like it does on so many others! From now on I will make it a point to buy Abu Khaled's goods. But will it be enough to remove the signs of strain from his face?

Bettina Ezbidy lives in Ramallah and teaches cello at the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music.