

Chapter 26: The nursing station; living in Haifa (1991-1992)

1991. Department of Surgery. Rambam Hospital, Haifa.

Early on I noticed a trend forming: whenever I needed to speak with one of my senior residents, I could find one standing, chewing the fat, at the central nursing station by the main entry to our department. But it took me some time to understand why they were standing there.

During day hours, the nursing station looked and always felt like Tel Aviv's old central bus terminal—that of Haifa's was much more civilized. Doctors writing orders, nurses deciphering and copying the orders, clerks screaming into phones, patients' wives complaining that "his urine bag is exploding", or husbands that "her chicken soup is too cold". Consultants—psychiatrists, microbiologists, rheumatologists, and dieticians—all stood fighting for desk space to write a note in the chart; medical students wandered among the legs of all the above. Let us not forget the ancient volunteer ladies who would arrive each day to improve the mood of our "wounded boys" and stand there, drinking lemon tea in plastic cups tattooed by burning cigarettes. Small groups of infantry soldiers in oil stained field uniforms, carrying assault rifles—directly from Lebanon—would loiter around, awaiting the return of their buddy from the OR. Contributing to the sub-acute cacophony were the habitual *kibitzers*— porters and custodians who after unloading or loading a patient, or a corpse, would halt at the nursing station for a small glass of "mud" coffee, or sweet mint tea, and to share a racy joke with the nurses. I had visited, before and since, surgical departments in Africa, Canada, the US, Chile, Germany, Italy, Belgium, England, Switzerland, Cyprus, Moscow, and the West Bank, but had never experienced anything as noisy and chaotic as a nursing station at the Rambam Hospital.

But where were all our senior residents? Where were Drs. Klein, Doberman, and Alterman— all well-built and tall (they way Maccabi liked them)—what were they doing? Whenever not in the OR or ER they were standing at the nursing station, in scrubs or white coats hanging slackly over

faded jeans, crumpled T shirts, and open sandals exposing furry toes. It took me a year to decode this strange behavior: why did they waste their hours, couldn't they read or write something or go for a swim?

Then I understood: as residents, they were already marketing themselves to the public by being available to the patients' families amidst this pandemonium. "Yes, Mrs. Goldstein," fair-haired Doberman would say to the little lady carrying a heavy bag of oranges, "I fixed Mr. Goldstein's stomach" — in reality it had been fixed by Prof. Maccabi—"let me know if there are any problems...I'm always at your disposal." It was impossible to ascertain how many *shekels* or dollars —the American green bank notes were always welcomed—were dropped into Doberman's pocket the following day. This "terminal" served not only as a market place to residents trying to build up current and future private practices but also to established senior (attending) surgeons who would divert patients from here into their private offices or clinics. (The complex intricacies of the "black" and "gray" Israeli medical system are ever-changing and beyond the scope of this narrative.)

I noticed that after 3 pm the hospital emptied of all attendings; myself being one of the few taking residents on afternoon rounds. I realized that most attendings spent the afternoons and evenings striving for an extra buck, and that by doing one major operation at a private clinic on the Carmel Mountain one could earn more than what I was getting for being on call for a whole month. But to gain entry into private practice one had to be accepted into one of the private HMOs. A leading HMO was "Maccabi" (nothing to do with professor Maccabi). I applied to be added into their surgeons' list. No reply. I re-applied—nothing. I went there personally and talked to their head administrator: "your application, Doctor, is being processed." Three months silence. "Oh, you want to join Maccabi," exclaimed one of my mother's girlfriends, "why didn't you tell me? The director of Maccabi in Haifa plays bridge with us on Tuesdays." Two weeks later I was invited for an interview with the deputy medical director, a middle aged English-born lady. "We have too many surgeons on our list but I will see what I can do; would you agree to travel to the suburbs?" I never heard from her again.

In Israel it does not matter who you are but who you know and how well they are connected—and so I reached the CEO of the HMO in Tel Aviv. “Did you ever apply?” he asked, “our Haifa branch has no file under your name.” Later, before I left Israel, I accidentally came across another administrator of that HMO. “Didn’t you guess,” he said, “that it was your own boss, Professor Maccabi who had blocked you. He befriended that English woman. I know, you were his deputy but nobody needs competition.” Eventually I managed to penetrate another, smaller, HMO—its medical director was a remote member of my family. However, my contract excluded operative privileges—this was stipulated by the chief surgeon of that HMO—a surgeon from the competing department in Rambam. When you were “parachuted” from outside, it took cunning and patience to penetrate the system—two qualities I lacked.

The endemic Israeli *balagan*— *bardac* (“chaos” in slang derived from Arabic and Russian, respectively) did not spare the weekly “professorial” rounds led by Professor Maccabi. After passing the first or second patients’ room, the large procession of doctors, students, and nurses gradually fragmented into multiple groups of individuals chatting with each other. Eventually, hardly hearing our own voices Maccabi and I would be left alone to discuss the patients; the others stood by, telling jokes or flirting with attractive students. The lack of discipline irritated and frustrated me, but Maccabi, to my great surprise, seemed not to be bothered at all. To survive in that environment one had to be immune!

Formal resident education existed only on paper —teaching sessions were scheduled and announced but it was impossible to have more than one or two residents attend. There had been a curriculum established by the National Medical Scientific Committee and every year or two a few external reviewers would arrive from Tel Aviv or Jerusalem to assess whether we adhered to it, finding, of course, a solid paper trail to suggest excellent academic standards. And yet, the overall standard of the residents produced by that system was not much different to that which I would later observe in the United States. Just to show that surgical training is like an

apprenticeship in any profession—what you need is a good mentor and practical experience—and in Maccabi’s department they had plenty of the latter and very little of the former.

The competing department, Surgery A (ours was B) was led by the late professor Ami Barzilai who was nicknamed *muchtar*— meaning a “leader” in Arabic. And he behaved like a *muchtar*: well connected, cunning— kind and protective to his disciples and ruthless to the opposition. He was the director of the hospital’s “section of surgery” which existed only on paper. As Prof. Maccabi had not introduced me to him, I wondered whether I should walk to his office and say hello. But this was not necessary because Barzilai introduced himself to me the Rambam way—in the men’s room. As I was shaking my member dry, ready to leave, the full professor joined me at the adjacent urinal and undid his fly. I zippered my fly and said a dry *shalom*. Extracting his penis, the head surgeon looked straight ahead at the white porcelain wall and said solemnly without any preliminary small talk: “Schein, I warn you—never badmouth Surgery A.”

“What? Who is badmouthing? What are you talking about?”

“You did already, people talk. Stop or else.”

“But I only arrived a month ago, I don’t even know your doctors.”

“You’ve been warned.” He was in a feeble midstream but his monologue was over.

I recounted this to Maccabi. He shrugged his shoulders: “Don’t worry — for him it’s a prophylactic measure.”

Surgeons in general, and everywhere, tend to be extremely competitive egomaniacs: “if a surgeon were asked to name the three greatest surgeons, he would be hard-pressed to name the other two.” But what impressed me in Rambam was the profound disrespect of surgeons, if not doctors in general, with each other. A Hebrew word exists— *lefargen* — that does not possess an equivalent in English. It was adopted from the Yiddish *fargenen*, which had been corrupted from the German *goennen*,

meaning begrudge or resentment. But in Hebrew the use of the word has a positive connotation—*lefargen* means the total opposite of begrudge—a combination of “to praise, to support, to appreciate, to admire, to encourage” and so forth. This was however almost totally absent in Rambam. Asking a doctor an opinion of another surgeon; the response inevitably would consist of eyebrows going up, shoulders shrugging, sardonic smiles—all the above accompanied with long “*eehhhs*”. Or—if the rare occasion occurred where one would bestow a compliment on somebody it would always be followed by a certain “but...”. This was the prevailing attitude among Rambam surgeons—and the “popular” residents adopted it rapidly. Such nonchalant macho like attitude was probably imported from Eastern Europe, where according to Professor Plotnicov of St. Petersburg, “For a surgeon: modesty is the shortest way to obscurity,” and “it is not the surgeon who does not drink pure spirit, does not sleep with the scrub nurse and does not urinate in a washstand.”) The “spirits” did not apply to the average Rambam surgeon who preferred orange juice, but the constant and vigorous pursuit of casual sexual encounters with anybody—nurses, students, secretaries, visitors and even patients—was emblematic.

And yet, these few years in Rambam were altogether not too bad. Maccabi and I were working well together and seemed to appreciate and even like each other. Clinical work was abundant and stimulating, we wrote and published quite a lot during that period. I received my senior lectureship and knew that the next step—not too far away—would be a professorship. A professorship In Israel—unlike the USA, where academic titles mean nothing to the patients, but like in central Europe—*Herr Professor*—is crucial in establishing private practice. The average Jew, if forced to dish out money from his pocket, would only dish it out for a “professor”—not to a lowly “doctor”.

As in most places, Rambam included a few “positive characters”—highly qualified professionals who avoided corrupting political intrigues, stayed away from the gold rush and did good for the public—people who were termed locally *Tzadikim* (the “*Righteous ones*”). Like Isser, the portly

bearded anesthetist, summer and winter in tight shorts, a torn T shirt and brown “biblical” sandals, always smiling and witty, riding on his old *Vespa*; and ever helpful. Later when I was kicked out of Rambam, he immediately helped me to find a job. Or Titlemann—an astute senior intensivist, straight like a ruler, modest like a monk —ever engaged in combative opposition to the forces of darkness represented by General Revach and his band. He was the only one who stood openly and actively on my side when I came under attack by Revach. The *Tzadikim* in Rambam were obviously tenured; only tenured doctors would dare to speak out their opinions without endangering their positions. Under the Israeli public service system, all employees, after three years of employment, became tenured or “permanent”—only criminal activities could then result in their termination. Thus, if one would want to get rid of somebody one would have to do it within the first three years of their employment.

But it was Ahmad, a young Israeli Arab, who made my Rambam period tolerable and even enjoyable. I saw him grow from a junior resident to an outstanding and charismatic surgeon. With his sharp intellect, curious independent mind, overwhelming personal charm and high qualifications of a *bon vivant*, Ahmad had become my chum from the first day I stepped into the department. Our intimate friendship earned me the title of “the Arab lover”, which was added to the “South African racist”. After I left Rambam, Ahmad was victimized as “Schein’s friend”—an enemy; but he survived and today he holds my old Rambam position. Ahmad is a remarkable “character”—easily reproducible to multiple entertaining and sad subplots —but as I stated before, I won’t be developing the characters of my close friends.

I should not forget to mention Boris. He was among the lucky ones, out of the numerous doctors who had arrived from Russia, he managed to pass the Israeli licensing examinations and find a clinical job—others, doctors and professors, continued to sweep floors. He was a typical Russian intellectual—literary, fond of music, delicate, subtle and with a warm sense of humor. Very soon I realized that Boris was one of the best anesthetists in Rambam; whatever the case was — hernia or liver resection —with Boris the

patients were sailing smoothly through anesthesia. Boris, his wife and their child were renting a flat in Bat Galim near ours; one Saturday I met him walking his dog on the beach, his face was down: “What’s the problem, Boris?”

“They stopped my night calls, the budget, you know.”

“So?”

“So? No calls, no money—how am I supposed to feed my wife and son?”

It turned out that Boris, who provided the best anesthesia in the hospital, was working as a slave. To get paid for a few night calls he had to work during the days as a volunteer —for nothing.

I do not remember what I replied. What could I have said—we all had our own problems. But later, soon after I left Rambam, one morning Boris was found locked in the toilet of that scruffy OR doctors’ changing room — as a rule of thumb the quality of surgical care correlates directly with the quality of the surgeons’ changing room—a plastic tubing in his brachial vein, connected to an infusion of *pentothal*. Boris, the top anesthetist decided to anesthetize himself forever. It was Abdullah who informed me about what happened. I was deeply saddened: is this how we, a nation of chronic sufferers and immigrants, treat new comers? I remember with distaste the patronizing, the jocular contempt, with which Israeli doctors treated their new colleagues from Russia — having a Russian accent was interpreted as practicing an inferior brand of medicine. But xenophobia is endemic everywhere — later on, in the USA, I have felt it on my own skin.

* * * * *

When returning to old hometowns— they always seem different: not only do they change during the years of one’s absence, but one also discovers its previously unknown faces. And so it was with Haifa: an underrated jewel on the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean, where the steep green Carmel Mountain meets the sea; with miles of sandy beaches and pine forests — a pseudo Mediterranean San Francisco or perhaps Cape Town. Haifa is a fusion of the East and West; the lower port town looking

like a little Alexandria, and the upper town like a mid European spa resort—lush, elegant, peaceful. As a “good” Jewish *Ashkenazi* boy, I had grown up on the slopes of the Carmel in the “European” Haifa, where ladies like my mother had huddled in cafés, kvetching in German, amidst cigarettes and *Strudel*, reminiscent of Krakow or Vienna. I had little knowledge of the “exotic” Arabic enclave of Haifa; but now, with Abdullah’s help, Haifa’s Levantine delights were revealed to me. Often after a prolonged midnight laparotomy, we would venture out to the Arab market at the *vadi* for a *hummus* at “Allenbi” restaurant. We’d share a large portion of freshly ground *hummus*, covered with a thick warm patè of fava beans and garlic, swimming in a lake of extra virgin olive oil from the Lower Galilee. One would eat this with two freshly baked *pitas* and side dishes of sliced onions, tomatoes, pickled eggplants, and broken olives, and wash it down with a bottle of *Goldstar* beer. Such a breakfast, according to Abdullah, would build a solid layer of concrete in the stomach—keeping hunger away until the night. And then, heavy but satisfied and belching out fumes of garlic, we would return to Rambam for yet another day.

And there was the “Gold Fish” restaurant, wedged between the commercial Jaffa Road and the railway trucks. One cubicle, five or six small wooden tables, broken chairs, a ceiling fan, and a noisy air conditioner. Behind the counter, in the tiny kitchen, there was a huge metal bathtub, filled with ever boiling oil, where all sorts of fresh sea food—the catch of the day — was turning yellow brown and crisp. The *chef*, who was also the manager, a diminutive and hyperactive young Arab, was assisted by one or two ever-changing blond *Russiot*. This was ours favorite place; there was no need to order — a bunch of *pitas*, pickles, a jar of *charif* –hot sauce, and a tall mountain of fish, shrimps, calamari, and whatever was caught in the net, appeared instantly on our table. This was always followed with a bottle of *Arak* served by the *chef* himself: “*Tfadal, tfadal* — please, welcome—it’s on the house”, his right hand on his heart—the Arab way. And just on the other side of Haifa’s bay was Akko—Acre, the ancient harbor town built by the crusaders, the fort town that Napoleon had attempted to conquer from the

Ottomans, but failed. Akko, with its ancient and crumbling majestic walls, crusaders' halls, authentic Arab market, is yet another relatively under appreciated Levantine jewel. Here we would sit in the evening night, watching the fishing boats leave the harbor, which had been built by the Greeks, enlarged by the Romans and rebuilt by the crusaders. At Abu Christo's they would serve whole grilled fish on large silver plates, covered with parsley, dried thyme, and lemon. Then, across the bay, the sun would slowly disappear behind the Carmel Mountain and Haifa's lights would start to glitter through the white mist emerging from the dark water.

* * * * *



Ahmad and his late wife Rim



With Heidi in Akko

More pictures below



Haifa and the Carmel Mount as seen from Akko