

## My Sister Victoria

I started giving money to beggars after my sister's death. Every time I do so I say to her: it is because of you; I was always opposed to it. But she, in her life, always stopped when people reached out their hand. Sometimes it got her into trouble, like in India, when flocks of beggars surrounded her and I had to come to her rescue. My sister was a very spontaneous person and her responses were immediate, particularly to human misery.

Victoria's political insight derived from a deep knowledge of history, particularly ancient Greece and Rome. Suetonius described for her how power corrupts human nature and Thucydides delineated the mechanisms of pointless wars. It was a thrill to travel with her. She was never bored by the long rows of Roman emperors in the museums and could tell stories about most of them. We did a lot of traveling together; we called those escapades to Mexico, Russia, China, India, Georgia, Armenia, South Africa, and Mozambique "studying the world". I was usually responsible for the organizational part, while Victoria brought her knowledge about the country we visited. The trip usually began with a few guide books and ended with scores of books that she was buying and reading during the trip. We went to see many slums. Impoverished people attracted her like a magnet. She used to say that she was a low-life herself.

Victoria completely disregarded her external appearance, she was incapable of saying to people outside the academic milieu that she was a professor, and I always envied her for her lack of vanity, a quality with which I am not blessed. She was shy at social events, but was an assertive public speaker on academic and political subjects, lecturing to students, giving talks on her scientific research at academic conferences, or speaking in the media concerning political issues. She was frequently elected best teacher by students at the Hebrew University and never told me about it. I usually discovered this inadvertently when her name appeared on posters in the Medical School, where I am employed.

In 1993, when Victoria returned to Israel after eight years of absence as a resident of the United States, we both started to study the mechanisms of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. We took the first steps in exploring this subject when we began volunteer work in an El-Hader Palestinian school, Zuhur el Amal. Near the school, for the first time, we saw the shocking image of a demolished house of a Palestinian family with ten children. The house was demolished not because a member of the household participated in terrorist activity, but because it was too close to the road leading to the Jewish settlement of Tekoa. Victoria was deeply shaken by this experience, which led her to join the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions. She spent many nights in Palestinian houses trying to protect them from demolition. It rarely helped and she could only watch alongside Palestinian families as their house was destroyed by a bulldozer. The Israeli authorities' justifications for destroying Palestinians houses in the occupied territories are numerous. Victoria wrote about it in one of her best political articles: "The History and 'Morals' of Ethnic Cleansing" published in *Counterpunch* (January 2009), half a year before her death.

With time she became more and more overwhelmed by Palestinian suffering and she began to work with Doctors for

Human Rights. She accompanied Palestinians who came to Israeli hospitals to receive treatment. She had numerous stories about these people, some even funny. Yet I learned of one very moving case only after her death, which I will recount at the end of this article.

A children's neurologist from Shaare Zedek (a hospital located in Jerusalem), to whom Victoria brought many Palestinian children for consultations, said to me during the shiva (mourning days after the death of a close relative): "I thought, at first, that she was retired, with plenty of free time to take care of other people's problems." Victoria devoted herself to scientific research as if it was her only commitment, and she struggled against the occupation as if she did not need to teach courses, write grant proposals and articles, and participate in many other academic activities. A striking illustration of this can be seen in two articles that she published in *Nature* in 2002. One is scientific and the other is entitled "Israeli Concern about Palestinian suffering".

Following the outbreak of the second intifada, the Oslo hopes for ending the occupation were shattered, causing Victoria great emotional suffering. She needed to find an outlet for this suffering. She began to print political stickers at her own expense. One of them, which I still have, states: "Our strong leader gives your money to Yeshivot and settlements". She used to go out late at night to paste her short political statements all over Jerusalem. She used to say that in Rehavia (an affluent Jerusalem neighborhood) her stickers lasted for a day and a half, while in Kiryat Menahem (another, less secular, Jerusalem neighborhood) they survived for only half a day. In an effort to alleviate her suffering and her futile efforts to express her rage, one day, in autumn 2004, I told her: "If you want to protest against what is going on, it will be much more efficient to spread your message through a website." In October 2004, she launched *The Occupation Magazine* ([www.kibush.co.il](http://www.kibush.co.il)). This website brings news, summaries, and commentary by people opposing the occupation. Her friends keep alive this website to this day. *The Occupation Magazine* was her baby. In her political views on the Middle East conflict she was fully aware of the complexity of the political situation. But the complexity never blurred her political vision, which remained clearly focused on the Palestinian victims of the Israeli occupation. Two weeks before she died, on Saturday, June 6th, 2009, she contributed to this website for the last time.

I will conclude the commemoration of my sister with a story that was related to me by Victoria's friend, Hava, a member of a group of women that monitors Israeli military courts. These courts deal with legal issues concerning Palestinians under the occupation. In one of the court's sessions, Hava was approached by a Palestinian man, who asked her if she knew Victoria Buch. Hava said, "Yes, sure I know her, but sadly, she passed away in June last year." The man was very agitated, he called his wife to share with her this news, and they told Hava that they met Victoria under the following circumstances:

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Seven years ago this Palestinian was run over by a car driven by an Israeli settler; he was seriously injured and was hospitalized in the Hadassah hospital in Jerusalem. Victoria was asked by Doctors for Human Rights to visit the man at the hospital since no member of his family could get a permit from the Israeli army to go to Jerusalem. The man told Hava that Victoria spent whole days by his bed supporting him emotionally and also helped to get a permit for his wife to visit him in the hospital. After he left the hospital he lost contact with my sister, but when his daughter was born he and his wife named her Victoria. So now in the Arabic neighborhood of Jerusalem, A-Ram, a six-year-old girl named Victoria is growing up. Let us hope that she will see the end of the occupation and the oppression, for which Victoria Buch so persistently and patiently fought.

**Nina Mayorek**