

LDG Introduction

When the Cold War ended, people wiser than myself rushed to print with the gleeful declaration that henceforth I had nothing further to write about: Le Carré's wry spell was broken. Well, the fact is that of my fourteen novels to date, five have had nothing whatever to do with the Cold War and that as a writer I'm far happier than many of my colleagues that the Wall has finally come down and I can move to the other passions of our time.

Unlike the Kremlinologists, arm-chair strategists and defence correspondents, who are at this moment desperately scratching around for new territory, mine was staked out long ago and the LDG, written in 1981 and 1982, while the Cold War was still running nicely, is a piece of it. Its cast contains no George Smiley and no character I have used before or since. The Cold War is a distant abstraction, at best. The novel's 'theatre of the real', as my protagonist Joseph calls it, is the much longer running war between two peoples, the Jews and the Arabs. Oh, but stop stop! I've already revealed my bias. The Palestinians, I was repeatedly assured in Israel in those days, are not a people. They're a left-over rabble of peasants and layabouts, whose only task, for two thousand years, was to keep the Jewish homeland ticking over, until its rightful owners returned.

It was a hard story to come to grips with. I began with no firm plot in my head, which is my way and no preconception about which side had the better case, except that, as a young Intelligence officer in post-war Austria, I had interrogated numberless Jewish refugees and their plight was, and is, forever printed in my memory.

I had the usual English familiarity with middle-class anti-Semitism, though, Lord knows, it was never a patch on the Continental and East-European varieties that I have since encountered. Of Palestinians, of Arabs altogether, I knew next to nothing. In the Foreign Office, where I had served for a few years, Arabists had always seemed to me to have an upper-class slant to them, even when they were working on other territories. They seemed to remain a club within a club and outsiders got to hear little of their deliberations. The Arabists, of course, would have said the same about the pro-Israeli lobby, though it was much smaller. And probably, in the diplomatic theatre of the unreal, as in Joseph's theatre of the real, both sides would have been right.

Somehow, one morning, I began. My first destination was the offices of the League of Arab States, in Green Street, in London's West End. Is it still there, I wonder? With its security cameras on the rooftops of adjoining houses and its bored, fit men,

lounging in the streets. I've never been back. Not to the Middle East, not to Green Street. Once the books are finished, I never do. The PLO's Representative in Green St, in those days, was a Mr Rumlowie, and I had an appointment with him that midday. I sent him a copy of Time Magazine, with my engaging features on the cover. On the telephone I dropped names of people we had in common. « Yes, yes, nice fellow », said a brown voice. It was in my mind, if we got along, to take Mr R on to lunch. I wanted everything he could give me - introductions, guidance, warnings, propaganda, lies - I didn't mind. I wanted the treatment from both sides. But because the PLO were strangers to me, I wanted them to have first go. I pressed the bell, and the bored, fit men in the street eyed me without expression. So did the cameras on the roof. The door opened and I stepped into an armoured glass coffin set on end. The door clicked shut behind me. While I stood in my nice suit, peering through the glass into the pretty eighteenth century hallway, two Arab heavies studied me with liverish disapproval. My coffin opened, I stepped into the hall, the men closed on me and patted me down, the long, slow, methodical hand search of professionals. They do it to you at Lod airport in Tel Aviv, or in the antechamber to Yasser Arafat's permanently temporary headquarters. And they do it to you in Green Street. Or they did then. They don't just frisk you, these Arab and Jewish bodyguards. They interrogate you with their hands and eyes, watching you for suspicious body talk as they move slowly over you. Time is of the essence - take as much of it as you like, make the suspect conscious of his genitals, his bad breath, his bad intentions. Writing the LDG, I was searched like this more times than I'll ever remember. But you never forget a first time and mine was in Green Street, that midday, on my way to visit Mr R. And of course Mr R didn't show up. He left me standing at the altar. There was nothing in his appointments book, his secretary had never heard of me, he was abroad, he was out, he was busy - try another day. So that was another first time. Countless Arabs have kept me waiting since. I could do a book on the antechambers of the PLO alone. But the absent R. gave me my baptism of fire, which is a bad joke, because his predecessor in London had been shot dead and R. himself was in due course shot dead in Spain, or perhaps he was blown up, I forget. But the PLO won't forget.

After Green Street, I did what I should have done in the first place, and got hold of Patrick Seale, the distinguished Arabist and writer, and gave him the lunch I couldn't give R. And through Seale, I began to leapfrog, which is how it goes when it's going properly and you're making the inward and outward journey at the same time. People led to other people, I was passed around, pointed in conflicting directions. My telephone never stopped ringing, everybody wanted to persuade me of something, head me off from some fatal error. My case had finally become active, as far as the Palestinians were concerned.

From then on, like my heroine Charlie, I rode the emotional pendulum, swaying first this way then that, as I went back and forth, most often via Cyprus, between Israel and the scattered Palestinians. One week I was with the Palestinians in Lebanon or

Jordan or Tunisia, the next I was in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv or the Negev or, on one disastrous occasion, crossing the Alambe bridge from the Jordanian side while afflicted with dysentery. My friend David Greenway, then of The Washington Post, was with me and I will never forget watching him, as I crouched miserably in the back of our car, stride confidently down the line of parked lorries to the checkpoint and by throwing out the name of every Oriental dignitary he knew, persuading the guard to let us go first. On another occasion, Greenway and I had ourselves driven up to an old crusader fort on the extreme southern borders of Lebanon. The Palestinians were still in occupation, just. I'll never know which I was more afraid of - the sniper fire from the valley or the driving technique of our Druise driver, who prayed in grunts each time he flung us round another hairpin bend. Greenway was based in Jerusalem in those days, and like myself covering both sides of the conflict.

It took an awful lot of waiting to meet Yasser Arafat. I'd wasted the requisite number of infuriating hours in the evil little anteroom to the PLO office in Beirut, studying the mangy exhibits of Israeli cluster bombs and napalm canisters, while I waited to be received by their spokesman of the day, a Mr Lapadi. I had nearly asphyxiated myself, breathing the stale cigarette smoke that clouded the offices of Arafat's seemingly numberless deskborn heroes.

« You will be contacted at your hotel, Mr John. », I had been told. « Remain in your hotel, please and wait ». Writing is waiting. I hunkered down in Beirut's Commodore hotel, and spent a lot of money in the bar, where the parrot had learned to imitate incoming and outgoing gunfire. I listened to the evening fusillades and watched the long, slow flashes behind the hilltops, from my unlit bedroom window. I ate jumbo spring rolls in the empty Chinese restaurant that the Commodore's extraordinary staff somehow kept running, through thick and thin. And I kept a constant ear for the front desk. It was the limping waiter who finally brought me the summons. I think he had lost most of a leg, but he was so young and agile that it was hard to guess how much of him was missing. I was about half way into my iron-case spring roll, as he toppled towards me between the empty tables, his eyes burning with excitement. « Our chairman will see you now », he announced, in a conspiratorial murmur of immense significance. « Now please ». But it was my evening to be stupid. I saw that he meant me to stand up, so out of a kind of courtesy I did so. I supposed he was proposing to take me to see the chairman of the board of the hotel. I wondered whether I had stayed too long without paying my bill. Or perhaps our chairman wanted me to sign a book for him. Or perhaps he proposed to throw me out for some real or imagined offence against the hotel's propriety. In Beirut, nobody's behaviour, including my own, was predictable.

I followed the boy across the lobby as far as the front door. And it wasn't till I saw the little group of fighters, with their coats worn like capes over their shoulders, and their hands out of sight in the folds, and their two sand-coloured Volvo saloon cars waiting,

that it dawned on me that I was being taken to see the chairman of the PLO.

Somewhere in the LDG there is a description of a similar journey through Beirut at night - the repeated switching of cars, the lying low, the ninety-mile-an-hour burst before we bumped across the central reservation of a dual carriage way in the wrong direction and continued with our lights flashing down the opposing lane. It was the journey we made that night. Our final destination was a half-bombed, half-restored high-rise apartment house, the tenth or twelfth floor. And here at last, as the fighters came forward to frisk me for the umpteenth time, I lost my temper and announced rudely that I was sick of being searched. Smiling apologetically, they drew back and bowed me into Arafat's presence.

He was wearing a silver-coloured pistol, and a perfectly pressed uniform. And he smelled of baby powder. The stubble on his cheeks, as we entered the traditional embrace, was silky, not prickly. « Mr John, why have you come here? » he demanded, unexpectedly using my Christian name while he placed his hands on my shoulders, studied my eyes like a worried doctor. « Mr Chairman », I said, « I've come to put my hand on the Palestinian heart ». He seized my hand and pressed it to his breast. His hand was as soft as a girl's. « Mr John, it is here, it is here. » He talked in soft rushes of enthusiasm, punctuating a standard act with inspirational leaps to suit his audience. He could lecture you like a schoolmaster or stare at you like a spellbound disciple, while he listened to your wisdom. But the face that appeared between times was the face of an over-sensitive little soldier who had lost his horse and you felt an irresistible urge to go and find it for him. I was enchanted by Arafat, which was what I wanted to be. I wanted to be as seducible as my heroine Charlie, I wanted her to be a twice promised woman, serving both loyalties and therefore doomed to betray them also.

So I went with the flow, as we say these days. But with both flows, with both opposing currents. And the terror? you ask indignantly. The violence? The bombs on Jewish schoolbuses? Was I really so starry-eyed, so soft-headed that I didn't even realise what was going on beneath my nose? Oh, I realised all right. You didn't have to be in Beirut very long in those days to smell the terror outside the door. It didn't take a trained eye to see that half of the people you laughed and chattered with should be stretched out on the psychiatrist's couch, that their lives since infancy had been so displaced and violent that they had learnt to identify normal society as a hostile target. Those who are treated as pariahs become pariahs just as, to quote Auden, those to whom evil is done, do evil in return.

And of Israel? Why do I say so little of my experiences there? Well, because in a sense they were predictable and structured. And because Israelis are accessible, they have doorbells and telephones that work, and nice houses, and schools and passports.

If you want to talk to someone in Israel, you say so and in almost every case, you can. The official arguments are familiar, and fall more easily on our Western ear. Nobody kept me waiting. Generals in shirt sleeves leapt to their feet, clapped me on the shoulder, had all the time in the world. Politicians, Intelligence officials, newspaper editors chatted and argued together in an atmosphere of assured normality, which the Palestinians, as a matter of philosophy, refuse to let into their lives. It is not the Israelis' fault that victory does not bring popularity, that the romantic in us instinctively espouses the underdog. The Palestinians like to get themselves up as exiled partisans, as a popular and spontaneous movement of a people that has become a pawn in the world's game. But Israel can no longer conceal its identity, as a hugely impressive, American-armed, military power, arguably the best fighting force in the world. In the tug of war of public relations, the Palestinians have become the David, and the Israelis the Goliath. It was easy enough to see why European terror gangs had nailed the Palestinian flag to their mast. Easy enough too to understand how my Charlie's heart could be swayed in each direction in turn.

The reception of the book, three years later, was as paradoxical as had been my experience of writing it, but then I expected no different. The Israelis were relaxed and gave it a good press. In America, where no popular novel had presumed to suggest that the Palestinians were human beings with a legitimate case, it created a brief furor. I endured, pretty much in silence, the cheap gibe that anyone who criticises Israel is by definition anti-Semitic. I received some foul letters from American Jewish organisations, but some remarkably moving ones from individual Jews. The most influential American reviewers, Jewish and non-Jewish, gave the book a good time. A leading Arab American dismissed it as the usual stuff about Arabs as terrorists. In the Arab press, the book was praised and damned in the same haphazard way. An important Arab critic declared it anti-Palestinian, on the grounds that in the novel, as in life, the Palestinians lost.

As to myself, looking at it for the first time after ten years, I find that I am uncharacteristically at ease with it, my main regret being that we spend a little too long with the Germans at the beginning. My sadness is, that with a few changes, the story could be played today, tomorrow or the next day. And Charlie, my heroine, would still come out of it as I did myself, torn to pieces by the battle between two peoples who both have justice on their side.