

# Sedek

A Journal on the Ongoing Nakba

Towards return  
of Palestinian refugees

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## MIRI LITVAK THREE STORIES

From the Hebrew: Amy Asher

## MEDIOCRE ENGINEER

Great Uncle Garik works at the university now. He and his friends invented a method for electromagnetic measurements that measure something in the water. Grandpa explained to me that this is a very important scientific invention and that they even wrote a story about it in Haaretz. Grandma showed me the story with a picture of Great Uncle Garik's in his lab.

"This is excellent", Grandpa concluded after reading the story. "Their research will help to turn Israel's seawater into water we can drink!"

Everyone was happy for Uncle Garik, but Uncle Garik didn't seem as happy as the others.

"I didn't think anyone would still need me here", he told me as we walked down the stairs. Ever since he went back to work, if he doesn't come home too late, we go down in the evening to ride around the park. He takes Daddy's bike, which Daddy doesn't use anyway and he helps me carry my own bike down. "But good, so long as you have your health...", Uncle Garik added and made a sound that's something between a sigh and a hiss.

Uncle Garik looks very healthy. He rides fast in zig-zags and laughs with me. He taught me how to steer without hands and now I can do it really well.

"I am not very good in my line of work", he tells me when we park the bikes and rest on the bench for a while. The park is already empty. All the kids have gone home for supper. "I know I'm mediocre...", he says without sorrow, as if saying something unimportant. "It's because of my dad", he sighs, and I don't know if it's because he is tired today or sad.

"Because of your dad?" – I don't understand – "but he died a long time ago, didn't he?"

"Yes, and in ripe old age", confirms Uncle Garik, "but when I was about to start my medical studies my mom found him hanging on a rope. She went to work, but on the way to the train her heel broke and she had to go back home to change her shoes", he tells me in a practical, non-dreamy tone, as if this is simply

information that I have to know. "Dad was already unconscious, but she managed to bring him back to life. My mother was also a doctor..."

"He tried to kill himself?" I asked, "but why?"

"Why?" Uncle Garik turned to face me and scrunched up his eyes in a way that is familiar by now. "All the papers were hyping it -- the so-called 'murderers in white coats' – and all the Jewish professors in Dad's hospital were afraid to go to work. They were waiting to be taken away at any moment...", he used an expression I already knew from grandpa's stories. He didn't bother explaining it to me, as if he knew I already knew it. "Stalin was about to deport all the Jews to Siberia and execute them...", he said and then went silent for a moment. "My father was also afraid", he continued, "we are all going to die soon, Dad kept saying every evening as he sat motionless on the kitchen stool and stared at his glass. He loved to drink... but I... I couldn't believe that we would all die soon. I was young. I wanted to live. I wanted to be a doctor like him and like all previous generations of my family...". Uncle Garik leaned back on the bench and stretched his arms over his head.

"Then Stalin died", he said. "It was springtime. The snow was still on the ground, but by noon the sun would come out and give out warmth, and by morning the streets would be covered with a thin layer of ice. This is why my mothers' legs slipped and her heel broke. Lucky!..." He crossed his arms behind his head and went silent, but I didn't feel like he was daydreaming or remembering like Mom does when she tells a story. All this time he stayed with me. "You understand, Bobbik? You understand what it means?" he asked and hugged my shoulders. I could feel his warm arm and his hand grabbing my shoulder. Grandpa told me that before the progress of modern medicine, the physicians' power was in their hands. They would feel their patients to know what they're suffering from and how to cure them. They didn't need x-rays, CT scans or ultrasounds. Garik's palms were wide and flexible

– I don't know if those doctors who could diagnose by touch also had such palms, but I did feel their resolve, and the power of somebody who knows how to do all kinds of stuff with them.

“After the incident with Dad, I gave up and became an engineer. But... But I'm mediocre, I know it...”, he raised his head and gazed into the darkness of the park. It was completely empty and only one couple was whispering on the faraway bench. They didn't notice us. “It was at that time that your mother arrived in our town, at Chinsk – a young and gentle Jewish girl who just escaped from Moscow. This is how we became friends. Your father was also waiting to die in Moscow. Everybody waited. This is why he let Klarchka escape. He wanted at least her to save her life. That's what he thought”.

I did not interrupt Uncle Garik because his story was familiar to me. I thought about the trees in the courtyard my mother would tell me about, and about the diagonal path between the two buildings. Suddenly everything came together for me as one story. Grandpa's book in a blue wrapping paper was probably really a gift for Grandma, an apology for not having asked her to marry him in time. “But what do you say”, said Uncle Garik in a different tone, “Do you want us to ride some more or go back upstairs? Grandma is probably waiting for us, isn't she?”

“I don't know”, I said. I didn't feel like riding again, but I didn't want to go upstairs either. I wanted to ask Uncle Garik some more questions. He told the story differently than Grandpa. He told the story himself, as it happened, and it was easy to understand. I thought of his father's bloodless face with a rope strung around his neck, about the tall plain trees and the snowy forest, about the thin ice Under Garik's mother's feet, and about a gentle Jewish girl wearing a dark jacket who came to Chinsk to be a doctor so that Stalin's men wouldn't deport her to Siberia on a freight train just like all the other Jewish doctors.

“But why didn't Grandpa escape to Chinsk together with Grandma?” I asked Uncle Garik.

“That I don't know. I was just a teenager then. You need to ask him yourself”, Great Uncle Garik tapped my shoulder, “maybe he still remembers”.

## THE BLACK CRUST

Great Uncle Garik pointed deep into his bag. I looked inside, but even before I could see anything, I smelled the bread. At the beach near the sea the smell of water and air overpowers everything else, but the scent of the bread was strong and very sharp. A large crust of black bread like the kind Grandma Clara buys at Oleg's store near her house lay inside Uncle Garik's bag: dark, thick bread, and each slice was thicker and heavier than the airy bread dad buys at the supermarket.

"Whenever I go outside", said Uncle Garik in a scholarly and secretive tone, "I always take a piece of bread with me, so that I won't go hungry during the day".

"No, what are you talking about?!", I tried to calm him. "You won't go hungry", I said, "Today is Saturday and we're going to have a nice Sabbath lunch". We may even go to a restaurant to celebrate his visit, I thought, but at that moment dad raised his eyes from his book, turned his head towards us and said, "Well, how was it?" He nodded at the plastic bag at the edge of the blanket and said, "I've got something here... in Tina's bag, coffee, look... If you want... Bobbik, get me some fruit if there's any", he added and went back to his reading.

My dad doesn't like to go to the beach. He joins us when we drive to Ashdod on Saturdays because Mom keeps begging him. Mom loves it when we do things together as a family. She thinks that if each of us does things separately, we stop being a family. But I also like it very much when Dad comes along, even though he stays away from the water. Mom tries to talk him into it and so do I, but it's hopeless. When I ask Dad to come with me, he smiles a little at me as if there's some big secret that prevents him from getting wet, as if he is bewitched and if he goes into the sea, something terrible will happen.

Dad lies on the blanket and reads his book about the philosophy of art, and sometimes goes with me for a short walk along the beach. We follow the waterline

and in the distance we see the port of Ashdod towering like a huge monster, like a gigantic mysterious city. Dad looks at the people on the beach and makes all sorts of witty comments about them, and whenever a wave comes and threatens to bite his white feet, he simply runs deeper into the sand.

Dad never takes off his clothes, and only sometimes removes his shirt and remains in the white undershirt he wears at home. His big shoulders look very naked under its straps. Their skin is pale and tender like a girl's, with a thin web of bluish veins painted over. This way dad always stays white as if he lives in a wintry land rather than in Israel where you have lots of sun year round.

Great Uncle Garik drank his coffee standing up. He ate mom's sandwich with a big appetite. He didn't sit on the blanket next to dad, but stood quietly on the sand, facing the water. I often see men standing like that on this beach, gazing at the sea. I don't know why they don't stroll or play racquet ball or don't lie on their blankets to read books and magazines like the women do. They don't talk – they just stand still.

"I'm going to the water", I finally said. I couldn't wait any longer.

After sitting so long in the sun, the water that touched my skin was burning cold, and the sea was no longer as quiet as earlier in the morning. The waves kept growing stronger, they lashed and sprayed me and the foam got in my eyes and nose, and I had to jump up so that the waves wouldn't slap me right in the face. Around me were elderly and flabby Russians who kept their hats on in the water, and one woman entered with her eyeglasses, with white paper attached to them over her nose. She advanced slowly as if careful not to mess up her appearance, and her wobbly arms and round belly vibrated like waves. When I looked at her, I saw Uncle Garik behind her back. He had followed me.

"Hey, Bobbik", he said to me. He was already calling me like everyone else did. "You coming with me to the

rocks?”, he asked and pointed at the little bay close to the surfing cabin. He didn’t wait for my answer and jumped into the water. For a moment, his body painted a beautiful arch above the waves. I could see his arms flashing as they spun in measured and composed rowing movements like bird wings flapping. They were white with silver hair he hadn’t gotten a chance to get a tan yet, so the sun made them seem even whiter. His movements were long and slow, perhaps because of me – to indicate that he’s waiting for me – but he advanced quickly, without any sign of tension or nervousness.

After several movements he turned around to see if I was joining him, and nodded at me. He didn’t speak – the waves were too loud anyway for anyone to hear anything. I hesitated for a second and then moved in his direction. The distance wasn’t great. We swam side by side. I tried to lengthen my movements like his so as not to stay behind, but I was sure he was swimming slowly especially for me. He didn’t swim at full strength – I could see it clearly. Apparently he is strong and agile, despite being old, I thought, and at that moment, when I turned my head to breathe, I swallowed some water, but I did my best not to cough.

The rocks surrounded a small bay, like a quiet pond away from the beach. When we got to them, we climbed over and sat down to rest. The sun was already high in the sky. I saw the beachfront and the entire city of Ashdod stretched out before me. It was bright, tall and modern, and seemed new as if they just finished building it. But it also seemed unpopulated, as if nobody lived in its towering neighborhoods, as if its stone buildings glimmering in the sun were not a real city but a movie set. Everything in it was too new, smooth and clean. I could see no objects or colorful laundry lines on the balconies, and the passers-by beneath the buildings were all alone. From afar, I could identify the rows of retired old people sitting on the public benches near the beach that we see when we arrive in the morning: short, stout women with red-orange hair and thin men

wearing caps and leaning on canes.

“Israel is beautiful”, said Uncle Garik. He looked at the white city with me. “The sea is good, very good...”, he added, “but salty... very salty... hot”. I didn’t understand what he meant – the sea is salty by definition. His face wore a smile of contentedness and odd embarrassment. I asked him if you have to be strong to dive, if you need a lot of strength, and he shrugged his shoulders and said, “Strength? No, you don’t need strength. You need to love...”, and looked at me with narrowing eyes, as if he were observing me from a distance.

The day wore on and towards noon and the waves kept rising and foaming. Uncle Garik turned his head away from the city and looked into the deep sea. It was wide, gigantic and alive, as if it had a mood of its own. It was all foaming like a man in rage who is capable of doing something terrible for no reason, someone you should steer clear of. I was afraid that despite Mom’s warnings, Uncle Garik would want to swim deep into the sea, it was so tempting, but Great Uncle Garik only gazed at it for a long time and said, “Beautiful isn’t it?”

When we got back to the beach Dad was still engrossed in his book. Mom sat on the blanket shiny and wet – she too had returned from her swim. I shook some drops of water on Daddy’s body, and his body shook from head to toe. He shrank and waved his arms at me in a way that was pretty funny. “Bobbik, don’t pick on me!”, he said. Mom laughed out loud, but I didn’t laugh. I only returned Dad’s little smile back to him.

## IN THE HEART THERE'S ONLY BLOOD

Grandpa already knew about our visit to Jerusalem. I didn't tell him anything. I didn't tell him about Great Uncle Garik's big dark eyes that moved slowly. I asked Grandpa where the body goes after death. "The body disintegrates", Grandpa snapped back.

"And what do you feel?" I asked.

"Nothing. You don't feel anything. It's all over".

It seemed to me that Grandpa was particularly pleased to tell me those things that way. He said it with a kind of cheerfulness. He raised his head to look at me for a second and his face had a mischievous smile, and I didn't know whether he was serious or jesting, but I realized he wouldn't tell me and that I'd have to guess it myself.

Grandpa was busy with his favorite pastime: organizing his CD cases. He cut color images from papers and magazines showing composers and performers related to the compositions in the CDs and stuck them on the cases according to the recordings' contents and country of origin. His desk was full of thin paper strips of all colors, and he was holding a pair of scissors in his hand.

"The dead body disintegrates and decomposes", he said, as if this were a commonly known and trivial fact of life.

"Decomposes?" I asked.

"Yes, decomposes and disappears like the food remains in the trash can".

"But Grandpa, the food that's left in the trash does not disappear. It becomes disgusting and stinky".

"That's very true", Grandpa confirmed. "And after you go down and throw it into the big garbage cans in the room behind the building and the garbage workers come and get it, they take it to a place where it decomposes. It loses its entire structure and becomes a sort of slime, something very similar to the earth itself".

"The earth?" That I couldn't believe, although usually I believe my Grandpa. He's smart and knows

a lot of stuff. "And what about your heart? Your soul?" I asked.

"In the heart there's only blood", commented Grandpa as he hyperventilated while trying to stitch a red paper strip onto the back of a narrow CD case.

"Everything disappears", he said without raising his eyes towards me. He made such an effort that he even stuck his tongue out. He passed his fingers over the thin paper strip over and over again, and then wiped it with a napkin to make sure the glue did not smudge the case.

"That's impossible..." I murmured, half to myself.

And what about Uncle Garik's heart? I thought. And Garik's big eyes – would they be gone too? I wanted to ask.

"Come, Bobbik, climb on the desk here", said Grandpa, "and bring me the book that's behind the picture".

Grandpa's room is crowded and pretty dark, with only a little light coming through the little window. But Grandpa loves the stuff in his room, and keeps adding more and more pictures and statuettes of interesting people or favorite characters. Even behind the loudspeaker of his stereo he has a picture you can see only from a certain place in the room and only if you look at a certain angle. But if Grandpa likes someone, he always finds room for him on the walls or on the cabinet shelves.

The picture showed a man dressed in a shiny red shirt with wide sleeves and his neckline open wide. "This is a very important Russian philosopher", remarked Grandpa in passing. The man's hair was wavy and he looked like a Gypsy singer with a guitar, rather than a philosopher. "Come up here", said Grandpa, and he made room for me on the desk amongst the papers, CD cases and bottles.

I climbed on a chair and then on the desk and pulled the book out.

"No, not this one", Grandpa corrected me, "that

one, with the blue cover”.

Grandpa took the book from me, wiped off the dust with his shirtsleeve and fished out a tiny black-and-white photograph of a man with a suit and tie. “You see?” he showed me, “this is Emil Gilels, the world-famous pianist who died because of a mistake by the glorious doctors at the Kremlin. He felt bad before the concert and since he was a senior and renowned artist, they took him immediately to the hospital of the Soviet elite at the Kremlin. But who got a job at the Kremlin’s hospital? Not me or your grandma, lousy Jews! But the children of the senior Politburo officials and all kinds of other talentless people with connections. Do you follow? They did not do what any reasonable doctor should have done. Instead they gave Gilels a penicillin shot – but Emil Gilels was allergic to penicillin. He died on the spot! At age 58! Emil Gilels’s body also rotted and turned into stinky slime, but luckily for us, technology was already advanced enough to preserve the music at least. I have almost all of his tapes! Oh, Emil Gilels! What a master!” Grandpa slid the small photo in front of the light, and then cut it along the sides so that the white frame would be of equal size on all sides and placed it on the CD case. “You see? That’s what’s left”.

“But what about the afterlife”, I refused to settle this so quickly.

“There is none”, Grandpa retorted.

“So I won’t be able to meet Uncle Garik when we die?”

Grandpa hesitated for a moment. “No, kid”, he laughed, “nor will you be able to meet me. Anyone you wish to meet, you have to make haste and meet them here in this world of ours”, he concluded and applied the glue to the back of Gilels’ photo.

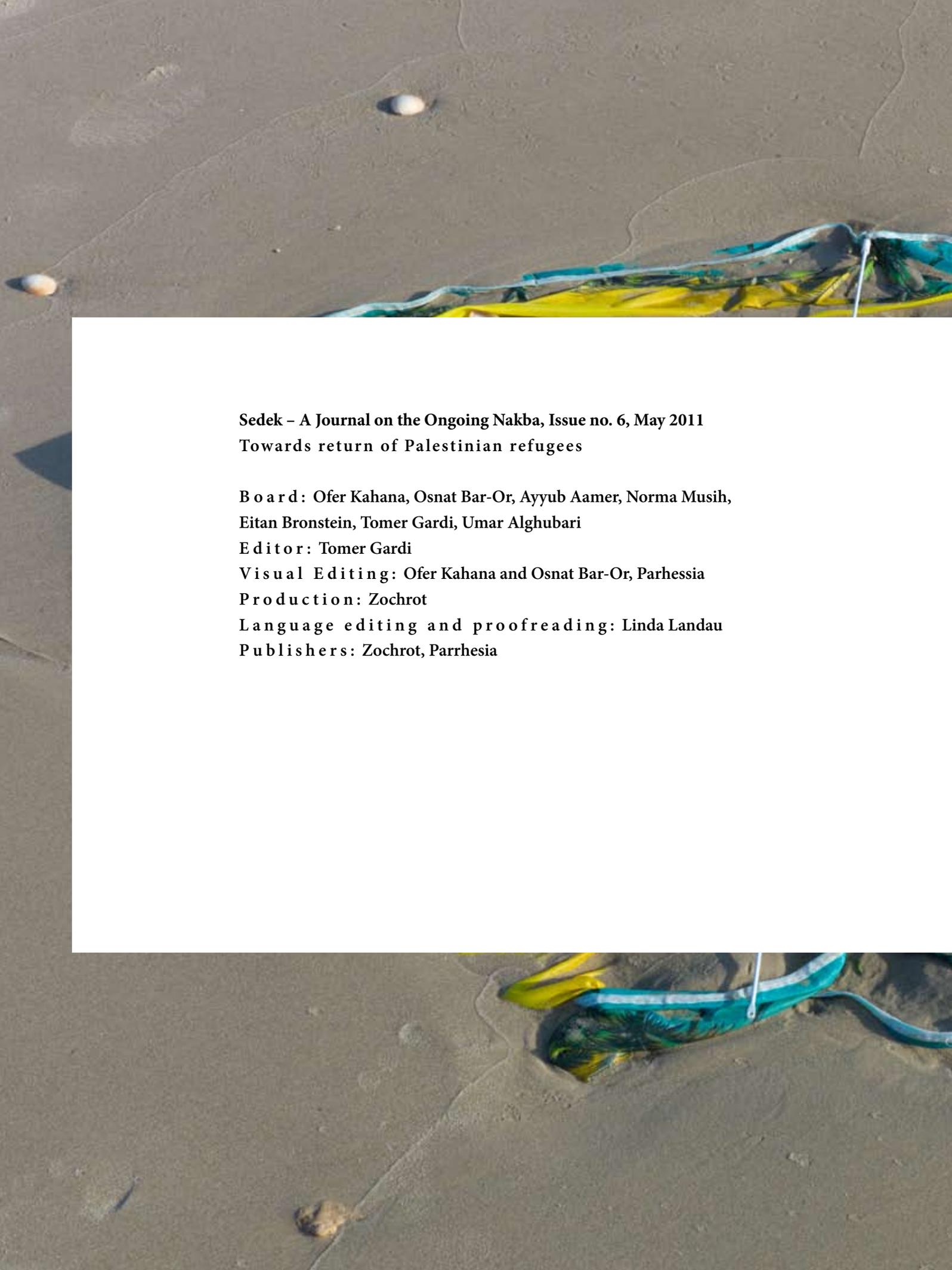
I couldn’t stop myself: “Then why don’t you want to go visit Uncle Garik before he dies”.

“Mmm...” Grandpa hesitated again and that’s how I knew his reply would not be frank. “No need to bother

a sick man... it’s difficult enough for him as it is...”, he said in the grave and angry tone I have come to know. Grandpa uses it when he doesn’t want to talk about something. With his long, straight fingers, he turned the plastic case around and attached Emil Gilels to the frame.

“And when you die, wouldn’t you want me to visit you before your death? Even me?” I didn’t want to aggravate Grandpa, but I couldn’t stop myself again. I wanted to know. Grandpa fixed something in the picture and pushed the case away from his eyes, stretching his arm forward to relish the fruit of his labor.

“We will see about that...”, he said, and his dark, unkempt eyebrows dropped over his eyes, sheltering them like a pavilion that lets the rain slide.



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**Towards return of Palestinian refugees**

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