

Aeham Ahmad
The Pianist from Yarmouk

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»When I started to play, the birds in Syria started singing again.«

A young man is playing piano in the middle of a bombsite. He is playing for his neighbours, and above all for the children to distract them from the atrocities of war. An image iconic for the catastrophe in Syria – but also for the inextricable will of the people to somehow oppose the destruction. His playing reached and touched millions of people around the world via You Tube.

Now Aeham Ahmad tells his own story. His sheltered upbringing in a still peaceful Syria, the beginnings of the rebellion and the terrible war, and the life threatening flight across the Mediterranean to Germany. Time and again it is music that comforted, gave courage and literally saved lives.

Aeham Ahmad, born in 1988 in Damascus, is part of the Palestinian minority in Syria and lived in the refugee camp Yarmouk with his family. His musical talent was fostered from an early age, he learned piano from the age of 5, and later studies music in Damascus and Homs. Ahmad had to flee the country in 2015 and made it to Germany. Meanwhile he lives with his family in Wiesbaden and gives numerous concerts. He was awarded the first International Beethoven Prize for Human Rights in December 2015.

Sandra Hetzl, born in 1980 in Munich, commutes between Beirut and Berlin. She translates the work of numerous Arabic authors into German. She is also the brain behind the 10/11-Collektive, a lab and mouthpiece for contemporary Arabic literature.

Ariel Hauptmeier, born in 1969 in Bad Oeynhausen, traveled the world as a reporter for many years. He worked as an editor for the magazine GEO and is among the founders of the journalist think tank Reporter-Forum. Today, he is the editor in chief of Correctiv, a Berlin-based non-profit center for independent journalistic research.



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Translated by Simon Pare

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It is an iconic picture that captures the immeasurable devastation in Syria, but also the people's indomitable will to live and their defiance in the face of destruction – a young pianist playing and singing in the streets of Yarmouk, a town near Damascus, amid ruined houses and rubble. As the video spread via YouTube, his music touched the hearts of people around the world.

Yet Aeham Ahmad was to suffer the same fate as hundreds of thousands of others: a perilous journey overland and across the Mediterranean, the torment of the Balkan route, separation from his wife and family, and then the relief of arriving in Germany, quickly followed by fresh despair at being separated from his family, his former life and everything he once knew. Yet the life-saving power of music is a recurrent feature of Aeham Ahmad's story, which reads as if *The Pianist* had been restaged amid the greatest tragedy of our time.

The worldwide media dubbed him 'the pianist from the ruins', and here for the first time Aeham Ahmad tells his own story, his whole story.

Pictures never say anything about the beginning, and they are silent about what comes next. Pictures isolate a moment, a tiny instant, from a story. In the case of the most famous picture of me, it seems as if the whole world had agreed on the same caption: 'The Pianist from the Ruins'. I don't come 'from the ruins', though, and the picture seen around the world – I have heard people in Germany whisper that it was as much a symbol of 2015 as the dead refugee boy on the Turkish beach – was neither the beginning nor the middle nor what I think of when I remember the moment it was taken. The foremost image in my memory is a picture of three birds. But they are not the beginning either.

It began at first light. It was mine and my friend and neighbour Mahmoud Omar's turn to fetch water again. That meant setting off in the half-darkness and pulling a three-wheeled cart with a five-barrelled water tank on top one kilometre to the well. Then we would have to lower the bucket five hundred times into the well, fill it, haul it up and pour the water into the tank until we had collected a thousand litres, before pushing the whole shaky contraption home. That was in early April 2014. Three families shared the tank: mine, Mahmoud's and Samir's, another neighbour of ours. The Palestinian camp at Yarmouk had been under siege by government forces since June 2013, and the water supply had been cut off.

We had left at six in the morning and by the time we got back we were completely exhausted. I had actually arranged to meet up with Meras Saeed that day for a shoot. It was going to be the first video since the breakup of our band, the Yarmouk Boys. Meras would film me alone, playing the piano and singing, as usual in front of one of the bombsites of which there were so many near my house, to show the scale of the destruction; to show the world we were cut off from that in spite of everything we were alive. We made these videos mainly for YouTube and for the world beyond our besieged neighbourhood; we didn't have many listeners inside Yarmouk. Death and hunger were rampant, and people were too emaciated and downcast to get excited about music. Many people regarded our songs as inappropriate amid all the mourning, though most merely thought that what we were doing was totally nuts. Which of course it was. We wanted to defy death.

Meras is a photographer. It was he who took the picture of me that day that made newspaper front pages around the world – the one of me in a green T-shirt, sitting at the piano in front of a landscape of ruins.

Meras is the kind of left-wing activist who spends the whole night on Skype. It was about eight o'clock when we got back, and Meras was dozing off over his laptop. I thought, Oh well, we can forget about shooting today.

I went home and lay down to sleep. Soon afterwards my then eleven-month-old son Ahmad woke me up. He babbled something in my ear and then

– God knows what had got into him – prodded me in the eye with one of his tiny fingers. It hurt like hell, and I had an intuition that Meras was going to call me for the shoot. It was a strange feeling. I couldn't go back to sleep after that, so I got up. Coffee and tea had been unavailable in Yarmouk for a long time, and I had learned to make myself a kind of tea by boiling cinnamon sticks. There had been an abundance of cinnamon, of all things, since a group of armed men had stormed a cinnamon factory in Sbene, an industrial zone just the other side of a neighbourhood called Hajar al-Aswad, which means 'Black Stone'. There are a lot of restaurants, factories and large warehouses there, containing products like cardamom and Indomie instant soups. One of the factories the armed group attacked was filled with cinnamon, which would have been quite a prize under normal circumstances, because it is quite pricy. But what are people under siege supposed to do with it? They ended up selling the cinnamon sticks for next to nothing and advertised it as an aromatic fuel. Cinnamon fires did indeed smell better than the ones we made with plastic bottles for lack of any other fuel. This kind of craziness had become the norm during the siege. There was no sugar either, so people had started to sweeten things with hair removal cream instead, because a different group had stormed the corresponding factory. The cream tastes sweet, but it is actually poisonous. It doesn't contain sugar; it contains glycerine. This is what we had come to.

Anyway, I drank my unsweetened cinnamon, my morning coffee substitute, and actually, it didn't taste so bad. Then I decided to go out and make the video after all.

I had no hope of pushing the four-hundred-kilogram piano to the shoot location on my own, so whether I liked it or not I had to wake Mahmoud Omar. Although we are friends, he has always called me 'Prof'; or to be more precise, if we're fetching water I'm Aeham, but as soon as the piano comes into it I'm Prof. I've told him thousands of times that I find this weird. He always replies, 'Okay, of course, Aeham!' but five minutes later he's calling me Prof again. It's probably a reflex, because he used to come to my choir and have lute lessons with me. Mahmoud always took the lessons very seriously. I respect him for that.

So I went outside to call him. 'Mahmoud! Come on, get up, we're going to meet Meras!' I hadn't told him anything about the shoot yet. It had been in the back of my mind the whole time while we were fetching water, but I'd imagined that we'd be half dead by the time we got back.

'Hey, Mahmoud! What's up? Are you coming to help me push the piano?' Usually Mahmoud was ready to help me at any hour of the day, and this was the first time I'd ever heard anything like displeasure from him. 'Whew! Oh man. All right, I'm coming.' We went to the music shop together and lifted the piano over the threshold, put it on the dolly and pushed it to Meras's house.

Meras didn't have a downstairs bell, but we had a pre-arranged signal: we would throw a stone at his window. The stone couldn't be too big, though, because Meras's was the only intact window in our entire neighbourhood. He might merely have been lucky so far, but he was also especially careful that nothing happened to his windowpanes. Whenever the bombs started to fall he would quickly fling his windows open to make sure that they didn't shatter, because his uncle had entrusted the house to him. I gently tossed the first pebble. Meras isn't the lightest of sleepers, but this was a start at least. Mahmoud had been a bodybuilder before the revolution. Tell him to throw a stone, and the result isn't quite as gentle. I threw a second stone and then a third, but still Meras didn't wake up. You could hear him snoring from out in the street. Mahmoud was slowly losing patience. 'Why isn't he waking up? Your mate obviously thinks he's too good for this kind of job.'

In Mahmoud's opinion any journalist or activist who was in touch with anyone outside Planet Yarmouk was a snotty little upstart. It's true that Yarmouk felt like a separate continent back then. We were here, this was Palestine and we were living in a state of emergency. It was impossible for us to grasp how people in the nearby district of Zahira could be eating shawarma and falafel as normal.

'He's got a nerve! He must have heard us!' Mahmoud regarded Meras as an intellectual who thought he was smart and talked big.

Carefully I lobbed a fourth stone. When even that brought no reaction from Meras, Mahmoud grabbed a lump of concrete and hurled it through Meras's window. A tirade of curses rained down upon us, something to the effect of 'Damn you and the God who created you. For God's sake, you bloody idiots!' Blasphemous curses were daily fare at the time. It might start with 'We haven't even got anything to eat or drink . . .' but sooner or later the Prophet would be come into it. I muttered an apology as Meras let loose on Mahmoud, who rolled up his sleeves menacingly. Meras immediately piped down.

Mahmoud may be a little quick-tempered at times, but he has a heart of gold.

When Meras came down he was carrying his Canon 7D single lens reflex camera. 'I thought we were going to shoot a video today?' I asked.

'Why would we do that? All you need are a few good photos.'

I said, 'Photos? Who looks at photos of a concert?'

Meras swore and went back upstairs to fetch his video camera.

Sometimes it takes several attempts to get things right. Sometimes it takes a series of coincidences. If my son Ahmad hadn't poked his finger into my eye, that whole day would have been wasted. Instead it turned out to be one of the

most extraordinary days I've ever experienced in Yarmouk. That day smelled different, and my perception of the streets was different.

We started pushing. Meras's building was about a kilometre from my flat on the edge of the besieged Yarmouk camp most exposed to bombing. It is only three minutes by foot from his apartment to the front line in Tadamon. It was Meras who chose where we would shoot. He stopped in a particular spot and announced with utter conviction, 'This is it. We'll film here.'

Glancing around, I said, 'Are you out of your mind? The sniper has a perfect view of me here!'

Meras answered laconically, 'Fine. Then move a little further to the left and you'll be out of his line of sight.'

I said, 'Okay. You must be even crazier than we are. Let's do it.'

We were in the middle of Palestine Street, which marks the boundary between Tadamon and Yarmouk camp, right on the front line where the Palestinian People's Front, Assad's allies, had taken up position. Turn left and you came to the Kamilia biscuit factory, which had just been blown up by a car bomb. This was where my best-known video was to be set.

We lowered the piano onto the ground, and Meras set up his camera at a slight distance from me. If he had stood directly on the pavement, the sniper on the roof would have easily been able to take him out. He filmed me from various angles, but couldn't approach to within two yards of me. I don't need to tell you that what we were doing was extremely risky: we were virtually dead men.

It was only when we had everything set up that I began to consider what I might sing. Then I thought of Zakaria al-Khatib, who had visited me three days before. Zakaria al-Khatib sold honey. Honey is something exquisite and precious in Syria and throughout the Middle East, unlike here in Germany where honey is just something you buy at Lidl. In Syria honey is more like gold, and honey traders can make a considerable fortune. That was what Zakaria al-Khatib had done. He is an intellectual, a very educated and cultivated person with an exceedingly good heart. Before the revolution he would frequently drop in on me for a coffee and have me play Chopin, Rachmaninoff or Mozart. He has a PhD, and selling honey was his passion. He would undertake excursions to some beekeepers high up in the mountains or travel to foreign countries such as Yemen to taste a new blend of honey. That was before, though – before the revolution.

On one of his most recent visits this same Zacharia al-Khatib had left me a piece of paper bearing a poem he had written.

نسيْتُ اسمي
نسيْتُ الأحرفَ والمعاني
نسيْتُ الكلمات
التي أنطقُ منها الأغاني

نسيْتُ صوتي
صورتني
حتى مكاني
نسيْتُ شقاءَ الطريقِ الى السماءِ للإنسانِ
للمجد الذي كان
فلسطيني
فلسطيني

وهنا توقّف الزمن
عند ربطةِ خبز
عند كرتونةِ مُنن
ااه يا مجدي
فلسطين
ااه يا أمّي
فلسطين

I have forgotten my name
its letters and its meaning
I have forgotten the words
from which I craft songs

I have forgotten my voice
and my image,
even my place
I have forgotten the hardship of the path
to the heavens, to the human,
to the glory of what was

Palestinian
Palestinian

And here time stands still
in front of a loaf of bread
in front of a box of aid supplies

Oh, my glory.
Palestine.
Oh, my mother.
Palestine.

Zakarias's wife had died only four days earlier while giving birth to their son. Her contractions had started on the way to hospital, but they wouldn't let her through the regime checkpoint on the road out of Yarmouk camp. The soldiers were waiting for the order to let her through at last. They kept her waiting there for ever. Eventually her waters broke at the checkpoint. She died soon after being admitted to the Mujtahed clinic, but her son was delivered safe and sound. He was her first son after three daughters.

Zakaria al-Khatib was therefore celebrating the birth of his first son and yet was also in deep mourning for his wife. Theirs had not been an arranged marriage, not a marriage for marriage's sake. It was a genuine love match. She was his best friend, his wife and his lover. They had been over the moon about their child.

And so he came, laid his poem on the piano and asked me to put it to music.

I had my doubts about this. 'It's beautifully written, but I don't think it can be made into a song. I could perhaps read it as a poem and accompany it on the piano, but sing it?'

Later, my wife read it aloud to my father. She always does that when someone brings me a text. Although he's blind, my father has a Master's in Arabic philology. He said that it was a wonderful text, but that he wouldn't trust me to put it to music. I agreed with him: I'm a classical pianist and songwriting really isn't my strong suit.

Anyway, that morning Meras asked me what I planned to play. Zakaria al-Khatib's words and their heart-breaking cause came to my mind. I lifted the lid of the piano and what should I find but the piece of paper, as if it had been waiting there for me.

I told Meras that I had something, so he could start filming. I hadn't prepared the song at all, but I wanted to prove to my father and to myself that I was perfectly capable of putting the poem to music. I adjusted the piece of

paper, Meras trained the camera on me and I had begun to play a few chords when I suddenly saw a woman walking towards us out of the distance. She was coming from Tadamon and bearing a tray with a pot of fresh coffee and two cups on it. It was totally surreal.

She told us that she was so thrilled that someone had appeared with a piano in this desolate spot at nine o'clock in the morning that she had brewed up her last five teaspoons of coffee. She had kept them carefully hidden, saving them for a very special occasion. Now she wanted to drink her remaining coffee while listening to music.

In all the months I played in the streets of besieged Yarmouk, she was the only person – other than my wife, of course – who seemed happy about my music. I knew nothing about her except that she was from Tadamon. Tadamon is a very diverse neighbourhood, both religiously and culturally. It is home not just to Palestinians but to Druze, Alawites and Shiites too.

She admitted that she had often come to Yarmouk and had followed what we were up to and listened to us. I'd never seen her before, but she said that she always watched us from afar. 'What you're doing,' she said, 'is very, very important.' This one sentence lifted my spirits more than hours of conversation could ever have done.

So I tried to sing Zakaria al-Khatib's poem. The tune was suddenly clear in my mind. I was incredibly moved by it. 'I Have Forgotten My Name' is the most beautiful song I've ever sung, and now it is generally the song with which I begin my concerts. CNN even broadcast it during a concert I played with Michael Barenboim at the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin.

I was in a completely different state of mind when I first sang this song in Yarmouk camp. I was about to begin when I noticed three birds perching on a first-floor washing line directly opposite me. There were many such buildings with low first floors on Palestine Street, housing offices, pharmacies and doctors' surgeries. The birds were sitting neatly on the washing line, not making a sound. Nothing special about that, you're probably thinking, but in fact it was a small miracle, since birds had disappeared from Yarmouk by then. If someone happened to spot a bird, they would immediately shoot it; after all, they wanted to eat. There weren't even any dogs or cats left in the streets. Those three birds seemed to be the only animals that had not yet fallen victim to people's hunger. They looked completely out of place, and that might explain why they were so amazingly beautiful. It wasn't clear what had brought them here. There certainly wasn't anything for them to eat, and this was also the front line. Birds tend to look for peace: it's no coincidence that the symbol of peace is a dove. Birds are always the first to flee from an exploding bomb, a grenade or a sniper's shot. My theory is that those three birds must have come

from somewhere outside the camp and had merely made a detour into Yarmouk, but that thought only struck me afterwards.

So there we sat: four humans – the woman, Mahmoud Omar, Meras Saeed and I – and those three birds. Unlike us they were not under siege; they were only visiting. A three-minute flight and they'd be back in Zahira where everyone had enough to eat and drink.

When I finally started to play, the birds began to twitter.

This twittering, which I hadn't heard for so long, the aroma of coffee, which I certainly hadn't smelled for eight months, Zakaria al-Khatib's story and all the other stories of the siege and the hail of bombs that were swirling around in my head; my father's off-hand remark 'Oh, there's no way you'll be able to put that to music'; my son's finger poking me in the eye so that it stung all day long and I was half blind; all these things, mixed together with the taste of cinnamon in my stomach, all my disgust and my tiredness from fetching water at daybreak, flowed into the lines of the song.

I have forgotten my name
its letters and its meaning
I have forgotten the words
from which I craft songs

I have forgotten my voice
and my image,
even my place
I have forgotten the hardship of the path
to the heavens, to the human,
to the glory of what was
Palestinian
Palestinian

And here time stands still
in front of a loaf of bread
in front of a box of aid supplies

Oh, my glory.
Palestine.
Oh, my mother.
Palestine.

That 'oh' came from somewhere deep inside me, streaming up from the soles of my feet to my throat. I was so fed up; I was so sickened by everything, brimming with sorrow and worry.

The woman could only weep as I played. The words expressed the complete state of forlornness in which Zakaria al-Khatib found himself, in which we all found ourselves – the woman, the three birds, Meras, Mahmoud and myself. Our singing sounded like the scream of a man plunging into an abyss who describes that descent into hell in music. I will never forget that day.

That is the story of the photo that was shown around the world. Newspapers continue to print it to this day, and each time I am presented as a prototype, as the epitome of a refugee. As if all the Syrian people who have fled to Germany were pianists. As if there were no political dissidents or even regime supporters among us. As if we had no story and no background of our own, in my case Yarmouk. As if we had arrived from nowhere, or at best from the ruins.

Sometimes people ask me what colour my tent was back there in Yarmouk camp. Goodness gracious! They really think I lived in a tent? I own a flat, a wonderful, big flat! Our lute-making business was thriving before the war came and destroyed everything, before a grenade severed my tendon. I used to play Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff; now I'm overjoyed that I can play at all. But when you flee bombs and political persecution, you leave behind your world where each thing had its own significance. To the people in the new place you become one of thousands of miserable figures, someone they think of as poor and without any prospects; someone who must always have lived in wretched conditions and has now come to Europe to partake in its wealth. My story, however, like those of hundreds of thousands of other refugees, is very different. I'd like to tell it, starting from the very beginning, to counteract the misconceptions and simplistic reports, to counteract the pictures that lie and those that are misleading, even if they contain a glimmer of truth.