



NAJI AL ALI'S LIFE

In 1983, Naji Al Ali spoke at length about his life in an interview with the Lebanese daily *Al Safir*. Naji was born in Al Shajarah village in the Galilee, northern Palestine, in 1936. On May 6, 1948, Naji and his family left their village and headed for Lebanon, under the impact of the Zionist aggression. In Al Shajarah, there was a battle with the Zionists, in which the famous Palestinian poet, Abdel Rahim Mahmoud, was martyred.

«We waited under the fig trees of Bint Jbeil (South Lebanon) for two months,» Naji said. «We were positive that we would soon return to Palestine... Until now, I still have that feeling, after so many years and atrocities...» Later, when Zionist policy made it impossible to return to Palestine, Naji's family moved to Ain Al Hilweh camp, near Sidon.

Recalling his village, Naji said, «I was ten years old, but I remember my village very well... not only the houses and trees, but the grass and stones as well... It is located between Nazareth and Tiberius in the northern Galilee... They say it was called by that name (shajarah means tree), because Jesus used to sit under the shade of a tree in that place.»

About his life in Ain Al Hilweh, Naji recalled, «Camp life was a daily humiliation... I obtained the Lebanese high school degree... but couldn't find work... so I started working in the fields... Later I went to Tripoli and studied at a vocational school....» He graduated with a certificate as a mechanic.

In 1957, he went to Saudi Arabia and worked as a mechanic for two years. During this period, he began to draw in his spare time. In 1959, Naji returned to Ain Al Hilweh. About that period, he recalled that he was «influenced by Dr. George Habash, Abu Maher Yamani who was principal of one of the schools in the camp, and Ghassan Kanafani who was the first to publish one of my sketches in *Al Hourriyah* (at that time, the magazine of the Arab Nationalist Movement)... I was impressed by Ghassan Kanafani when I saw him give a lecture in the camp. I realized that he expressed the people's suffering. They loved him. We loved anyone who could come close to our suffering...»

About beginning to draw caricatures, Naji said, «In the camp I used to sketch on the inside and outside of the tent we lived in. Later, in the prison, I drew a lot. (Naji was imprisoned by the Lebanese military intelligence, the Deuxieme Bureau)... In 1963, I went to Kuwait and worked for the Kuwaiti magazine *Al Talia*... I was later convinced that I wanted to be a cartoonist.»

Naji's characters are well-known. In his drawings, the idea comes before the form. About his characters, Naji said, «The big-bellied guy represents the regimes. The poor man, woman and child represent the masses.» Most famous of his characters is the ragged child aptly named Hanzalah, which means bitterness. Hanzalah was Naji's trademark and represented the witness to events and history. In fact, Hanzalah can easily be identified with Naji Al Ali himself. Of Hanzalah, Naji said,

«He is my icon which safeguards my soul from committing mistakes... He is the ever alert conscience... When I draw Hanzalah, I find the cover under which I take refuge.»

Between 1968 and 1975, Naji worked for the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al Siyashah*, where Hanzalah was first introduced, facing the reader for one of the few times. Since then, Hanzalah is most often drawn with his back to the audience, watching the event depicted in the cartoon.

Naji went back to Lebanon in 1975 and worked with *Al Safir* until 1983. In 1983, he joined the staff of the Kuwaiti daily, *Al Qabas*, working there until his forced departure from the country in 1985. Naji then went to London where he continued working at *Al Qabas* until his assassination. About living in London, Naji once said with bitterness obvious in his voice: «Isn't it a heavenly damnation that I live here? - in Britain, land of Balfour!»

In 1984, Naji was elected president of the Arab Cartoonists' League. He was a founding member of the General Union of Palestinian Writers and Journalists, and was elected to its general secretariat in 1980. His works have been exhibited in Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Tunisia, Kuwait, UAE, Yemen, London, Paris, Chicago, among other places.

Naji Al Ali was married and had four children - Khaled, Layal, Judy and Osamah. On July 22, 1987, Naji Al Ali was shot. On August 29, 1987, Naji's heart stopped beating...