Bruised friendship wins chance to heal

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ON FRIDAY afternoon in Arab East Jersualem, two old friends met to talk about the past and the future, and about themselves. They had not relaxed with each other for many years, their relationship stunted by conflict. But now they were at ease — or so it seemed — as they talked and joked sitting inside Orient House, the likely seat of a Palestinian government. Outside there was new expectation in the streets. Palestinian flags were being flown on the Old City's Damascus Gate for the first time. And the radio had announced that Israel was about to recognise the PLO. "We could have cooked the solution back then," one said, recalling their first meetings 25 years ago in Oxford. Sari Nusseibeh and Avishai Margalit both grew up in Jerusalem, but on different sides of the divided city. Nusseibeh, aged 44, was born into a family of Jerusalem notables; his father, Anwar Nusseibeh, was a Jordanian minister and ambassador to London when the West Bank was under Jordanian rule. Margalit, 53, is the son of an early Jewish pioneer, who came to Palestine from Poland in the late Twenties. They met as philosophy students, in a coffee shop outside Christchurch, shortly after the Six Day War.

At that time what attracted each to the other was a hunger to learn. Until that war in 1967 the Palestinians of East Jerusalem and the West Bank were living under Jordanian rule, cut off from Israel by barricades. "Before 1967 you could not go across," Nusseibeh says. "All we knew of the other side was what we heard from our parents. But we had no sense of what it was. We created fantasies about what existed there. I had never really known an Israeli."

When Israel seized East Jerusalem and the West Bank in 1967, smashing down the barricades, Nusseibeh was already studying abroad. He flew back into the airport near Tel Aviv, seeing Israel for the very first time, and the lands from which his family had fled in the 1948 war.

"Driving to Jerusalem from the airport was a tremendous experience. I was driving through areas where my family had lived. . Paradoxically, at first I was happy that my country had been united, even though we were under occupation. I could go to the other side and be in touch with my past. It was like seeing the inside of an enemy. I remember how run down the place looked, for a country with so much power. I was excited by the prospect of finding out about Israelis. At first it was an interest in their society, their poets, their daily life, able to exchange experiences, and float solutions, first at Oxford and later at Harvard in the mid-Seventies. "We always spoke as if it could be solved in a day," Margalit says.

"When we talked in those days we respected each other's point of view: that we were essentially two human beings talking as equals. However much we disagreed there was something common to us — an identification with one another as human beings — and I think it is still there," Nusseibeh says, glancing across at Margalit.

There was much talk between the two of Israeli-Palestinian co-existence in a single secular state, with equal rights for all. "I remember you proposed a secular bi-national state," Margalit says. "It would have been incredible. But just a fantasy. It would have become a Lebanon in no time. The nationalist feelings here were too overwhelming."

"I believed in it," Nusseibeh says. "But then I found out that on the Israeli side they didn't share it. And on the Palestinian side there was a need for a separate identity."

By the early Eighties Nusseibeh and Margalit were both back on the scene of the conflict: one a philosophy professor at Bir Zeit University on the West Bank, the other at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Now they found they could no longer communicate and coffee-shop discussions about co-existence became ivory tower dreams.

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"Nusseibeh funds terrorists"; "Nusseibeh jailed for spying for Iraq" — headlines in the Hebrew press reveal how Nusseibeh came to viewed in the eyes of many Israelis over the next few years. The Palestinian identity he had spoken of at Oxford was, by the end of 1987, crying out for recognition in the uprising of the *intifada*.

Nusseibeh played a central role in the struggle. "Before the *intifada* people were talking about national identity but they were doing the opposite, living in the Israeli system. They walked around with Israeli identity cards, they sold Israeli goods, they even wrote their

Nusseibeh says that then he started looking at all Israelis from a political perspective. "Someone might be working for the Shin Bet [the Israeli internal security agency] or doing this on behalf of that. I had no inclination to look beyond that. And it was true within my own community too. You became more and more a prisoner of your own situation. I was no longer a free agent." "It was not that I feared Sari suspected me," Margalit says, "but I didn't want to feel I had to be over-nice to compensate. When we returned we were both intrinsically part of our societies. There was too much to explain on behalf of Israel, and I didn't want to have to do it."

As the *intifada* intensified, the barriers to friendship grew.

"Before the *intifada*, at least I could still go into East Jerualem. After it I stopped going. There were the stabbings and people were afraid," Margalit says. And before the uprising Nusseibeh had been beaten up by students at his own university for associating too much with Israelis. It soon became impossible for the two men to fight off the suspicion and fear.

Nusseibeh became known as the intellectual behind the struggle. Accused of writing *intifada* leaflets, he was increasingly targeted by Israeli security forces.

Margalit read about his friend in the papers. "Nusseibeh was arrested at his home just before midnight on Tuesday by five jeep-loads of border police," read one newspaper article in 1991. His wife, Lucy, daughter of the Oxford philosopher J L Austin, described the turmoil, and the article quoted Nusseibeh as saying his arrest was intended to "silence the voices of moderation". Jailed for six months, he was released after three. Margalit tried to help and says he felt responsible. "I spoke to Lucy and wrote to our friends in Oxford and elsewhere and tried to help organise his release."

All this was only two years ago. Now Nusseibeh, distracted and rushed, is running the technical committees that are setting up Palestinian self-rule. He was seen on television yesterday hoisting a picture of Yasser Arafat above a celebrating crowd. Last week Peace Now held their celebration in Tel Aviv. On Friday Margalit was able to walk into Orient House without a sign of suspicion from the new Palestinian guards.

A political solution has been found to the conflict, as Margalit always predicted it would, and reconciliation has begun. Like Nusseibeh and Margalit before them, the parties found that under-

member how run down the place looked, for a country with so much power. I was excited by the prospect of finding out about Israelis. At first it was an interest in their society, their poets, their daily life. This happiness was a very strong feeling and it continued for a some time."

Margalit too felt in some senses "liberated" by the Six Day War. He fought in the Old City in 1967, and recalls his early elation at the victory, the end of Israel's feeling of siege. He too recalls his curiosity to see the other side. "We used to stroll around every day, going into restaurants. It was tremendously exciting."

But Margalit also remembers his early foreboding. When he went to Hebron, deep in the West Bank, soon after the victory, he realised that Israel was "trapped". "People were confused and hostile towards us. For the Jews this was going to be a menacing place," he says. "I knew we had to get out and I have never changed my view since."

Away from the confusion and intensity of their homes the two were identity but they were doing the opposite, living in the Israeli system. They walked around with Israeli identity cards, they sold Israeli goods, they even wrote their slogans with Israeli paint. The *intifada* was an attempt to impose a national strategy on behaviour. To assert a national identity."

Margalit, meanwhile, had continued to work behind the scenes for Palestinian-Israeli dialogue. A founder of Peace Now, the Israeli political movement that campaigned against the occupation, he found himself on the left-wing intellectual fringe of Israeli society at a time when Israel was governed by the right-wing Likud. Yet despite their common opposition to the manner of the occupation, they now lived worlds apart.

"On neutral ground we had been able to talk as equals," Margalit says. "But back at home the conflict had a poisonous effect. We met from time to time — but only in semi-official ways. I was by definition a part of the occupiers and he was part of the occupied and here there could be no equality."

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But will the new solution allow real friendships across the divide? Margalit believes the political change will lead to a breakdown in psychological barriers. Nusseibeh is less certain: "I don't believe it will ever come to the point where most people see each other as friends. Over the next months and years they will learn to co-exist."

The two professors, however, expect to meet more and more now — if they have time. Nusseibeh may well be co-opted into the new government of Palestine, although he talks of returning to philosophy. Margalit is writing a new book: *The Decent Society*. "I think we can get back to where we were as friends very easily," Nusseibeh says. "You believe in life after the Arab-Israeli conflict?" he asks his friend across the table. "Yes," says Margalit.

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