

# Sayed Kashua: why I have to leave Israel

The Arab-Israeli author moved to Jerusalem as a child and has devoted his life to telling Israelis the Palestinian story. But last week he decided to emigrate with his family to the US

**Sayed Kashua**

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Quite soon I am going away from here. In a few days we'll be leaving Jerusalem, leaving the country. Yesterday we bought little suitcases for the kids. No need to take a lot of clothes, we'll leave our winter clothes; in any event they won't be warm enough given the cold of southern Illinois, USA. We'll just need a few things until we get settled. Perhaps the kids should take some books, two or three in Arabic, and another few in Hebrew, so they don't forget the languages. But I'm already not sure what I want my kids to remember of this place, so beloved and so cursed.

The original plan was to leave in a month for a year's sabbatical. But last week I understood that I can't stay here any longer, and I asked the travel agent to get us out of here as fast as possible, "and please make them one-way tickets". In a few days we'll land in Chicago, and I don't even know where we'll be for the first month, but we'll figure it out.

I have three children, a daughter who is already 14 years old, and two sons, aged nine and three. We live in West Jerusalem. We are the only Arab family living in our neighbourhood, to which we moved six years ago. "You can choose two toys," we said this week in Hebrew to our little boy who stood in his room gazing at boxes of his toys, and he started to cry despite our promises that we will buy him anything he wants when we get there.

I also have to decide what to take. I can choose only two books, I said to myself standing in front of shelves of books in my study. Other than a book of poetry by Mahmoud Darwish and another story collection by Jubran Khalil, all of my books are in Hebrew. Since the age of 14 I have barely read a book in Arabic.

When I was 14 I saw a library for the first time. Twenty-five years ago my maths teacher in the village of Tira, where I was born, came to my parents' home and told them that next year the Jews would be opening a school for gifted students in Jerusalem. He said to my father that he thought I should apply. "It will be better for him there," I remember the teacher telling my parents. I got in, and when I was the age of my daughter I left my home to go to a Jewish boarding school in Jerusalem. It was so difficult, almost cruel. I cried when my father hugged me and left me at the entrance of the grand new school, nothing like I had ever seen in Tira.

I once wrote that the first week in Jerusalem was the hardest week of my life. I was

different, other; my clothes were different, as was my language. All of the classes were in Hebrew - science, bible, literature. I sat there not understanding one word. When I tried to speak everyone would laugh at me. I so much wanted to run back home, to my family, to the village and friends, to the Arabic language. I cried on the phone to my father that he should come and get me, and he said that only the beginnings are hard, that in a few months I would speak Hebrew better than they do.

I remember the first week, our literature teacher asked us to read *The Catcher in the Rye* by Salinger. It was the first novel I ever read. It took me several weeks to read it, and when I finished I understood two things that changed my life. The first was that I could read a book in Hebrew, and the second was the deep understanding that I loved books.

Very quickly my Hebrew became nearly perfect. The boarding school library only had books in Hebrew, so I began to read Israeli authors. I read Agnon, Meir Shalev, Amos Oz and I started to read about Zionism, about Judaism and the building of the homeland.

During these years I also began to understand my own story, and without planning to do so I began to write about Arabs who live in an Israeli boarding school, in the western city, in a Jewish country. I began to write, believing that all I had to do to change things would be to write the other side, to tell the stories that I heard from my grandmother. To write how my grandfather was killed in the battle over Tira in 1948, how my grandmother lost all of our land, how she raised my father while she supported them as a fruit picker paid by the Jews.

I wanted to tell, in Hebrew, about my father who sat in jail for long years, with no trial, for his political ideas. I wanted to tell the Israelis a story, the Palestinian story. Surely when they read it they will understand, when they read it they will change, all I have to do is write and the Occupation will end. I just have to be a good writer and I will free my people from the ghettos they live in, tell good stories in Hebrew and I will be safe, another book, another movie, another newspaper column and another script for television and my children will have a better future. Thanks to my stories one day we will turn into equal citizens, almost like the Jews.

Twenty-five years of writing in Hebrew, and nothing has changed. Twenty-five years clutching at the hope, believing it is not possible that people can be so blind. Twenty-five years during which I had few reasons to be optimistic but continued to believe that one day this place in which both Jews and Arabs live together would be the one story where the story of the other is not denied. That one day the Israelis would stop denying the Nakba, the Occupation, and the suffering of the Palestinian people. That one day the Palestinians would be willing to forgive and together we would build a place that was worth living in.

Twenty-five years that I am writing and knowing bitter criticism from both sides, but last week I gave up. Last week something inside of me broke. When Jewish youth parade through the city shouting "Death to the Arabs," and attack Arabs only because they are Arabs, I understood that I had lost my little war.

I listened to the politicians and the media and I know that they are differentiating between blood and blood, between peoples. Those who have become the powers that be say

expressly what most Israelis think, "We are a better people than the Arabs." On panels that I participated in, it was said that Jews are a superior people, more entitled to life. I despair to know that an absolute majority in the country does not recognise the rights of an Arab to live.

After my last columns some readers beseeched that I be exiled to Gaza, threatened to break my legs, to kidnap my children. I live in Jerusalem, and I have some wonderful Jewish neighbours, and friends, but I still cannot take my children to day camps or to parks with their Jewish friends. My daughter protested furiously and said no one would know she is an Arab because of her perfect Hebrew but I would not listen. She shut herself in her room and wept.

Now I am standing in front of my bookshelves, Salinger in hand, the one I read 14 years ago. I don't want to take any books, I decided, I have to concentrate on my new language. I know how hard it is, almost impossible, but I must find another language to write in, my children will have to find another language to live in.

"Don't come in," my daughter shouted angrily when I knocked on her door. I went in anyway. I sat down next to her on the bed and despite her back turned to me I knew she was listening. You hear, I said, before I repeated to her exactly the same sentence my father said to me 25 years ago. "Remember, whatever you do in life, for them you will always, but always, be an Arab. Do you understand?"

"I understand," my daughter said, hugging me tightly. "Dad, I knew that a long time ago."

"Quite soon we'll be leaving here," as I messed up her hair, just as she hates. "Meanwhile, read this," I said and gave her *The Catcher in the Rye*.

*Sayed Kashua is a Palestinian writer whose novels have been translated into 15 languages. The film Dancing Arabs, based on his first novel, opened the 2014 Jerusalem international film festival. His most recent novel, Exposure, was published by Chatto & Windus. Translated by Deborah Harris*

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