

Poems one cannot forget

JUST 10 days the beginning of the Intifada in December 1987, Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani wrote a poem whose resonance has been ever-present ever since. "Children of Stones" has become, without exaggeration, the poem of the Intifada for a people for whom poetry is a major medium of culture and politics. I first came across in 10 days after it was written when a friend in Occupied Palestine showed me a fax of it that was beginning to be distributed among the Palestinians.

Now an Israeli, a professor of Hebrew literature, has writ-

ten a poem that is shaking the Israeli political establishment much as Qabbani's did in his own circles.

Dan Almagor is a major personality in the very heart of the Israeli mainstream—at least until recently. He has been a prolific lyricist and moderator of a popular TV programme on Israel's state-owned channel. His songs, often commissioned by the Israeli Army or Israeli TV itself, have stirred nationalist passions for many years. Moreover, Almagor was—until recently—pretty much a non-political person, a symbol of Israeli pride and Israel's

fighting spirit.

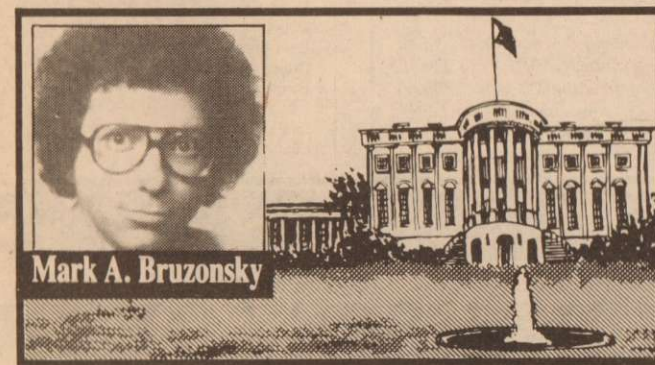
But the Intifada's repercussions have had very profound impact on many persons. And what has happened to Almagor is among the few bright omens that possibly a major change can be caused to reverberate through larger segments of the Israeli population.

Some months ago, Almagor made his first visit across the Green Line to see what was happening to the Palestinians. Quite literally he was shocked beyond his wildest imagination. When he read the following poem at a peace demonstration he them quite

literally stunned the entire nation. Like Qabbani's, it is destined to be a poem that we will not be able to forget.

I first heard the poem in English at a meeting of the Charleston Peace Committee in Charleston, South Carolina where I spoke this weekend. It was read by a representative of Yesh Gvul, the Israeli organisation of soldiers who are refusing to serve in the army if they are ordered into the Occupied Territories or to put down the uprising. I was so startled when I heard it yesterday that I immediately realised I had to feature it—all of it—in my very next column.

From



Mark A. Bruzonsky

Washington

We shoot children too, don't we?

*Most of these people truly desire
To harvest their olive trees
As they have for hundreds of years.
Most of these people truly desire
To raise their kids
Not to throw stones
Or Molotov cocktails;
But to study in peace
To play in peace
And raise a flag.
A flag
Their own flag.
And facing that flag, to cry
As we did, that night, then, excited as we were.
And we have no, have no, have no
Right in the world
To rob them of this desire,
This flag
These tears.
These tears which always, always
Come after all the others.*

* * *

*Let us start preparing our defence.
We will need it soon enough:
Those who actually did it
And those who still do.
All those who hushed it up
And those who still do.*

*And those who said nothing
And those who clucked their tongue, saying
"Something must be done really;
(But not tonight. I have a concert,
A gala event,
A birthday!)
Indeed, we'll all get our summons one day
For the colonels' trials.*

* * *

*The colonels' trials are coming.
Their time will come, it must be so.
The trials of the generals, the colonels,
And the division, the battalion,
And the platoon commanders.
There is no escaping it.
This is how history works.
What shall we say then?
What will the colonels, the captains, the corporals say?
What will they say—
Of those terrible beatings,
The brutality,
Of houses blown up.
And most of all, the humiliation.
That humiliation.
Of patients forced to wipe off the writing on the walls,
Of old men forced to take down a flag
From an electric pole,
Who got electrocuted, or fell*

*And broke their legs.
Of the old water carrier
Whom soldiers ordered off his donkey
And rode on his back, just for fun.*

* * *

*We turned a deaf ear, we turned a deaf heart,
Mean, arrogant, and dumb.
Who do we think we are?
Who gave us the right
To be so deaf, so dumb?
Ignoring the obvious: They are as human,
As we are, as we are.
At least as we used to be,
Only forty one years ago.
No less diligent, no less smart
As sensitive, as full of hope.
They love their wives and children
As we do, no less.
And our children now shoot theirs
With lead, plastic bullets, and gas.
The Palestinians state will come to pass.
It will.
Not a poet wrote this.
History will.
And seasons will come and seasons will go
And life goes on as we very well know
Weddings and birth and death all the same,
But just the shame of it. The shame.*