



Written by
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I Am A Storyteller

I use stories to talk about larger socio-political issues dealing with outsiders and those perceived of as 'others' – those who have lesser voices.

As some members of my family were killed because of state-sponsored terrorism, I am acutely aware of what happens to others perceived as outsiders. My subject matter includes homelessness, racial and sexual violence, Matthew Shepard, Iraq, and most recently, a large body of work on refugees and immigration. *I Had a Home Once, Syria: I Live in Berlin* is an accordion art book, comprised of two volumes. The prints, which tell the true story of Abdullah Saleh's life in Syria and his forced flight to Berlin, are lithographs, woodcuts, or a combination of both. Those works are accompanied on the reverse side by offset prints of plaster sculptures that represent the centuries of diaspora of those driven from their homes. The two books, when closed, together are 15" x 11" x 2" and are contained in a slip case.

My family, like so many others, was forced from the home they knew, in their case Minsk, Belarus, heading for a better life in America, the land of opportunity. The pogroms – a foreshadowing of the horrors of the Holocaust that would take the lives of many of my family members who stayed behind – was one of the many reasons my grandmother, grandfather and uncle boarded a boat in 1930 and sailed for New York, where my mother, and eventually I, was born. This is why I related so strongly to Abdullah's story.

I met Abdullah in Istanbul in the autumn of 2014. My husband and I went to the spice market where Abdullah was working at one of the stalls. Since he was the resident English speaker, he was tasked to help us. At the time, I was working on a project about the bombing of Al-Mutanabbi Street, the booksellers'

district in Baghdad, and asked him to translate a phrase for me. During the two-hour discussion, we learned about Abdullah's life in Syria and after. I asked him if he would share his story, and he graciously agreed, offering me a rare window into what it is like to rebuild one's life from the rubble.

Until 2011, Abdullah was living a solidly middle-class life in Damascus.

Until Syria was enveloped in a devastating civil war.

Until the break-up of his family.

Until the destruction forced him far from his home.

The use of art to tell larger, more complex issues is an old idea. Art allows for the engagement of the viewer. It is through this interrelation that we, as a society, form bonds and hopefully make personal connections that cross borders and time – humanising the 'other', both people and ideas. The front pages of the book use older techniques, lithographs and woodcuts (lithography was invented in 1798 and woodcuts have been around in some form since the 1200s) to tell a very modern story. On the back side of the pages, sculptures were made to represent the eons of refugees, war related or otherwise, but reproduced in a very modern technique, the offset printer. The cross-linking of the techniques and related themes makes a more complete story about the forced movements of peoples away from their homes and across the globe. It puts Abdullah's story in this larger context – and humanises this seemingly nameless,



faceless, generalised and often stereotyped motif. The choice of medium for these prints was perhaps a less conscious decision. All media have their emotive qualities. Etching, a violent medium – the marks being born of acid – I usually associate with more brutal subjects and could have worked, but it seemed perhaps more mired down in a place and time. Lithography gave me the fluidity of an ever-changing subject while allowing for the darks to suggest the shadows of the destruction of a country. And the woodcuts gave me the structure and organic quality I was looking for.

The first book, *I Had a Home Once, Syria*, deals with Abdullah's time there. In it I contrast his childhood with the war that made him flee Damascus. Throughout I overlaid his quotes about his youth on relevant prints. His quote about safety and security is related to the food insecurity brought about by the civil war. The quote about Abdullah's university refers to the footprints of the soldiers who maliciously trampled on his books. The one about morning music, "It's a kind of tradition, the coffee, the Jasmin tree and Fairouz singing," is set over the sounds of the bombs. And the one concerning his vision of his future, "There was my life I thought, complete. I studied, I worked, and I saw my friends in my little spare time. I have never dreamed of my future and how it is going to be," touches on the future that it became. The quotes were written out by Abdullah in Arabic and English.

Part two, *I Live in Berlin*, chronicles Abdullah's exodus from Damascus, first to Turkey, then across Europe, and finally ending in Berlin. The quote at the end sums up Abdullah's current feelings. The quote is from a Persian poet (1185-1248) and one he has been thinking of lately. I needed some words to tie books one and two together and asked him for something. He immediately responded with this:

"Try not to resist the changes that come your way.
Instead let life live through you. And don't worry that your
life is turning upside down. How do you know that the
side you are used to is better than the one to come."

Shams Tabrizi



"I would be remiss if I didn't talk about the collective nature of printmaking, and this project in particular. Printmaking is collaborative to begin with."

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Looking for iconography, the problem became how to tell the story of the disintegration of a society. I made many prints, all fine prints in themselves, but when laid out, the narrative timeline seemed trite. I could not find an elegant way to do this until I came upon the idea of the quotes to tell the story of his pre-war life. (I actually came upon this when I saw a catalogue which showed descriptions and prices in a translucent overlay and lightning struck – one never knows where inspiration comes from!) The quotes are overlaid on the relevant prints in a translucent material which refers to the 'rosentinted glasses' of the halcyon days of the past. And it allows for the contrast of the security of the past and the devastation of the present. In addition, the use of the arch, an architectural element seen throughout Syria, is repeated throughout the two volumes: in between the languages in the quotes, on the covers, blind stamping to open each book, and in full force on the opening page. This is the linking element that ties together past and present, memory and reality, and underscores the destruction this war has inflicted upon the country and the people.

I would be remiss if I didn't talk about the collective nature of printmaking, and this project in particular. Printmaking is collaborative to begin with. When you are working with a printer, it's like a marriage – each party bringing something to the table. It is the artist's vision, the printer is unseen, yet each printer has their own touch, an invisible yet certain mark on the outcome. Finding someone who is true to what the artist wants is what makes the relationship work.

The complexity of making a book adds another dimension to this process. Especially when book-making is beyond the technical scope of the artist. One relies on both the expertise and artistic sense of the bookbinders. In my case, discussions started well before the prints

were finished. In fact, before I even started printing, I went through paper trials – testing out the different papers that could be used – until I found the one I would use, and then went to the binders to make sure the grain direction of paper would work when they were cut to size. When we worked out direction, I had all the paper cut down – more than I needed because as it turned out (as normal) for every print that ended up in the book, there were perhaps two more that didn't make it. Then six years later I was ready to bind it all together. We had numerous discussions about what I intended, and how it could be done. We worked hand in hand over the two years it took to put it all together, collaborating with their thoughts and mine, to produce a book, that between myself, the printer and the bookbinders, was greater than the sum of its parts.

Abdullah is the face of a story that has been told for time immemorial. And today, we see it happening again and again, because of war, environment, economics, religion or violence. The coerced exodus of people, whether across a country or beyond a nation's borders, forces a reckoning, both with the places they leave and the places where they settle. The consequences of the actions by those in power on the innocent masses creates a generation of

orphaned and separated families, struggling to establish new roots in countries with different traditions, oftentimes in places where they face hostile receptions. An optimistic, bright and extremely affable young man, Abdullah landed on his feet and settled in Berlin. He has made a life for himself there. Already speaking Arabic, Turkish and English, he quickly learned German, and is now a kindergarten teacher.

For every Abdullah who has migrated, survived and adapted, there are so many others who continue to struggle. Sadly, not so much has changed over the centuries. †

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The book is available from the artist at www.nomisilverman.com

