

In 1948, Izzat al Ghazzawi's family fled their home in Haifa. The dying grandmother refused to budge, and they later found her under the rubble of the bombing. Izzat was not yet born. He was born in 1951. From the house where he grew up in the village of Deir Al-Ghasoun outside Tulkarem, he could, when the wind was blowing the right direction, smell the sea where his family came from, but he never saw it until he became a man. His father was a shepherd in the fields, and he wanted the same for his son. Until Izzat was 15, he was allowed to go to school, but then his father said enough was enough, the life of a shepherd awaited. For a whole year, Izzat snuck off to go to school in the afternoons. He was a very good student, and the teacher prayed for him. Finally, his father succumbed, and he received scholarships and got a B.A. in English literature from Jordanian University and a master's degree in modern American literature from the US. He then returned to the West Bank and worked as a professor at Birzeit University.

I first met Izzat al Ghazzawi at the Palestinian Writers Association in Jerusalem in the late 1980s. We met again in 1991. Meanwhile, he had spent two years in prison, of which eight months in solitary confinement, for his membership in Al Fatah. In prison, he wrote the book *Letters underway*, with the subtitle *Palestinian letters from Israeli prisons*. It has been translated from Arabic to Norwegian by Anne Aabakken and published by Cappelen forlag. I read it when it was published in 1994, and now I have reread it. It's like meeting Izzat again, having him sitting in front of me, talking, with a cigarette in each hand, and with lots of smiles. The book is more relevant than ever, it struck our time, and should be printed in new editions.

The letters are imagined conversations with writers he appreciated, such as Nasrim Hikmet, who also wrote poems from prison, there is Tagore, there is Lorca, Yair Horowitz, Eluard, Mahmoud Darwish. The manuscripts were smuggled out, sheet by sheet, by his wife Nahla, who received them with kisses, on the rare occasions she was allowed to visit her husband. In the letters, Izzat writes that he does not know how he would fare in the cell, out of sight for everyone, if he is not able to create this poem to talk to. He says that he becomes happy like a child when he imagines a flap of his mother's dress, not the whole dress, the shape is not important, but the ability to create the flap out of chaos. And what he wants for himself and his family and for the people, he tells the interrogator, is the daily bread, shady trees and a roof over his head, his homeland.

The Jerusalem Post wrote that Izzat al Ghazzawi with *Letters underway* renewed Palestinian literature. He uses the old myths and traditions while at the same time portraying complex and longing people of flesh and blood. The Palestinian authority gave him its highest award for writing.

Izzat's letter is still underway. The cars that transported the prisoners were called mail cars and the prisoners were envelopes. As long as thousands are imprisoned, countless of them children, as long as the bombs fall, people are killed and the people are without their own country, the letters have not reached their destination.

Izzat led the Palestinian Writers Association from the early 1990s until he fell one morning in Ramallah in 2003. Izzat had a formidable ability to talk to anyone and everyone. Certain members of the association deeply disagreed with him when he engaged in dialogue with Israeli writers, but he was always re-elected by acclamation. He crossed borders, but at the same time he was faithful to his people, his family, his small patch of land, his writing, his profession, and his colleagues. He was under all conditions and at all times an advocate of dialogue. He was an open man. Both on a small and large scale, he possessed the ability to love and care. He was wise and a true intellectual who was capable of both overview and double vision. But most tangible was his ability and willingness to forgive. He believed that every society has a built-in flexibility to heal itself, also Palestine. We don't know what he would say today, after 100 days of bombing Gaza, but one of the last times I spoke to

him he touched on the grief over the division of the Palestinian people between Hamas and Fatah, which he described as the hardest and saddest since 1967. But, he said, his experience was that when it was darkest in his mind a light arose in or from that darkness. Tomorrow will be better, he said, next week, in a year.

Those of us who knew him and those who read the books got to share this light and hope. It was noticeable in his home. I admired him and Nahla for the happy atmosphere despite lack of freedom and harassment and the constant shelling from the settlement on the other side of the valley. The answer was: The children are the most important. We must take care of the children! And he always said when I asked: But we (the family), we are fine.

This was claimed by the man who in 1993 experienced the most terrible thing, that Israeli rifle bullets killed his 16-year-old son Rami in the school yard. The soldiers refused medical personnel access, and Rami bled to death after 20 minutes.

Nevertheless, it was Izzat who stood on the Nationaltheatret's stage two years later and read his poems at the Nobel Peace Prize award, together with Rabin, Peres and Arafat.

The collaboration with Izzat Al Ghazzawi began when the Norwegian Writers' Association took the initiative for a writers' meeting between Palestinian, Israeli and Norwegian writers. The meeting took place in Oslo in 1993, and lasted a full 10 days with 6 authors from each country. Many reefs and mines lay embedded, and the fact that it did not run aground was not least due to Izzat al Ghazzawi's calm and reason.

He then took part in two trips to Yemen on behalf of the Norwegian Writers' Association and Norwegian PEN together with Kirsti Blom, Kari Vogt, Wera Sæther, Anders Heger, Eugene Schougin and others to get the Yemeni poet Mansur Rajih released from prison. Mansur was released in 1998 and he came to Stavanger together with his wife Afrah, as Norway's very first free city writer.

The Palestinian Writers' Association, the Norwegian Writers' Association and the Norwegian Writers for Children (NBU) also collaborated on a publishing project for fiction, the Ogarit cultural project, with more than a hundred publications.

For his courageous, independent voice, Izzat al Ghazzawi was awarded the Norwegian Writers' Association's Freedom of Expression Award in 1994. In 2002, he received the Council of Europe's Sakharov Prize for his work.

Izzat al Ghazzawi participated in the great 100-year celebration of the Nobel Peace Prize in Tromsø in 2001. The speech he gave was like Izzat himself: a proud, outstretched hand. The Israeli writer Amoz Os stood up immediately afterwards and asked to speak. I agree with everything, he said. No Israeli or Palestinian writer has ever given a more worthy and truer speech, he concluded.

As chairman of the Palestinian Writers' Association, Izzat himself managed to arrange Palestine's first international writers' congress with participants from 28 countries. The title of the congress: New times, new themes?

For well over two years, readers of Dagbladet could follow Izzat al Ghazzawi's personal and insightful day-to-day depictions of the Israeli occupation, seen through his eyes from the West Bank and Ramallah.

Izzat had friends all over the world. He visited more places in Norway than most Norwegians. Kirkenes, Vadsø, Karasjok, Tromsø, Tynset, Stavanger, Kristiansand, Hamar.

We would have needed Izzat these days. His unsentimental kindness and pride, the willingness to respect and empathize with others and himself at the same time, a diminishing skill these days. Fortunately, we can read the books, three of which have been translated into Norwegian, and let ourselves be inspired by the visionary, patient and courageous poet's heart, that burst far too soon when he was only 52 years old.

Kirsti Blom

Writer and leader of Norwegian Authors' Unions' International committee 1990 – 1996.