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The duo had spent the morning helping to decorate another friend's bedroom. They planned to attend a meeting of Ezra, a Jewish youth movement, in the afternoon. They were looking forward to it.

But first, they thought, they should have some lunch. They chose Sbarro, a city centre pizza restaurant popular with teenagers, as the venue.

A young man arrived at Sbarro around the same time as the girls. Izz El-Din Al-Masri was a 23-year-old Palestinian and a member of Hamas. His clothing disguised a bag strapped to his body. Inside the bag were nails, screws, bolts and 5-10 kg of explosives.

In the middle of the crowded pizzeria, just a moment before two o'clock, Al-Masri detonated the bomb. "There was blood and glass all over the street, on the stretchers of the ambulances, and on the faces of those who had survived," Robert Fisk wrote in the next day's London Independent.

"A plump lady lay outside the restaurant with her brains bursting through her head. A child -- perhaps three, perhaps five -- was so mutilated by the bomb that its eyes had been blasted from its head."

Malki and Michal were killed. So were 13 other civilians. The youngest victim was a two-year-old girl, the oldest a 62-year-old woman. Approximately 130 people were injured. The bomber also died.

It is five months since the explosion now. But the grief of the bereaved will never be assuaged.

"This man walked up to Malki and Michal in order to take their lives," Malki's father, Arnold Roth, says. "This was barbarism."

Raw anguish can be found on both sides of this conflict.

One Friday morning last March, Muhammad Darraj, a Palestinian, took his youngest son, Obei, to get a haircut. When they came home, Obei had a shower and changed into new clothes that had been bought specially for an upcoming Muslim festival. After lunch, the child went to his bedroom to play with his toys.

An Israeli soldier's bullet came through the window. It struck Obei on the back of the shoulder and exited through his chest, ripping his flesh apart.

His father was so shocked that he can only remember a few more details. He knows that his child cried: "Dad, dad, something hit me."

He knows that Obei's mother and sister carried the boy down several flights of stairs to the street. And he knows that, in the process, every one of those steps became coated with his son's blood.

Obei died within half an hour of being shot. He was nine years old.

Since the current phase of Israeli-Palestinian violence began on September 28 2000, over 1,000 people have been killed. Arguments about which side is right or wrong can stretch on infinitely. That isn't what this story is about.

It isn't a story about the complexities of the Middle East struggle. It isn't about Ariel Sharon or Yasser Arafat, Judaism or Islam, or which side is entitled to which patch of desert.

This is a story about two fathers and their two dead children.

Arnold Roth is a trim, bespectacled 49-year-old. He once practised as a lawyer, and now works in an IT company. His self-control seldom cracks as he speaks about the killing of his daughter, though sometimes he falls silent and bows his head.

Roth, whose father survived Auschwitz, was born and brought up in Melbourne, Australia. In the mid-70s, he went to New York where he met his future wife, Frimet. The couple set up home in Australia soon after their marriage. They already had three sons by the time Malka Chana 'Malki' Roth was born on November 27 1985. When Malki was two, Arnold and Frimet decided to move the family to Israel.

"We both nurtured a feeling that Israel was the natural place for Jews to live," Arnold says. "This is not an easy place to live, it has never been an easy place to live, but we always envisaged raising our kids here."

Three more daughters were born in Israel. One of the girls, Haya, is blind and severely brain damaged. Malki was her mother's main helper in caring for the child.

Malki worked hard at school, but devoted most of her energy to Ezra. She had joined the youth movement at an early age, loving it from the start. She was also a classically trained flautist, and her mother would often be moved to tears by the beauty of her playing.

Arnold says his daughter was no more angelic than any 15-year-old. But he remembers her warmth above all: "All her friends knew her as the person who would come up to them and say 'smile, cheer up!' She was a wonderful, bubbly person, with an exceptionally good heart."

Twelve hours passed between the explosion in Sbarro and the Roths learning of Malki's death.

Arnold was in his office when the phone rang. "My wife was crying and screaming," he recalls.

"She had CNN on the TV and was saying 'there has been a terrible terrorist attack in the heart of Jerusalem, and I don't know where the kids are'."

She phoned back about 45 minutes later to say she still couldn't reach Malki. Her husband tried to calm her. But his mood darkened as time went on and his eldest daughter remained uncontactable.

"By about 5 o'clock Frimet was in a state of hysteria," Arnold says. "She told me she was going to one of the hospitals."

Frimet met her neighbour Aviva Raziel, Michal's mother, outside her home. The two women, distraught, drove to the hospital together. Bad news came during the journey. "Aviva received a call on her phone," Arnold says.

"It was a mutual friend of Malki and Michal's, saying 'I'm sorry to tell you this, but the girls were on their way to Sbarro. I know, because I was speaking to them'."

Arnold takes a slow breath. "So, things were really black. And they just got blacker and blacker."

The first death to be confirmed was that of Michal. "We didn't know what to pray for," Arnold

relates. "We were praying that Malki should be unconscious, or that there should be some other explanation as to why she hadn't called us."

Eventually, a social worker at Jerusalem's Hadassah hospital suggested that the family should check the Abu Kabir Forensic Institute near Tel Aviv. The Institute receives the corpses of those killed in violence.

Neither Arnold nor Frimet could face the task. Two of their sons went instead. The boys phoned their parents at 2am. They had found Malki's body. Malki Roth and Michal Raziel are buried alongside each other in Jerusalem's Har Menuchot cemetery.

The Israeli police phoned the Roths a few days after the attack. They had recovered Malki's mobile phone, still in its protective pouch.

When Arnold opened the plastic case, two nails -- shrapnel from the bomb -- fell out. Then he looked at the phone. Malki had scratched a Hebrew message next to the mouthpiece with her pen. "It is forbidden to speak ill of other people," it read.

Arnold can only talk haltingly about the effect of Malki's death on the family. "My wife is still sinking," he says. "It has been a shattering experience."

Malki's 9-year-old sister, Pesi, is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Her other siblings, and Arnold, try to live something approximating a normal life. But nothing will ever be normal again.

Ramallah is 15 kilometres and a world away from Jewish west Jerusalem. One of the main Palestinian towns in the West Bank, it is ringed by Israeli army roadblocks. Frustration hangs in the air.

Here, I meet Muhammad Darraj. He is a small, wiry man with thick black hair and sad eyes.

Speaking through an interpreter, he explains that he grew up near Ramallah, and that his wife, Fathiyeh, is a refugee from the outskirts of Jerusalem.

Before the current intifada began, Muhammad worked on building sites inside Israel. He has been unemployed for over a year.

Obei was the youngest of the Darrajs's five children. His brothers and sisters doted on him, as did his parents. "It is a cultural thing here that the youngest boy gets a lot of special treatment, so he was spoiled," Muhammad says with a smile.

Obei, a friendly child with a talent for mimicry, was a popular pupil at the Al-Mughtaribeen Boys School. He enjoyed all his subjects, with written Arabic being a particular favourite.

The Darraj family had moved into a new apartment in the Al-Bireh district just two weeks before Obei was killed. Across the hills from Al-Bireh is Psagot, a Jewish settlement. Psagot is home to about 1,000 people. The Israeli army maintains a permanent presence on its edges. Gunfire between the settlement and Al-Bireh is a frequent occurrence.

When Obei was shot, Muhammad sprinted to a nearby shop to phone for an ambulance. The minutes ticked by, and the ambulance didn't arrive. The boy, fading fast, was bundled into a neighbour's car. Someone in Psagot began firing at the vehicle as it sped off towards the nearest hospital. Muhammad followed a short time later.

"Obei had been put into emergency surgery," he remembers. "There were at least six doctors trying to resuscitate him. They tried their very best, but it didn't work. He had lost too much blood and his heart had been damaged. Obei was dead."

The doctors didn't want to let Muhammad see his son. "I lay awake that night talking to myself, muttering, trying to come to terms with the fact that I hadn't been able to see him. I saw him the next day, before his burial."

Obei Darraj's funeral drew thousands of mourners. Almost 11 months on, the desolation of his family remains. "We are always sad," Muhammad says. "Obei was the one who brought joy and laughter into the house.

"It is particularly painful for my wife. When the academic year began again, it was very difficult. She would go to the verandah, and stand there watching the other children go to school."

In Obei's school, the desk at which he used to sit remains empty. Some flowers have been placed there.

Muhammad begins explaining something in Arabic. The interpreter looks confused. But he confirms that she has understood him correctly. "I go to the school regularly," he has said, "and I sit at my son's desk, even when there are classes going on."

What does he think about?

"I remember Obei's gestures. I remember the things he used to do," Muhammad replies quietly.

In the wake of Obei Darraj's death, an Israeli army spokesman claimed that soldiers opened fire only after Psagot settlement had come under attack. Local Palestinians insist this is untrue.

The Israelis also said they were "unaware" of inflicting any casualties. It was a disingenuous comment -- the soldiers positioned around Psagot would almost certainly have seen the frantic attempts to get Obei to hospital.

On the afternoon of the Sbarro bombing, Hamas issued a statement of responsibility. The 'communiqué' was grotesquely inhumane.

The organisation gloated that, with Allah's help, the bomber had "launched a martyrdom operation in a restaurant in the heart of Al-Quds [Jerusalem], inflicting [a] large number of casualties in Zionist lines. This retaliation is the first in a series of strikes that will teach the Zionists an unforgettable lesson."

"This person was evil, and the people standing behind him are evil," Arnold Roth says.

What is his reaction when a Palestinian child is killed? "When a child in a Palestinian village, throwing stones at Israeli soldiers, is injured or killed, I think it's horrifying. But I don't cry over it, because that's their problem, and I've got my problems."

What is Muhammad Darraj's reaction when an Israeli child is killed? "Before my son was killed, I would have felt bad if I heard of any child being killed. Since then, I just feel nothing. Do the Israelis feel for us?"

Every death is a unique tragedy. Malki Roth and Obei Darraj deserve better than to be seen as mere 'equivalents' of each other.

But their surviving relatives have one thing in common.

"There is not a moment that passes when I do not think of my son," Muhammad Darraj tells me.

"I wish to God Malki were here," says Arnold Roth.

* Arnold and Frimet Roth have set up The Malki Foundation, a charity that, in addition to commemorating their daughter, will help Israeli families with handicapped children. For more information go to: www.kerenmalki.org

It was a hot, sunny day in Jerusalem. Malki Roth, a willowy, cheerful 15-year-old, was enjoying the school holidays with her best friend, Michal Raziel.

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