

Notes on Identity Card by Mahmoud Darwish:

When he wrote this poem, Mahmoud Darwish was an angry young poet, living in Haifa. He was born in 1941 in the village of El-Birweh (subsequently the site of Moshav Ahhud and Kibbutz Yasur), fled with his landed family in 1947 to Lebanon, returning to the Galilee to scrape by as outsiders in Dir al-Assad.

At the time of writing, the Arab locales in Israel were controlled by the Military Government established in 1948 (and abolished by Moshe Dayan in 1966) and every area of civilian life from registering a birth to traveling outside the locale required a document signed by the military governor.

The exhortation “Write it down, I am an Arab” is addressed to an imagined functionary of that bureaucracy and it is also an exhortation from the poet to himself to write the experience of his community.

As Salman Masalha wrote after Darwish’s post-surgery death in Houston, Texas in 2008, “He found his way to the Arabic-language press of the Israeli Communist Party, and his star as a poet quickly rose. After the war of June 1967... Palestinians on both sides of the border were joined as one group with a fresh wound. Even the neighboring Arab world suddenly discovered an Arab-Palestinian minority, whose members had been forgotten in parts of Palestine and who had become citizens of the State of Israel.”

Darwish left Israel to join the Palestine Liberation Organization and become the Palestinian national poet. “Write Down, I’m an Arab” is the title of a documentary about his life by Israeli filmmaker Ibtisam Mara’ana-Menuhin.

Over the years he refined his skills and wrote more sophisticated poetry but this one was always in demand, and he would read it reluctantly, but to great applause. It is without a doubt a formative text for Arab Israelis.

“Identity Card” is a poem about Palestinians’ feeling and restriction on expulsion. Darwish repeats “put it on record” and “angry” every stanza. This shows Darwishes’ feeling against foreign occupation. “Record” means “write down”. Darwish wanted Palestinians to write this history event down and remember that they have been excluded. People feel angry when their property and rights were taken away. Palestinians had lived in that land from generation to generation. They took many efforts on their land, so some Palestinians would not want to give up their land.

This poem relates to Mahmoud Darwish’s experience. In the Arab- Israeli war of 1948, Israeli government occupied Birweh, so Palestinians were forced to move and leave their hometown. This recalls me about the American history that U.S. government forced the Native Americans to move to reservations. Many sad stories happened when Native Americans were forced to move. People who experienced exile need to give up some of the property like land they have before and move to another place. This was a hard time for Palestinians because their lives were destroyed, and they needed to start their new lives in a new place.