



Steve Sabella. The kidnapers were sure he couldn't be an Arab. (Francesca Sabella)

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## People / Steve Sabella: Blurring the lines

By Danny Rubinstein

Steve Sabella was born 1975 in an old house next to the Fifth Station of the Cross on the Via Dolorosa in the Old City of Jerusalem. This is the Station on the corner of Hagai Street, opposite the renowned Abu Shukri hummus restaurant, where Simon the Cyrenian helped the tired Jesus carry the cross. When he was a child, Sabella's Christian Arab family moved to a place not far from there, to the street that goes down to the Lions' Gate. The neighborhood where Steve grew up is called Bab al Huta and is considered one of the poorest in the Old City. In this neighborhood live most of the Gypsy community, which is known in Arabic as al Nawar, and is held to be of very low status by the Arabs of the city. One day the young Steve discovered that the Jerusalem municipality had put up street signs and its new name was Antonia Street, after the citadel that had been located there during the time of the Second Temple and where the trial of Jesus was held.

"I decided that it would be better if the address in my identity card were Antonia Street and not Bab al Huta," he says. At the Interior Ministry the clerk regarded him with suspicion. "Why do you want to change your address when you haven't moved? Then she checked and said yes, this is Antonia Street, and changed the address." He told his neighbors, the shop owners, and all of them hurried to the Interior Ministry to upgrade their address from Bab al Huta to the respectable Antonia Street.

Why is this interesting? Because Steve, a professional photographer who works for the various United Nations agencies in the territories, visited Gaza a few weeks ago together with an Australian woman journalist who works with him in order to prepare a report for an official UN magazine under the heading "A Look at Gaza." As they were passing near the Gaza port, they were halted by a group of young armed men. They were abducted and taken to a house down the road beyond the Shati refugee camp.

The kidnapers were certain that Steve was a foreign citizen. His appearance is the opposite of what is called an "Eastern look." His complexion is fair, his hair

is long and he dresses like a young Roman or Parisian. He speaks rapid and fluent English, French and Hebrew. His abductors did not believe that he is an Arab and when they examined his identity card, he immediately declared: "What do you mean, Antonia Street?! All my life I've lived in Bab al Huta." After a few hours they were released.

After Steve completed his studies at the Freres School (run by the brothers of a French Catholic order, near the New Gate in the Old City), he decided that he wanted to study art and applied to Bezalel. To this end, he learned Hebrew at the Beit Ha'am ulpan (school for Hebrew language study) in West Jerusalem. Within a short time he wrote and spoke Hebrew almost without a foreign accent and without mistakes.

He was not accepted to Bezalel, but today he is an artist-photographer who shows in exhibitions around the world. In any case, he began to study at a small photography school in West Jerusalem, in the Musrara neighborhood. All of his classmates were Jewish; "I didn't deny my identity, but I didn't run through the corridors shouting that I wasn't Jewish either," he says. His first name, Steve, like his surname Sabella, do not disclose his identity. Certainly there was nothing in his appearance or his language that testified to his residence in Bab al Huta in the Old City.

Now and then his classmates spoke disparagingly about Arabs. Once they went on an annual class trip to the Dead Sea, to photograph in the desert. A friend drove the minibus and along the way they saw a hitchhiker. Steve was sitting beside the driver and said to him: "We have room in the car - why shouldn't we take him?" The friend answered: "He's an Arab and I don't give Arabs rides." "How do you know he's an Arab?" asked Steve. "I know," replied the friend. "I can smell Arabs from a distance of two kilometers."

Steve said that he didn't feel comfortable surprising his friend and telling him that he himself is an Arab. But there were times when he acted differently. At his barber's, for example, near Zion Square in Jerusalem. He had been having his hair cut there for years and once, before the Knesset elections, a political argument developed at the barber shop. "Yossi Beilin and all the leftists who are for the Arabs should be hanged," declared the barber. Steve remarked to the barber that it isn't nice to talk like that. "What do you care?" said the barber and he replied: "I care, because I'm an Arab." The barber was astonished, it was impossible, it couldn't be true. "You look Jewish, you talk like a Jew." Steve showed him his identity card where it states that he is a Christian and lives in the Old City. The barber could not come to terms with this and said to him: "But tell me the truth, Steve, you feel like a Jew, right?"

After completing his studies at the photography school, he did not succeed in finding a job as a photographer and worked for two years marketing health insurance. He did very well. In the Old City he met a young Swiss woman from Bern, fell in love with her and went to Switzerland to meet her family. They decided to marry and went to the city hall in Bern. The mayor's secretary, who prepared the ceremony, examined his passport, an Israeli passport that is also issued by the Interior Ministry to East Jerusalem Arabs, and then she said to him: "I have a surprise for you." The surprise was that as the mayor completed the marriage ceremony, she pushed a button on a tape recorder. The melody and words of "Hava Nagila" burst forth into the room at high volume.

"I didn't stop the celebrations and thus I became the first Palestinian in the world to marry with 'Hava Nagila,'" says Steve.

The work in insurance taught him a chapter in the ways of marketing. He went back to photography and learned to market himself as a photographer. He

prepared a portfolio and contacted institutions and organizations. His success was rapid. Most Palestinian photographers take news pictures - roadblocks, the intifada. Steve's emphasis is on art. He looks upward a lot. He sees windows, roofs, treetops. In his photographs he tries to tell stories.

Now he lives in a rented house on the way to Bethlehem, at the far edge of Beit Safafa opposite the Tantur church institution. The land around where he lives is still partially exposed, but the dense building in south Jerusalem is getting closer to him. In this context he has begun to walk around the area, taking stones out of ancient terraces and walls around old houses. He photographs the landscape and attaches the picture to the stone he has chosen. "Some day, years from now, I or maybe someone else will knock on the door of a house that stands there and say: This is what used to be here, and I want to return this stone to its place."

In the meantime, yesterday he opened a new exhibition at the French Cultural Center on Saladin Street in East Jerusalem and has been consulting with friends and a few of his teachers from the photography school. Do they know that you're an Arab? "Sure," he laughs. "Everyone knows."

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