

Humus & Dutch

First published, 2013

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Corrector & Technical Editor & Support: Kasper Veen

ISBN: 9789048430536

NUR: 336

Publisher: Free Musketeers, Zoetermeer

www.freemusketeers.nl



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HUMUS & DUTCH

Sara Ahron

Humus & Dutch is the story of Lisa Cohen, the leading character in this book. Lisa is a young woman with a Dutch-Israeli background. As she has spent part of her youth in Israel and also has fulfilled her military service in the Israeli army, she has obtained a great deal of knowledge about the Middle-East. After her time in Israel, she returns to Holland to study Middle-Eastern sciences. During her studies, she receives a job at a research institute. This work brings her into the world of counterterrorism. This is a subject that she is very familiar with thanks to her former position in the army. Her expertise provides a fabulous insight into the covered aspects of a region full of turmoil. It also shows the security situation in Europe, which is by far not as stable as it seems. You are invited to come along on this journey, exploring a fascinating and illuminating life story!

Author's note.

This book contains a combination of fact and fiction. The main character is a fictitious person. Any comparison with reality is based on coincidence. The matters discussed in this work are, however, based on facts. The author has used a variety of sources, which are listed in the back of this book. The knowledge about the Israeli army is partly derived from the author's own experience. For privacy reasons, the author has decided to write under a pseudonym.

I

A red file on my desk screamed for attention. It had a post-it saying: "Analyse me!" I had to laugh, pondered on my grey morning and took another sip of my tea. Then I redid my hair back up in a ponytail. There I was, Lisa Cohen, 22 years old and just completed one year of Middle-Eastern studies. I knew that this was probably one of Jeremy's little jokes, as out of all my colleagues, he was by far the naughtiest! Besides, I had only been part of the analysts' team for a few months. Therefore I was unable to escape a little ragging. I was lucky, as nobody had asked me to go find the strawberry ladder! Which of course doesn't exist, but this trick is often pulled on newbies. I'm a little bit of the odd one out at work anyway. Most of my colleagues are down-to-earth Dutchies. As a half Israeli, one tends to stand out a bit. My father Tom has a Dutch background and comes from the town of Apeldoorn. This is in the eastern area of Holland, the small country famous for its windmills and wooden shoes! The well known story of the boy who put his finger in the dyke is also connected to Holland. The country is situated between Germany in the east, Belgium in the south and the North Sea in the west and north. My mother Talia was born and bred in the Israeli city of Haifa.

From what I know, my parents met at a kibbutz in the north of Israel. A kibbutz is an agricultural community, where several families live and work together. My father used to work there as a volunteer, while my mother fulfilled her military service, as in Israel, all healthy men and women over the age of 18 are conscripted into the army. Men usually do three years, and women two.

After four years of romancing each other from afar, my mother decided to come to Holland where they were married. In fact the reason that she decided to come to Holland, has now become family folklore. It went like this, my dad had sent her a few small surprises for Valentine's Day by mail. However, those presents arrived four weeks later and were accidentally opened by her brother! My mom

was not amused! So my parents had a lengthy discussion over the phone. Somehow my dad was able to convince her to come and live with him in order to avoid these embarrassing situations in the future! When she had finally settled in they got married. Shortly after their marriage, my mother found a job at a small insurance firm. My father has had his own legal consultancy firm for many years. He is very dedicated to his work and enjoys it. With the three of us, we form a close and loving family.

Until the age of 10, my Israeli background did not play an important role in my life. However, at the time, my parents received an opportunity to start working for a Dutch-Israeli company. They were eager to do this and accepted the offer. My parents signed an initial two-year contract. It took some planning and organising, but one year later we were at last in a plane on our way to Israel. I was thrilled to bits about the prospect of starting this adventure. We were all looking forward to it. It also gave my mother the chance to be closer to her family for a longer period of time, which is an important part of Israeli life. They are real family people, and friends are just as important. Israeli people are rarely found in their houses on a weekend all by themselves. Their greatest hobby is going out to a restaurant to meet up with family and friends, and then go out and find fun things to do. Should there ever be a moment of boredom, there's always a neighbour around for a cup of coffee and a chat.

In Israel we lived in the city that never sleeps, Tel Aviv. We had a small apartment about 5 minutes' walk from the beach.

The wonderful promenade and the beautiful beach became my living room. As soon as I had finished a school day, I was at the beach doing my homework, and mainly hanging out with friends. Teenage life had no worries. Unlike life at school. It took me a while to learn Hebrew and Arabic, the two official languages of Israel. The reason is that these two languages have no relationship whatsoever with the language of Dutch. For one, they are written from right to left, which took some time getting used to! Another confusing aspect was that the school system in Israel is completely different to the one in

Holland. There is for example no such thing as an 11-plus exam to decide what type of school you should be going to. Instead, they have an interim exam to determine your level for secondary school. There was also a 10-minute break after each lesson. You can imagine I had no trouble with this! Those 10-minute breaks were well spent catching up with friends. Having completed my basic education, my parents were offered another two years in the company they worked for and decided to stay. Meanwhile I continued my education in Tel Aviv, and entered the first form of secondary school. This school period is called *Chativat Bina'im* in Israel, and appears similar to the American Junior High period. My results went up in leaps and bounds, and I was enjoying it! I was very happy that we did not yet have to return to Holland. By this time I was fully integrated and had many friends. A life outside the vibrant city of Tel-Aviv and my circle of friends was by then unimaginable. By the time we had to go back to Holland I was engrossed in my examinations in order to complete the foundation year of secondary school.

To make sure that I would be able to pass my exams, my parents decided that I could stay in Israel with family. While I was busy at school, my parents went back to Holland. This was all planned despite rising tensions between Israel and Iraq, which deepened in 1991. Saddam Hussein had threatened to wipe Israel off the map by firing scud missiles at us. The heads of the missiles were to be loaded with chemicals and biological material. In other words, life was not going to be easy for us! For both my parents and I, the distance between us at that time was very difficult. The atmosphere at school and at home started to change. Israel was slowly turning into a ghost city. In Tel-Aviv people started to stock up the air-raid shelters in their homes. Anti-scut- missiles were being deployed on the city's boundaries. Everyone was required to get gas masks from the army distribution centres. As a student, I was supposed to have the gas mask with me at all times. We also received additional training at school to prepare us how to find shelter in case of a bombing. It became clear, without a doubt, that we could be involved in a war at any moment! Even though this war seemed very far away. It was an experience that I will

never forget. All of a sudden I was in the middle of a conflict that made headlines all over the world! I couldn't believe that I could see all that was happening during this war on television as I was right in the middle of it! In order to not let tensions get the better of us, and to make them feel smaller, my Israeli friends and I decided to do what people often do in a war situation. We converted the air-raid shelters and held end-of-the-world parties! Once you are threatened with total destruction, you may as well dance and laugh your worries away because at night they come back to haunt you in your sleep! At the time I was not extremely scared, but I did have restless nights. Because no one stuck in a war will ever really get used to it.

When I returned to Holland in the summer of 1992, I was a little older and a great deal wiser. Back home at my parents' house, it took some time to find my feet again. It wasn't easy to suddenly be back in a country where life seems so simple. There were times that I really didn't know what to do. To keep myself going I quickly continued with my secondary school and completed my pre-University education with good results. Along with the preparations for the final examination, I was very busy with the orientation period for my military service in Israel. Because of my double nationality, this was compulsory, however it was also something I found important and wanted to do. When I look back at it now, I probably also used it to be able to go back to Israël. Because I missed that country and my family and friends very much during my high school years in Holland.

In the summer of 1996 I finally left for Israel to start my military service, called *Sheroet Tzva'ie*. Two weeks after I arrived in Israël, I reported to the Bakum call-up camp. At this army base, each Israeli, man and woman, swaps youth for adulthood and life as a soldier. Friends and family gave me a send-off when a young female sergeant roared us into file. Together with another 73 girls, I traded my clothes for a uniform, was inoculated against several diseases, and received a military number. Then we went on our way to a training camp somewhere in Israel.