

Incarcerated in the Camps in (West) Pakistan soon after the surrender of General Niazi and the capture of over ninety thousand Pakistani soldiers, the Bengali Armed Forces Officers and their families counted the days and months as they eagerly awaited repatriation to their newly liberated motherland, 'matribhumi' Bangladesh. My family, along with hundreds of other families who were stationed in Rawalpindi and neighbouring smaller cantonments in March 1972, was first taken to the mountainous North West frontier city of Bannu. A few months later, we were all taken in convoys and shunting train journeys in the dead of night down to the plains of the Punjab, to the sprawling camps near the rural town of Mandi Bahauddin.

It was a surreal experience for me, then 18 and waiting desperately to start classes at University of Dhaka. The night trains were diverted and made to wait at deserted remote stations to keep our journey a secret from the native populace. Heavily guarded by Pakistani soldiers, the train crept from one ghost station to another. My mind automatically registered a correspondence between our train journey and the journey forced upon the Jews by Nazi Germany, significantly noting with relief the major difference between the two journeys. The hapless, innocent Jewish men, women, and children were packed tight like cattle in suffocating, dark locked compartments and led to the slaughter-house. In contrast, our train journey was a picnic, with our laughter and optimism and Dhakaia, Sylheti, Chittagonian, Barishaila, and Noakhaila stories and jokes. We did not fear for our lives, for we knew that Bangabandhu had 90,000 men held hostage for our safe return.

As it turned out, diplomatic negotiations for our safe return to Bangladesh, in exchange for the release of the Pakistani POWs held captive in India, took almost another year and a half. The first chartered German Interflug flight out of Lahore airport began at the end of November 1973.

We were settled in shared bungalows and houses in three camps in Mandi Bahauddin. Camp A was the biggest and about a kilometre away from the two smaller B and C camps which had a common gate and an inner gate within a walled compound. The ex- army service holders were given half the amount of the salary each received according to rank, and all groceries and other daily provisions had to be bought at the camp general store. We were not allowed to go to the town. I saw no Pakistani man, woman, or child during this period, apart from the sentries manning the gates. We would spend afternoons and evenings either studying for future enrolment in schools, colleges, and Universities

FIRST ENCOUNTER BANGABANDHU AND THE BIRTH OF OUR NATION

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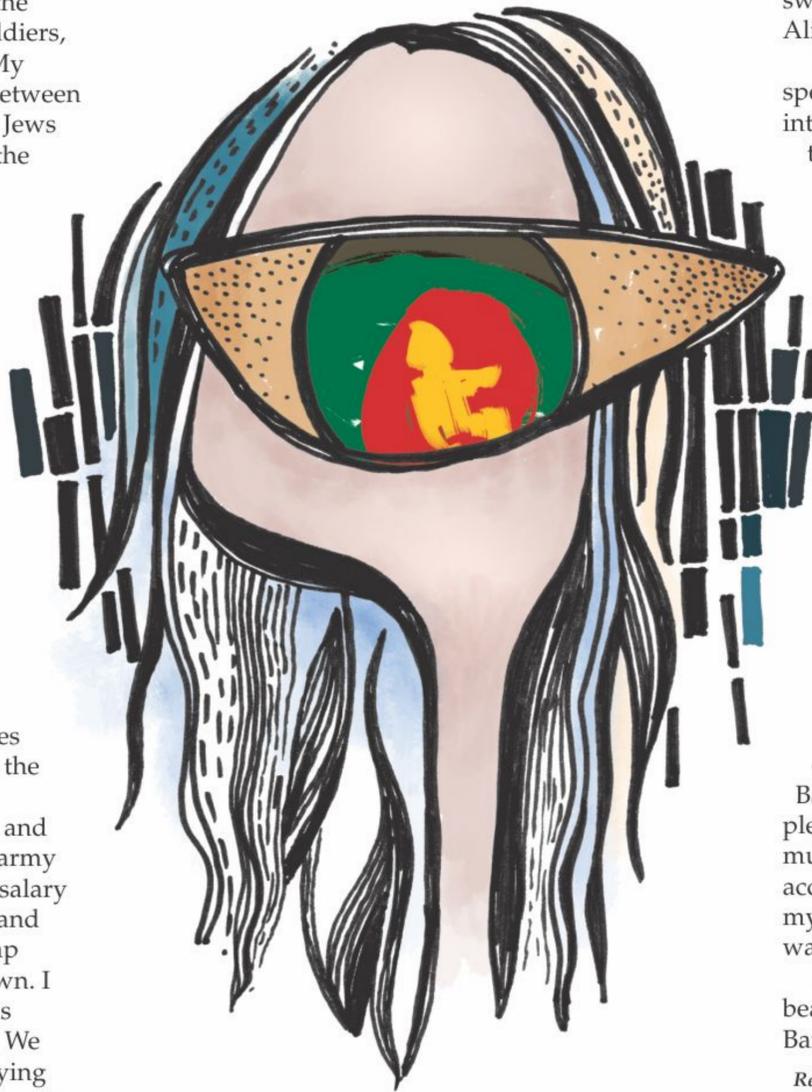


ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

in Bangladesh, or we would walk to the other camps and socialise and play badminton or other sports. My family was in a large bungalow, with two other families, in Camp C.

Daily life was disciplined and structured by the few very senior officers, Major- Generals and Brigadiers who set the rules for conduct and civic behaviour, and set up separate bodies for educational and cultural activities. My dad, a Colonel at that time, had a prestigious place in the inner sanctum by virtue of his expertise as a highly respected Psychiatrist. Our evenings were full of collective gathering to watch televised news on foreign channels about Bangabandhu and his international efforts for securing the rights of the people of Bangladesh. The whole camp would tune in to Bangladesh Betar at the appointed anointed hour and we would scan the stars in the inky vault of the sky as we listened to the achingly sweet songs of home sung by Abdul Jabbar and Abdul Alim, and others.

I recall, as in a movie unfolding in the mind, one special evening—the evening of the first David Frost interview with Bangabandhu. (A few families had televisions, and dad kept our Phillips 14-inch black-and-white TV after selling the car and other electronic goods back in Rawalpindi when the order came from GHQ to move the Bengalis to the distant camps.) Nightfall was upon us, I

remember, when dad set up the TV on the top of the high chair outside under the window ledge of the front drawing-room of our bungalow. The majority of the residents of Camp C had begun gathering in the lawn—my army uncles and their wives, and my friends, young boys and girls, even toddlers for whom the name Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was a magical incantation. Rugs and bed spreads were laid on the asphalt, and chairs set up in a semi-circle in rows on the few feet of grassy lawn beyond the cemented pathway. The mood was carnivalesque, as in a harvest festival. There was a warm bond of kinship, of belonging, of a sense of home in a place away from home.

In fact, the chattering, excited crowd became one quiet, breathing entity as soon as David Frost and Bangabandhu came alive on the screen. With only the pleasant swoosh of the cool breeze rustling through the mulberry trees on the edge of the lawn, faintly heard as accompanying melody to our intense concentration, I felt my heart leap. I felt it expand to encompass the surging wave of emotion that ushered a new dawn.

This scene remains imprinted in my memory as a beacon, a beginning in my own individuation as a Bangladeshi national.

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Sandalina মানেই বিশ্বের সেবা

Sandal Wood Extract এর সর্বোচ্চ নিশ্চয়তা...

ম্যান্ডালিনা

সোপ

স্যান্ডালিনা স্যান্ডাল সোপ এখন স্যান্ডাল এন্ড ময়েচারাইজার সমৃদ্ধ

নতুন রূপে খাঁটি চন্দন ও গার্ডেন ফ্রেশ গোলাপের সুগন্ধে স্যান্ডাল এন্ড রোজ

রূপচর্চায় আদ্রিজাত্য...

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