From Robert Fisk’s *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War* (1990)

The first time I ever saw one of the keys was in the Chatila camp in Beirut in 1977. I had been interviewing a family – four young brothers, two sisters, their parents, the children’s paternal grandmother – about their lives in a city that was now dominated by the Syrian army. Were they watched by the Syrian intelligence service? Probably. Had any of the family been arrested? Perhaps. Did Yassir Arafat truly represent them? Of course. And then – because the deepest questions curiously acquire the least importance in such interviews – did they ever really think they would return to ‘Palestine’? At this, the grandmother stood up and shuffled into a little hut-like concrete alcove, her bedroom, and emerged carrying something in a handkerchief. ‘It is from our home in Haifa,’ she said, unwrapping the cloth. And there was her key, its gun­metal grey shaft rusted brown but the handle still gleaming. How many families kept these keys? They did not know. Only the grandmother was old enough to have lived in Palestine. Her son and his family regarded the instrument as the key to ‘their’ home, just as they regarded Haifa as ‘their’ town although they had never been there.

Over the following three years, I was to see the keys again and, more often, the deeds of ownership to lost land. In many cases, they were kept in a container with ageing brown British Palestinian passports, the last used page of which registered their owner’s final departure into exile. Before the fighting started in 1948, some Palestinians had even arranged to take a holiday in case of hostilities and had called at the Lebanese consulate in Palestine to pick up a visa for Beirut. An agreeable sort of departure, a legal exit to which no legal re-entry was ever to be forthcoming. But if it was so easy for me to see this evidence and to talk to those who had substantial proof of their ownership of homes in mandate Palestine, surely it would be no more difficult to go to Israel, find those same homes and – the idea had a special excitement about it – to knock on those same front doors. Who would open them?