



Memories of Communal Relations in Jerusalem Prior to 1948

Rochelle Davis

JQF editors asked Rochelle Davis, a colleague and contributor to the Institute of Jerusalem Studies 1999 book, **Jerusalem 1948: The Arab Neighborhoods and their Fate in the War**, for excerpts from interviews she conducted with Jerusalem residents who remembered aspects of communal relations before 1948. While memory may be colored with latter-day experiences, these three brief excerpts offer glimpses of networks of commercial, educational and neighborhood relations between different religious and ethnic communities that remind us that the Jerusalem contested today has not been frozen in time. In a previous issue (Issue No. 9), selections from the memoirs of Wasif Jawhariyyeh on living in Ottoman Jerusalem described social relations, community participation in various religious festivals (including descriptions of Wasif and his brother Khalil in Purim costumes) and solidarities that reinforce the view that the administrative division of the Old City into

four confessional quarters was largely a Mandate-era development.

As the twentieth century attested, often tragically, communal relations are often brutally transformed by political conflict, yet both the mutual aid in Muhammed Zuheir Nammari's account and the religiously mixed marital and neighborhood history of his family before 1948 underline other histories, while his account of his relative's forced exit from his home in the Jewish Quarter after 1967, or the fall into silence Samira Abdelhadi Al Budeiri experiences after a 1967 communication with an pre-1948 Jewish school friend resonate with the present. Dr. Wajih Barakat's assertion of a cosmopolitan viewpoint against a Jerusalem he sometimes hates is rooted in his perspective on his upbringing and family values.

Indeed, a number of elements of these brief narratives regularly occur in pre-1948 Palestinian memories, including themes of good neighbors, commercial relations and even the excellent Jewish doctor. Are they discursive stereotypes, alternative histories, dead letters or alive options? JQF will be exploring what Jerusalem social histories tell us about the Jerusalem of today - and tomorrow - in future issues.

1. Walls and Windows:

Muhammed Zuheir al-Nammari

Mr al-Nammari was raised in the Old City of Jerusalem until 1948, after which his family remained in the Jerusalem area. In the 1950's he received a scholarship to study in the US, and then later returned to the Arab world to work. This interview was conducted mostly in English with some

Arabic in his home on 6 July 1999.

Al Nammari: Our house [in Haret al-Sharaf in the Old City] had one window which overlooked Assyrian neighbors, our wall was shared with Armenians, and the back of the building and the rear window overlooked Jewish families. We were in the middle. As we walked the street, we passed the Assyrian, Armenian, and Jewish neighbors. We used to buy and exchange with all of them. My father spoke both Armenian and Hebrew, as well as Arabic. We children were familiar to everybody, because we always walked through the same area, and everyone knew we were the children of 'Abdelqadir. We could stop anywhere and buy on credit. We were a small community and everybody knew everybody.

My father was a shoemaker in Suq al-'Attareen. He lived all his life in the same area. My younger brother went for his preschool years to an Armenian school where they spoke Armenian. We rented a big room in our house to an Armenian family of six or seven members until they returned in 1947 to Armenia. All our lives we shared the bath, the outhouse, and the play space in the courtyard. It was really a life lived with everybody together. There was no segregation until later on when everything was politicized.

One of our relatives, Othman Al-Nammari, rented directly in the middle of the Jewish Quarter. When the Israelis took over in 1967, they razed most of the buildings around his home, because the area was close to the synagogue. But they couldn't raze the building where he had an apartment because his family continued to

live there. I went and visited it -- all the buildings around were leveled except his building, a two-story building with about twenty rooms and several courtyards.

Then, the Israeli authorities started to dismantle the building step by step: they removed stairs, or knocked down part of the wall, until they forced Othman and his family to leave because they claimed the building was unsafe. The building was then renovated and now a group of fanatic Jews have taken it over. It overlooks al-Haram al-Sharif because it sits high on a hill."

Question: Before 1948, how would you characterize the relations between Muslims and Christians and Jews?

Al-Nammari: Before 1948, it was amiable. For example, when we moved out of the Old City to Baqa' when the 1948 war broke out, many of our Jewish friends said to my father: "Why do you move your family? Stay, remember, you are one of us." The synagogue and the churches were part of our daily walk. Sometimes, we would go to the nuns for treatment because they knew first aid.

The Christians are like brothers and sisters, until now these relationships are very close. Our problems were not with the Jews living with us as neighbors; these relations were also very close, because we were acquainted through several generations; we trusted them and they trusted us. The new arrivals were the ones that caused problems. When the fighting began in the Old City between the Jewish Quarter and the Arabs, it was not the residents of the Jewish Quarter that fought, it was new arrivals. They used to be smuggled in buses, they would lay on the bottom of the

bus and run through the blockade. We heard then and even later that the original Jewish inhabitants were surprised and asked "Why, what is this all about?"

An Ottoman Donation

A few years ago, an Orthodox Jew showed my cousin an old document. In the nineteenth century, the Jewish community needed to renovate their synagogue, it was a huge building and very old. My family contributed 200 Ottoman coins, -- gold coins -- to the Jewish synagogue and so the Orthodox Jew told my cousin "Look, your family gave us that much to renovate." That was our relationship. Indeed, some of the members of my family were married to Jews and some to Christians. I'm not talking about one or two or three, but more. It was very normal, like marriages with Christian Arabs today.

On Credit

As I said, we always bought on credit from our Jewish neighbors as they did from us. In the Jewish Quarter, there were a lot of grocery shops, and this old woman or old man would hand me a sweet as I walked by. We usually bought shoes at an Armenian shop, Shahmilian. He was well-known. Groceries were mostly from Jews because they were closer to our place and they had good relations with my father. My father would send me to buy and I would tell the shopkeeper that he'll pay you later. Fine, he or she would say, and record it in a notebook. After a month or two, the shopkeeper might tell me, please remind your father, he did not pay or his credit is high. He would then pay or ask for a delay.

I knew a Jewish family were renting housing in Harat al-Namamreh [in al-

Baqa' in the New City] before 1948. And Harat al-Namamreh also had Christians, like the fellow from the Hababo family who gave us a house in al-Tur village. He was the agent for Ford spare parts and in 1948 he moved to Egypt. The Namamreh neighborhood was for the elite, those who had money.

Question: Did your Armenian and Jewish neighbors go to the 'Omariyya [government] school with you?

Al-Nammari: No, the British at that time allowed Jews to have their own schools. The Armenians also had their own schools. But Muslims and Christians were together. Therefore, our holidays were Friday and Sunday. At our school we always had Christian friends and Muslim friends. At that time, we were not aware of the difference, except to say OK, he goes to a church, you go to a mosque.

Playground Advantages

Question: You didn't have religion studies in the school?

Al-Nammari: Only for the Muslims - the Christians could go out and play. Therefore we always used to love to be Christians to go out and play. I remember one day I got angry with a Christian friend, and I made a cross with my fingers and I spat on it. You know how kids are. Of course, Muslims don't really have a symbol. The only symbol is a moon. So he thought the moon was ours. So he made his fingers like a moon and he spat on it. [al-Nammari laughs]. We had funny incidents, but we were never aware of a real difference in religion. Actually, later on in the 70's and 80's when things started to politicize then people started to be aware of the Chris-

tians, Muslims, and Jews - before that, no. I raised my children not to differentiate.

Even now, most of our good friends are Christians. When I was in Saudi Arabia, my wife would stay in Jerusalem with the children. A Christian friend, an Armenian from the Old City, looked after my family.

Of course, it doesn't mean there aren't fanatics that use religion for their own purposes, but it's not part of the religion I know.

2. Schoolfriends and Silences:

Samira 'Abdelhadi al-Budeiri

Ms al-Budeiri grew up in the Shaykh Jarrah neighborhood in Jerusalem. She married and moved to Qatamon in the New City, but she and her family were driven out in the fighting in 1948. This interview was conducted on 17 March 99 in Arabic.

Al-Budeiri: From the beginning, I attended the Jerusalem Girls College in Rehavia [a Mandate-era Jewish neighborhood, now in West Jerusalem] an English school. A school bus used to come pick us up. In 1936, during the strike, there were no buses, so our families rented a car and driver for all the girls in the neighborhood. Or we would go walking from Shaykh Jarrah when I was old enough.

Question: Did you have friends from school?

Al-Budeiri: Yes, and even Jewish friends. The school had many Jewish students because it was in Rehavia, more so than Schmidt Girls College. And I had Jewish friends who were wonderful.

Question: Did you stay friends with them?

Al-Budeiri: No. I tried to call a Jewish school-friend after 1967, and we talked, but we couldn't really go back and forth to see each other; I'm not the kind that likes to go over there. But I called her because my sister, who resembles me, went to a party here on Mt Scopus. The Jewish woman saw my sister and asked her. "Are you related to Samira?" And she said, "yes, she is my sister," and gave her my telephone number. We talked a few times, and then ... nothing more, silence.

Question: Did you have English friends?

Al-Budeiri: No, because they had their own school, the British Community School in Talbiyya, the British Community School. The rest of us, Arab, Muslims and Christians and Jews, were together.

Question: Did the Jewish students study Arabic?

Al-Budeiri: Of course not. Only the Muslims and Christians.

Question: What did they do during Arabic class?

Al-Budeiri: I think they went outside. I don't remember them in the class. But there was no difference or discrimination between us and them. We were good to each other.

3. Food Across Borders:

Wajih Barakat

Dr. Barakat grew up in Deir al-Thor neighborhood, and then later his family moved to al-Baqa'. He was in university in Beirut in 1948, and later studied medicine in Germany. This interview was conducted on 15 April 1999 in Arabic.

Barakat: I hate being [in Jerusalem] sometimes. I don't hate the Jews, not at all.

I am cosmopolitan, I don't have that point of view. What happened to them was terrible. And what happened to us was terrible. It's the same thing. When I get really angry, I always remember what happened to them and remember that they are to be pitied, they suffered a catastrophe. But they came and caused us a catastrophe. That is not right. We could have lived together - we were living together. A Jewish doctor, Dr. Katz, was our family doctor and when I visited him he would always tell me, "You are going to become a doctor." We had Jewish friends. When the borders closed, and they didn't have any food, we used to send them eggs and meat with the UN workers. My family is that way. We don't differentiate between people. We'd send them food across the border in Jerusalem.

It's shameful what is happening now. The Israelis are stubborn. They want everything - and what about the rest of us? It won't work. It won't. This is what is painful. Otherwise it would have been the best place to live in the Middle East - us and them together in particular.

Question: Before 1948, were your neighbors mixed?

Barakat: In lower Baqa' and in Abu Tor, we were all Arabs. But now of course, it's different. The Israelis took over our house; it now has three Jewish families living in it.

A Jewish Doctor

Question: Why did you go to a Jewish doctor?

Barakat: He was better. We didn't have advanced medicine or many educated people. That's why we lost our whole world. They [the Jews] came to Palestine

knowledgeable and educated from Germany, from America, from Poland. It's similar to what happened later when Palestinians came to Jordan. The Jordanians weren't educated. Knowledge is the basis for everything. At that time, we didn't have it.

Question: What were the relations like between Christians and Muslims?

Barakat: Very good. Of course, there were occasional problems, like during Nabi Musa, or Easter. Some drunk Muslim might shout, "This is for Muslims" and people would fight. But the relations were good, I'll tell you. The Arab Christians spoke like us, you would have to ask if you wanted to know a person's religion. Then, they didn't name their children Francis or

Pierre; they used names like Ramzi, Rami, Fadi. These names were known to us, and you wouldn't know if there person was Muslim.. You might ask, "Brother, are you Muslim or Christian?" Underneath our house in Deir Abu Thor were three apartments. All of them were lived in by Christians. Once I brought Dr. Katz, the most costly doctor, to visit one of these neighbors when he was ill. My father sent me out to get him. The last two years, we didn't take any money for rent because they were poor. The man couldn't work any longer. One of them was named Yanni, one was from the Skaffi family, one from the ... I forgot, I've gotten old.

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