



# A View from the New Gate

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Atallah Kuttab

*Based on interviews by Fateh Azzam*

## **Decentered in Jerusalem**

A few months ago, the Israeli occupation authorities informed me that my right to live in my Jerusalem was to be denied. The decision was based on their premise that I was only a "permanent resident" - in other words, a temporary "guest" in my city of birth and family history. Since I now have a German passport and have been living outside the country for a few years, they have unilaterally deemed that my "center of life" must be elsewhere. Therefore, the "privilege" of being considered a Jerusalemite would be withdrawn. This came on the heels of many months of letters, telephone calls, and visits as part of my ongoing efforts to make sure that I did not violate their law. I have always been careful to obtain the necessary re-entry permits, make the requisite appearances, and keep my papers in order. However, try as I could, they are now trying to deny me

my city. They will not succeed, just as they did not succeed the last time they tried to do this.

Yet I am somehow strangely pleased about this turn of events, because I now have more freedom to move in Palestine on my German passport than I ever did as a Jerusalem resident. On a three-month tourist visa in my own country, I can go to Haifa and Nazareth and Gaza, anywhere in historic Palestine, without the humiliation of waiting for hours and days for permits to do the simplest things. I can drive anywhere and visit anyone. Protected by the German State, I have more privileges as a German in my Palestinian Jerusalem than as a Palestinian.

It is a painful dilemma, to be caught between my present "legal" identity and my personal, real one: to have freedom or to give it up for the right to Jerusalem. I could never understand why I cannot have both. I will probably never understand it, but I can never give up either. This is my dilemma as a Jerusalemite.

### **Raising the Family *Bairaq* at**

#### ***Sabt Al-Nur***

I was born in Jerusalem in 1954, and grew up in the Christian Quarter of the Old City just inside New Gate, which had been sealed since the 1948 War. I grew up in the midst of its corners and alleyways, looking over the walls onto that strip of no-man's-land that divided Jerusalem after the war of 1948. My family is one of the oldest Orthodox Christian families of the Old City, with our own space in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and our own church standard (*bairaq*). Generation after generation, myself included, we carried that *bairaq* through all the religious holidays, processions, and dramatic events

affecting the Holy City. My mother's family, the Shama' - related to my father's - still have their traditional compound (*hosh*) inside the Old City Walls, between New Gate and Jaffa Gate. We were, and still are, part of the core of the Old City Christian Arabs. We have always felt that we were the Old City.

During the war of 1948, my family was living in the Musrara, a short distance from the Old City wall. When a barrel-bomb detonated by Jewish paramilitary forces exploded in the area, killing one of my aunts, we and many others fled back into the shelter of the Old City. By making the 200-meter walk from the Musrara back into New Gate, my family became card-carrying refugees, registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) and thereby eligible for rations and relief assistance. As the economic situation steadily worsened in the decade after the war, this relief proved invaluable - especially for our community, which was trapped in a corner of the Old City's Christian Quarter, far from its commercial traffic and cut off from the outside world by the sealed New Gate. It was a working class community: eight or so carpenters and woodworkers, a blacksmith, two framing shops, a print shop, and several shoemakers. Survival was dependent on mutual support and assistance, which came easily because of a strong sense of community that lingers to this day in my psyche like innocence lost. I still hold heartfelt memories of people, places and events, smells and sounds, and help mutually, gladly offered and received. The community took care of its own, in sickness and health, applying its own traditional means when modern means were not available. There was the time,

for example, when neighbors poured a bottle of *arak* and a half-kilo of ground coffee into a gash in my head when I fell off the City wall at 10 years of age.

Although we were dependent on UNRWA rations for some time, it was not unusual for us to have as many as 30 people at dinner, especially when my uncles' families moved in with us for a time.

Our immediate family of seven was of modest means. We lived in three rooms that opened onto a courtyard. The Jordanian authorities provided almost no municipal services, and we and many of our neighbors could not afford electricity for most of my childhood, let alone television and telephones. Night lighting was provided by kerosene lanterns and candles. A water carrier (*saqqa*) used to bring water around: we also used to buy it from an ornery neighbor who had a tap that, once a week, pumped water, which we used to store in 20-liter canisters for our daily needs and weekly baths. We had no toilet in the house, and had to share seven outhouses with around 30 other families in the neighborhood. I still smart from the awful smells and memories of those miserably cold Jerusalem nights on my behind.

My father owned a small traditional coffee shop/tea-house just inside New Gate, which he had inherited from his own father. Everyone in our tight-knit community knew my father's coffee shop, *Qahwet Abu Atta*, just as we knew everyone in the neighborhood. It was a small center of a small communal universe: a meeting place for political and other kinds of gossip and playing backgammon, chess, and *dhama* (dominoes). Like most boys of my generation, I spent my entire childhood, from the age of four, working at my

father's shop. I would go there immediately after school and spend my afternoons making and delivering cups of coffee and tea, setting up *arghileh* (water pipes), and studying in between. I remember Sundays with particular distaste, as I had to wake up at five in the morning to help clean the *Qahweh* thoroughly before going to church.

It was a constant struggle to make ends meet, and I remember only too well pulling heavy loads of watermelon in my homemade cart from Lions Gate to New Gate to sell. I also sold hot corn and collected orange peels to sell for making marmalade. UNRWA continued to distribute oil, bread, and milk as food supplements. We would always compete to see who would be the early bird: at seven and eight years of age, I would stand in line for hours to get my family's share. The difficult economic conditions forced many of the businesses in the Old City to close down and move to Amman, such as the Siniora canned food factory and Qassissieh's tile factory.

With financial assistance, I was able to study at the Freres School (College de La Salle) in our neighborhood. In elementary school, scholarships were available for many children in the neighborhood, and we went to school alongside children of the more well-to-do who could afford to pay the tuition. Many of my friends had to drop out over the years in order to work, eventually taking over their father's businesses, as per tradition. I was lucky to continue at the school through the preparatory stage until graduation. I could not have done it without the community. Everyone had some contribution to make in their shop; everyone was somehow responsible for everyone else. Almost daily, I would take coffee or tea to George

El-Shiber at the framing shop, where he would tutor me in mathematics, at which I quickly became good. Years later in Beirut, George would claim - justifiably - that my success as an engineer was due to his efforts. I also did my part, tutoring Nicola Ninios, the dentist's son, and Dr. Ninios never accepted any money for our dental care. Nicola eventually took over his father's clinic, and he still will not accept money from my family for his dentistry work.

Like that of most boys, my childhood consisted of work and study; we had to steal playing time in between the two. The Old City streets and Ottoman walls were our playground: the streets our football fields and the ancient broken-down walls our jungle-gyms. We would jump here and there and sneak out into the no-man's-land near Notre Dame to pick flowers and cactus fruit (*saber*), to the chagrin of Jordanian soldiers who had to be assuaged with free cups of tea from our coffee shop. Our micro-cosmos, that little cut-off corner of the Old City, was our own magical kingdom filled with corners and alleys - caves and secret hideaways that we barely had time to explore. We were always discovering new spaces, jumping across the roofs of houses to visit one another and sometimes falling through crevices and holes in the ground. Many Old City houses had windowless cellars formerly used as storage, which were utilized as guesthouses during Easter, when Christian pilgrims from Syria and Lebanon would come to pray and meet up with their relatives from the Galilee at Mandelbaum Gate, shouting to their loved ones across no-man's land. Every Easter, my mother would be invite people she had just met at the market to stay with us. In later years, these cellars were rented to Cypriots and

others who flocked the City for the holidays.

### **From Jerusalem to Beirut**

The immediacy of our daily life of work and study during our pre-teen years precluded any understanding of the larger political picture; that came much later. When East Jerusalem fell to the Israelis in 1967, I was aware only that the Jordanians were on the wall and the Jews were out there on the other side. On that fateful June day in 1967, I was carrying an order of hummos to a customer when violent shooting flared up all around me. I can still see the hummos flying in the air and myself flying home, where we were stuck for a week because of all the shooting. The radios that used to hum with Um Kulthum's songs on the first Thursday of every month now broadcast Israeli war propaganda, making us believe that the Israelis were Iraqi soldiers coming to liberate us. The Israelis blew up their way into New Gate, causing damage to several building. When they later broke into and robbed my father's shop, I sensed that we were in for different kinds of trouble.

A few months later, the Israelis organized a military parade through East and West Jerusalem to celebrate their victory. It was to be a show of force with tanks and armored personnel carriers. We were excited to see such things and begged our teacher to let us go watch. His angry refusal planted a political seed in my mind: it was totally unexpected, given the school's near-total blackout on political discussion of any sort. Other more insidious changes were also occurring: a census was taken by the Israelis months after their occupation; identity cards were issued; and the Israeli *lira* (later the

*shekel*) became the daily currency instead of the Jordanian *dinar*.

The real political sea change came a year later, when news began filtering about the existence of Palestinian *fedayeen*. We heard that they were driving the Israelis crazy and were about to liberate Jerusalem: it was only a matter of time. One day our teacher, Mr. Abu Sa'da from Beit Sahour near Bethlehem, stopped the lesson, saying: "I can't continue, I must hear the news..." The battle of al-Karameh between the *fedayeen* and Israeli army was taking place near the Jordanian border, in which the Israelis were to suffer heavy losses. This created a new kind of excitement. Older students began talking about running off to join them to fight for the liberation of the homeland, and some did.

But the Old City was already changing fast. Upon taking over, the Israelis immediately began developing it - something the Jordanians never did. Sewers were put in and streets were re-tiled. We got our first shower and toilet in 1969, and slowly the public outhouses went out of use. By the mid-1970s, even telephones became common in the Old City. Other major changes were taking place in and around the Jewish Quarter, heralded in 1968 by the wholesale destruction of the Moroccan Quarter (*haret al-maghariba*) to make space for the Western Wall plaza. People were losing their homes and livelihood, but we were a little too far from the center of the Old City, in the corner by New Gate, to feel it immediately. Changes in our neighborhood were dramatic but more of an economic nature.

Since New Gate was now opened to through-traffic, our neighborhood became a passage way. Business increased with

this opening up to the world and my father's coffee shop flourished. Significantly, many of the community-focused businesses began to change towards new and more lucrative enterprises. As the numbers of tourists began to grow steadily, souvenir shops flourished in place of the cottage industries and businesses that had served the needs of the community. On one street alone, no fewer than eight shops became souvenir stores, including my uncle's carpentry workshop. Hostels and small hotels opened up for foreign visitors and rentals sky-rocketed. Some families left, having sold or rented their homes at steep prices. Cars began driving through our football field. Businesses that had moved to Amman returned to the Old City, which now promised new lucrative markets. Over a decade or so, as our small universe in a corner of Jerusalem's Old City lost its corner and became a thoroughfare, the community slowly disintegrated.

I graduated in 1971 and became the first member of my family to go on to college. Originally, it was anticipated that, like many other students of the French Catholic system, I would go to college in France, but my political consciousness made me insist on going to Birzeit University. My process of political self-discovery began through the voluntary work committees and other types of political involvement, but my real political education was during difficult years as a graduate student at the American University of Beirut (AUB).

AUB offered only one scholarship to Birzeit students, and I was the recipient. All I needed was documentation and money: the first proved much more difficult than the second. Since I could not study in Beirut with an Israeli-issued *Laissez Passer*, I needed a Jordanian

passport. This proved extremely difficult, and although I finally succeeded, I still feel resentful that we had to make near heroic efforts to legally prove my Jerusalem identity. The unexpected problem was that my father had never had a Jordanian passport issued, for he had never left Jerusalem. It was the miraculous retrieval by an aunt in Amman of an UNRWA ration card, from 1949 or 1950, with our names and address on it that saved the day and opened up the world for me. I have since made sure everyone in the family got a passport, but my father refused to sign an application. He still refuses to leave Jerusalem.

This, of course, was only the first of many battles to prove, and hold onto, my right in Jerusalem. I will not bore the reader with all the grisly details. Suffice it to say that, as my studies and scholarships took me to Beirut, the U.S. and the U.K., I had to endure many humiliations: repeatedly lining up at the Israeli Ministry of Interior to get the necessary re-entry permits; getting a new *Laissez Passer*; making sure I returned within specified periods; and ensuring I did not violate their law. When I returned to teach at Birzeit University, after a short employment in the Gulf, I had to endure periodic closures of Jerusalem, unable to leave the Old City one day or to enter it another day. I recall, with still simmering anger, the frustrations of dealing with checkpoints and the blanket prohibitions against going to the Galilee and other parts of Palestine. Like most of my generation, I was arrested a few times. Then, of course, came the first Intifada, about which much has been written elsewhere.

### **We Still Have the *Hosh***

The constant battle of a Jerusalemite was taken on by my first wife, a British citizen who, after several years of going to and fro with relevant ministries, finally received approval for a resident ID card in Jerusalem. Ironically, the approval came a short while after we were divorced and she returned to the UK. I re-married and, when my first child was born, I made certain to register the birth to ensure my child his own resident ID number. I was happy and proud of myself. However, when I went to register my second child, the laws had changed, and the effort failed. As a result, my wife and younger son do not have IDs, while my older son and myself do. And now I am informed that the Israelis do not think I have one any more.

Through this, I never lost touch with home and kept going back to the Christian Quarter, to my old neighborhood. My family still lives there. We still have our *hosh*. The family still bears its standard and has a mausoleum in a corner of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

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