



# The Streets of Nostalgia: A Journey in Jerusalem

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Reviewed by Penny Johnson

*Jerusalem in the Heart* by Ali Kleibo

*A Kloreus Publication in cooperation with Al Quds University, Jerusalem: 2000. (208 pages with black and white photos and fifteen color plates.)*

In a book that is a sometimes charming mixture of personal memoir, an album of photos and paintings, and a cultural guide to Jerusalem, painter, and anthropologist Ali Kleibo draws our attention to the "ubiquitous presence" of a picture of Jerusalem. This picture hangs formally in Palestinian homes, offices, and restaurants, is stuck, postcard size, on a cab dashboard in Amman, or, until recently, loomed behind many official Palestinian press conferences and will undoubtedly do so again. The picture is of course the Dome of the Rock, majestic in the foreground with the Old City and the Jerusalem hills as a

backdrop. Indeed, its power is so pervasive that it was echoed, rather sadly, in the golden dome placed incongruously on the new Ramallah police headquarters.

Through the tale of Aziz, a youthful summer visitor from Amman who explores Jerusalem with his cousins, interspersed with site descriptions, photos, and paintings, *Jerusalem in the Heart* aims to bring this picture of Jerusalem to life. Interestingly, however, the dominant and static image of the Dome of the Rock remains iconic throughout the book, a "sacred icon" that operates primarily through nostalgia. The stillness and weight of this image contrast with the vivid floating household domes, light-and-shade portrayals of courtyards and street scenes of Kleibo's own paintings. The multiplicity of domes evokes one of Kleibo's most endearingly deflationary images where the domes are described as "tens of turtles lying on rooftops." (p.32) The reader experiences a tension between nostalgia and experience, formally represented by the Jerusalemite author exploring his city through a visitor from Amman who sees it for the first time, but is already dominated by the picture he has gazed at every day in exile. The author's prose poem about Aziz's discovery of Jerusalem (and his sister Muna, but she is not a developed character) aims to dissolve the picture on the wall through the "intimacy of direct experience" (p.7) whereby Jerusalem "slowly takes its rightful place in the heart." But is it a Jerusalem of experiential memory or a Jerusalem of nostalgia?

Nostalgia is a pervasive feature not only of Palestinian, but also of global tales of migration, exile and displacement; it is also a strong component of the "Janus face" of nationalism, looking back on an imagined past and tradition in order to look

towards a national future. Aziz's comment has the flavor of many exiles: "I became without even seeing it/homesick and nostalgic for Jerusalem." (p.11) Nostalgia then does not necessarily derive from personal experience: is it then memory of the experience of others or a selective form of personal memory? For the poet Adrienne Rich, nostalgia opposes memory: "Nostalgia is only amnesia turned around."<sup>1</sup>

While some of Kleibo's childhood and contemporary experiences and feelings of Jerusalem are displaced onto his characters, he speaks most directly of his own memories in relation to that great repository of childhood and cultural memory: food and more specifically, his grandmother's food in a section of "Six Easy Recipes from Grandmother's Kitchen," and the street foods of Jerusalem. In the compendium of the book, recipes also have a place, interspersed with reflections on season and place; this heterogeneity can be pleasing, although sometimes creating narrative confusion and verging on authorial self-indulgence. The two narrative styles employed - the first in Aziz's story, told in poetic prose and framed almost as a children's tale for young readers, and the second in descriptions of Old City historical sites and events - sometimes jar.

The author also rejoices in the heterogeneity of religious traditions in Jerusalem, and emphasizes both encounters between Muslim and Christian and attention to Christian, Islamic, and Jewish sites (the Rambam synagogue) in the Old City. That these encounters are mostly in the past serve both as exemplars of the history of the city and also feed into the book's nostalgia.

Kleibo's love for Jerusalem is

unreserved, and this both emphasizes nostalgia and perhaps poses the biographical problem of the writer in love with his or her subject. As Richard Holmes, a biographer of Coleridge, Shelley, and English romanticism, has noted, a biographer may well begin with falling in love with the subject: "If you are not in love with them you will not follow them - not very far, anyway. But the true biographic process begins precisely at the moment, at the places, where this naïve form of love and identification breaks down. The moment of personal disillusion is the moment of impersonal, objective re-creation."<sup>2</sup>

This note is seldom struck in *Jerusalem in My Heart*: one rare occasion, repeated in the text, refers to the perpetual dampness and decay of Old City buildings: "No sooner is the house painted than the humidity begins to seep through again. The paint forms wet spots that bubble up, crack and begin to fall, leaving disgusting looking fungus-infested spots." The disgusted reaction is so strongly stated that the reader feels an eruption of suppressed sentiment; perhaps Jerusalem is not as perfectly beautiful as we have been led to think, at least in its present. A photo illustrates decline: "An extremely elegant Turkish mosque in Khasqi Sultan becomes a dreary elementary classroom." (p. 188)

The book suffers from some repetition: the story of Caliph Omar and Patriarch Sophronius is told twice, for example. A picture of the encounter between the two by Daoud Zalatimo is not credited to this Jerusalem painter; indeed, no credits are given for the numerous and often excellent photos which the reader then assumes are by the author, with the exception of historical photos. Clear photo credit would have been appropriate: in general, a firmer

editorial hand would have been welcome. The choice of a flowery script type for the title on the book's cover is also unfortunate.

The nostalgic current in *Jerusalem in My Heart* places it in the genre that Susan Slyomovics calls "memorial books - individual volumes that memorialize a village, a district, a region or a country that no longer exists," serving as a locator that leads to "the emotional core of the past."<sup>3</sup> Kleibo's quest for this emotional core is palpable and sometimes moving, as his character is guided through the streets of Jerusalem - and Jerusalem is always and only the Old City -- saturated with memories of the past. Perhaps if Kleibo's own experiences of growing up and living in Jerusalem had been more directly portrayed, the journey through the streets of Jerusalem would have been less marked by overly sentimental moments. And Jerusalem is not a lost city -- yet - even though Palestinian expulsions and dispossessions mark the city with loss. (In this context, one wonders why Kleibo's chronology of "major events" in the history of Jerusalem stops with the British Mandate. The interweaving of visual and narrative genres is innovative and welcome, but *Jerusalem In My Heart* leaves this reader at least with a question concerning which Jerusalem - of nostalgia for a lost city, memory of a palpable past or experience of the present - is the destination for the book's journey.

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<sup>1</sup> Rich, Adrienne. "Turning the Wheel," *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far, Poems 1978-1981*, New York and London: Norton, p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> Holmes, Richard. *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer*. London: Flamingo, 1995. p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> Slyomovics, Susan. *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998. p.1.