



The Shop at Bab al-Khalil

Adam Abu Sharar

Until the second half of the 19th century, the boundaries of Jerusalem were limited to the walled city we know today as the Old City. The walls, restored last by the Ottoman Sultan in the 16th century, had seven gates that enabled people to go in and out of the city. Facing various directions, the gates of Jerusalem were used by different people depending on the direction of their arrival and the purpose of their entry to the city. If a person was arriving to the city from the north, then the likely entrance would have been Damascus Gate (bab- al-amoud); and if the person was arriving from the east, then the logical destination would have been Lion's Gate. Still, not all the gates of the city were equally important in terms of their use.

Jaffa Gate (bab al-khalil) was considered the main gate of the city: visitors, dignitaries, and conquerors alike were welcomed into the city from this particular gate. Both Emperor Wilhem II (who visited Jerusalem in 1898) and General Allenby (the British conqueror of the city in 1917) entered the city in grand fashion through Jaffa Gate. The prominence

of Jaffa Gate and its adjacent plaza in Jerusalem's life at the time of these events was the result of various elements connected both to location and administration.

Jaffa Gate is located in the middle of the western wall of the Old City. It faces the direction of Jaffa to the west and Bethlehem and Hebron to the south and historically served as the city's main point of arrival and departure. Just outside of the gate, horse carriages and, later on, buses and cars formed Jerusalem's central station. And just to the south of Jaffa Gate, the railway station from which trains left for Jaffa and elsewhere was established in the late 1880s.

For centuries, the Citadel inside of Jaffa Gate was the seat of the governor of Jerusalem. Following the Sublime Porte's order in 1874 to make the sanjak (district) of Jerusalem a privileged mutasarrافیyya (independent district within the Ottoman Empire), the municipality of Jerusalem was established. The municipality was first housed at the second floor of the Sarai in the Citadel and was later on moved to Mamilla Street outside of the Old City just opposite of Jaffa Gate.

As a result, it was natural that the area around Jaffa Gate was transformed in the second half of the 19th century into an important center of town. It was there that a number of hotels were located as well as a number of popular coffee houses such as the Bristol, Qahwat al-Ma'aref and Qahwat al-Bank. On the outside of the city wall, a line of shops was established: some were used as photoshops, others as rug-dealers, and others were grocers who served European-type consumer products. On the inside of the gate, there was a vibrant vegetable market as well as offices of tourist agencies, such as the Thomas Cook & Sons. Sellers of souvenirs and photographs were also located there. One such shop was that of Boulus Meo

featured in the following essay by Adam Abu Sharar.

Issam Nassar

The story of the Boulus Meo Shop is one of a Jerusalem family enterprise that was a landmark at Jaffa Gate for 124 years. The shop thrived amidst Jerusalem's historical and political richness and witnessed enormous changes as it grew from a Persian rug store into one of the city's most successful antiquarian shops.

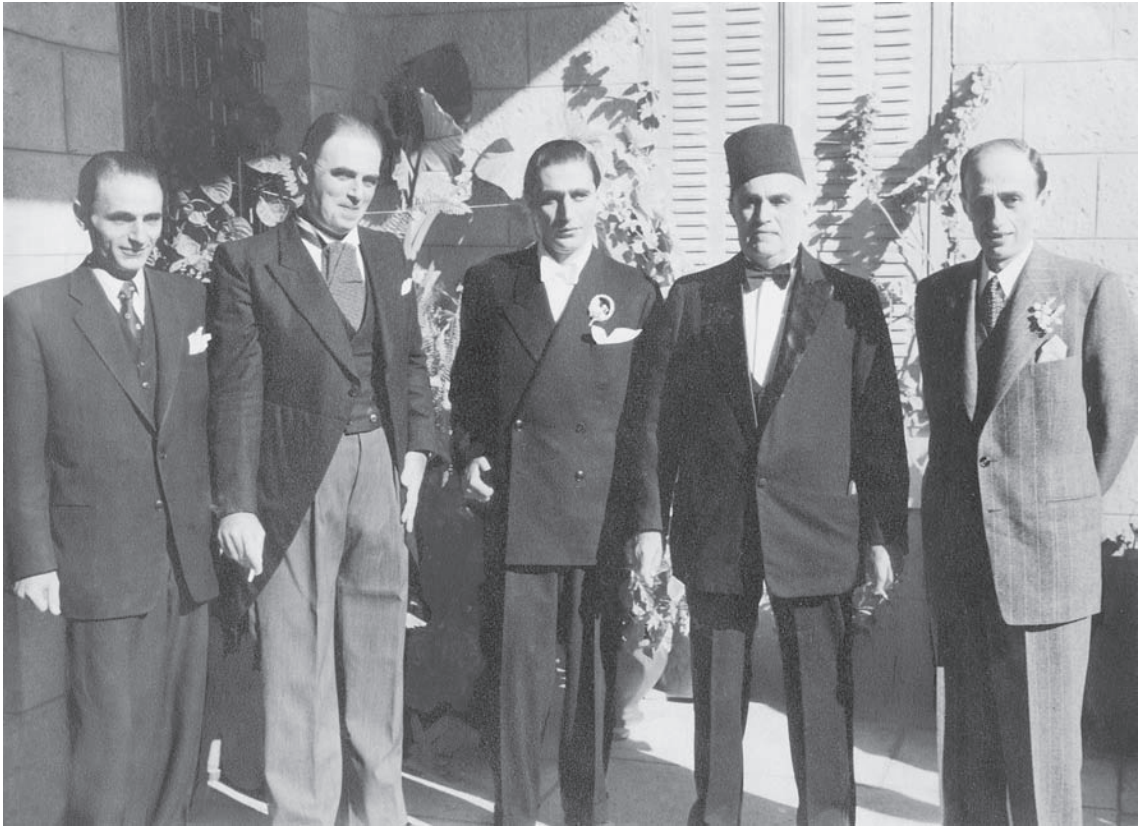
Originally from Italy, the Meo family came to Jerusalem during the Crusades and quickly settled and assimilated into the local community. They were merchants by trade, and Boulus Meo opened The Persian Rug Store in 1872. Later renamed Boulus Meo Antique Shop, the store was run by four generations of the family, becoming a fixture in Jerusalem's growing tourist industry.

Boulus Meo was a very knowledgeable and shrewd businessman, with a keen eye for quality products and upcoming trends. He traveled to Iran, Egypt, and Turkey, searching for the best rugs for his shop. Persian rugs were the main products for the family business, although the shop also carried such things as icons, jewelry, and other products. In the beginning, most of their customers were religious pilgrims coming from Europe.

The early 1900's represented an era of prosperity for the Meos. Boulus Meo's great-grandson, Sani, describes it as "the golden age" for the business. At this time, the store was mostly run by Boulus' two sons, Anton and Pierre. While Anton was the calm and serene one, Pierre was known as "the fox of the souk". The British rule, as well as a changing world, influenced the influx of tourists to Jerusalem, and the shop's strategic location near Jaffa Gate, at



Jaffa Gate from the inside, with the Boulos Meo Shop in the lower right hand corner.
Photographer: Bonfis, early 20th century.



From left to right: Eugene Meo, Arthur Meo, Jean Meo, Pierre Meo, Paul Meo.

a crossroads between Jerusalem's main religious sites, made it extremely successful. "They came in boats first. Then they started coming in planes, more and more frequently," reflects Najla, Sani's mother.

The Meos tried to keep good relations with their customers, and tried to use their European heritage and influence in order to appeal to them. "We spoke their language," says Sani Meo of the family's relationship with the tourists, stressing the importance of creating an atmosphere in which the customers would feel at home. In order to attract and get to know their customers, the Meos hired a café next to their shop. Inside the shop, they played classical music, which was a favorite among the family members and customers

alike.

Sani Meo describes the Israeli occupation in 1948 as "the beginning of the end" for the Meo family's enterprise. "In one day, the family's spirit was broken. It was a rude awakening for a family which had until then been fairly pampered and prospered amidst the political tensions." Although the shop was unharmed due to its location in the eastern part of the city, the family lost both of their homes and most of their personal property, which were located in West Jerusalem. Although Najla Meo and her husband went to see their old home years later, 1948 remains a painful chapter in the family's history. "It was devastating for all of us. It took decades to get over. I remember the afternoon when we went to see the family



An example of damascene furniture sold in the Boulos Meo Shop.



Ottoman travel document of Boulos Meo, 19th century.

occupying our old home. The lady living there now complained to me that in the 1967 war, one of the walls was damaged. I could barely contain my anger. I wanted to point out to her that she may have had a wall damaged, but we had lost the entire home, and still can't fully get over it," Najla remembers. The occupation was a huge personal and material setback for the family, although the business continued to thrive and adapt to the changing conditions in Jerusalem.

In 1977, after the death of her husband, Paul, Najla Meo took over the business and managed it with the help of her sons. She revived the shop by changing its character. Although it still sold Persian rugs, in the last 20 years of business, the shop began to specialize in antiques and antiquarian books. Among the most successful products at Meo's were lithographs by an Englishman named David Roberts. These were unique to the shop, and quickly became favorites with the tourists as well as the Meo family. Today, many of these lithographs, most of which depict scenes of late 19th century Jerusalem, can be found at the American Colony and private collections. Some of the other favorites included a wide variety of mother of pearl products, old photographs, documents, postcards, and books. Many of these products served as testimonies of Jerusalem's evolution through history and the preservation of its history.

Boulos Meo's shop became an institution in Jerusalem. Locals and visitors alike recognized it by the classical music always heard from inside and the warm relationship between the owners and their customers. It is through this relationship that the family was able to determine what their customers were interested in, as well

as appeal to the ever-increasing number of tourists and pilgrims to Jerusalem.

According to Sani Meo, the success of their shop was a result of four things: "high quality products, a keen merchant sense, a welcoming atmosphere, and an impeccable sense of timing." This ensured that the shop not only survived but also thrived through periods of great turmoil and change in Jerusalem. Personal relationships with customers were also very important, since much of the shop's business came from repeat customers who would buy products in bulk and return as much for the familiar company of the merchants, as for their products.

As the different members of the family started to move abroad or pursue careers outside the family business, Najla found it more and more difficult to maintain the shop. This signaled an "end of an era, and a time to let go", as she and Sani decided to sell the shop. While parting with the family business was difficult, they wanted to sell the shop while it was still successful. While Najla has retired, Sani is part-owner of Turbo, a publishing and graphic design house in Ramallah. He maintains he is still "a merchant at heart," although he has switched industries.

The legacy of the Meo's antiquarian shop lies in the combination of its owners' skill as merchants and the character of Jerusalem as a historic city amidst changing times. The shop evolved from a Persian rug store, catering to religious pilgrims, to an antiquarian shop, selling everything from mother of pearl picture frames to old Ottoman passports and coins to tourists from all walks of life. The Meo family is an example of a Jerusalem merchant dynasty, as well as a testament to Jerusalem's cultural richness and evolution.

صدر
عن مؤسسة الدراسات الفلسطينية

أرض السفارة الأمريكية في القدس الملكية العربية والمأزق الأمريكي

وليد الخالدي

٩٧ صفحة ٥ دولارات

صدر
عن مؤسسة الدراسات الفلسطينية
ومؤسسة التعاون

تاريخ فلسطين في طوابع البريد

مجموعة نادر خيرى الدين أبو الجبين

٣٦٢ صفحة ٨٠ دولارا