



“Gray and sober Jerusalem”

Edward Said

On November 1, 1947 - my twelfth birthday - I recall the puzzling vehemence with which my oldest Jerusalem cousins, Yousif and George, bewailed the day, the eve of the Balfour Declaration, as the “blackest day in history.” I had no idea what they were referring to but realized it must be something of overwhelming importance. Perhaps they and my parents, sitting around the table with my birthday cake, assumed that I shouldn’t be informed about something as complex as our conflict with the Zionists and the British.

My parents, sisters, and I spent most of 1947 in Palestine, which we left for the very last time in December of that year. As a consequence I [...] was enrolled at St. George’s School in Jerusalem.

The signs of impending crisis were all around us, the city had been divided into zones maintained by British Army and police checkpoints, through which cars, pedestrians, and cyclists had to pass. The adults in my family all carried passes marked with the

zone or zones for which they were valid. My father and Yousif had multizone passes (A, B, C, D); the rest were restricted to one or perhaps two zones. Until I turned twelve I did not need a pass and so had been allowed to wander about freely with my cousins Albert and Robert. Gray and sober Jerusalem was a city tense with the politics of the time as well as the religious competition between the various Christian communities, and between Christians, Jews, and Muslims. My aunt Nabiha once gave us a big scolding for going to the Regent, a Jewish cinema (“Why not stick to the Arabs? Isn’t the Rex good enough?” she asked rather shrilly. “After all, they don’t come to our cinemas!”) and even though we were sorely tempted to go back to the Regent we never did so again. Our daily conversation in school and home was uniformly in Arabic; unlike in Cairo, where English was encouraged, our family in Jerusalem “belonged” and our native language prevailed everywhere, even when talking about Hollywood films “Tarzan became “Tarazan” and Laurel and Hardy “*al Buns wal rafi*” (“Fatso and the Thin Man”). [...]

The teachers [at St George’s where I went to school that year] were mostly British, although I had two, Michel Marmoura, an older contemporary of Albert’s and son of the Anglican pastor, and Mr. Boyagian, a Jerusalem Armenian and a young boy during my father’s time, who weren’t. The one woman on the premises was Miss Fenton, who occasionally sat in for the regular English teacher. Black-haired, sandal-shod Miss Fenton, a slim figure in her white blouse and navy skirt, struck me as dashingly attractive. I had far too little interaction, too little occasion away from the rough-and-tumble boys’ and masters’ world I inhabited. And so she remained a romantic figure, someone whose graceful presence gave me private pleasure as she floated through the primary school’s arcades, or as I glimpsed

her through a window in the staff tearoom. Many years later, I discovered she was the aunt of the poet James Fenton. At the opposite extreme was Mr. Sugg, a seriously lame Englishman whose name when pronounced brought forth peals of sadistic laughter for his appearance and his stutter. One of the first British academic misfits I met, he was a man who seemed disconnected from the (perhaps too) complicated realities of the school he served and the students he tried on the whole unsuccessfully to teach. Neither the class nor I was attentive to, much less taken by, the droning lessons on geography that he offered; in his stiff collar and his beige suit, he was a creature from another world, full of Danubes, Thameses, Apennines, and Antarctic wastes, none of which made an impression on the indifferent and resolutely self-involved boys.

My class was divided equally between mainly Christians and Muslims, boarders and day students. Michel Marmoura, who taught mathematics, belonged to a world that was very soon to face dissolution and exile in the cataclysms of 1948. He was a gentle and acutely intelligent teacher who despite his nervousness at being a family friend of most of the students (and son of the cathedral dean who had baptized me) taught us the rudiments of fractions with considerable skill. I have seen him over the years in Madison, Wisconsin, and Princeton, and later in Toronto, where he now lives; the pathos of his shattered past has never left him. The rest of St. George’s academic offering made no mark on me: it combined indifferent teaching, a volatile atmosphere, and, as I look back on it fifty years later, a general sense of purposeless routine trying to maintain itself as the country’s identity was undergoing irrevocable change. Already too tall and developed to look my age, when I turned twelve and needed a pass just to go to school, nervous Tommies at the barbed-wire barricade peered into my satchel, and

examined my zone pass suspiciously, their unfriendly foreign eyes looking me over as a possible source of trouble.

Though this pass restricted me to the area where my school was located, my aunt's family had a light-green Studebaker which Albert and Robert were allowed to drive, and so the three of us toiled around the little square just west of the house. Two blocks up the hill behind the house, a British army bugle corps would rehearse in the unyielding midday sun; on weekends I remember crouching behind the rocks to look at them, transfixed by their unintelligible shouting cries, their large black cleated boots pounding on the black asphalt, almost melting in the heat, and their weirdly savage bugle calls. Albert had a knack for English poetry, which he declaimed with a great deal of eye-rolling, a caricature of both the English teacher and the actor in full flight: "Half a league, half a league, / Half a league onward, / All in the valley of death / Rode the six hundred." I took it that we too were supposed to be noble soldiers plunging forward, with no thought in mind but our duty. Albert's voice rose still higher: "All the world wondered. / Honour the charge they made. / Honour the light brigade. / Noble six hundred." Until much later, I never knew anything about the Light Brigade, but gradually learned the poem, and as I declaimed it with my cousin I remember thinking that words could blot out all thought and feeling. "Theirs not to reason why" was an eerily apt forecast of an attitude I had not directly encountered but would recognize and be gripped by twenty years later as I watched the vast Egyptian crowds that cheered and clapped for Gamal Abdel Nasser in the Cairo heat.

My aunt Nabiha's family would be driven out of Jerusalem in stages, so that by early spring of 1948, only my oldest cousin, Yousif, remained; he had abandoned the Talbiyah

house because the whole quarter had fallen to the Hagganah, and moved to a small apartment in Upper Baqa'a, an adjoining district in West Jerusalem. He left even that last foothold in March, also never to return. My distinct recollection of Talbiyah, Katamon, and Upper and Lower Baqa'a from my earliest days there until my last was that they seemed to be populated exclusively by Palestinians, most of whom my family knew and whose names still ring familiarly in my ears - Salameh, Dajani, Awad, Khidr, Badour, David, Jamal, Baramki, Shammass, Tannous, Qabein - all of whom became refugees. I saw none of the newly resident Jewish immigrants except elsewhere in West Jerusalem, so when I hear references today to West Jerusalem they always connote the Arab sections of my childhood haunts. It is still hard for me to accept the fact that the very quarters of the city in which I was born, lived, and felt at home were taken over by Polish, German, and American immigrants who conquered the city and have made it the unique symbol of their sovereignty, with no place for Palestinian life, which seems to have been confined to the eastern city, which I hardly knew. West Jerusalem has now become almost entirely Jewish, its former inhabitants expelled for all time by mid-1948.

The Jerusalem my family and I knew in those days was a good deal smaller, simpler, and superficially more orderly than Cairo. The British were the holders of the mandate, which they terminated suddenly in 1948 about six months after my own family had left Jerusalem for the last time. There were British soldiers everywhere - most of them had already disappeared from Cairo - and the general impression was of an extremely English place with neat houses, disciplined traffic, and a great deal of tea drinking, a place whose residents were, in the case of my family and its friends, English-educated Arabs; I had no idea what either the mandate

or the Palestine government - whose name was featured on currency and stamps - really meant. Compared to Cairo, Jerusalem was a cooler place, without the grandeur and wealth - opulent houses, expensive shops, big cars, and large, noisy crowds - that surrounded us in Cairo. Jerusalem, moreover, seemed to have a more homogeneous population, made up mainly of Palestinians, although I do recall the briefest glimpses of Orthodox Jews and one visit to or very near Mea Sharim, where I felt a combination of curiosity and distance, without assimilating or understanding the startlingly different presence of the black-suited, -hatted, and -coated Orthodox Jews.[...]

There was one very colorful character in those early Jerusalem years who fascinated me, even though I had no idea until much later who he really was. My father's unappeasable appetite for playing *tawlah* [backgammon] was often satisfied it seemed by an elderly, heavily mustachioed man who always wore a dark suit and tarbush, smoked cigarettes incessantly through an ivory holder, and with an alarming frequency coughed his way through the smoke that circled his head. He was Khalil Beidas, my father's cousin, and the senior Arabic teacher at St. George's; I never saw him at school, however, and did not know about his professional connection to it until four decades later, when my cousin Yousif told me that Beida had been *his* Arabic instructor. The other fact that I later acquired about Beidas was that he was the father of Yousif Beidas, a man who had once worked for the Palestine Educational Company, had been my father's best man, and after a short stint in the Arab Bank had come to Beirut as a refugee and in a matter of ten years or so had become Lebanon's premier tycoon. He was the owner of the Intra Bank, which had enormous holdings in airlines, shipyards, commercial properties (including a building in Rockefeller Center), who exercised

a powerful influence in Lebanon until he was ruined, and Intra collapsed in 1966. He died of cancer a few years later in Lucerne, destitute, nursed at the end by Aunt Nabiha, who had herself moved to Switzerland a short time earlier. Beidas's astounding rise and fall was considered by some to presage the terrible Lebanese-Palestinian disputes of the seventies, but it seemed to me to symbolize the broken trajectory imposed on so many of us by the events of 1948.

Yet what I discovered much later about Khalil Beidas was that far from just being an Arabic teacher, he had been educated first in Jerusalem's Russian Colony School (al-Masowbia, now an Israeli interrogation and detention center mainly for Palestinians), then in Russia itself as a ward of the Russian Orthodox church there. When he returned to Palestine early in the century he became a participant in the literary *nadwa*, or ongoing seminar, held in Nazareth at its al-Masowbia, now *that* town's Israeli police station. When he returned to Jerusalem, full of ideas from the nineteenth-century Russian Christian cultural nationalists, from Dostoyevsky to Berdayev, he began to achieve recognition and even fame as a novelist and literary critic. During the twenties and thirties, he contributed to the construction of a Palestinian national identity, particularly in its encounter with the incoming Zionist settlers. It is a sign of how overprotected and ignorant I was as a boy of our political situation that I only thought of him as a quaint old man with a racking cigarette cough and - when he played *tawlah* with my father - a rollicking, very jovial manner, all of which, I discovered a few years later, did not survive the loss of his country. Unlike his children, he was spared the fate of refugee.

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