



FEATURES

Occidental Obsessions: Diary of a Country Doctor

Donn Hutchison

The wedding of Najleh Audi and Odeh Mansur in 1926. Back from left: Jirius Mansur, his cousin Aziz Shaheen, Ellen Audi (who later became Jirius' wife). Front: Second person from the right is Elias Audi, first mayor of Ramallah, and Emily Ramuni, his wife. *Source: D.Hutchison*

In the 23 years I knew him, he seemed to be overbearing, manipulative, critical and opinionated. There were glimpses of his humour and smatterings of his compassion, but they seemed as a mirage must seem in the desert. They took me by surprise, and afterwards I wondered if they had really existed at all.

Very little of the bright, sensitive peasant boy remained in the doctor I knew. The little boy who use to weave 'ubi with his older brother Issa, and fashion baskets out of dried grape vines, or lay under the stars in his father's vineyard and dream of a fine stone house where the roof didn't leak and where the smoke from the cooking fire didn't irritate his mother's eyes, seemed buried in the man I knew as father-in-law and grandfather to my children.

After Jirius Mansur's death, I found among his things a copybook filled with Arabic poetry that he had written, the rough draft of a romance novel about a young Arab doctor named Ramzi, and his autobiography. In the pages of his autobiography, the



Jirius resting on his father-in-law, Elias Audi, approximately 1933, in Ramallah. *Source: D.Hutchison.*

story of the poor, young, peasant boy in *qumbaz* and *tarboosh*, speaking only the village dialect, transforms into the doctor he was to become: fluent in five languages, sophisticated, prosperous. It is a chronicle that rounds out the picture of the man I knew. It speaks of a boy who dreamed dreams as he stared at those stars in his father's vineyard those many years ago, who was a romantic, who wrote beautiful poetry and lyrics to songs that spoke of his devotion to his wife and daughters, who was sensitive and caring and kind. Through the pages of his autobiography, I saw a man so different from the man I thought I knew.

His story is one of a peasant boy, a young intern at the American University in Beirut (AUB), a horse-riding doctor in the Trans-Jordanian Frontier Force. It is a diary of courtship and arranged marriages, of the beautiful green-eyed blonde of romance fiction marrying your

brother. It is a journal of doctoring among the Bedouin of Beer Sheba, of building a villa in Jerusalem, and living through the period of the King David and Semiramis hotel bombings, of the fleeing from Katamon, of Hitler and Palestine.

It is the everyday chronicle of relationships, of the disappointment of having *only* daughters, of marrying across social classes, of cousins and sisters-in-law, of neighbours and friends, of Arabs and foreigners. It is a history of the game of *shesh besh*—your luck depends on the roll of the die and how well you place the stones.

His story covers the period of the end of Ottoman rule in Greater Syria, the arrival of the British, the 1948 *Nekbe*, the rule of the Hashemites. It is a personal story, yet peppered with events and personalities that are part of the history of the time: Glubb Pasha, Hasan Salameh, Abdel Qader al-Husseini..

Like most stories, it begins with “Once upon a time”...

It was a sad day for the Mansurs when the first Great War was declared.

Everybody was buying provisions for hoarding, but we had no money at all to buy with. It is true we received a check for

65 pounds from my brother in the States, but banks refused to cash it for us.

My father used to provide out daily bread literally day by day. Mother used to tell us how he stayed idle until he actually needed our bare necessities. He believed implicitly in Christ's prayer that God would give us our daily bread no matter what happened.

However, on that particular day, the infection of hoarding was passed to him. [H]e felt entirely responsible [for us after] my two elder brothers were mobilized to serve and fight in the Turkish army against the British, a war in which we did not believe.

He had no money and he decided to approach the local money lender for ten pounds, but alas the latter refused to give him on the grounds that my father had no security in the form of gold bracelets to give. We owned a plot of land [now in the centre of Ramallah] but its price dropped considerably and it wasn't considered good enough for 10 sovereigns.

The signs of disappointment were clear on his face when he came back[...] The next day, he went to Jerusalem and after trying several banks succeeded in cashing the check at a loss of 25 pounds. We got 40 instead of 65 pounds. This was great news and we all felt better.

[My father] joined a caravan going to Trans-Jordan, which was a primitive and purely Bedouin country where wheat was plentiful. In fact he succeeded in buying us so much of it that it lasted the four years of the war.

Of the two brothers who went to war, the younger did not return. He died at Shana Kala [Janaq Qal'a-Galipoli] in Turkey, but the elder returned long before the war ended. He had facial paralysis, and by putting some irritant in his open eye he managed to be passed unfit for military service by a Turkish medical board. We were very happy for his return, and as he was a weaver[...], he resumed his weaving and business was brisk and so we managed to come out of that war with only one member of the family missing. Otherwise there was no great hardship, or so I thought.

—Autobiography, 1



Jirius Mansour at age 15, as a student in approximately 1915 stands in the rear. Next to him on the right is Najma Salameh Audi, his sister-in-law, at age 13 and already married. Below her, seated on the right is Jirius' mother, Sabha Mansour née Salah and his father Mansour Mansour. On the far left stands Khadra, Jirius' sister, at age 20. Source: *D.Hutchison*.

On the wall of the dining room, in the first house my father-in-law built in Ramallah, hangs a family picture of a young Jirius Mansour when he was first a student at the Friends Boys School. Dressed in *qumbaz*, wearing a *tarboosh*, and holding a book in his hand, he soberly stares out of the past. In the picture are his parents (his illiterate father also holding a book), his sister, and his 13-year-old sister-in-law. For him, and for his family, the Friends Boys School was to change their lives.

There were rumours that the American School, which was closed for the duration, would reopen. Several families were planning for their sons to be admitted to that coveted school for it was the best high school in the country. A cousin of mine[...] also made plans for next fall[...]. As for me, I had no such plans because my family could not afford it. It is true we had saved a few gold sovereigns, but they were not enough to meet the fees of an exclusive school. My father and my mother believed that it would be far better for me to follow my brother to the States and make my fortune there. Their only wish was to save enough to build us a decent stone house. So far we had been living in a shack shared with mice. In winter, it leaked [...]. I do not blame them for wanting to live in a

liveable house, for they had had enough of misery and trouble with the old shack. To prevent leaking in winter, they used to heap earth on the roof and then roll it with a stone roller. That helped a bit. In spring, all the wild seeds buried in the new cover sprouted and we could see a veritable flower garden.

The ceiling of the shack was made of loosely-fitted round logs of wood and that is where the mice lived and showered dust in our eyes if we ever dared open our eyes at night.

For heating and cooking, we had an open hearth with a crooked chimney that always smoked and we learned to accept the heat coupled with smoke. Mother used to say smoke is good for the eyes as it brings down tears which washes them clean and thus prevents sore eyes. For her part, when her eyes were too sore from excessive smoke, she used to put soft ashes in her eyes which she claimed cured them.

—Autobiography, 3

*In the fall of 1919, I joined the Friends Boys School as a boarder. We were only four in that class under the supervision of A. Edward Kelsey and his wife, Marion. The school was handicapped from the beginning: no water in the cisterns, poor beds and bedding, plain food and lack of good teachers. But the Kelsey's driving power and enthusiasm made the school work against all odds. We as boys had to fetch the water from a nearby spring. We had to sweep the floor, wash dishes, wait on tables, and make gardens, in addition to study and play. Edward Kelsey taught us to say *madrasiṭna*—our school. We felt it and we acted it. It was a great spirit. One of the Jaffa boys, apparently well-to-do, objected to working on the grounds that he came to study. Mr. Kelsey's answer was unhesitating and clear: you either work or leave the school. The latter left the school and I haven't heard of him since. Such sissies always leave no trace behind them; they simply fade away.*

—Autobiography, 4

The arrival of Moses Bailey at the Friends Boys School was to change Jirius Mansur's life for ever. My mother-in-law used to blame Moses Bailey for the westernization of my father-in-law. It was Moses Bailey, so she said, who told the young, impressionable peasant boy that if he didn't take off his *qumbaz* and *tarboosh* and didn't stop speaking the village dialect *fellahyeh*, he would never advance. Jirius Mansur *wanted* to advance. He followed the advice of Moses Bailey: he wore a suit; he spoke in the *madani* [city] dialect; he had his daughters call him 'daddy' instead of 'baba'; he wore the veneer of Westernization, as he saw it.

The arrival of the new principal started a new spirit in the school. Moses Bailey was keen, intelligent and had a deep understanding of people. He must have studied some Arabic before he came and used it to great advantage by mixing with his students. In addition to academic work, he taught us manners at the dining table, in the classroom and during play. He was always there to show us the way.

Moses Bailey spoke to us about our religion and answered our questions and asked us questions about what we saw on the way. It was my first contact with western thought but it was a pleasant contact. In spite of my religious prejudices and fanaticism, he opened my eyes and my thought. I began to question my father about his religion, and when I tried to explain things to him in the light of my new ideas, he would rebuke me saying, 'It is again Moses Bailey who is putting these ideas in your head.' He spoke fondly of him though because Moses and I used to visit my father in our vineyard and eat grapes and joke with him.

[Approximately 1914] As a child, I spent my night in the vineyard under a dried branch roof that kept the dew away from my eyes. When I think of that vineyard, I feel a twitch in my heart for I had a wonderful time and its memory lingers with me.

I said previously that my father loved his vineyard and spent most of his time working it. One season when the bunches were still sour, hordes of locusts came and covered every green leaf and devoured them. They even devoured the tender branches [...]. He tried to fight the locusts but he had no means [to do so] except his hands, and these were helpless. When he came home he had tears in his eyes. It was one of the few times I saw my father cry. My mother took it more philosophically and said afterwards that the locusts had eaten everything green—not ours only but the whole country's, 'Even death with a crowd is more merciful.'

Although my mother was a cheerful woman, she could be grim at times. I was told a story about her that revealed the character of the times.

Ramallah is divided into seven clans that keep their identity even to the present. She was married into a clan different from her own. Her own uncle on her mother's side was killed

in an armed quarrel by one member of her husband's clan. Someone teased her about it and her answer was tragic, 'Revenge will be taken, even if I have to kill one of my sons.'
—Autobiography, 5-6

Falling in Love

[Approximately 1924 - 1925] The second attraction at the Quaker Meeting House where we went to church was a green-eyed girl with rosy cheeks and golden hair. She was serene and silent: whereas I tried to show off in answering questions or raising my hand to show how much I knew. She sat quietly listening and dreaming. Whenever she looked up and I had a chance to look into her eyes, I was transported to a wonderland of beauty, tenderness and love.

As I was too young to think of love and marriage, I made up my mind to bring that girl to our family by arranging a match between her and my brother Audi who was still in the States. I was so grateful to him for helping me through school and opening my eyes to a vista of culture, knowledge and education, that I resolved to help him to marry the most beautiful girl in the world.
—Autobiography, 8

Audi, his camera hanging on his shoulder, went about canvassing for prospective brides. His adventures [in fact] generated talk and gossip and made it difficult for him to find a suitable bride. In my letters to him, I strongly recommended Najla Audi, but his answers were that he had met her on various occasions, but she made no response to his advances. Things became worse when an American girlfriend called Clara Brown came to Ramallah and stayed with us in the new house [...]. It was ready and furnished beautifully. Clara liked it. Many of the Ramallah girls took it for granted that Audi would finally marry his American girlfriend. This however did not take place.

After she was gone, Audi agreed with me that the best girl for him was Najla Audi. However, the girl was not sure in her mind. She had graduated from the Friends Girls School, while Audi picked [up] his education in the States. She spoke cultured Arabic and good English, while he spoke the peasant dialect and broken English. She wanted to be proud of her

husband, instead she was afraid that her friends would make fun of him. All these reasons combined made her change her mind and send us word to stop all plans for the future. Marion Kelsey, the wife of the Friends Mission Secretary, was interested in Audi and me and thought Audi was a good match for Najla. So she dispatched him to live in the fig yard for a few days until she smoothed and ironed things out. A week later, he returned and she told him that Najla's objections were overcome, specifically as he was taking her to the States where such social difference did not matter. The wedding took place late in the summer and I was best man while Najla's three sisters and one of her classmates acted as bridesmaids.
—Autobiography, 14

The wedding photo from the 1926 wedding of Audi and Najla hangs in the dining room of the Mansur family home. The social divisions are clear in the picture. Audi's family is dressed in traditional dress, Najla's in the western dress of the '20s. On the right, as the photo faces you, stands Jirius Mansur, next to him his cousin, Azeez Shaheen, next to him Ellen Audi (Najla's sister and the eventual wife of Jirius.)

That contrast, so striking in the photo, was to remain a wall between the married couple. Without the interference of a well-meaning foreign woman, Aunt Najla would have listened to the concerns she had and the marriage of Audi and Najla would never have taken place.

The Boy Doctor, Marriage, and Five Daughters

[Approximately 1930 - 1932] To Ramallah I went, full of hope for the future. I rented a suitable office, bought simple equipment and started working. Azeez Shaheen, my cousin, offered me ten pounds a month if I would reserve one day a week for the poor. This agreement was good in a way, for it made me known. [O]n the other hand all the chronic cases unsatisfied with one doctor and [seeking to] try all available doctors tried my skill on the free day, and thus I lost my fee. I tried private practice for three months, and I found it trying. It tied me to my office and to my home and I had to be available for calls at all times. The fees were small. Then I had limitations on my social life. I was young and wanted to see girlfriends, but my father told me in clear terms that talking to girls and socializing would spoil my reputation.

I had another disadvantage, I looked young and the patients used to call me 'the boy doctor'. In addition, so many



Jirius' driver's license, issued in 1945, in English, Arabic and Hebrew. His address is listed as Katamon in Jerusalem.
 Source: D.Hutchison.

relatives and acquaintances wanted free treatment, but when they went elsewhere [they] paid the regular fees[...]. I tried to look at myself a few years hence and the picture did not please me. I sent an application to the Director of Medical Services in Palestine. His answer was prompt. He had a job for a medical officer with the Trans-Jordan Frontier Force, which had its headquarters in Zarqa.
 —Autobiography, 24

My mother-in-law kept hundreds of photographs stuffed into an old purse in the back of her wardrobe. On rainy afternoons, she would sometimes bring out that old purse and thumb through the photos. There was one photo there of a handsome medical officer astride a horse, riding crop in his hand, with three stars on his epaulettes to denote his rank as captain.

He presented a handsome picture in his uniform. He was happy to be working with the British officers. He had a batman to serve him, groom his horse, bring him tea in

the morning, heat the bathroom, help him dress and tidy his room. He had everything, except a wife.

I was kept busy and happy. However, with the rank of officer, I received the title of 'Bey', which I enjoyed. After all, I was a student only recently and all these honours that were heaped on me made me swollen-headed [...]. I became sophisticated and felt like a veteran. In the midst of all this, I went on a week's leave to show my people what became of me and to impress Ellen Audi [Najla's sister] of whom I began to think more often. She was still unmarried, and although she was not interested in officers and camps, things might [eventually] turn out differently. In Ramallah the whole town noticed me because I believe I was the first military officer that Ramallah ever produced.

I must say that Najla and Ellen's parents were all for us getting married, but Ellen wasn't sure for two reasons: first, she didn't care to live in a camp in distant Transjordan and second, she wasn't sure she loved me. There was another candidate teaching at the Boys School who, in her opinion, was a more likely suitor.

—Autobiography, 26

In the months that followed, the young medical officer went to Ramallah almost every weekend to pursue Ellen Audi. For once, her sisters were united—even Najla. The green-eyed, golden-haired beauty had been married off to the uneducated seemingly-uncouth brother. The sisters weren't going to let the educated doctor get away. Once again, it was a maiden foreign Quaker lady who finally persuaded Ellen to accept Jirius' proposal.

Things began to speed up for I went to Ramallah almost every weekend. Every time I called to see Ellen, she was willing to go out with me[...]. One of Ellen's good points was her open and bright face with sparkling honey-coloured eyes and a ready smile. She smiled readily and laughed whole heartedly. She was courteous, tactful and serviceable and such qualities gave her a good reputation. All over, people spoke of her as the best of her sisters. Her students admired and loved her. I imagined she developed some of these qualities being the fifth daughter in a family of girls. She wasn't petted as much as the others and her elder sisters bossed her and in time she found herself meek, unselfish, able to please and altogether loveable [...]. In addition to all that, Ellen was beautiful with a clear, white complexion, lovely hands and arms and a dream of a figure. I was so eager and hungry for

her grace, that I lost no time in knowing her and appreciating her more every weekend. Finally we decided to get married.
—Autobiography, 48

The marriage of Jirius Mansur and Ellen Audi was like the game of *shish-besh* that they played daily. Sometimes he won, sometimes she did. It was all in the roll of the dice and the strategy of placing the stones. It was an interesting mix of opposite social classes. He was *fellah* in background; she was *madaniyyah*.

Their days in Zarqa and Ma'an, were spoken of fondly: "When we were in the army...". Jirius was happy. He still had his batman to groom his horse, but now he had a beautiful wife to serve him, bring him coffee in the morning, heat his shaving water, lay out his clothes, tidy his room, and play *shish-besh* with every afternoon. They were young, away from family and friends, and still had hope of prosperity: a stone house of their own, two children—a boy and a girl—growing old together.

The first child was a girl and seemed a blessing from God. The second child was a girl with golden curls and honey-coloured eyes (just like Najla)—still a blessing from God. They would have been satisfied with two girls, but Jirius' sister and the older ladies of Ramallah kept saying: "A son, a son." The hoped-for boy was another girl. She was quick to smile, with long, black lashes and soon her parents' favourite.

They were convinced to try again. This time, a strong heartbeat and a big baby assured them this one was a boy. Their fourth daughter was born. For the fifth pregnancy, my mother-in-law said she was hopeful. Surely the move to the desert and the transfer to Beer Sheba would result in the birth of a boy.

Sena was born on the 9th of July 1946. She was dark and had coal black hair. We were not interested in her looks, but she was demanding and forced herself on our attention. There was a great hush in the hospital. Everybody spoke in whispers. Whenever the nurses met me, they averted their eyes. People felt sorry for me. It was just like a funeral. Our disappointment passed quickly though as I tried to cheer up Ellen, for she needed more strength than I did. Our children had a wonderful attitude and received Sena well. They made us proud of them. The elder two said openly, 'We are glad it is a girl because a boy may have preferential treatment. We do not need a brother to take care of us. On the contrary, we might have to take care of him.' Telephone calls came from Ramallah to inquire about our news. When we told them it was a girl, they would close the phone [...] without comment.
—Autobiography, 117

Though Jirius was a doctor and knew that the sex of a baby is determined by the father, in moments of anger and disappointment, he blamed Ellen for only giving him daughters. To his credit, he did not listen to the advice of his sister that he divorce Ellen and marry a woman who would give him a son. He saw that each of his daughters had a college education and that each would inherit a fine, stone house. He was a bit disappointed in his sons-in-law. He would have liked a “doctor, lawyer, engineer”—instead he got two Arab grocery store owners, and two foreigners: one a former monk and myself, a teacher. As matchmaker, he was once again unsuccessful. Like his matchmaking with Audi and Najla, he matched his college-educated eldest to her uneducated cousin. This addition to the family bore the Mansur name and was the son that Jirius never had.

A Doctor Among Bedouins

[1932 - 1934] The Bedouins of Beer Sheba were afraid of measles and would stop visiting any tribe with that disease. They held a false belief that doctors know nothing about measles, and therefore [physicians] were not consulted. They had another belief shared by peasants and uneducated Arabs that measles needs heat to be cured. They overdressed the patient to suffocation and stopped washing him because water, in their opinion, was contra-indicated. I have seen Bedouins huddle a few children with measles in a tent, heavily-covered and surrounded by a ring of brush fire [...]. Children died like flies and no matter how I lectured they would not understand.

Bone-setting was the specialty of the Bedouins. They never brought a case for treatment until the patient was dangerously ill. They brought fracture cases [sometimes] if medico-legal reports were needed because the fractures were sustained during quarrels. I used to take a policeman with me to take a child with a broken thigh or arm for proper setting, as the family resisted me fiercely and was ready to use fists or even clubs if I insisted. The Arab precept says: do not advise those you love; leave counselling to Almighty God.

Cauterization is a favourite practice of healing among the Bedouins. They cauterize joints for rheumatism, stomachs for colitis and legs for sciatica. Some of them put a pea in the cauterized wound, cover it with a green mulberry leaf and bandage it. The dressing is changed daily. They contend that the discharge that comes out of such wounds draws the disease out of the body. To the Bedouins, epilepsy and

facial paralysis are the acts of jinn. They rarely sought the help of a doctor in such cases. They would go to a dignified priest who would write a holy text, fold it, and put it under a leather triangular cover, well-stitched and attached to two strings at the corners to tie around the neck of the patient.

—Autobiography, 75

Chaos, Katamon, Defence and Flight

The Palestine question is one of the blackest chapters of modern history. Here was a country full with its own inhabitants who owned it for over 1,500 years, which was promised to the Jews who at one time lived in the hills of Judea. It would have been different if it had no inhabitants like North and South America. Every Jewish comer had to replace an original inhabitant, as there was no room for both. The promise was made by an outside nation, Britain, who conquered Palestine from the Turks but with the help of the Arabs. King Hussein of Hijaz with his four sons, Emirs Ali, Faisal, Abdallah, and Zeid, mobilized all the available Arabs to fight the Turks with Britain, on the understanding that they would give freed Arabs their independence. Great Britain, on the other hand, did not allow her left hand to know what her right hand was doing.

It seems to me that the Balfour Declaration was made in a hurry without recognition of its implications. Besides, when it was made, nobody realized that the Jews would ever take it seriously until Hitler took over the government in Germany. He encouraged the Jews to leave Germany, as he wanted a pure German race. The Jews felt that sooner or later all other nations would follow suit and unless they had a place of their own they would continue to be pushed about. Some Arabs had great hopes in Hitler, but he did a lot of mischief in pushing Jews to Palestine.

—Autobiography, 64-65

I often wonder how the Jews, who produced Moses and the prophets, could think in narrow and fanatic terms of national aspirations. One would think they would be promoters of world unity or a world government with themselves as the leaven.

—Autobiography, 79

When Rommel was knocking at the doors of Egypt in Alamein, the Jews in Palestine began to sell their properties and leave to other countries. A Jewish officer by the name of Lumer came to see us one evening at our home in Zarqa. It was moonlight and we sat in the garden outside. The talk centred on Alamein and Ludmer told all those present about the possible plight of the Jews when Hitler came. He then inquired whether we would give him over to the Germans or protect him. We assured him that he will be taken care of as one of us. We had lived together so long that we had become more than friends. It is a tradition with the Arabs, ancient and modern, that they lay down their lives to save their [friend], if he appeals for their help.

A few Jews, members of an orchestra group, played at one of the hotels in Ramallah. During one of the Arab-Jewish clashes, some villagers wanted the town to give them the Jews as hostages. The whole town stood for them and protected them. Moreover, they took them to their homes under their custody.
—Autobiography, 79-80

Jirius and Ellen were transferred from Zarqa, to Beer Sheba, and then to Jerusalem. There, Doctor Mansur built a villa in the fashionable Katamon neighborhood. Political turmoil continued to disrupt their lives. The war in Europe had ended, but the battle between Arab and Jew was leading to the *Nekbe* and the creation of a Jewish state on Palestinian land.

Chaos started in the city and each quarter had to defend itself against the enemy. The inhabitants of our quarter gathered in a central place and decided to have the young men defend the quarter during the night. We collected enough money for arms and imposed monthly tithes on ourselves. We started first-aid posts. Doctors and nurses were commandeered. It was like a battleground, but it was worse. In battles, the enemy faces you on one side and your back is to the wall, but here the enemy was around us and as near to us as our own breath. One night we were awakened by a terrible explosion that lit the whole house with blue light. My eyelids were wrenched open. The house shook and I almost thought our house was blown up. Ellen and the children were wild with fear but we dared not move. We stayed in bed until the next morning when we were told that the Semiramis Hotel had been blown up over its inhabitants. Many lives were taken. Many people were still under the debris[...;] we wanted to leave Jerusalem at any cost.
—Autobiography, 128

One day, while in Jerusalem, I heard rumours that 17 Jews had been killed around Ramallah. Rumours in those days were rife, and I never took them at face value. The Jews, as I had said before, always retaliated for any violence and gave back many measures for one. I should have been careful, but my eagerness to go home to be with my family overwhelmed any other consideration. Wishful thinking made me decide that the story of the 17 killed was only a rumour and therefore I drove back to Ramallah after regular office hours. Things went beautifully until I reached Mitzpah [just north of Ramallah, believed to be mentioned in Joshua 11:3] of the Bible, which is only a few kilometres from Ramallah. There I saw a hushed group of young men. A young man wearing breeches and a pullover, bareheaded with his hair brushed backwards, stopped my car. He was of medium stature and he looked dignified and impressive. He asked about the road. I reported that all was clear. Then I asked him about the rumour of the 17 Jews. He said that it was not a rumour, as he himself had counted the dead bodies. I called the W/T officer that I knew and asked privately as to the identity of the man who spoke to me. He was surprised that I had not recognized Abdel Qader al-Husseini, the famous Arab leader who was trying to defend the country with a handful of men and very little ammunition and no funds. He made his headquarters at Birzeit and was often in and around Ramallah. His word was law and when he asked for a batch of young Ramallah men, there was no hesitation. Often our young men had to go and defend villages or ambush Jews. The Arab League sent troops under Fauzi Kawukji with guns and ammunition, but the Palestinians trusted the leadership of Abdel Qader al-Husseini above all others.

—Autobiography, 130

The Nekbe

[1948] In the north, Haifa and Acre, panic gripped the masses. They began to run away; the sooner the better. Nazareth people, however, stayed behind with the conviction that the city, being holy, would not be molested[...]. Chaos, turmoil and tragedy set in. Refugees by the thousands poured into Ramallah. It was early summer, hot and sultry, and newcomers took their shelter under the trees, around houses, next to hedges and loose stone walls. The smell and stench of human excreta filled the air. Children came to the houses to

ask for water and other essentials. Veiled women came for the use of toilets. The population of Ramallah was touched and many of them would fill their pockets with change to give the unfortunate children. All public buildings and churches were open to refugees. The Religious Society of Friends lodged over 12 families in the Meeting House. The well-to-do carried on to Amman or Lebanon, but the poor remained in Ramallah.

—Autobiography, 131

Life Was Different Then

On my mother's side, I had only one uncle, mother's only brother, Suleiman Salah. He was a stone cutter, a stone dresser, a mason, and later a foreman. He was keen and intelligent and would have made a good engineer if he had had the chance[...]. He joined the Society of Friends and he sent all his seven sons and three daughters to the Friends Schools. Two of his sons became engineers, two lawyers, two government officers and one a physician. One of his daughters became an author by writing a cookery book which is the only book of its kind in the country. Uncle Suleiman was known for his honesty and integrity, people cited him for both. He loved a good life and he and my mother were close. My mother and he were orphaned when their father died. Their mother remarried against her will and the two children had to stay with an uncle of theirs. The land that their father had left them was exploited by their uncle, against keeping them alive. They ran away from their uncle's house and started a home of their own in the one-roomed house that they had inherited. They worked together and did well. When both were marriageable, the men married by exchanging their sisters for brides. My father gave his sister to a man who, in return, gave his sister to my uncle and my mother went to my father. In the past, men paid a dowry for their wives or exchanged their sisters. It often happened when a sister was more beautiful than peer, a few gold coins had to be added [along with the] homelier girl to strike a balance in values.

Today a bride and her groom go away in limousines. In those days, the couple mounted horses for all their friends to see. My father and his brother Shaheen were married on the same day. During the wedding festivities my Uncle Shaheen, who

*was younger than my father, got off his horse, took a sword
from one of the doors and danced in front of his brother.*
—*Autobiography*, 104

Postscript

At times, the autobiography my father-in-law left reads like a modern adventure tale. It has all the elements one wants in a good story or soap opera: intrigue, battles, romance. There is success and there is failure. (He *did* fulfill his goal of building a fine, stone house for each of his five daughters. The beautiful green-eyed blonde, however, did not marry the right man.) His story is not perhaps how he would have written it.

The last two years of his life, Jirius returned to a second infancy. His story was not even a memory in his mind. He knew no one, but had, like the mirage in the desert, moments when he would smile lovingly at my mother-in-law and call her ‘Mother’. He had no idea who I was. One time, when he seemed more aware, I asked him, “Do you know who I am?” He smiled that toothless smile and nodding knowingly. “Mahmoud.”

The most touching scene the day of his funeral was watching the eyes of his 94-year-old cousin, Azeez Shaheen, well up with tears that overflowed onto his apple-red cheeks. I suppose for him it was an especially nostalgic moment to hear the wailing of the women, the singing of old Ramallah songs for the dead. They had been children together, sleeping in the watchtowers at night during the olive picking season, laying under the stars in the vineyard dreaming their dreams, living a childhood marked by stark simplicity. A time now gone that only lives in the memories of the elderly, and in the stories we tell each other.

The portrait of the man who emerges from this autobiography is different from that of the man I knew. I wish I had known the young boy and young man he was.

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