



Young Women in the City: Mandate Memories

Ellen Fleishmann

Focusing on Jerusalem's women provides us with a distinctive lens on the city during this period, illuminating in particular the pressures on and transformations in attitudes about gender which accelerated with the events of 1948, but which have their origins even earlier. These stories reveal rich information, showing a Jerusalem whose special atmosphere enabled certain Palestinian women to live less restricted lives than in other parts of Palestine. Quite a number of Palestinian women participated in the dynamic women's movement, which originated in Jerusalem and brought involvement in

politics and social affairs. The creation, development, and existence of this movement belie commonly accepted notions that Palestinian women were "passive, inarticulate and disorganized."

By weaving together a composite portrait of Arab women's lives through telling their stories, this article will address the question of why Jerusalem constituted fertile ground for the development of the Palestinian women's movement. The narrative is not centered on the national issue; we can take it as a given that the political situation permeated the very air of Jerusalem during this time. Instead, I wish to indulge in evocative history, focusing on the social and cultural environment that nourished women from a limited segment of the population, the middle and upper classes. The trajectory of the narrative is directed by the stories and memories of certain Jerusalem women who generously shared them with me in conversations.

The Social, Cultural and Educational Climate in Mandatory Jerusalem

Jerusalem during the Mandate was the seat of government and "the center of intellectual, social and political activity" in Palestine. In the wake of damages wrought by World War I, in the 1920's the government focused on renovating the city and establishing new institutions, government departments, and schools. In the 1930s, the world depression, the effects of escalating Jewish immigration, and the Strike and Revolt of 1936-1939 adversely affected the economic situation of many Palestinians. With World War II, economic conditions improved due to war demands. The years 1939 to 1946 were perceived as

a time of prosperity and peaceful, albeit uneasy coexistence between Arabs and Jews.¹ As Hala Sakakini wrote, "both sides seemed to forget their enmity of over twenty years and to relax...It was as though we were enjoying a prolonged holiday that we knew must soon come to an end."²

The depictions of the social environment for women in Jerusalem varied according to the identity and experiences of the commentator. Certain western visitors considered Jerusalem a "stronghold of religious conservatism rooted in the past." Yet Palestinian women in interviews perceived Jerusalem as more "liberal" than other cities in Palestine, a place where, in the words of Nahid al-Sajjadi, "if a woman wanted to take the veil off, she just did.

¹ Wafi'a Duzdar remembered the 1940s as an economically prosperous time: "In the thirties it was really bad, but in the forties everyone was happy. Everybody lived in his or her own house. Nobody rented. Workers used to work in the British camps, just like they now work in Israel. Even the villagers in the forties were well off."

² Sakakini, *Jerusalem and I*, 79. Versions that departed from the theme of the "happy life" which some women recalled, can be attributed in part to women's different family experiences during their youth. (The quote is from Sa'ida Jarallah). The presence of and character of a supportive father was mentioned frequently by women and affected the tenor of their youth. The death of a father profoundly affected young girls; in Hind Husseini's case, it meant economic deprivation, and prevented her from being able to continue school, since all the family's meager resources went to support her brothers' education. The tone of her remembrances are distinctly less nostalgic than those of Sa'ida Jarallah or Hala and Dumya Sakakini.

Men did not bother her."³ Hala Sakakini remarked that "the first Muslim ladies to become free" were from Jerusalem. Fadwa Tuqan, who moved to Jerusalem in 1939, experienced release from her restricted life in Nablus. She described Jerusalem as a "free society" where the "modern woman" engaged in "natural behavior" and "the veil separating the two sexes had been lifted."⁴

The attitude of male relatives played an important role in women's efforts to unveil. Nahid al-Sajjadi was encouraged by her husband to discard the veil, and Sa'ida Jarallah recalls that her father, Shaykh Hussam al-Din Jarallah, an eminent judge of the Islamic court, supported her unveiling. Yet throughout the 1930s, women often incurred criticism from Arab society and the wrath of elders for unveiling. While riding the bus to school unveiled, for example, the young Sa'ida was accosted by an older female acquaintance who scolded her, "Sa'ida, why are you not wearing the hijab? Do you think when you get married that your husband will allow you to go out without the hijab?" Sa'ida retorted, "If Shaykh Hussam gave me the permission to go out without the hijab, then there is no one in the world who can force me to wear it."

The mobility of women of certain classes continued to be restricted in the early years

of the Mandate. Hala and Dumya Sakakini described their aunt Melia, a teacher, as "a window to the world" for her secluded Muslim friends, whom she frequently visited, entertaining them with accounts of plays and concerts she had attended.⁵ Yet over time, many Muslim women began to perceive the world with their own eyes, moving about the city to work and to attend school or cultural events. The support of male relatives also played a role in facilitating women's increased mobility. Nahid al-Sajjadi said, "We were from the liberal class. Neither my father nor husband stood in my way...they used to encourage me to work outside." Sa'ida Jarallah recollected:

We used to go to the cinema at the holidays. My father did not mind us going, but my mother was against it... But we did anyway. There were beautiful old movies. I remember seeing "Gone With the Wind" three or four times. Sometimes my mother and father used to go with us, and my father used to explain the movies to us.

The period witnessed a blossoming of cultural and civic endeavors, including the establishment of literary and sports clubs and civic and religious associations. Jerusalem women attended films, poetry recitals, lectures, sports events, and concerts, as spectators, participants and, in some cases, performers. In 1936, the Palestine Broadcasting Service was

³ Most women I interviewed used the word *hijab* (the head scarf); it is not clear how many women wore face coverings or merely covered their heads. Photographic evidence indicates both. See, e.g., Walid Khalidi, *Before Their Diaspora: A Photographic History of the Palestinians, 1876-1948* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1991), and Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women* (London: Quartet Books, 1988).

⁴ Fadwa Tuqan, *A Mountainous Journey*, 99.

⁵ Melia Sakakini was a sociable woman of strong character, whose career as a teacher and involvement in the Arab Women's Union garnered her much respect and the friendship of women from different backgrounds.

established, and was soon broadcasting special programs for girls and women, featuring women renowned for their literary, political or charitable work, such as Fadwa Tuqan, `Anbara Sallam al-Khalidi, Matiel Mughannam, Shahinda Duzdar, and Henriette Siksik.⁶ Every Friday, when the PBS broadcast the women's hour, Shaykh Hussam Jarallah interrupted prayers to listen to his daughter on the radio. Institutions like the Y.M. and Y.W.C.A. were "social and cultural center[s]" offering young people opportunities for entertainment, education, sports and cultural events. Julia Awad, a former officer of the Y.W.C.A., reminisced that it "was the only outlet for girls...a place where you could go and feel safe...The whole environment of the Y.W. was to develop girls. You had mixed religions." The Y's also attracted young people disseminating radical political ideas; Samira Khoury remembers becoming politicized in the 1940s through attending YMCA lectures at which the Communist Party passed out pamphlets. The Arab Women's Union expanded its arena from politics and charity to literature, theatre, and sports, building its own playing field and tennis courts. Its members performed plays as fundraisers. Jerusalem hosted a concert tour of Umm Kulthum and traveling theatrical

⁶ The service sponsored a training course for the Arabic service, out of which 8 of the 30 applicants selected were women. "PBS News," Jan. 17, 1947, ISA RG 15 File 33; HC to SSC, July 3, 1936, CO 733 398/12; Fadwa Tuqan, *Mountainous Journey*; Filastin, Jan. 26, 1941; Sa'ida Jarallah, interview; Henriette Siksik, interview.

productions featuring renowned Arab actors such as Najib Rihani and Yusuf Wahbeh.

Jerusalem was a magnet for Palestinian women seeking higher education since it was one of the few cities in the country with educational institutions beyond the primary level.⁷ Young women left their natal towns and villages to study at the city's private religious schools or the only government-sponsored secondary school for girls, the Women's Training College. Nimra Tannous moved to Jerusalem from her village near the Lebanese border with her mother and sister in order to attend secondary school, but instead of taking the usual course of teacher training, studied a vocation. "I was born to be a rebel" she said. "I revolted against being a woman, against the conservative stigma attached to feminism, and I wanted to prove that if girls were given equal opportunities like boys, they might excel."

Many girls did excel. Sa'ida Jarallah's sister Nafisa and sister-in-law Samiha were among the first graduates of the WTC. She commented that the principal, Miss Ridler, "used them as propaganda to show that women could succeed in school... So when the high class families agreed to educate their daughters all the people were encouraged to do so."

Mrs. Jarallah was the first Muslim

⁷ There were no secondary schools for girls in the villages, and even the number of primary schools was limited. In the 1940 Annual Report to the Permanent Mandates Commission, the number of rural (primary) schools for girls was 27, and town schools, 33. (The numbers of the same for boys were, respectively, 303 and 39.) CO 733 439/23.

Palestinian woman to study abroad on her own, in 1938. Her father was an enthusiastic advocate of education for all of his children, including his seven daughters [foreigners jokingly called them "the little college"]. She describes his attitude:

My father was supposedly a fundamentalist shaykh...Everybody was angry with him for sending me in 1938-1939...to England. I was supposed to be a Muslim girl and I shouldn't travel to Britain alone...I remember one time there was a big feast and King Abdallah was attending...one of the people told the king that Shaykh Hussam teaches his daughters how to play the piano and sends his daughters to foreign schools. My father stood in front of the king and cited some of the Prophet's sayings about education and culture in front of everybody [and] told him that the Prophet said, 'you should pursue your education even if it takes you to China', and that education was a requirement for every Muslim man and woman....My father believed in educating women. He would say that a woman should have her diploma like a bracelet in her hand. For if she did not get married or married but was widowed or divorced, she should be independent and have her own job and not depend on her father or brother to support her....This is a favor my sisters and I will never forget from our father for as long as we live... He loved us and respected us and treated us like real women....

Employment opportunities also drew women to Jerusalem. The British government required a corps of educated, capable civil servants, both male and

female, to service the colonial administration. Women such as Nabiha `Audeh commuted to Jerusalem from places like Ramallah. She worked as a stenographer for the Police Department, and became very popular "fixing" the tickets of anyone she knew! The most desired jobs for women were in education, which is where the majority of the educated among them ended up working. Many women taught at the Women's Technical College or worked in the Ministry of Education, as did Sa'ida Jarallah and her sisters Nafisa and Ra'ida. Melia Sakakini and Sa'ida's sisters-in-law, Samiha and Sara all eventually became school headmistresses. Henriette Siksik taught in a girls' elementary school in the Old City, where she had 80 girls in one class.

Determined to get a job quickly in order to support herself and her family, Nimra Tannous falsified her age in order to obtain work as a telephone operator at the Department of Telephone and Posts on Jaffa Road. "What I wanted was to be independent. I didn't want to rely on anybody," she emphasized.⁸

Women from the upper and middle classes used skills they acquired from their education for social and political objectives, founding civic, religious, and

⁸ Nimra means "tigress" in Arabic. Her mother had lost 22 children in infancy before Nimra was born. During her pregnancy with Nimra, she sought the advice of a fortune teller who told her to name the baby a fierce animal name so that it would survive. Her sister (her only living sibling) was named Diba, which means "she-wolf". She later changed her name to Rida, but Nimra kept hers.

political organizations. These groups shouldered the major responsibility for taking care of the poor, sick, illiterate and increasing numbers of prisoners and their families, providing much-needed services neglected by the parsimonious Mandate government, which spent a paltry amount of its budget on social services. Jerusalem was noted for its active, dynamic women's organizations.⁹ Its women were prominent leaders in the women's movement, which was formally launched in 1929 with the convening of the Arab Women's Congress.

These organizations tapped women's talents and provided outlets for their energy. Many women from the elite classes became involved in multiple activities, juggling different responsibilities and interests. Nahid al-Sajjadi, for example, was one of the founders of the Red Crescent Society in the 1940s, while simultaneously active in the Arab Women's Union and the Women's Solidarity Society.

Even female students became involved, particularly during the Revolt, when they created student unions that united girls from different schools in the Jerusalem area. Hind Husseini was one of the women whose initial involvement derived from the student unions in the 1930s. Through the influence of two of her teachers, Elizabeth and Victoria Nasir, she became interested

⁹ A Department of Social Services was not established until 1942, six years before the end of the 30-year Mandate. A survey of British colonies reported that Palestine spent a lower percentage of its budget on social services than any other colony. Review of the Palestine Press, Public Information Office, 1942; note on "Economic Survey of the Colonial Empire," Oct. 12, 1943, CO 733 463/3. (The figures were from 1937.)

in social work and took courses in it. Later she was active in the Women's Solidarity Society, which focused on education and social welfare. Her interest in social work ended up defining her life when she founded the orphanage, Dar al-Tifl al-'Arabi, in the aftermath of the Deir Yassin massacre.¹⁰

Women from or living in Jerusalem became increasingly sophisticated and politically aware from their experiences in work, cultural activities, and organizations. The atmosphere of the city during this period was characterized by a certain tolerance, plurality, and urbanity that coexisted with vestiges of more traditional mores. In the memories of Arab women who lived there, Jerusalem was a place apart, and, in the words of Hala Sakakini, "something different...[a place where]

¹⁰ Interestingly, in my interview with her, Sitt Hind claimed that she did not "join anything" until she started Dar al-Tifl, yet I read numerous accounts of her activities as an activist in the young women students' union in 1936; she was a member of its executive committee, according to articles in *al-Difa'*, May 5th and 6th, 1936. She was also active in the Women's Solidarity Society and signed a statement to the press in *al-Difa'*, May 7th, 1946.

Elizabeth and Victoria Nasir (twins) were the sisters of Nabiha Nasir, who founded Birzeit secondary school, which ultimately became Birzeit University. Elizabeth became the first woman director of Social Welfare in the Jordanian government, which ruled Jerusalem in the 1950s. She subsequently established a vocational school for girls in Jerusalem called *Rawdat al-Zuhur*, motivated by an encounter with several young girls she found begging on a cold, rainy day. Victoria was a social worker in Nablus in 1948, and lived there until her death in 1974. She established a *Nadi al-Fatayat* (girls club), and worked for the Middle East Council of Churches after she retired, visiting villages in the Nablus region. Samia Khoury (their niece), interview, May 16, 1994.

people were open..." This openness had a short life, however.

The End of the Mandate

The vicissitudes of the political situation affected all facets of life in Jerusalem. Interspersed between events such as the Revolt were periods of relative calm and stability. But the end of the Mandate brought increasing chaos, and normal life was turned upside down as the violence escalated. Women like Nahid al-Sajjadi responded to the deteriorating situation through involvement in emergency medical assistance. When the neighborhood of Shaykh Jarrah was attacked, she said, "We used to go down to the streets...to bring the school students to help carry the wounded to the hospital we established in Beit Safafa..."

Hind Husseini's founding of Dar al-Tifl happened by chance in the course of tragic events in 1948. Below is her description of this event:

...In 1948, around the 20th of April, a group of men and women were called by the assistant of the governor of Jerusalem...to attend a meeting to discuss the situation in Jerusalem because it was flooded with refugees. While coming to this meeting...I met children standing in the courtyard of the Holy Sepulchre, at the door and the courtyard of the Khalidi Mosque...and here in the streets there were children, sitting and sticking to the walls. It was a funny sight. I tried to talk to them, but they were afraid to answer me even. Then I left them because I looked at my watch, there is no time. But I couldn't. I went back...and said, "children, why are you out of houses? What of your houses? Bullets are shot. You might be

shot." Then one of them, (she was 12 years old, her name I still remember)... said, "we are the children of Deir Yassin. They killed our fathers and many of our mothers, and they brought us and they kicked us and they threw us at the entrance of Jaffa Gate and they said to us, 'go to your people. let them look after you.' And here we are." So that day I went to the meeting. I said to them, "I saw this and that, and you want to discuss the problem?...I want to see what I can go and do for these children. Bye bye." And I went and brought the nurse, her name was Hanni Kashe...She came with me...and immediately we started collecting...around 55 little children and a mother was expecting...And that's how we started in the Old City, in two rooms of the basement of the hostel of the Lutheran Church...we were collecting for their feeding. I was having a bit of money in my pocket and I believed that it was too much, but it was too little. We continued for more than two weeks and then we started going here and there collecting in the Old City. The people of Jerusalem were very generous. They were sharing their daily bread, you see.

She eventually brought the children to her family home, which she converted into a school and orphanage. Her words again:

...at that time I was not able to come through the Herod's Gate -- it was very dangerous, so I went to the Dames de Sion [a school run by nuns] and I took a room for myself. I wanted to be near the children and see them every day. Then, when once I went to the children and found them scared and very much afraid, they said at night there was much shooting. I said to them, "All right, I'll

come and stay with you." I came back to the Dames de Sion to take my things, and the mother superior said to me, "No, you go and bring your children and come and stay all together here"... she was very generous, she said choose any place. I said to her, "Give me Sitti Maryam." There is a door called Sitti Maryam that leads outside...and there was a courtyard and a few rooms around it. We lived there for 45 days; then we went back to our place when it was quieter. And then I came and took this house...and that's how I started...we formed a committee and here we are, carrying on the work. And I feel as if it were yesterday.

Nimra Tannous also became caught up in the turbulence of 1947-1948. "We were living on an explosive barrel all the time," she said. She and her sister joined the vigilance committee in their neighborhood, the Musrara, because they could distinguish between Hebrew and English and detect Jewish terrorists. One day she was summoned to Government House to work as an operator for the High Commissioner. The British police escorted her to the job, because of the danger posed by the Irgun. On the way home, her vigilance committee attempted to seize the arms and ammunition of her escort. She persuaded them not to, saying that it would expose the people in the neighborhood.

Then came the time when the bombing started. A group of us was in the post office. I must admit, I was the only girl. I said, 'what's going to happen? We have to do something.' We decided to go to al-Rawda College near the mosque, near the Aqsa. I arranged so we took all our equipment, machines, big headsets, and

all that. We wanted to make an Arab liberation force headquarters.

At the convent in the Old City where she and her family had relocated after their house in the Musrara had been bombed, Nimra asked the Melchite Catholic priest to look after her family, giving him her telephone number and code name; he, in turn, bestowed upon her his blessing. Then she went to the Rawda headquarters of the Arab militias where she worked the telephone switchboard for 45 straight days, and was "the only woman there." After the *Nakba*, Nimra joined the Arab legion as an officer, and ended up living in Amman.

Conclusion

It would be easy to idealize life in Jerusalem during this period. Many of the stories of daily life told to me by Jerusalemites were characterized by an elegiac quality, presenting a rhapsodic version of the past. Oral history, as a "knowledge of past and present [that] is...produced in the course of everyday life...may be encapsulated in anecdotes that acquire the force and generality of myth."¹¹ Loss contributes to this often exaggerated, mythic quality of life in pre-1948 Palestine. But as Ted Swedenburg points out, positive memories do not necessarily indicate "nostalgia for a lost past so much as

¹¹ Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method," in Richard Johnson, Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwartz and David Suttow, eds., *Making Histories: Studies in History, Writing and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 210.

criticism for a burdensome present."¹² In my conversations with Palestinian women, they often avoided certain subjects -- usually, the tragic ones, which were still, more than forty five years later, too painful for many to recollect. They preferred to offer more sparkling memories that were "like fish jumping out of water, with a glint here and a glint there."¹³

Yet the sober side presaging the end of this life did arise, as we saw in the stories of 1948. The end of the Mandate was, in Hind Husseini's words, "the worst of times...a very difficult time for Jerusalem." Its bloody termination resulted in violence, war, dispossession and exile. Paradoxically, though, in memory at least, intense political tension and escalating strife coexisted with an odd, precarious social stability. People worked, attended school, developed and survived. Jerusalem,

20, 1993; Wafi'a Duzdar, Al-Bireh, March 21, 1993; Hind Husseini, Jerusalem, Feb. 15, 1993; Salwa Husseini, Jerusalem, Apr. 19, 1993; Sa'ida Jarallah, Jerusalem, Apr. 19, 1994; Augustin Jouzi, Amman, Mar. 1, 1993; Yvonne Kardosh, Nazareth, Apr. 27, 1993; Ellen Mansour, Ramallah, Sep. 5, 1992; Nahid al-Sajjadi, Amman, Jan. 28, 1993; Hala and Dumya Sakakini, Ramallah, Sep. 11 and 28, 1992; Nov. 21, 1992; Apr. 30, 1993; May 6, 1994; Henriette Siksik, Jerusalem, June 15, 1993; Nimra Tannous, Amman, Jan. 26, 1993.

ERRATA

The last lines of Ellen Fleishmann's essay were accidentally omitted. The sentence should read: "*Jerusalem, as a flourishing urban center, provided not only social, cultural and economic opportunities, but also an atmosphere of possibility from which elite women benefited.*"

Ellen Fleishmann is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Dayton. This essay is part of her work on the women's movement in Mandate Palestine, *The Nation and Its 'New' Women: Feminism, Nationalism, Colonialism and the Palestinian Women's Movement, 1920-1948*, Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., 1996. This paper was originally presented at the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies Symposium on Arab Jerusalem (Washington, D.C., April 18, 1996). The author is grateful to the following people for the information provided in their conversations, and to Rheem Totah for helping transcribe and translate some of them (from both English and Arabic): Bahjat Abu Gharbiya, Amman, Jan. 29, 1993; Julia Awad, Amman, Jan. 25 and March 6, 1993; Evelyn Baramki, Ramallah, Feb.

¹² Ted Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt: the 1936-1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 25.

¹³ Denise Ching, author of *The Concubine's Children*, at a talk in Washington, D.C., January 26, 1995.