

A Jerusalem Childhood: The Early Life of Serene Husseini

Serene Husseini Shahid

1922 Sharafat. Serene at the country house,
playing under the oak. Source: *Husseini and
Shahid collection.*



When I was about eight , I was sent to the girls' school, a Islamiyya, which had recently been opened by the *majlis el islami al-al'la* (the Higher Islamic Council). With its emphasis on general education and sciences-rather than on the languages, music and the handicrafts which were regarded as the proper education for girl's in my mother's time—this school was to achieve fame for its academic excellence. The teacher's were of different religions and sects: Christian, Druze and Moslem. Many of them came from Lebanon; I remember especially Wadad and Ishan Mahmasani and Zahia Maksad. I also keep a special memory of Meil Sakakini, a friend of the family from Jerusalem.

The school was situated inside the walls of the old city, not far from my home. A twenty minute walk down the hill from our house in the Musrara, in the shadow of the ancient wall of Jerusalem, brought me to Bab el Amoud, the gate way into the old



1924 Jericho. Serene and her sister Wijdan, who died shortly afterwards. *Source: Husseini and Shahid collection.*



1924 Jericho. Serene at the family house. *Source: Husseini and Shahid Collection.*

city. Under its high historic arch people seemed to move back and forth between two worlds.

Learned grown-ups might have felt that walking through the great portals was like passing into history, but for me the gateway was and the entrance into a world of mystery and strange stories. Once I passed through the gates, I found myself in a large open space leading to the steps down into the heart of the old city. Here, the cobblestone streets were rubbed smooth by the feet of all those who had walked over them over the centuries.

It was always crowded in the old city. Sheikhs, priests and rabbis dressed in black, their heads covered with different head-gear demanded of their respective religions, busily went about their business. Peasant women from the neighboring villages, coming to market to sell their wares, carried vegetable and fruits in handwoven baskets on their heads and one hand on their hip, the other on the basket, a wonderful display of a balancing skills. Their long black dresses, intricately embroidered in characteristic patterns of red, green, and pink, and their flowing embroidered white shawls swung gracefully as they walked with their heavy burdened heads held high. Students in blue uniforms, men wearing *kuffiyehs*, women in black Islamic dress, and others in Western garb, officials and tradesmen—all of them surged and blended into a motley crowd. Vendors of cool drinks, licorice and raisin juice, called their wares and clapped their brass castanets to attract the attention of prospective customers, *jig-a- jig, jig-a- jig, jig-a- jig*.

The only form of transportation in the

small cobbled alleys of the old city was provided by the donkeys, and I loved to watch them. Sometimes a donkey's bray mingled and jingling brass of the drink vendor, and I would stop and listen, fascinated.

A few minutes' walk from the gate brought me at last to my school, situated in a dark narrow street at the end of which I could see the al-Aqsa Mosque bathed in sunlight. The building around al-Aqsa, including the school, was very old mostly from the Mamluke period.

When I arrived at the school on my first day, I found myself in front of a huge, brass studded wooden door. It was always closed, and to enter I had to knock, using the brass ring that hung on the door. A much smaller opening appeared in the massive leaf of the main door, allowing only one person at a time to enter. I could feel my own humility as I did this, aware of the wideness of the great door and the smallness of the aperture through which I entered. As soon as I stepped inside, however I found myself in the courtyard, in the heart of the school, crowded with girls of all ages.

The great noise made by the chattering and laughing girls was interrupted by the ringing of the school bell. All the pupils then stood in line waiting to be inspected by the teacher on duty, who checked for tidiness and cleanliness. We stood straight, with our hands stretched out in front of us, waiting for the teacher's approval. Then, clutching the iron railings, we were taken up a very steep stone staircase which led to the classrooms.

Luckily for me, in two years I attended this school my classroom faced the open space around the al-Aqsa Mosque. Even if I did not know then that I was looking at one of the most beautiful shrines in the world, my eyes were so drawn by its magnificence that what went on the class attracted little of my attention.

In my second year at this school, I became a boarder. The house in which the boarders, lived was outside of the old city, the same neighbourhood as the American Colony. The boarding house was one of the most beautiful in the area belonging to a member of the Husseini family, Said Effendi, who had left it during his absence from Jerusalem.

Once again, following in a long winding queue with my fellow boarders, I commuted between two worlds. As I walked back and forth from school, I passed the houses of uncles, aunts and cousins everywhere.

In the same neighbourhood was located St. George's School, or as we knew it, the Bishop's School. This was the prestigious institution where young men from all over the country came to study. The football field especially was the focus of fun and pride for all the male students. Later when I was older I used to glance sideways at some of them, hoping to attract their attention. The names of some of my uncles and cousins, who were champion football players, were inscribed on the wall of the building in the roll of honour. My father's name is inscribed on that wall, as well.



1922 Sharafat. Serene at the country house.
Source: Husseini and Shahid collection.



1922 Sharafat. Serene in her father's lap. Jamal al Husseini. *Source: Husseini and Shahid collection.*

The Oak Tree

The oak tree grew in Sharafat. Before my grandfather Fadi al-Alami, had become mayor of Jerusalem, he was a government official when Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire. One of his duties was to survey the country. This was not a time of comfort and motor cars. It was a time of slow journeys on horses, mules or donkeys through the hills and plains of Palestine. Grandfather loved the countryside and enjoyed every twist and turn of the road. He also liked the people and easily made new friends.

One summer day he was, with his aides, laboring on horseback up a hill between Beit Safafa and Sharafat near Jerusalem. It was noontime and despite a cool breeze wafting up from the valley, the sun was hot. They looked around for a place rest. Then they saw the oak tree on a hill in the distance and headed towards it, longing to relax in the cool shades of its branches.

Some villagers from Sharafat noticed them approaching and came out to meet them. They wanted to know who the gentlemen were and to offer help if it was needed, as was the custom. This small event was a turning point in the life of my grandfather and his family. He fell in love with the oak tree, a love which lasted all his life and through generations after him. Later he was told by experts that the tree was over one thousand five hundred years old.

The owner of the oak tree was one of the villagers who had greeted my grandfather and his companions. As the two groups sipped coffee together in the shade of the tree, grandfather made a proposal. Would the owner sell him the

oak tree and its shade?

The man was delighted to do so. Thus Fadi Effendi, as my grandfather was known, became a lifelong friend of the village. The villagers suggested that he should buy enough land to build a house. He did so, and in time Sharafat became a happy summer home for the all the family.

By the time I was born, Sharafat had become the focus of many family occasions. I grew up in the shade of the oak, and by the time I was nine or ten, I had conquered the tree and climbed to its topmost branches.

Being the eldest child in my family I was lonely for friends, and Sharafat in the summer was heaven for me. We were the only family living in Sharafat, so I was eagerly received by the girls and boys of the village. They took me to their homes and I brought them to mine, and we played in the garden for hours on end. We ran like hounds behind my father when he went hunting in the nearby hills. We sat close to Uncle Musa in the evening when he received the village men in a tent in the garden outside the house. Often the *hakawati*, the village story-teller sat with his *rababi*, playing the instrument as he told stories of bygone days.

There was so much to discover and enjoy. Each morning when I woke up I immediately looked through my window to the houses across the road and felt a tremor of happiness in anticipation of the day to come.

Early each morning Abed, the son of Eid the gardener, would be waiting for me downstairs, and we would run out to pick ripe figs in the soft light and sweet morning air. Then mother would call us to come and have a proper breakfast of *zaatar* (thyme) and olive oil with country bread, and an egg to make us grow stronger.

Then the day's adventures began. Abed and I enjoyed climbing every kind of tree, just as we loved watching his mother bake bread on the heated stones of her *taboun*, the simple oven buried in the ground. Once he took me to see his mother's big hen who glared at us fiercely as we entered the barn. I did not believe him when he told me that she was sitting on eggs which would soon burst with chicks, so he pushed the protesting hen off her eggs to show me. One of the eggs fell and broke, spilling a form of life, the shadow of a chick, a sight I never forgot.

Later we would join our other friends in the village for more fun and games. I loved to show off by climbing to the very top of the oak tree. Standing on the highest, thickest branch I would call at the top of my voice to Miriam my friend:

"Hey, ya Miriam, hey!"

"*Ounich!*" she would answer, "I'm coming!" in the village dialect. I liked calling her "Miriam" as they said her name in the village, and not "Mariam" as we called my aunt in Jerusalem. I was proud to feel part of the village and its dialect.

Miriam was the eldest daughter of Ali Mishaal, the *mukhtar* or head man or Sharafat. He and his family had become our closest friends in Sharafat, their house just across the road from ours. Miriam was a few year older than I, which made me look up to her. She was my best friend, but if for some reason she could not come to play, there were always her sisters and cousins. We would spend the morning playing under the huge oak tree, the centre of our lives. There were certain rules to be observed with



1923 Sharafat. Serene with her grandfather Fadi al-Alami and her grandmother Umm Musa in the straw house that was built before the stone house. *Source: Husseini and Shahid collection.*

regard to the tree. We had been taught never to injure its branches, never to pick a leaf or an acorn, and always to behave nicely beneath its canopy. This was the famous oak tree, that was said to be more than a thousand years old, and experts had all sorts theories about it. But we children measured it differently. We would join hands around its massive trunk and see how many of us were needed to surround it- ten, six, four. The number diminished as we grew older.

The long summer days passed quickly, we children grew taller and became a little more self-conscious. Our families grew closer together, exchanging customs and habits. We learned village cooking and they learned city ways, and our lives were enriched.

I was happiest when Grandmother asked me to invite the Mishaal family over for morning coffee. I would probably climb to the top of the oak tree and call:

“Hey, ya Miriam, hey!”

“*Ounich!*” would come the reply, “we’re coming!” Our voices echoed through the village and the wadi, and passersby, familiar with our calls, would smile approvingly at the friendship between the city and the village.

In the mornings Grandmother preferred to receive her guests under the pine trees near the house where she could supervise the activities within. Many years earlier, Uncle Musa had helped his father start the little pine wood from seed, the idea began that if, God forbid, the oak tree should die of old age, the pine trees would be a consolation.

In anticipation of the arrival of their guests, I ran around with Grandmother helping her prepare a place to receive them. Over a base of dried pine needles, we spread a thick handwoven striped woolen rug. Cushions were scattered over it. Then we sat waiting in the shade of the trees.

Gracefully the women arrived in their colourful costumes and flowing white head-dresses, their daughters following respectfully behind. Greetings and compliments were exchanged, the women finding plenty to talk about. The little girls sat down shyly, shedding their playfulness in the presence of the older women and behaving like young ladies.

The years passed and eventually I learned Miriam was engaged to be married. Now when I looked at her, I was filled with awe and excitement. Village girls married much earlier than girls in town. She was perhaps fifteen years old, fair and beautiful, with a smile that lit up her face. During those morning visits, I sat opposite her on the rug, fascinated by her every movement. Her beauty was enhanced by her close fitting head-dress and her embroidered robe, a work of art, which spread around her as she settled on the rug. Soon, when she became a bride, little coins would be sewn into her head-dress surrounding her face.

She would reach for the bundle containing her embroidery, which she always carried with her and began to sew. I knew that she was working on her trousseau. I can still see the silks laid out on the rug beside her, reflecting the rays of the sun. Her hands would move up and down in perfect rhythm as she plied her needle. The gentle sunlight filtering through the pine trees caught her threads in the flashes of pink, green and red.

Years after these events, our lives were shattered when our lands and our houses were occupied and our people were scattered around the world. Under the United Nations plan for the partition of Palestine, Sharafat remained Arab, and its inhabitants feeling safe stayed on their land.

Decade later I was living with my husband in Beirut when one evening we heard over the radio: “Sharafat, a small village west of Jerusalem had been attacked. The house of Ali Mishaal, the *mukhtar*, has been blown up, killing him and his family.”

Later we learned more details. Miriam and her little daughter had been buried up to the waist in the rubble for a day before being rescued. They were taken to hospital but died soon after.

I think of Miriam sometimes, and my heart cries out, “Hey, ya Miriam, hey!”

The easy happiness of my childhood days was to be rudely interrupted by the harsh realities of Palestine. The time I am describing was, after all, the mid-1930s and the situation in Palestine was coming to a boil. Even in our protected school environment,



Gathering at Sharafat. Source: Husseini and Shahid collection.

we knew about the demonstrations and strikes and began to think about politics.

Father had become the leader of the Palestinian Arab Party in 1935 and was also responsible for a newspaper called a *Liwaa*. He was proud of me when I would read the headlines at home. Now I asked him to send the newspaper to me at school. Whoever was responsible for the mail at the newspaper office sent the paper to me in my name, but in the masculine gender, apparently not believing that a girl could want to read a newspaper. Thus, I became famous at school as Mr. Serene Husseini and the newspaper became more popular by the day. It was delivered in the afternoon and after classes we would rush to the outside gate to collect it, pouring over it and passing it on from one group of ardent readers to another.

One afternoon, I came out of class later than the others. I looked for my friends, but when I found them their eyes seemed to avoid mine. I asked about the newspaper. There was a moment of hesitation; then one of them said they had not seen it that day. I was surprised, but not for long, because I saw one of my friends holding the paper behind her back. I rushed to take it from her, but she ran away and I ran after her, while all my other friends ran around the campus. I had no time to realize what was happening. Was it a game? Finally, I caught up with her, snatched the newspaper from her hand and rushed to hide in a nearby lavatory, locking the door after me.

The girls waited outside for a long time until I came out, trembling with shock and drenched in tears. My father had been arrested! For us, the word “arrest” was

synonymous with shame and guilt. We thought that only criminals were arrested. My father, arrested? In prison? Not until days later did we discover that arrest was not only for criminals, but also the Arab resistance in Palestine was being punished by the British. For us schoolgirls, this was a political awakening. My newspaper had been our contact with the events going on outside our school life. Now, our childhood gave way to early maturity.

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Serene Husseini Shahid was born in Jerusalem (1920-2008). She graduated from the American University of Beirut in 1941. With her family she lived in exile in Lebanon and married Munib Shahid in 1944 and had three daughters.