



My First School & Childhood Home

Issa Boullata

Jerusalem 1929. Issa Boullata 5 months old.
Source: Issa J. Boullata collection.

My First School

“Good morning, children,” Sitt Alexandra said as she stood on the landing at the top of the long external flight of stairs leading to the classrooms behind her on the second floor.

“Good morning,” the children responded in unison, arranged in four parallel straight lines in the schoolyard below, as they raised their eyes to their headmistress above.

When silence reigned, she said, “Al-Fatiha.”

Prompted thus, the children recited aloud and together the opening chapter of the Qur’an, in clear Arabic and with a measure of rhythmic intonation:

*“In the name of God, the
Compassionate, the Merciful.
Praise be to God, Lord of the*

worlds, the Compassionate, the Merciful, the Master of the Day of Judgment. Thee only do we worship, and Thee alone do we implore for help. Guide us in the straight path, the path of those on whom Thou hast bestowed blessings, not those who have incurred wrath, nor those who have gone astray.”

It was my first day at school, which I had been looking forward to all summer. I did not know what to expect. All I desired was to learn how to read and write like the adults. Yet here I was, listening to beautiful Arabic words I had not heard before, which I could not recite with the other children because I did not know them as they did by heart. So I listened, and I realized that the words were a prayer to God different from the prayer I had been taught by my parents at home and had repeated silently at the beginning and end of every day:

“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever.”

After the recitation of al-Fatiha, the headmistress gestured to the children to climb the stairs and go to their classrooms. They were no more than sixty boys and girls, and each class of them was led in turn, and in an orderly fashion by its mistress. I walked behind my new classmates until I reached a room which, I learned later, was called ‘Kindergarten’ as the sign on its door said. And I liked it at first sight, not only because my teacher in it was the headmistress herself, Sitt Alexandra, with her good looks and friendly smile, but also because the room’s walls had big colorful pictures of animals and birds, and its large windows let in abundant light that made everyone cheerful. One of its windows opened on to a lovely garden behind the schoolhouse, at the same level as the school’s backdoor, which did not have stairs like those of the front door leading down to the schoolyard.

I do not remember now what I learned on that first day of my first academic year, 1934-1935. But I remember it was a happy day which I did not want to end. Yet it ended with the ringing of a bell, from which I understood that my day was divided into times for learning, times for rest and play, and times to eat or go home. On the next day, I came early to school, eager to continue my contact with a new place which had brought me great happiness and in which I had begun to absorb new knowledge in a most pleasant way and to win new friends in play and study.

This first day was later followed by many more until school became an intimate and inseparable part of my life. I began to greet the headmistress with my schoolmates in the collective manner in the schoolyard every morning, and to recite al-Fatiha with them by heart before climbing the stairs and going to my kindergarten. And I began to vie with my classmates in acquiring knowledge and attracting the attention of my teacher, to ally myself with some of them against others to achieve advantage in

play, and to do other things that were natural signs of a normal merging into my new society.

My School was called ‘The Thawri Elementary School for Boys and Girls’, it was located on the top of the mountain lying in the middle of the Thawri neighborhood, commonly called Tori in colloquial speech or Abu Tor. Situated in the southern part of Jerusalem and separated from the walled Old City by a hill and a valley leading eastward to the village of Silwan, this Arab residential neighborhood had modern buildings and its inhabitants were mostly Muslims. My father had moved our family to it from Upper Baq‘a, a modern Arab residential neighborhood inhabited mainly by Christians, and situated in the south-western part of Jerusalem. He considered our home there too far from the only government school in the area, the Thawri School; so he decided to move from it and rent an apartment for our family that would be closer to the school, to which I, and later my younger siblings went.

The school consisted of four classes: the kindergarten, and three elementary classes; the four classes were housed in rooms on the second floor around a hall, which also had a teachers’ powder room and a small kitchen where the teachers could make tea or coffee, and warm up their lunch. Since the school building was constructed on an incline, the first floor below had only two large rooms: one was used as a refectory for pupils who brought their lunch with them, and the other as a storage room. The latter room was commonly called ‘The Mice House’ and was reputed to be the dreary place to where badly behaved pupils were temporarily consigned for punishment. Although I never saw pupils or mice there. The schoolyard was not too large but sufficiently comfortable for the small student body to play in. It had a wall of rough, uncemented stones on three sides, a wooden gate for the pupils’ entrance, two huge, shady trees, and separate lavatories for boys and girls at the far end. Behind the school on the opposite side of this yard was the lovely garden visible from the kindergarten room, but it was for the pleasure of the staff only. Enclosed on three sides, it had a small fountain and pond in the middle, several footpaths and flowerbeds, a number of shady trees and benches, and a gate on the far end used exclusively by the teachers.

The school had four female teachers: Sitt Alexandra, the headmistress and kindergarten homeroom teacher; Sitt Nigar, Sitt Asma, and Sitt Wasila, each of whom was responsible for one of the higher elementary classes. The pupils were mostly Muslim; as for the teachers, Sitt Alexandra and Sitt Wasila were Christian, and Sitt Nigar and Sitt Asma were Muslim. The teachers had all been trained professionally at the Teachers’ Training College in Ramallah and had acquired the latest teaching and pedagogic methods of modern education offered there by the Department of Education of the British Mandate of Palestine.

My kindergarten year was a pleasant introduction to my later academic formation. I do not remember its details but I know that, by playful instruction, I came to learn how to read, how to add and subtract, how to draw and write in pencil, how to make figures in plastic dough, and how to sing a few songs with my classmates.

Among the many stories that Sitt Alexandra told us in class, I remember one about

a little boy who ate unripe green apples from the garden tree at his home against his mother's advice, and he became ill and had pain in his stomach. He cried, "aaa" and "uuu" and "iii!" To imitate him, the class was asked to say, "aaa" and "uuu" and "iii." The children obliged willingly and rather gleefully, and were asked to repeat the three sounds several times. Then the teacher showed them three cards, with one letter written on each, and they were the three long vowels of Arabic: a (as in fat), u (as in food), and i (as in feet). "These letters are called 'Letters of illness' in Arabic," she explained, referring to the little boy's stomach pain which, we were told, was cured on drinking a cup of chamomile tea prescribed by his mother. Showing one card at a time, Sitt Alexandra then said, "This is a, aaa... and this is u, uuu... and this is i, iii." The pupils were asked to write them in the air with their index fingers by imitating their shapes in turn, and to say their sounds aloud, which they did with accuracy. Then she asked the class to guess the one card she showed, while hiding the other two, alternating between the one shown and the two hidden. Then she asked them to write the three letters in pencil on a piece of paper. By the end of the hour, and despite the deceptive semblance of chaos, the children had learned how to read and write the three long vowels of Arabic, correctly called 'letters of illness' in Arabic grammar books. The three cards were then returned to their proper pockets in a cloth board hanging on the wall and containing pockets for each of the other letters of the Arabic alphabet to be learned later.

Addition and subtraction were taught on an abacus, which stood on a large wooden frame in front of the class. Counting was first taught by sliding the abacus beads, one bead at a time, on the horizontal wires within the upper frame of the abacus; there were ten rows, and each row had ten beads, every five of which were of the same color but different in color from the next or previous five. After several weeks, when the names of the numbers from 1 to 100 had been mastered orally, addition or subtraction was taught for several more weeks. The first row of ten beads visibly showed the results of adding or subtracting by sliding the beads to one side or the other. The next rows were later used to learn addition and subtraction to include numbers up to 100. Learning to write the numbers followed several weeks later; but learning to do more complicated processes like multiplication and division was left to the higher elementary classes.

This was serious learning in kindergarten but it was absorbed by us children in play and was conveyed to us by pleasant methods. But there was also fun for fun's sake, like drawing with crayons, and playing with plastic dough to make invented figures, and singing rhymes and ditties, acting some of the latter with movements of the hands, fingers, and arms to represent—for example—the swimming of fish, the flying of birds, the turning of the wheel, and the clapping of children at play, in one particular song. Unconsciously this fun was also a learning process and an acculturation to school discipline and common social living. There was also time for complete silence and rest when we children laid our heads on the little table at which each of us sat, pillowing our heads on our folded arms, and closing our eyes for a nap, which was especially blissful on hot afternoons.

A few weeks into the kindergarten year, I was given the privilege of entering school from the teachers' entrance at the back of the garden behind the schoolhouse. On entering, I was told I had to walk on the side lane and directly down the side stairs leading to the schoolyard in order to join my schoolmates there and later climb the front stairs with them to our classrooms when it was time for school to begin. I was not to wander or tarry in the garden. I was pleased at being given this privilege because our home was nearer to this garden entrance and, by using it instead of going around to the main entrance, my way to school was shortened. Walking on the side lane of the garden, I dared to look at the beautiful flowers, smell the air redolent of their scents, and listen to the birds chirping and the water gurgling as it fell into the pond from the fountain—these were unforgettable moments of ephemeral, private pleasure in a paradise with no occupants. I enjoyed this short walk daily until, one day, I caught sight of a whitish gray trunk of a tree that I had not seen earlier, standing immediately to the right of the garden entrance as I came in. I was struck with fear, quickened my steps, and did not dare to look back.

The whitish gray trunk was that of a dead tree. It had no branches and no leaves. It was a hollow trunk, yet it was standing firmly. It was bulky and ugly, towering and forbidding. At its foot was a rugged opening, arched like a gate. And within it was empty darkness...!

I was afraid that a little goblin would come out of it at any moment and shout at me for disturbing his master, who was trying to sleep in his little underworld kingdom down below. I hurried my steps and did not look back.

My father, who was the best storyteller I ever knew, had told me one evening the story of a poor woodcutter who cut wood from forest trees for a living. He sold the wood he cut and bought food for his wife and children, but could not always provide them with all they needed. He complained about his poor life and living conditions but always hoped he would have better circumstances in the future. One day he went farther than usual to cut wood in an area of the forest where he had never been, and saw a lovely tree with abundant thick branches. He rolled up his sleeves, sharpened his axe on a small whetstone he carried with him, and began cutting chunks from the nearest branch. After some time, he heard a voice chiding him. Looking around to find from where the voice came, he saw a little goblin at the foot of the tree, on the side opposite the one he was working on. Dressed as a military guard with a little sword on his side, the goblin shouted at the woodcutter, "You are hitting and hitting this tree with your axe, and causing such a loud noise. My master down below is trying to sleep and you are giving him no chance. You had better stop the noise or I will call the other guards and we will stop you by force."

"I'm sorry," the surprised woodcutter said as he stopped cutting wood, "but I'm trying to make a living, and feed my wife and children. Who is your master, anyway?"

"He is the king of the underworld, and his kingdom is just below this tree. I will now take you to him so that you may explain to him your problem and why you were causing all this noise. Please follow me."

The goblin then entered through a little opening arched like a gate at the foot of

the tree, and the woodcutter followed him, surprised at first that his large body could easily fit into the little opening but later feeling comfortable as he descended a long flight of well-lit stairs leading to a majestic hall. There were little candelabras hanging from the ceiling, and their lights were reflected on the marble floor. In the front of the hall was a little golden throne but it was empty, and in the hall were courtiers, lovely little ladies and gentlemen in stately clothes, waiting for the king to arrive.

When the king arrived with his pages, everybody stood up until the king sat on his throne and gestured to everyone to sit down.

“There has been a lot of noise, and I could not sleep,” he said. “Now tell me, what’s the matter and who is this man?”

“He’s a woodcutter, Your Majesty,” said the little goblin guard. “He was trying to cut wood from your tree above and I stopped him.”

“Well done, guard. Come forward, woodcutter.”

The woodcutter stepped forward with awe and explained, “I was simply trying to make a living by cutting wood in order to buy food for my wife and children, Your Majesty.”

“You seem to be a good and honest man,” the king said. “What would you say if I were to relieve you of woodcutting and make you a rich man?”

“But I’m a woodcutter, Your Majesty. However, I don’t mind being a rich man.”

“Fine. Take this purse of gold coins,” the king said. “This will be your capital. Use it to start a lumber business in your country. But don’t you ever come again here to my country in order to cut wood from my tree and disturb my kingdom.”

And so the woodcutter left and eventually became a rich businessman dealing in lumber, and his wife and children lived with him happily ever after.

But I was not a woodcutter and did not want to become a lumber businessman: I wanted nothing to do with the little goblin and his king. I said so to myself every time I warily passed the whitish gray trunk of the hollow tree until, finally when the little goblin never appeared, I was reassured that I was to be left alone.

The three school years (1935-1938) after kindergarten were as pleasant and educational as my kindergarten year at the Thawri School, and my knowledge continued to be incrementally developed. I learned to read Arabic well, using the graded series of *al-Jadid*, the popular and extensively-used four reading books by the great Palestinian educator and author Khalil Sakakini (1878-1953). First published in Jerusalem in succession between 1924 and 1933, they were used in government schools all over Palestine as well as in some other Arab countries, and were often reprinted.

Right from the first page of Book One in kindergarten, I learned to read the words *ras* and *rus* (meaning ‘head’ and ‘heads’ as the illustration showed), and on the second page *dar* and *dur* (meaning ‘house’ and ‘houses’ as the illustration also showed) using an additional letter to those learned earlier, and so on to the end of the book, which culminated in teaching the Arabic alphabet from reading the names of illustrated everyday things seen and experienced by the pupils, and without learning it abstractly as single letters arranged in a specific order. Book Two in the next class introduced

simple sentences and easy grammatical structures, using daily conversation; and Books Three and Four in the following two classes elaborated by offering further simple readings and brief stories, without the insipid rules of traditional grammars.

I also learned to write Arabic well, and my handwriting was particularly neat and beautiful using the graded calligraphy workbook series of calligrapher Shihabi, with a model top line by him on each page to be imitated. I also learned the four processes of arithmetic, some basic geography and history, and important information on hygiene and cleanliness. Above all, I learned to be a good member of a small society, and an example to my younger siblings who joined the school after me in later years.

One of the important things I learned was using my hands to make beautiful things. At the beginning it was making figures with plastic playing dough in kindergarten. My imagination was given free rein to make what I liked and, to go by what my mistress Sitt Alexandra told my parents, I was so creative that I made things the other pupils never thought of, such as spoons and forks and kitchen utensils; but I also made figures of animals, birds, and people in different professions. Using wax crayons, I also made creative pictures of children playing or a boy flying a kite or other scenes; in later years when colored pencils were used in the higher elementary classes, I drew more detailed pictures after I quickly finished drawing anything that the mistress had prescribed like a pitcher or a glass or any single model object she brought before the class that I deemed too easy or unimaginative. In the higher elementary classes, I also learned to knit and to embroider during the hour of crafts. My project one year was to knit a woolen scarf, and I was proud to wear it later on; another project was to embroider a cover of a cushion, which I later gave my mother to use at home; another project was to make a wicker wastepaper basket with a round, thin plywood bottom and sides made of rattan that had to be woven. This latter project was the most complicated and was undertaken in the third elementary class under the supervision of Sitt Wasila, who helped me in making equal sized holes on the circumference of the round plywood bottom for the rattan stems to be rooted in, and provided me with the rattan shoots after having soaked them in water to make them pliable to weave around the stems and build up the basket sides with. And I used this wastepaper basket at home for many years later on.

However, if I remember anything vividly from my childhood days at 'The Thawri School for Boys and Girls', it is that it was in it that I read by myself the first book from cover to cover in one sitting. The book was an Arabic book entitled *al-Dajaja al-Saghira al-Hamra'* (*The Little Red Hen*). I was about eight years old in 1937, a pupil in the third elementary class. The joy I felt during the weekly hour in Sitt Wasila's class devoted to silent reading of Arabic books that she distributed to her pupils was ineffable and is still with me to this day. Little did I know then that was the opening for me to the endless world of literature.

I could easily read and enjoy *al-Dajaja al-Saghira al-Hamra'* (*The Little Red Hen*) in the third elementary class and, later in the same class, many other similarly delightful books in the weekly silent hour of Sitt Wasila's class. But imagine my great surprise and delight on seeing the author of my Arabic reader, Khalil Sakakini himself,

in my class one day. He was paying an official visit to my school as the government's Inspector of Arabic. He was a strongly-built man, tall and portly and awe-inspiring. He wore a red fez and had a commanding and dignified presence. His eyes shone brilliantly with intelligence, and an encouraging smile never abandoned his lips. He spoke in classical Arabic and I was asked by Sitt Wasila to read a new text to him. I read it aloud, trying to conceal my nervousness and slight intimidation. When I finished, he asked for the meaning of the word *fawran* that I had read in the text. No one in the class knew, so he used it in a sentence and asked again for its meaning. I raised my hand with a few other students but he did not call on any of us. He used the word *fawran* in another sentence and asked for its meaning again. More students now raised their hands to answer. But he did not call on any of them until he gave a third sentence using the same word again. At that moment, almost all the students raised their hands eager to answer, and those asked said—correctly—it meant 'immediately'.

I admired Khalil Sakakini and wanted to be like him when I grew up, a good teacher and educator with an excellent knowledge of Arabic language and literature. I later learned that he was the author of more than a dozen books; that he had been an indomitable man whose participation in Palestinian politics in Ottoman and British times often led to his imprisonment. He always cherished freedom and dignity and truth and justice as essential human values worth struggling for. He had a good sense of humor, was interested in music and singing, played the violin, and liked good food and a hearty life enhanced by physical exercise and sports. As a young man he emigrated to U.S.A. but returned to live in his beloved homeland. At different times of his life, he was a member of a variety of literary circles in Jerusalem which gathered the best Arab intellectuals and writers of the day for informal conversations which were a pleasure to attend. He had friends among the writers of other parts of the Arab world and was in contact with them; and he was elected as a member of the prestigious Academy of the Arabic Language in Cairo.

Of his books which I later read, I liked in particular two very personal books: firstly, his book *Sari* (Jerusalem:1935) in which he gathered all the letters he had sent from Jerusalem to his son Sari who was at university in U.S.A between 1931 and 1935; and secondly, his book *Li-Dhikraki (In Your Memory)*, Jerusalem: 1940) in which he poured out his heart at the death of his beloved wife Sultana in 1940 for whom he had written his best poetry earlier. While many Arabs would rather keep such personal feelings and thoughts private, Khalil Sakakini made his public, strongly believing that the best literature is written about the genuine inner experiences of a human being, expressed beautifully to display the impact of living on him and to wonder at the meaning of life. His other book that I also liked was his posthumously published memoirs *Kadha Ana Ya Dunya (Such Am I, O World)*, Jerusalem: 1955) in which he opened himself to be fully known as he passed through life, recording his various experiences, his thoughts, and his feelings without reservation. The book is not only a frank register of his life but also of Palestine, its society, its people and its intellectuals, and is written as if consciously addressed to history so that all may know the point of view of the uniquely untraditional person he was, who always yearned

courageously and outspokenly for something new and better, and disliked being bound by conventions. “Such am I, O world,” he told history, using the very words of the heroic and ebullient classical Arab poet he liked most, Abu al-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi (915-965).

In the 1948 *nakba*, he lost to the Zionist fighters his home in Qatamon, one of the most beautiful residential Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem outside the Old City. His belongings were savagely plundered and his library was barbarously looted, and he had to flee for his life and his family’s, and take refuge in Cairo for some time. Then I briefly saw him afterwards in the Old City of Jerusalem, which had come under Jordan’s rule after the rest of Jerusalem and much of Palestine had come under Israel’s, following the 1948 war at the end of the British Mandate. A fallen titan, a broken old man, his dignity still bristled; the shine in his eyes had dimmed a little but he still believed that justice would eventually prevail and truth would always triumph. The streak in his thinking that had begun in the latter part of his life to favor the poetry and thought of the pessimistic and skeptic classical Arab poet Abu al-‘Ala’ al-Ma‘arri (973-1058) had become stronger in him. He did not live much longer after that, and died in 1953.

My Childhood Home

I don’t remember much about my first childhood home in Upper Baq‘a in the modern part of the city of Jerusalem. It was a rented apartment on the ground floor of a building with three floors, in the topmost of which lived the owner, the noted Jerusalem lawyer Henry Cattán, and his family. Upper Baq‘a, like Lower Baq‘a to the west, was a beautiful residential neighborhood of middle-class Arabs, mostly Christians. It was developed by Arabs who had left their crowded residences in the Old City of Jerusalem, mostly in the 1920s and 1930s, and built modern stone houses with gardens and trees.

My childhood was a happy one at this home. We had a front yard with trees, and my siblings and I played there with the neighborhood children. My maternal grandfather Ibrahim Atallah and his offspring, my aunts and uncles, lived nearby with their families; so their children, my cousins, were not far from us to see and play with. However, my paternal uncles, the Boullatas, lived in the Old City of Jerusalem; their children were farther to reach, except on occasion, when we had to take a half-hour bus ride from Upper Baq‘a to Jaffa Gate and then walk to their homes through the alleys of the Old City enclosed within its Ottoman city walls. My paternal aunts lived in other parts of the city or the country with their husbands, and their children were even farther to reach, except rarely on feast days and other special occasions.

I remember my second childhood home better than my first because I was older when we moved to it in 1934, when I was about five years old. It was a rented apartment on the ground floor of a four-apartment building with two floors, and was owned by Shaykh ‘Abd al-Bari Barakat. It was situated in al-Thawri neighborhood,

an Arab residential quarter mostly owned and inhabited by middle-class Muslims. It was nearer than Upper Baq‘a to the Old City to the south, and was separated from it by a hill and by a valley leading to the village of Silwan. My home in al-Thawri neighborhood was near its western entrance, and stood on a side street of the neighborhood’s main road branching off from Bethlehem Road at the intersection where the Government Printing Press stood, next to the Jerusalem Railway Station.

From the doorstep of my home I could see, across the valley, parts of the Old City of Jerusalem to the north that were not hidden from sight by the intervening hill, on which stood Prophet David’s neighborhood, one of the oldest neighborhoods outside the city walls of Jerusalem. Across the valley I could see Jaffa Gate, known in Arabic as Bab al-Khalil (Hebron Gate) because it leads to the city of al-Khalil (Hebron) to the south, past the town of Bethlehem; it also leads to Yafa (Jaffa) to the west, past the town of Ramleh. From my home I could also see, across the valley, the al-Aqsa Mosque and its dome in the southeastern corner of the Old City and within its city walls, and looking west, I could see the Government Printing Press opposite the entrance of our neighborhood and across to the Bethlehem Road.

There was a treeless open space in front of our home, across the unpaved, uphill side street on which the threshold of our door was. Although one section of this open space was a little higher than the rest, it was level enough for us children of the neighborhood to use for play, even in an occasional informal soccer game in which the standards of association football were not necessarily kept; the size of the field was small, the goal posts were piles of stones, the demarcation lines of the field were non-existent, and the two teams often had less than eleven players each.

My home was close to my school, ‘The Thawri Elementary School for Boys and Girls,’ which was only a few minutes’ walk uphill. It was in fact its closeness to school that motivated my father to move his family to this home from Upper Baq‘a in 1934. But this home was still far from my father’s place of work, the Telegraph Office located in the General Post Office building on Jaffa Road in the heart of the main business area of the modern city of Jerusalem, and he usually had to take a bus to go to work, and then walk a short distance. This home was next-door to that of one of my paternal aunts’ homes; and her youngest son, William, sometimes played with us children, although he was a little older than us. He was mostly the referee of our soccer games and the mediator of our occasional petty quarrels.

Our home was an apartment consisting of four rooms around a central hall, and it had a short corridor in the back leading to the kitchen and bathroom. If to my father “a man’s house is his castle,” to my mother “home is where the heart is.” My father was the one who provided in love all we needed and did his best to protect and guide us, and my mother was the one who kept our home a pleasant place to live in—with her love, her constant attention to the delicious and nutritious food we ate, the smart and clean clothes we wore, and the gleaming and spotless accommodations we had, thanks to her continuous labor. Both parents were genuinely interested in what we children did, and both cared conscientiously for our upbringing in the good traditions of the family, Arab customs and ways, and the Christian faith.

I was the firstborn of their six children. With a couple of years between the ages of each of their children and the following one, my sister Renée was next, then my brother André, then my brother Jamil, and then my sister Su‘ad. My youngest brother Kamal was yet to be born several years following my younger sister, after we had moved to the Old City of Jerusalem in 1938—to my third childhood home.

The years during which we lived in al-Thawri neighborhood were turbulent years in Palestine. Not that the years before or after were peaceful, for since the Balfour Declaration of 1917 was made by the British government, promising to view with favor “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people,” the Arab population of the country was in opposition to it and, in 1922, to having its principles and aims incorporated into the League of Nations’ charter of the British Mandate for Palestine. The Palestinian people expressed their opposition in repeated petitions, memoranda, and delegations of protest, and then in occasional street demonstrations and later in violent uprisings. I was a baby of six months when the 1929 uprising simultaneously exploded in August in Jerusalem, Hebron, Safad, and other parts of Palestine, and many Jews were killed as well as many Arabs. But the 1930s had a more intense and urgent character to their turbulence. Adolf Hitler had come to power in Nazi Germany, and a greater numbers of Jews than ever before immigrated to Palestine to escape his rising anti-Jewish policies. Although still less than the Arab population, the Jews were increasingly growing in numbers and acquiring Palestinian lands and properties and threatening to become eventually masters of the country with the support of the British Mandate as per the charter of the League of Nations.

In these circumstances, my parents tried to shield us from any feelings of insecurity at home. And although, as children, my siblings and I understood little of what was really going on, we sensed something was amiss. The truth was that there was an Arab armed rebellion in the country against the British Mandate. Arab rebels were occasionally seen in our neighborhood roaming the streets with their weapons, especially in the dark of night; the British army was more visible in the country in larger numbers, ominous weaponry, and armored cars; and the Palestine police force under the organization of the British mandatory government was more alert to new civic duties of public security, crowd control, and people’s movements. The Arab turbulence came to a head in the Rebellion of 1936-1939 which spread all over Palestine, beginning in April 1936 with a six-month general strike that paralyzed the country.

During the six-month strike, all Arab shops were closed, all Arab buses and trucks stopped running, all Arab workers of ports refrained from unloading shipments of imports or loading cargoes for export, and all Arab trade came to a standstill. The Palestinians demanded that the British suspend Jewish immigration and begin negotiations to form a national government for Palestine. The trains, however, continued to run because they were under the administration of the British Mandatory government, and all Arab employees of the government continued to do their work obligations lest they lose their jobs to Jewish employees, but they privately contributed

a percentage of their salaries to the strike fund. My father had to go five miles on foot to perform his daily duties at the Telegraph Office, my school teachers at the government school continued their usual teaching and I my usual learning; but the atmosphere everywhere was tense. Meanwhile, my mother had to provide food for the family, and her stored provisions were running low—mainly rice, bulgur, lentils, beans, chickpeas, flour, olive oil, ghee, salt, onions, garlic, pickled olives, cheese, sugar, tea, coffee, and other storable commodities like canned sardines and corned beef. Once in a while, a butcher appeared in our neighborhood, slaughtered a sheep clandestinely deep in Karm Karimeh, a grove of olive trees on the incline by the main road next to our home, hung the carcass on a tree, and was swarmed by neighbors wanting to buy fresh meat; and he had to finish his business in a short while before he was discovered by the roving members of the “national committees” who enforced the strike. Village women from the villages surrounding Jerusalem appeared from time to time carrying on their heads baskets loaded with fruits and vegetables that they had grown but could not take to sell at the closed markets, and so they brought them furtively to the doorstep of buyers in our neighborhood and elsewhere to sell, meanwhile fearing their goods might be mashed underfoot by the strike enforcers, if discovered. Similarly, village women went around to the homes to sell the milk and butter of their cows or goats in secrecy. My mother, like all the neighbors, took advantage of all these opportunities of food supply during the six-month strike and kept her family well-fed. No member of our family ever missed a hearty meal or went hungry to bed.

The strike lasted until October of 1936 and was longer than any other general strike in the Middle East or Europe. Instead of responding to the demands of the strikers and suspending Jewish immigration, the British announced a new quota for additional Jewish immigrants, which inflamed Arab passions. Sporadic violence started in May of 1936 and increased over the summer months despite severe British punishments. Small Palestinian guerrilla bands fought with the British army, they sabotaged a number of government buildings and railways, and the Lebanese guerrilla leader Fawzi al-Qawuqji entered Palestine in August 1936 and headed groups of Arab rebels in the area of Nablus and Jenin. The Arab Higher Committee, formed in April 1936 by Palestinian politicians and headed by al-Hajj Amin al-Husseini, realized that the general strike was not achieving its ends and was rather benefiting the Jewish community economically and hurting the Palestinians. They decided therefore to accept an appeal from the kings of the Arab countries to end the strike, and so the strike ended in the hope that the Arab kings would, as promised, intervene with Britain and help persuade the British to modify their policies.

Subsequently the British government sent to Palestine a six-man commission headed by Lord Robert Peel to study the situation in the country. They interviewed Palestinian and Zionist leaders and British officials during a few months after their arrival in November 1936 and issued their report in July 1937. They recommended the partition of Palestine between the two communities of the country: a Jewish state would be created in much of the coastal area and in Galilee, with a suggestion

that Jewish immigration would be limited to 12,000 annually for five years; and a Palestinian state would be created in the rest of Palestine (excluding a zone to remain under the British Mandate consisting of Jerusalem and Bethlehem with a corridor to Jaffa, plus an enclave containing Nazareth), with a provision that the Palestinian state would be joined to Transjordan and ruled by Emir Abdallah.

The Peel Commission's report served only to anger the Palestinians and made them resume their rebellion with more violence, including assassinations of some British officials and of Arabs perceived to be collaborating with them. The government outlawed the Arab Higher Committee and its local committees, and rounded up Palestinian leaders that it could lay its hands on. Al-Hajj Amin al-Husseini escaped to Lebanon, some of his colleagues were deported, and others who had left Palestine were forbidden from returning. The rebellion intensified, and local and regional guerrilla leaders took control of the national movement under the continuing leadership of al-Hajj Amin from exile. Abd al-Qadir al-Husseini, son of the former leader of the Palestinian national movement Musa Kazim Pasha al-Husseini (d. 1934), was the guerrilla commander of the Jerusalem region and other areas. At the height of the rebellion in the summer and fall of 1938, the Old City of Jerusalem was totally in the hands of the rebels for five days in October 1938 until the British forces took it back after fierce fighting with the rebels in its alleys and lanes. From my home in al-Thawri, I could see small, British reconnaissance airplanes flying over the Old City of Jerusalem repeatedly, and pinpointing the centers of rebel resistance in it by sending down signals of silver flashes that descended like shooting stars to direct and guide the British forces in the maze of the old city.

As a nine-year-old boy at the time, I did not realize the significance of what was happening, but I was becoming increasingly aware of the political and military developments, which were the main conversation topics of the adults I listened to as well as the talk among my friends at school. One day I saw a fully-armed, lone rebel lurking behind a hillock right across from our front door who opened fire on the guards of the Government Printing Press next to the Jerusalem Railway Station. The exchange of fire lasted for almost half an hour, while my mother made us children hide away from the windows in the back corridor, despite my curiosity to witness the exciting event. When the shooting stopped, I looked for the rebel but he had gone, leaving a pile of empty bullet shells on the ground. Soon afterwards, there was a house search by British soldiers in our neighborhood. It was not the first, nor would it be the last, and they were all without a court's warrant. A number of armed British soldiers entered our home and went into every room, opening wardrobes and drawers, emptying their contents on the floor and rummaging through them; they overturned furniture and fumbled mattresses and pillows, looking for hidden arms and ammunition; in the kitchen they ransacked my mother's provisions, pouring out her neatly organized supplies and mixing their contents; they asked a few questions in slang English mixed with broken Arabic about what we had seen, then left to continue their house search elsewhere. The government had made a new law that allowed them to demolish a home in which arms were discovered or ammunition was found, and to



Jerusalem 1939. Issa Boullata, aged 10 with his parents and siblings. He is standing on the left, in the back row. *Source: Issa J. Boullata collection.*

arrest its tenant. We children were afraid at the sight of armed soldiers in our home but my mother was not, or pretended she was not—perhaps to give us reassurance. My father was away at work, most of the times we had house searches. But one time, he was shaving in the morning before going to work, and the British soldiers took him away in his pajamas with other men of the neighborhood; they did not let him continue shaving or clean his face of the shaving cream foam. With the other men, he was taken to the parking lot of the nearby Government Printing Press where they were all subjected to an investigation: while each man was being interrogated separately by a British officer sitting at a table, an informant hidden in the back of a canvas-covered, British military truck was invisibly watching through a hole in the canvas and giving an agreed-upon clink to signal whether the person interrogated was a rebel sympathizer, or was in any way connected with the national rebellion. In the end, a few men were detained for further investigation and the others were let go, including my father who related to us what had happened when he returned home; he then continued his shaving, and went to work—about two hours late.

I don't remember the time when I came to know that my father owned a handgun that he hid at home—an unlicensed Belgian pistol with a few rounds that he had purchased on the black market. Like many other Palestinians during the national rebellion and later, he felt safer at home with a pistol at hand. When I was an adult, he told me that he hid it in the restroom, concealed in the unused toilet flush-tank that was a fixture high up on the wall behind our old-fashioned toilet, the kind that had a chain to pull down in order to be flushed. He was later afraid to keep it there, when house searches by the British became more frequent and more rigorous; so he hid it in a wooden box he buried under the floor tiles in the far corner of the drawing room. The weapon and its hiding place at home were kept secret from us children lest we divulge the fact to others, either innocently or boastfully, and British ears would hear.

The British authorities often imposed curfews in Jerusalem and other parts of Palestine in order to restrict rebel movements and bring the country under their control. My father, like other government officials, was given a curfew pass and an identity card in order to be permitted to go to his office and come back home during curfew hours. He had to walk because there were no cars or buses permitted to move during a curfew, and he often did that in the dark of night as a lone walker who was stopped several times on his way by British patrols and whose papers were thoroughly examined. When there was no curfew, British soldiers at many checkpoints in the city stopped and frisked people. They were particularly suspicious of men who wore the Arab headdress, that is, the head kerchief and black rope (the *kuffiyeh* and *'iqal*); for this headdress was what the rebels wore, and the British aimed at isolating them, limiting their movements among the population, and eventually catching them. It was at this juncture that orders from the leaders of the national movement were issued that all Palestinian men should wear the Arab headdress to confuse the British. My father, like many civilian Arabs in the city, used to wear a red fez; so he and all Palestinian men took to wearing the Arab headdress. This made his lonely walk to and from work during curfews, especially in the dark, all the more problematic and he had to keep

his curfew pass and identity card in his hand to readily show them to British soldiers screaming at him to halt or be shot.

The Palestinian rebellion persisted in the face of British punitive measures; and the rebels, despite limited means, inflicted many casualties on the British and suffered many themselves in turn. However, they succeeded in derailing government trains, burning government buildings, cutting telephone and telegraph lines, and disrupting government operations, but not defeating British purposes. One of their tactics was to sprinkle little sharp nails on the main highways in Palestine to stop or delay British military traffic. Even in Jerusalem, roads were often covered, over long stretches, with little sharp nails which had to be swept away before military vehicles could pass. British soldiers often subjugated Arab civilian passersby to sweeping the nails away with their bare hands; my father and I were caught up in this kind of forced labor a couple of times, when walking about unwittingly in Jerusalem for one errand or another.

The Palestinian rebellion subsided a little when the British, having realized that partition of the country was unfeasible, called for a Round Table Conference in London, at which they met separately with Zionist leaders and with Arab delegates from Palestine, Iraq, Transjordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Egypt. Then in May 1939 they issued a White Paper which suggested that Palestine would become independent in ten years as a unitary state if Palestinians and Zionists agreed, that land purchases by Jews in Palestine would be restricted, and that Jewish immigration to the country would have to be approved by Palestinians after a five-year quota of 15,000 annually was filled. The White Paper was a victory of sorts for the Palestinians but it was rejected by the Arabs as well as the Zionists. The outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 deferred the problem; and the establishment of Israel in 1948 after the UN Partition Plan of November 1947 created new complications.

Despite the political turmoil in the country, my parents did their best to let me and my siblings have a relatively happy and normal life at home. Every Christmas my father put up a lovely Christmas tree, a fragrant fresh pine tree, which he himself decorated with colorful glass balls, tiny bells, feathery birds, paper angels, small candles, silver tinsel, and a big star on top. Every evening of the Twelve Days of Christmas, he made us children line up in front of the tree and sing in Arabic “O Christmas tree,” while he accompanied us on his banjo, and sometimes we also sang for visitors.

My mother baked all kinds of goodies and cooked traditional chicken dishes for Christmas. On New Year’s Eve, she always cooked a cock which, to our amazement and amusement, crowed at mealtime before being carved and served—my father helping it, with his napkin covering his mouth! The other dishes had to be white, usually including stuffed *kubbeh* balls with yoghurt sauce, in order to inaugurate a “white” and happy new year. New Year’s Eve meal began with a small drink of red wine from a common glass: in descending order of age, each member of the family drank the wine then shook the glass, at the bottom of which was my father’s gold ring that caused a festive clink, then he or she exclaimed, “Zito!” (Life!), to wish everyone

a good life and golden opportunities in the new year. And we spent a big part of the night playing all sorts of games. In the early morning of New Year's Day, we woke up at the sound of a knock on the door by the man delivering the *kunafa* that my father had ordered the day before, and we began our new year with eating this sweet pastry so that all our new year would also be "sweet." We sat around the big, round tray of hot *kunafa*, and had our first breakfast of the new year together from it. For New Year, my mother spruced up our home and decorated the lintel of every inner door in our apartment with narcissus and tangerines clinging to their green leaves, in a wish for an auspiciously flourishing and "green" new year.

At Easter, to celebrate Christ's resurrection, my mother made us colored eggs and sweet semolina cookies in the shapes of the crown of thorns and of the sponge soaked in vinegar associated with Christ's crucifixion and death on the cross. She cooked traditional lamb stuffed with rice and spices, and it was served after a traditional lamb soup containing spicy meatballs and parsley, and made with a mixture of well-beaten, fresh, spiced eggs that made the soup whitish—and delicious.

Attendance of church services at Christmas and Easter was an experience we enjoyed: we had to go to the Old City, to St. James' Cathedral (our parish church) and to the nearby Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which was crowded with people from various parts of the world. And in the Old City, we had occasion to see our cousins, whom we did not see often, and to visit their families, who gave us colored eggs.

During his annual leave, my father took the whole family on holiday. It was usually in summer, and we often went to Jaffa, stayed at a hotel, and spent most of our day on the beach and swam in the Mediterranean; we also made occasional visits from Jaffa to nearby Tel Aviv and spent time on its lovely beaches and swam. It was exciting to see the sea for the first time, but it was no less exhilarating to see it again and again annually and to swim in it, being Jerusalemites living in a mountain city. We went also to Haifa, which was of course farther from Jerusalem than Jaffa; and we realized how the view of the Mediterranean from Mount Carmel was even more breathtaking than from Jaffa, and we enjoyed seeing the ships in Haifa's port.

In the summer of 1938, my father took us to Egypt by train and we stayed in Cairo. This was the farthest trip from home I made in my childhood. We had first to go west to Lydda, and then change trains to go south to Egypt, crossing the Suez Canal. It was exciting for me to see another Arab country, to notice the different Arabic dialect of its people, to have rides on the tramway for the first time in my life, and to marvel at the people in Cairo who didn't seem to sleep at night. It was also exciting to see the great Nile, flowing gently and majestically through Cairo and giving life to all Egypt. The internationally renowned zoo of Cairo was the most amusing part of the trip to us children. The Pyramids and the Sphinx at Giza were the most impressive sights, and the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities in Cairo was most memorable for its amazing artifacts from different periods of ancient Egyptian history, and the most spectacular relics there for me were those of Tutankhamun, recently popularized as King Tut, the pharaoh who became ruler of Egypt when he was nine and died at the age of nineteen, and whose tomb was discovered almost intact only in 1922 with all its wealth of

historical artifacts after more than 3,000 years. As a boy of about nine years, I did not understand much of what I saw then, but what I saw was the basis of the knowledge on which I built much more, in later years, when I visited Egypt several times as an adult. The more important thing was that the world to me then was beginning to be so big, so multifaceted, and so diverse and interesting that I have ever since remained open-minded to it and aware of the benefits of seeing it. There was so much to learn about the world and from my travels through it. As a result of this realization, I think, I eventually made several trips over the years to countries of the Arab world and Europe, as well as within USA and Canada, apart from five trips around the world by air, during which I visited countries of the Far East.

Issa J. Boullata was born in Jerusalem in 1929 and lived in it until 1968; he earned a Ph.D. at the University of London, taught in USA, then became Professor of Arabic Literature at McGill University in Montreal until his retirement.