



The Mamilla Cemetery; A Buried History

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The shocked and appalled Jerusalemites and members of the Islamic Waqf gathering the scattered bones left by Israeli parking lot workers in Mamilla, the historic cemetery in the western section of Jerusalem (1967).

Source: Memoirs of Anwar al-Khateeb al-Tamimi, the last Jordanian governor of Jerusalem, in his book, With Saladin in Jerusalem, published in 1989.

When tourists and visitors of Jerusalem walk the streets of the Old City visiting historical sites like the Western Wall, the Garden of Gethsemane, the Via Dolorosa, the al-Aqsa Mosque and the many other historical holy sites, they usually are lectured by their tourist guides about the ancient city and its biblical history of which Jerusalemites of the three faiths are very proud. Little is usually said about the other history of the city.

Karen Armstrong, however, in her book, *Jerusalem – One City, Three Faiths*, gives meticulous details of many of the very important historical events that the city went through in its long history. In chapter 14 of her book she described Saladin's first day of business in Jerusalem after he recaptured the city from the Crusaders in 1187. She wrote:

“...Saladin also invited the Jews to come back to Jerusalem, from which they had been almost entirely excluded by the Crusaders. He was hailed through the Jewish world as a new Cyrus. ...”

It is a very well known fact that hundreds of Saladin's soldiers and many of his senior generals and administrators who died in the battle for Jerusalem and those who chose to take Jerusalem as their permanent home were buried in Mamilla. What is saddening these days is that while Israeli bulldozers dig out graves of Saladin's men and those of other Jerusalemites buried there afterwards, Israeli leaders and Supreme Court judges together with their American Wiesenthal Center partners applaud the construction of their so called *Center for Human Dignity – Museum of Tolerance Jerusalem*. Shouldn't those people owe Saladin some apology.

The cemetery was full of thousands of grave markers in 1948 when it came under the guardianship of the so called Israeli Department of Absentee Landholders. Of those grave markers a handful of broken ones were found in 1967 when the whole city of Jerusalem was occupied by Israel. Now almost none of them exists.

In most countries there are laws that protect historic cemeteries against vandalism and destruction. In Israel, however, these laws do not seem to apply to Moslem cemeteries. To the contrary, Moslem cemeteries all over the country have suffered the constant obliteration of tombs and the Mamilla cemetery is no exception with only 5% of the tombs left. Tomb markers and grave stones were constantly removed from their original locations and many were broken for the purpose of wiping out any Moslem trace in downtown Jerusalem. Now with only 8% of the cemetery area left, new Israeli plans are being designed to eliminate this Moslem historical site once and for all.

During the period of Ottoman rule, the cemetery was encircled by a 2 meter high fence around the year 1847, and Jerusalemites continued to use it as a burial site for their dead up until 1927 when the Moslem Supreme Council decided to preserve it as a historical site. According to their decision, the Council continued to maintain the cemetery and look after its grounds and keep the tombs in a well maintained condition.

The Israelis, however, had different hidden schemes for the vast Moslem cemetery in downtown Jerusalem that was once the burial site for hundreds of Saladin's martyrs and for many other Arab Jerusalemites who lived in the city for more than 800 years after Saladin recaptured the city. The Israelis also know that neglected historic cemeteries are subject to long-term deterioration from natural forces such as weathering and uncontrolled vegetation. Neglect accelerates and compounds the process. For this reason, the cemetery that was placed under the guardianship of the Israeli Department of Absentee Landholders in 1948 suffered a lot. In addition, when Israel annexed the remaining part of Jerusalem after the 1967 war, they rejected a petition by the Islamic Waqf Department to give them permission to go back to their old practice of maintaining the historical cemetery. Instead they went on with their premeditated process of destruction, and in 1967 the Jerusalem municipality turned a large part of the cemetery into a public park that was named "Independence Park" In order to complete the project, many grave sites were dug out and the remains of the dead desecrated. On January 15th, 2005 the Israeli Electricity Company performed further excavations obliterating more tombs in order to lay some cables. Another part of the cemetery is used now as the main headquarters of the Israeli Ministry of Trade and Industry.

On May 3rd, 2004 the California governor Arnold Schwarzeneger, laid the

foundation stone for an American/Israeli project in a ceremony attended by Israeli government officials including then Vice Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and US ambassador Daniel Kurtzer. The huge project undertaken by The Simon Wiesenthal Center was to be constructed on the Mamilla cemetery ground. It includes two large buildings; one would be the Human Dignity, the other the Museum of Tolerance. Allocations for the project would amount to more than 200 million dollars raised mainly from American donors by the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. During the first week of December 2005, some Israeli bulldozers started the new destruction effort to complete the plan of erasing the cemetery. The Wiesenthal Center's plans has drawn outrage from Muslims and non-Muslims alike who emphasize that the museum is rejecting the very ideals it claims to stand for, tolerance.

What is striking is that even Israel's Supreme Court whose business should be implementing historical cemetery laws even if those laws concern (non-Jewish) historical cemeteries arrived with a ruling in November 2008 saying that the project could go ahead because "... a parking lot had been built in the area (i.e. on the cemetery ground) more than 40 years ago and then raised no objection..." This ruling was objectionable on two grounds. First, it is based on another unethical infringement and aggression on the cemetery ground that took place right after the 1967 war (more than 40 years ago). Secondly, it admits boldly and without shame that a parking lot was built on the historical site of the burial ground where Saladin buried his brave soldiers and where many Jerusalemite Moslem families continued to bury their kin up to less than 90 years ago.

When Jimmy Carter made a remark to Aharon Barak the chief justice of the Israeli Supreme Court in 1990,... that "...if he was to make decisions that affected the lives of people..., he should know more about how they lived." Barak answered with a smile, "I am a judge, not an investigator." I wonder if the Israeli chief justice knew in November 2008 (after two years of study and contemplation) that Jerusalem's Arab citizens and the Islamic Waqf people did protest then. They were appalled and terrified when they saw bones of their ancestors and loved ones in and around an excavation site left by the Israeli workforce that was preparing the ground for the famous parking lot in 1967.

As for the two years delay, it is believed that was enough time for the contractors to do their clandestine work behind the very high fences and under their white tents protected by their own security guards without interference from Jerusalemite protesters and/or other curious investigators or journalists.

Durgham Saif, the lawyer who brought the Islamic petition to Israeli Supreme Court, says that bones have been removed into boxes and that one skull has been smashed.

Fortunately, Mujeer id-Deen il-Hanbali, a Jerusalemite, included in his famous sixteenth century compendium "History of Jerusalem and Hebron" a long list of Jerusalem dignitaries buried in Mamilla. While his list had only the names of those whose tombs had grave markers at that time, it is still considered a good source of information about the burial sites of many Jerusalem famous clerics, judges, scholars, military leaders, city governors, custodians and sheikhs of al-Aqsa Mosque.

The following dignitaries were buried in Mamilla:

- (1) (al-Amir) Nasser al-Din al-Nashashibi. One of Saladin's ministers and military commanders. Later, he served as custodian of the two holy mosques al-Aqsa of Jerusalem and al-Ibrahimi Mosque of Hebron. (The irony is that while a huge colored portrait of one of his descendents, Ragheb Bey al-Nashashibi, Arab mayor of Jerusalem 1920 – 1933, covers a good part of a wall in the main lobby of The King David Hotel in Jerusalem less than a mile from Mamilla, the tomb of Nasser al-Din himself was dug out and leveled by permission of the so called Guardian of the Properties of Absentee Landholders.)
- (2) Dia' al-Din Issa al-Makari. One of Saladin ministers, and a famous Scholar.
- (3) (al-Amir) Ala' al-Din al-Kabkabi. The cupola (the small one-room mosque) over his tomb was built in 688 *Hijra* year. (died 1289).
- (4) Burhan al-Din bin Jamaa'a. Chief Justice (Qadi al-Quda) and head of is-Salahiyya School.
- (5) (al-Amir) Salah al-Din Imzerd al-Silihdar. A Mamluki official.
- (6) (al-Imam) Sharaf al-Din. A scholar and Imam of al-Aqsa Mosque. (died 1219).
- (7) Aydmaar al-Sheikhaani. Custodian of the two holy mosques al-Aqsa and al-Ibrahimi.
- (8) Jalaludin al-Qalansi. The cupola over his tomb lies to the north of al-Kabkabiyya.
- (9) Sheikh Shihab al-Din al-Maqdisi. A theologian.
- (10) Haaj Alloun *ibn* Ibrahim al-Randi al-Andalusi. Owner of Swaiqat Alloun, the famous popular market place in the Old City of Jerusalem.
- (11) Taqiy al-Din al-Qarqashandi. Chief Justice. (died 1276)
- (12) Ahmad Rajab al-Nashashibi. (Grand son of the aforementioned Ameer Nasser al-Din). Ahmad was a member of the Royal Court of the Mamluk Sultan al-Dhahir Jukmak.
- (13) Abdullah al-Bustami. A sufi scholar. (buried in al-Bustamiyya Court).
- (14) Abu Bakr al-Shibani. One of the great Sufis. Al-Shibani's descendants still live in upper Galilee.
- (15) Shams al-Din al-Deiri al-Khalidi. A forefather of the Khalidi family of Jerusalem. Shams al-Din was a Chief Justice. (Descendents of Shams al-Din al-Deiri continued to be buried in Mamilla up to the second decade of the 20th century.

- (16) Abdul Rahman al-Deiri al-Khalidi. (son of Shams al-Din). He was custodian of the two holy mosques.
- (17) Fakhr al-Din al-Razi. Chief Justice, taught in both of the holy mosques of Jerusalem and Hebron.
- (18) Chief Justice Shihab al-Din Arslan. (died 1449).
- (19) Abdul Hassan al-Badri. (A descendent of Ali bin Abi Talib, the prophet's son-in-law and the 4th calif.) Abdul Hassan and his whole family is-Saadail-Badriya were buried in Mamilla. It is worth mentioning that the whole family lived in Talbiyyeh which became a famous elite Jerusalem suburb in the 20th century. Talbiyyeh got its name from their great forefather Ali bin Abi-Taaleb, hence Talbiyyeh.
- (20) Salah al-Din Mohammad al-Attar. Representative of the Jerusalem region during the reign of Sultan Ashraf Bersibay. He also worked as custodian of the two holy mosques.
- (21) Sheikh Ahmad al-Dajani al-Mansi. He was an affiliate with the governors of Jerusalem and Damascus. (died 1561).
- (22) Imam Khair al-Din al-Ramli. The Hanafi Mufti. He had some published works. (died 1670).
- (23) Najm al-Din al-Khairi. Jerusalem Mufti. He's the forefather of the Khairi Family of Jerusalem.
- (24) Al-Amir Rukn al-Din Mankourish al-Jashenker. (died 1317).
- (25) Al-Amir Mohammad al-Qasim al-Tamimi al-Batrouri. Custodian of the two holy mosques. (died 1464).
- (26) Seif al-Din Arkas (son of Abdullal al-Jalabani.). Seif al-Din was Custodian of the two holy mosques.
- (27) Al-Amir Hassan bin Ayyoub. Sultan deputy in Jerusalem during the reign of king al-Zahir Juqmaq.
- (28) Al-Amir ibn al-Humam. Son of Nasser al-Din Khoushqadam. He was one of the notables of Jerusalem. He served as the city governor. (died 1460).
- (29) Jamal al-Din al-Rabi'. Deputy of the king al-Ashraf Qaytbay. (died 1486).
- (30) Al-Amir (Jan Balat) Junblat. Custodian of the two holy mosques during. The reign of king al-Ashraf Qaytbay.

Finally, Jerusalem Arab citizens are still wondering if the 20 page ruling of the Israeli Supreme Court will change history and historical facts. It will not support the false claims that Arab Jerusalemites never lived and died in the city and hence were never

buried in Mamilla. Was the court serious when it reached the conclusion that the cemetery was abandoned between 1948 and 1967? Of course it was. The cemetery during that period and up to 1993, was under guardianship of the Israeli Department of Absentee Landholders. Were they serious when they ignored the fact that the Islamic Waqf Department was denied the rights to restoration although they were the rightful custodianship over the cemetery in 1967? Were they serious when they claim that a parking lot built on the cemetery ground more than 40 years ago raised no objection? Was the Simon Wiesenthal Center really earnest when they claimed that the Frank O. Gehry-designed Center for Human Dignity – Museum of Tolerance Jerusalem (MOTJ) was truly for “Tolerance”. Could earnestly a museum of “Tolerance” be built on a disputed piece of land in Jerusalem or anywhere else in Israel? Do they expect Arab Jerusalemites to tolerate destruction of the burial site of Saladin’s men and of their own forefathers who passed away during the last 800 years?

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