



Remembering Haret al-Nammamreh

Jacob Nammar

On a dark, moonless, late summer, Al Quds lay quiet and cold. The stillness of the night was broken by my footsteps as I headed home, and by the murmur of the cool breeze as it drifted, whispering through the leaves of the olive trees that grew up along the road. Once at home, I packed my traveling bag and went to bed, hoping to get some sleep so as to wake up early the next morning in time to board the airplane for my scheduled trip to the United States. Restless as I was, sleep would not come, and as a result I remained wide awake all through the night, enveloped in thoughts and memories of my childhood.

We were a family of ten; my father, Yousef, my mother Tuma, four brothers and three sisters. Mihran was the oldest, followed by Fahima, Daoud, Suleiman, Wedad, Fadwa, Ya'coub and Zakaria all about two years apart.

1947, Ya'coub. At British soldiers' camp.
Defending Jerusalem with a toy gun!



1948, Tuma Marie Nammar. Waiting in line in the Baq'a prison zone for food rationing from United Nation Relief. (Third person from right, with scarf, rain coat and hand bag).

The Nammar extended family, also known as *Nammari*, *Al Nammari* or *Nammamreh* in plural (*Nammar* was the original name) is a large family with relatives scattered throughout the world. The *Nammamreh* of Palestine were one of the leading families in Al Quds. The family owned several tracts of valuable properties in the Old City near the Jewish quarter. In addition, they owned several orchards near Jaffa and a large house where once a year we vacationed and helped in the harvest of the citrus fruits. In addition, the *Nammamreh* owned agriculture farms in the villages of Yalu and Imwas for the cultivation of grains, wheat, bulgur, and other produce.

In the mid-eighteen century, as the Old City became overcrowded, several wealthy families ventured outside the Wall, including some of the *Nammamreh* who branched out by developing a new suburb in the south-western area of the city in the Upper Al Baq'a area. The relocation from the Old City to the West New City created an exclusive community named *Harat Al Namamreh* or *Al-Nammariyya*--the *Nammamreh* neighborhood. They built new palatial homes with unique spacious architectural designs for an upper class lifestyle.

My father was born in Al Quds in 1900 and my mother was born in Yerevan, Armenia in 1910. When she was five, she witnessed the massacre of her father, a judge, and her family by the Ottoman Turks. During World War I, between 1915 and 1918, the Ottoman Empire committed genocide against the entire Armenian

population. They were methodically starved, expropriated, abducted and deported. About 1,750,000 people, including women and children, were forcibly removed from their homeland in Armenia and scattered around the world.

A Turkish officer took Tuma to become a servant to his family in Diar Bakr, in Eastern Anatolia. One day, the officer dropped hot water on her arm, leaving her with a life-long scar. While in the hospital, Tuma was rescued by Armenian nuns belonging to an underground resistance group. They transported her to Beirut, and placed her as an orphan at a Catholic convent.

As a Jerusalemite, my father wore western cloths and a *tarboush*—, rather than a *keffiyeh*, the traditional Palestinian headdress. He drove a tourist bus through the Middle East's and was content with his job. He traveled to exotic cities such as Beirut, Amman, Damascus, Cairo and major cities in Palestine. On one of his trips to Beirut he was introduced to Tuma by a friend. He began to court her and showered her with gifts. Ironically, Yousef didn't speak Armenian and Tuma didn't speak Arabic—fortunately, they both could communicate in Turkish. Yousef had become a frequent visitor to this Mediterranean city and on each visit he became more attached and convinced she was to be his future wife.

Unfortunately, the *Nammamreh* family did not approve of Yousef's courtship, since they had other plans for him. He was to marry one of his cousins as was customary in his extended family. But Yousef's mind was made up and on one of his last trips to Beirut he got married in an ecclesiastical court. As it was illegal to cross from one country to the other, Yousef daringly smuggled Tuma in the bus luggage compartment to Al Quds against not only the authorities but also against his own family's wishes.

Over the years, my parents managed our large family very well by teaching us the rules of life, independent thinking and the freedom to practice our religious beliefs. They emphasized the Ten Commandments and the traditional values of respect for others, irrespective of their religion, or ethnicity.. We were strictly forbidden to curse or use foul language, it was not in our vocabulary. We were taught religious tolerance and often reminded us that, "God will help those who help themselves."

During the British Mandate period, I became friends with several *Engleez*—British soldiers who established camp near *Harat Al Nammamreh* inside an olive field. They liked to take pictures and allowed me to hold their rifles and pretend that I was shooting at the enemy. Frequently the soldiers told jokes and my brother Zakaria and I would make fun of the fact some were Scottish and wore kilts, which to us looked like skirts over bare bottoms! Late one afternoon a friend and I followed two of the soldiers to the *Hoursh Al Nammamreh*. To our surprise we saw an attractive black woman following behind. They went to a hideout in the woods. We sneaked up on them and hid behind the thick trees. Blissfully unaware of their audience, they undressed completely and---. What we witnessed! We were quite innocent because Baba always insisted that Mama skip any story that included a hint of sex out of respect for my sisters. So my friend and I decided that we would never tell them what we had seen that day in the forest, we swore to secrecy.

Before the creation of Israel in 1948, most Christians, Muslims and Jewish natives



1945, Yousef Rashid Nammam. With Palestinian armored border guard. (Yousef's bus in the background).

had lived together for centuries. They were inseparable and communicated with each other primarily in Arabic and identified themselves as Palestinians. I remember that every year, especially during the holidays, Christians, Muslims and Jews from all over the world made their pilgrimage and converged on the Old City of Al Quds. They greeted each other: “*Assalamu alaykum, wa alaykum assalaam*. Devoted visitors worshiped in their respective holy shrines.

My life was shielded from the dangers of the outside world. My childhood seemed to have been protected from the violent turmoil which was brewing with great danger and unrest brought by the Zionist colonial-settlers in Palestine and our city.

My pulse quickened and my peace shattered one afternoon when our bus was brutally attacked on the way back home from school. As our bus was passing near the Montefiore Jewish neighborhood, we were machine-gunned from the hill top forcing us to lie on top of each other at the bottom of the bus while the driver sped ahead. We were terrified. I knew we were hit because we heard screaming, crying and panic throughout the rest of the trip. Upon arrival at Al Baq’a, we dreadfully discovered two of my student friends had been killed and many wounded. From then on we began riding in makeshift armored buses. This horrific experience interrupted the tranquility of my childhood and changed my life for ever.

My family was shocked one afternoon on July 22nd, 1946. We heard a large explosion and saw towering columns of black smoke on a nearby hilltop over looking Al Baq’a. We soon learned that the Irgun, commanded by the notorious Menachem

Begin, blew up the south wing of the Grand King David Hotel, which housed offices of the the British Mandate administration and was the most luxurious hotel in Jerusalem. The explosion was extremely traumatic to our family, since my oldest brother, Mihran, was working in the hotel at the time as a front-desk-clerk. His job was to greet the many international dignitaries and influential guests because of his skills, in speaking several languages.

Even though the eight story hotel was highly fortified with soldiers, tanks and barbed wires, Mihran remembers:

“Four terrorists sneaked in the northern end dressed as an Arab delivery crew with seven milk containers filled with 350 kg of TNT explosives.”

Mihran heard shots from an adjacent bar and recalled:

“The attackers burst into the dining room, where they held me and other hotel staff at gunpoint while they planted explosives.”

Fortunately, there were mattresses stacked in an adjacent basement room, so Mihran and his friend: “had just seconds to dive for cover before the complex exploded destroying all the southern wing of the hotel.”

Mihran was exceptionally fortunate to stay alive and survive. He recalls: “By me I could see legs—two men’s legs. I could see their shoes, their trousers. But the rest of them was smashed.”

Later that evening, Mihran came home with blood stains all over his clothing, from helping the wounded. My parents, brothers, sisters and neighbors welcomed him with great relief and open arms.

The Irgun was the first terrorist organization to introduce powerful explosives to Palestine. The results have been catastrophic ever since. This was one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in Jerusalem. It killed ninety-one people and injured over one hundred civilians-- mostly British staff members, Palestinians and internationals.

In comparison, the Palestinians were mostly defenseless with rare instances of brutality and destructiveness. They did not have an organized army, adequate weapons and trained soldiers; they scarcely knew how to use guns. They demonstrated, marched, and closed businesses, conducted boycotts and hunger strikes. It was a situation of unfair and disproportionate use of power.

After the brutal atrocity of Deir Yassin and over 57 other massacres, Al Quds turned from a peaceful city into a city of carnage. Arab citizens took arms and the authorities blocked roads. The horrific crimes and threats to our lives caused all our neighbors in *Harat Al-Nammareh* to start fleeing from the highly equipped Zionist terrorists advancing our neighborhood. While the turmoil was taking place, our relatives began to evacuate their homes. They pleaded with my parents that since the terrorists were approaching , they too should also leave *Harat Al Nammamreh*, if only for the sake of us children.

I remember vividly my father and mother debating what to do!

They feared for our safety and security.

“This is our home, we are not leaving anywhere. We must remain steadfast”, Baba declared. Mama agreed!

Instead of running away, we resolved to seek temporary refuge at the German Colony. The Colony included a church, school, hospital and housing for the nuns and was a fifteen minutes walk down the street. My mother was convinced that her long time special friendship with the nuns would protect and harbor us during these difficult times. After all, for many years they looked after us for most of our medical needs at their clinic.

As the sun was setting that late afternoon, Mama was baking fresh bread in our backyard cooking oven. Inside she was preparing chicken with rice and Mlukhiyyiah—with Warak E'nib--grape leaves stuffed with meat and rice. Since our home was on a hilltop, we could see from our backyard the advancing Zionist armored vehicles closing in on our neighborhood. For our safety, Baba immediately split us by sending all the girls and the youngest boys to the German Colony leaving him, Mihran, Daoud and Suleiman behind to follow us a little later when the food was ready.

The walk to the Colony seemed a long way as we continued to hear the bombs and bullets nearby. We saw armed Jewish militias rushing in all directions. They were pre-occupied and didn't pay much attention to us.

Mama walked fast leading the way while keeping little Zakaria close to her.

Wedad and Fadwa marched together.

Fahima held my hand firmly dragging me—one step of hers, two of mine.

“We must keep pace,” she said, trailing close behind.

We reached the Colony safely, the nuns welcomed us. There were other Palestinian families already taking refuge. To our astonishment, several hours later only Daoud and Suleiman arrived at the Colony gate crying and explaining that on their way they were stopped at a corner of the street by a heavily armed Jewish militias who spoke both Hebrew and Arabic. After fetching and questioning all of them for an hour they allowed only my two brothers, Daoud 14 and Suleiman 12, to join the family, while detaining and taking both Baba and Mihran 17 years old, in a military truck.

We spent many hours in agony without any news, wondering about the fate of Baba and Mihran. The nuns insisted we stay at the Colony before we venture back home, since we were all traumatized by the uncertainties ahead of us. Although the nuns did their best to comfort us, it was very difficult to sleep, eat or even function normally. Since there were so many families seeking refuge, there was no other choice than for us to sleep on the cold concrete floor. For an agonizing time we huddled—hidden from the outside world. We could hear bombs exploding and gun fire in the surrounding area. We were frantically worried that Baba and Mihran had been caught in the gun fire and imagining the worst scenario. We were frightened that our shelter at the Colony could be bombed next. It seemed there was no end to the turbulence raging outside.

After about a week we reluctantly decided it was time to go back home accompanied by two nuns who insisted to come with us for our protection. Even though the streets were deserted and relatively quiet, we were wary as we walked back to our neighborhood. It was our first glimpse of the ravages and destruction of several buildings and homes, damaged by bombs. On arrival we could not believe our eyes.

Our home was already opened and vandalized! Anticipating the war, my father had stocked large amounts of food in the house; it was heartbreaking to find all our food stolen: big bags of rice, flour, sugar, burghul, olives, olive oil cans and kerosene.

We were now alone; the only family left in the *Harat Al Nammareh* and realized that all the other homes had also been robbed and looted by the Haganah and the Palmach. Our family was in despair. Mama was outraged at Baba and Mihran being abducted by the Zionist gangs and taken.

Mama tried her best to keep us calm and safe. At night she covered the windows with blankets and told us to stay away from them for fear of being harmed. We huddled all together in a small room in the corner like a bunch of puppies protected by their loving mom. During the day, it was very hard for Mama to keep us boys inside. Daoud, Suleiman and I began venturing outside to play and to explore the deserted neighborhood to search for food, which had become scarcer day by day.

On one occasion, while Daoud, Suleiman and I were playing on the first floor of a vacant four -storey building, we heard a big explosion followed by continuous loud, whistling and banging noises for several seconds on the forth floor. Curiously, we decided to creep upstairs to explore. We found an unexploded missile still spinning on the floor in the middle of a large room. It had made a big hole penetrating the wall and circling the room destroying all the furniture. The missile was very hot, so Suleiman found a blanket to wrap it in and took it home as a souvenir.

My mother demanded we get rid of the missile immediately. Better yet, she took it along with Baba's antique hunting shotgun, given to him by his father, and buried both of them next door in our neighbor's yard. Her concern was to keep the gun away from us kids, so that we would not have any crazy ideas to join the fighting and get ourselves killed, as many other young Palestinians had.

My spirit sank low when one day several Jewish soldiers came with a set of armed men to our home pretending they wanted to help us. They insisted that for our own protection it was not safe for us to stay in *Harat Al Nammamreh* and demanded that we relocate to another neighborhood, they said, 'only for a few days then you will be back soon'. After a futile argument, my mother and all seven of us young children locked our home, saved the key and were driven out of our home. All we took were the clothes on our backs and a few personal belongings. At that moment, we realized we were the last of the *Nammamreh* family to leave our neighborhood! We were escorted to the lower *Baq'a* area of the city and placed in a vacant Palestinian dilapidated apartment building still under construction next to the railway tracks.

We quickly discovered that we were now forced under military administration law in a fenced security zone (Zone A) confined with Palestinian families from other neighborhoods who also did not escape. They were Greeks, French, Italians and British, both Christians and Muslims, but not Jews. The military zone served as a ghetto and a large prison camp surrounded by eight feet of barbed wire with armed guards to prohibit us from leaving--no one could leave or enter. We were free to move around in the zone during the day, but under strict curfew at night. Innocently, we all presumed that this was a temporary arrangement and that we would return to our

homes soon, since we all had locked our doors and had kept our keys.

We went from a normal life to a state of poverty. To survive, we became completely dependant on charity distributed by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, who gave us basic food rations. I remember watching Mama standing for hours in long lines to receive bags of flour, rice, olives, sugar and, on occasion, canned foods.

One gloomy afternoon I asked Mama why she was so sad. At first she did not want to talk, but upon my insistence she confided in me saying: “*Habibi Ya’coub*, my heart is broken. I am horrified about Baba and Mihran’s disappearance. My memories about the Armenian massacres, my family and childhood are being repeated again in Al Quds. It is haunting me and I am afraid that the Zionists are committing crimes against the Palestinians as the Turks did against the Armenians. They are killing us, stealing our homes, land and our future.” I tried to comfort her. All I could do was to hug her. I saw in her eyes the pain of dislocation and daily humiliation.

One of the many dramatic incidents was when my 16 year oldest sister Fahima became acquainted with two Ashkenazi soldiers who guarded the zone and spied against us. From time to time they would sneak through the fence to visit and bring us some food and pretend they were kind and wanted to help us. They were physically very unattractive men, especially the leader who had a potted face and was bald with a long melon-shaped head. We nicknamed him *Abu Rassain*—man with two heads.

One night they came to our house armed and drunk.

“We want Fahima to come with us!” They ordered.

Mama stood firm: “Under no circumstances you will take or touch her.”

“She must come or we will take her by force,” they shouted.

“Are you threatening us, get out—now!” Mama demanded. All seven of us children began crying.

It is often said that wars and violence turn boys into men. After an exhausting argument Daoud, who was fourteen, stepped forward and stood between the gunmen and my sisters.

The gunmen stuck their rifles in Daoud’s stomach:

“Step aside, move,” they commanded.

“You will have to shoot me first before you touch any one of us.”

Daoud said assertively.

It was a tense stalemate.

I remember Mama holding me and hiding my face from the soldiers.

Miraculously they disappeared into the darkness—we never saw them again.

As young children in the zone, time did not seem real; our memories were consumed with the constant fear and struggle for survival. We had no news from either Baba or Mihran, even after Mama’s daily repeated requests to the authorities. They ignored us they knew they were in prison. We despaired, not knowing what was happening to them.

On May 14th, 1948, David Ben Gurion, proclaimed a unilateral- state of Israel. Overnight the name of Al Quds became Yerushalayim.

We watched in bewilderment. We were caught in wanton destruction of our innocent lives. More disturbing was to see thousands of new foreigners converge on our city. Since we chose to remain, we became the only *Nammamrehs* left in our neighborhood and one of the very few Palestinians who stayed in the Western part of the city. We also became a minority inside our own land in the new state, completely cut-off from the Old City and the rest of Palestine. We were now separated from all our extended family, school, and friends.

The state of Israel was established and the prison zone dismantled after two and a half years. Because we remained in West Jerusalem, we became the Palestinian citizens of Israel. We were given a *Teu'dad Zehut*--identity cards issued by the Israeli Ministry of Interior, printed in Hebrew and Arabic. It included a picture, signature, first and family name, father and mother's names, date of birth, race, height, eyes and hair color, city and home address in the zone.

Upon getting our papers our first thought was to move back to our own home at the *Harat Al Namamreh* where we belonged. But when we made the journey, we were astonished to discover that our home was already occupied by new Jewish families. They considered us strangers and would not allow us in our home. They did not speak Arabic, Armenian, French, English or any other language they spoke--only Yiddish! After agonizing for several hours, we were informed by a Jewish soldier, who protected them, that our home was given to them by the government and that they would not leave.

The soldier explained: "These people believe that God promised them this land so they came from Poland to claim it."

We protested to the authority but they advised us that under the newly promulgated 1950 property law we were now classified and considered "Present Absentees" same as "Absentee Land Owners," and "Internal Refugees". The "law states that land and homes left behind by Palestinians as of November 29th, 1947 are deemed "enemy" property and are liable for expropriation by Israel authorities". Even though we remained and never left our neighborhood and continued to reside inside West Jerusalem. Our home was now considered Israeli land dedicated exclusively to Jews. Since Baba and my oldest brother Mihran were still in the Israeli prison, there was nothing at all Mama or any one of us seven young children could do to defend ourselves.

We had to return to the zone area in the lower Baq'a to live in the same pitiful place. Our attention turned now to locating Baba and Mihran who were abducted several months earlier—it seemed forever. Fortunately, to our surprise, Mihran was released to join our family. Apparently, he was no longer a threat and was not considered harmful to the new state. However, Baba, on the other hand, who was sick and weak, was not released—he was deported across the new armistice border to Jordan in a prisoner exchange.

Mihran recounted his long ordeal after he and Baba were apprehended by the Zionist gangs. He explained: "First; we were both blindfolded and taken by armored cars to detention at the nearby Neve Shaanan Kibbutz camp. We were placed in



1960, Ya'coub soaring above competition. Jerusalem YMCA basketball team. Top scorer for three years.

miserable conditions along with other wounded Palestinian brought from all over the city. The prison conditions were miserable, many detainees suffered from bad coughs, vomiting, nausea and high fever—they were sick and had very little medical attention.

After Mihran recovered from the prison ordeal, he went back to work at the King David Hotel as a concierge. Later, Daoud joined Mihran working as a bell boy and an elevator attendant. On one of the elevator rides, Daoud befriended an American, Major General William Reilly, who was the United Nations Chief of Staff and who was staying at the hotel. He invited Daoud to come to his suite later that evening to explain how our father was separated from our family and living in Jordan alone. General Reilly was very touched by his story and volunteered to assist our family. We heard that he personally called Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, who within forty-eight hours had arranged to bring Baba back from Jordan to re-unite with our family. Baba was escorted through the Mandelbaum gate—a demilitarized no-man’s land supervised by United Nations peacekeepers. It was the only legal crossing between Jordan and Israel. Baba was relieved and heartened to finally be back with all of us. Five years had elapsed since we had seen him.

My father was out of work and a most of my brothers and sisters were idle. The conditions were getting worse each day, but we were determined to support each other and labor diligently to keep our family together. We did not have much, but we did have each other.

During the war while living in the zone we missed going to school for over two and a half years. We were fortunate that the Catholic Church opened two schools in West Jerusalem for the Palestinians. One was Saint Joseph, a French nun’s school for girls that my sisters attended and Terra Santa College for the boys where my older brothers went. But since my younger brother Zakaria and I were still very young we were permitted to attend the girls’ school along with my sisters and later transferred to the boys’ school when we got older.

The nuns at Saint Joseph school were excellent. They taught me to love studying and encouraged me to study languages, especially French and Latin. And because it was a French school, the nuns concentrated mostly on history and geography of France. I knew a lot about France and very little about Palestine and spoke French more than any other language. ‘Vive la liberte’—was my favorite saying.

After three years in Saint Joseph, I was 12— too old for the girls’ school— so I was transferred to Terra Santa College for older boys. It was nearer to our home and within walking distance of the Jerusalem Young Men’s Christian Association.

One afternoon, after school, I walked to the Jerusalem YMCA to play in its outdoor beautiful garden. While I was sitting at the edge of a fish pond with my feet in the water, three older boys deliberately pushed me into the water. Fortunately, I was saved from drowning by a physical education instructor who saw me struggling in the water. He took me inside to the locker room to dry. Then he convinced me to join the “Y” for swimming classes. This began my long fruitful association with this excellent organization. It not only got me out of the streets, but it gave me protection and introduced me to a wide range of productive activities.

Every day after school I went directly to the “Y” instead of going back to the zone. I became heavily engaged in active sports which kept my mind pre-occupied and away from our daily hardship and struggle. In a real sense the Y’ became my home. I spent more hours there than at any other place. I particularly enjoyed a hot shower each day—a luxury I did not have at our house in the zone. The soothing hot water running over my hair and down my back was a blessing; I did not have to wrestle with my brothers for my turn squatting in the pitiful cold tub.

Swimming was a big sport at the “Y” since it had the only indoor pool in the country and trained one of the best teams. Between the ages of ten and fourteen I became one of the best swimmers on the team, especially in the back-stroke style. In 1955 I won the 100 meter back-stroke at the Israel National Indoor Swimming Championship in Jerusalem, breaking the National record. In addition, during the same period, I won many other swimming races in Jerusalem and around the country. I also competed and swam successfully across the width of *Buhairat Tabariya*, the sea of Galilee, for three consecutive years at the *Tslihat Ha Kinneret*--lake crossing competition. The distances were four km first year, then five km and six km the third year. For this annual event I practiced and lived at the nearby Kibbutzim and was the only Palestinian swimmer participating out of hundreds of swimmers.

When I was fifteen I reluctantly quit the swimming team and moved to basketball. Within two years I became the youngest and the best player on the YMCA men’s team, which participated in Israel’s *Ligah Alef*—League A in the country. Because of my speed and agility I was selected to play guard. I had an excellent dribble in both hands and a very good drive to the basket. I assisted well and had a great jump-shot. At six feet I was considered tall and was able to dunk the ball in the basket, sometimes! My brothers, especially Daoud and several of my friends came regularly to see me play, particularly my home games. One outstanding night, I scored 29 points in the second half to win the game with the highest baskets.

When I was eighteen, the “Y” Physical Education Director offered to send me for training at the Wingate Sports Institute in Natanya on the Mediterranean Sea coast. Wingate was the prime sports education school in the country and when I completed the training and certification I was hired as the Assistant Physical Education Director of the Jerusalem YMCA.

In addition to my overall duties at the ‘Y’, I instructed various sports to hundreds of kids. I also coached a youth basketball team, which became one of the best teams in the city junior league. We were the team to beat. The players were Christians, Muslim and Jewish kids, who all became good friends and later my best fans during my home games.

Because of my basketball success at the ‘Y’, I was quickly recruited to the Israel’s *Ligah Le’umit*-- National Basketball League in which Jerusalem had two rival teams; *Hapoel Yerushalaim* from the Labor party and *Maccabi Yerushalaim* from the Herut party. Both tried to recruit me for their team. Even though I was not involved in politics and did not care for either party, I felt better playing for Hapoel. I had mixed feelings and a difficult time deciding whether I should join a Jewish team, since on

one hand I was the only Palestinian player on the team and in the entire League, and on the other hand I wanted to improve my athletic talent as a player to prove how good I could be.

My decision to play with *Hapoel Yerushalayim* in the National League proved to be the right choice. I soon became one of the five starters and one of the leading scorers on the team. More importantly, I was the first and the only non-Jewish basketball player in the league and the country. We traveled across the country playing against teams in Tel Aviv, Haifa, Kibbutzim and other cities. I was ranked and became a basketball star featured weekly in the sports news papers and was nicknamed the “Jerusalem Tiger”—*Nimer (from Nammari)* meaning tiger in both Arabic and Hebrew. Ironically, as my name was Ya’coub in Arabic and Ya’cov in Hebrew, there wasn’t enough difference between the two names to notice, so I was treated like any Israeli citizen.

Soon after on a pleasant day, I was selected to join the Israeli National Basketball Team. During the regular league that season, I was ranked among the top seven players in the country in “*Melekh Hasalem*”—king of baskets. I practiced very hard and excelled. I was on top of my game and was assured to make the team. Unfortunately, one day I was abruptly dropped from practice without any explanation or justification. Two weeks later I was completely eliminated from the National Basketball Team. The American Coach of ‘Israel’s National basketball Team’ George Davidson, who though I was an excellent player and who sympathized with me, reluctantly told me that since the team was funded by American Jewish funds; it was unacceptable for a Palestinian to represent the Jewish state in the upcoming Olympic Games.

I felt betrayed. During my regular next basketball games with the *Hapoel* team, I began to experience the full thrust of discrimination--not only from the fans and other players, but also by the referees.

I felt terrible and humiliated. I heard the fans booing me.

They called me “*Goy*”

“Stop him, stop him from making a basket,” they shouted.

“You don’t represent Israel! Go home!” “You don’t belong in this country!”

Some remarks were very offensive!

Predictably, I also began to be fouled-out consistently, sometimes in the first half of the basketball game. The team business manager David Krauz, our coach and my teammates all sympathized with me and were respectful. They felt sorry and asked me to ignore these “despicable Jewish fanatics,” as they called them. Unfortunately, the discrimination became overwhelming and began to take a toll on me. I could not continue to play basketball in a country in which I was hated because of my race and religion, especially in my own city and on my own land. It was the last straw.

I felt it was one thing for Israel to discriminate against one proud Palestinian athlete, but it was another thing to misremember, erase the history and destroy the memory of an entire culture. It was then that I made up my mind to leave Al Quds and everything behind to pursue my education, as Mama had encouraged me. I was not

ready to surrender then and certainly not now. It was very obvious the Jews did not want us to stay in our homeland. Their plan was, eventually, to force us to leave one by one. We were subjected to routine legal and institutional discrimination by the state laws. We witnessed a government strategy that clearly granted the Jewish occupiers advantage over the Palestinian indigenous inhabitants.

Baba got sick and died of “a broken heart”. We lost our ‘Rock’. We lost the center of our life, stability and safety. His sudden death was painful to all of us, especially for Mama who mourned for one whole year by wearing black and praying every day.

With no good future and stable employment opportunities in sight, one by one, all my brothers and sisters started to emigrate. First Fahima married and moved to the United States; she was followed by Mihran, then Daoud who both enrolled at American universities to seek a better future. Suleiman and Zakaria crossed to Jordan then Fadwa moved to Switzerland to study French where she later got married.

Some time later Mama and Wedad became completely disenchanted with their lives, so they also decided to leave together to the United States to join Mihran, Fahima and Daoud.

All my family had left Israel and I was all alone. I began to spend all my time at the “Y”; opening the health and physical education department at six in the morning to teach swimming classes before school. During the day I conducted fitness classes and stayed late in the evening to close the department at ten after basketball practices.

Nevertheless, I also felt compelled to leave Jerusalem, along with my hopes and dreams behind, to seek refuge during these uncertain times. My last memory and experience of Israel were sour; it tore apart my cohesive family and dispossessed not only my home but also my entire society. I was the last person from my family to leave my beloved Jerusalem and Palestine.

My own life in Jerusalem ended when I was 23 years old on September 1, 1964. Very early that morning, I packed my traveling bag, one-way airline ticket, my Israeli passport and my 150 dollars savings. I was on my way to the airport; the beautiful sunrise brightened the sky. I gathered my thoughts once again, it was a miracle I survived and wondered if there was going to be another turbulent phase in my life.

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