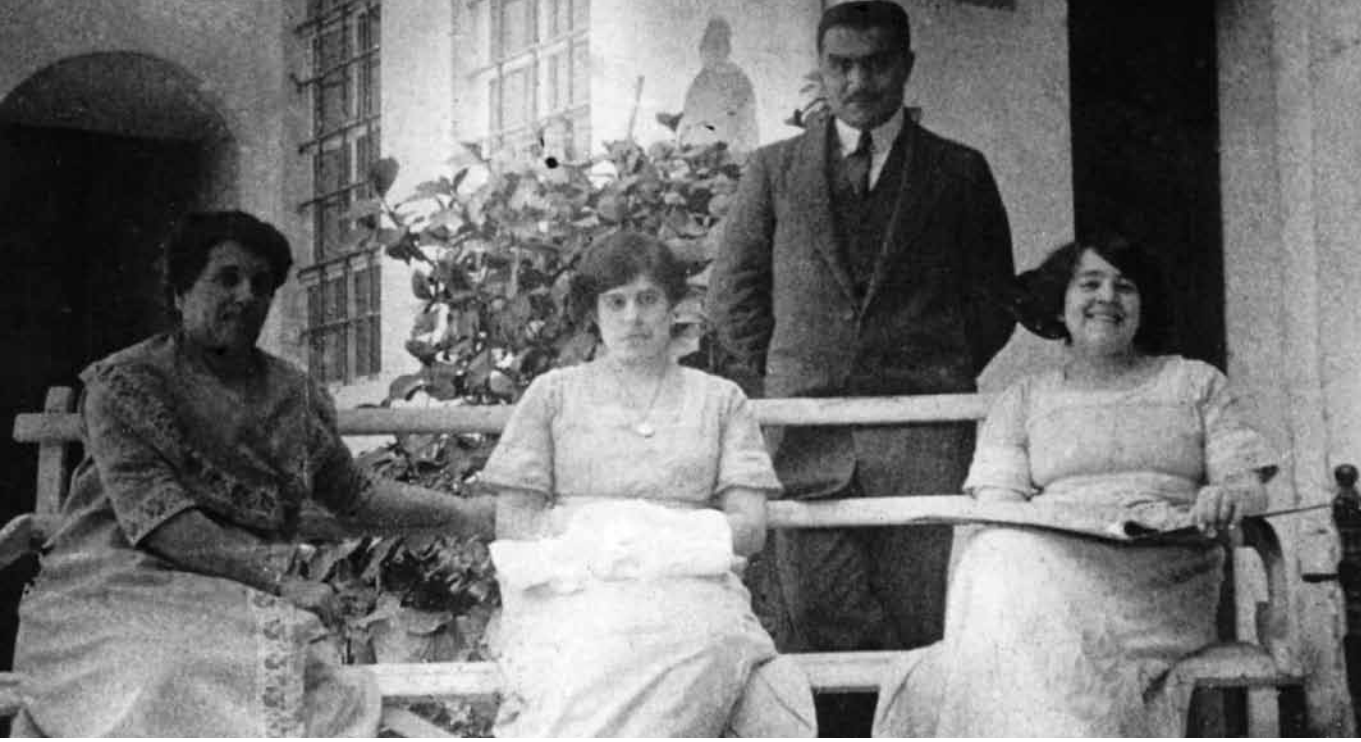

# Eating Bitter Cucumbers: My Aunt Rose's Pilgrimages to Jerusalem

Simone Fattal

Aunt Rose with family in Damascus. *Source: author's collection*.

When I was growing up in Damascus "between the wars" of 1948 and 1967, Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem was less an obligation than a deeply-felt desire, intertwined with a love for the places of that city. A very popular saying opined "if you did not complain when eating a bitter cucumber, you would go to Jerusalem." Pilgrimage must have been important enough to be enshrined in a proverb. I made sure never to reveal that I ate bitter cucumbers secretly so that I could go to Jerusalem one day. I did not know then just how difficult this simple visit was to become.

One year in the mid-1950s, during the spring semester, my mother arrived at my Beirut boarding school to take me out of school early, so that I could join a group traveling to Palestine to perform the Pilgrimage during the Holy Week and visit as many sacred sites as possible. Everyone complained that one could not visit Nazareth any more, the city where Jesus grew up, but still, we could go

to Bethlehem and Jerusalem. I am forever grateful to my mother for her initiative. Without it, I would have never seen Jerusalem.

The visit was so intense that I can still see images of the city and the surrounding hills, their color, and climate. We had gone on a bus from Damascus, a group of youngsters accompanied by their teachers and other adults. Once there, we were housed in a Franciscan convent. We performed all the rites of the Holy Week. On Holy Thursday, as in Damascus, we visited every church: chairs were lined up for us to sit and the priests would wash the feet of the parishioners just as Jesus Christ had done for his disciples. On Friday we followed the Stations of the Cross, as no mass could be performed that day, the day of Christ's death. We walked the narrow streets of the Old City behind a man carrying a heavy cross, stopping at all the stations of Jesus's long agony, where he had been beaten, insulted, humiliated with the Crown of Thorns, betrayed, and suffered until the final station of his crucifixion. I recall the tears I shed, for days and days.

On Saturday again only chants were sung in the churches as no Mass could be performed yet. Finally Sunday came with all the glory of the Resurrection, All the churches rang their bells, and mass was celebrated. My pilgrimage to Jerusalem was memorable – and I enjoyed how special it made me in the eyes of my schoolmates – but perhaps I did not understand its importance at the time.

My mother was very sensitive to the impending dangers of the political situation, as she was a very devout Greek Catholic and had herself visited Palestine many times and been engaged in an array of charitable organizations, but I don't think she had foreseen then the total loss of the city. She certainly understood the nakba: she had cousins who had a vast Bayara[1] in Haifa and its environments, who had to flee their homes in 1948. I met Marie B., and her brothers Joseph and Edward often atmy grandfather's house. It was often repeated to me that Marie had the Rakwé [2] of coffee on the stove, when she had to leave. The Rakwé stayed on the stove as she was sure she was to come back soon to finish what she had started.

Soon the 1967 war happened and disaster fell on the region. There would be no more possibility of pilgrimages to Jerusalem for my family and the whole Arab world. One person in my family was going to have her life radically affected by this change and that was my Aunt Rose.

My Aunt Rose was my father's sister and she lived in the new part of Bab Touma, the old Christian quarter. She had abandoned the old courtyard house after the death of her mother —her father had died long ago—as it was too big and expensive for a woman to run alone. She had moved to a flat close by. She had taken with her the grand piano, a few rugs and the linen. When I knew her she was already in her forties. I never understood why she had not married, and it is only recently that I saw pictures of her in her youth. I would not have imagined her wearing such lovely hats and fur-collared coats. The only youthful memory that she took pride in was her piano playing. She used to say, "When I was young I used to play over here and the orchestra that was accompanying me would be over there," pointing to a very distant point where the orchestra was allowed to be. She came and stayed with us in the summer whenever my

parents had to go to Europe on business trips. She would wake up in the morning and say over breakfast, "If you think the fish in the sea have slept, then I did!" and would invariably sigh. And Lord did we know that she had slept soundly for all the noise we had made had gone unheard all night. But oh how we liked her staying with us as we had a lavish banquet at every meal and great cakes ordered every afternoon. "The children have to eat well, Marie," she would tell the cook.

And this is what we remember her most for, the marvelous luncheons at her place, in the old quarter. The date was agreed upon a long time in advance, and of course we were always late according to her expectations. The menu was always the same. We went there for Kebbé. Her cook Marietta came from a village famous for making extraordinary kinds of kebbé. Kebbé is one of the national dishes in Syria, and she would prepare them three or four different ways. We were ushered into the dining room where everything to be eaten cold was already on the table. More than the wonderful taste of the food, I was impressed by the extraordinary cleanliness of the place, and the order of it all. The white linen, the smell of soap and perfume and the shining furniture left the most durable impression on me. Marietta never made those mythic fried kebbés, the seven hollow circles one inside another for which her village was famous, but she did all the other kinds. There on the table were the raw accompaniments, the onions, the radishes, the olives, the salads, the tabouleh. Then came the fried dishes, so much better than the ones we had at home, some cooked in yoghurt. After the meal, which lasted quite some time and was always very silent, we went to the living room. That room was sunny and there the conversation would take place. There, while having coffee, my father would ask, "Well, Rose how is the pilgrimage going this year?"

And so she would tell us about her yearly pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Aunt Rose's life was divided between preparing for the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and returning from it. She had been for years the President of the Daughters of Charity, in Damascus. She was always in charge of the annual pilgrimage, even when she was not president. She loved Jerusalem passionately. She would prepare the pilgrimage by writing to the nuns in whose convent they were going to stay, early in the year, and get the rooms at an early date before the summer heat would start, then she would gather the names of the ladies who would be part of the journey. She hired the bus which was to take them and bring them back. After the return, she would invite the bishop for tea so that he could meet the new members of the Daughters of Charity and discuss Jerusalem, its beauty and its churches. Sometimes, but not every year, they would go just before the Holy Week to be part of the rituals of the Stations of the Cross in the streets of Jerusalem. The Mass, the incense, the number of the priests and the faithful from all over the world would exalt their hearts, and they would talk about it all and the tears they had shed and shed during the whole time. Easter Day would come as an overwhelming joy after the days of sorrow and mourning.

Those were the years she liked best where she could be in Jerusalem during the first days of spring when the air still had a little chill, but the sun was warm. Her life revolved around the pilgrimage in a neat order, undisturbed. Nothing changed that rule, just as no dust entered her house.

Then the 1967 War happened, and Jerusalem was cut off from Syria, and Aunt Rose could no longer go there, nor prepare for her journey all year long. When she came to stay with us the summer following that terrible event, and every time there was a silence, she would say suddenly, "We cannot go to Jerusalem anymore." Or "The road to Jerusalem is barred." That became a leit-motiv. That terrible defeat that shook the Arab World, was for her the end of her *raison d'être.* She knew that she was only one among millions of other Arab Christians who would be denied their right to visit the seat of their faith, but that did not help her overcome the tragedy.

Soon after, she resigned from the Daughters of Charity, and stopped asking the Bishop for tea. One more summer she came to our mountain resort, to spend a month, but she complained all the time that it was too cold, that she was too old to do anything, that she was barely getting on, that she missed her friends, the nuns in Jerusalem, and that she was going to die without seeing them again. In appearance she had not changed but somehow she looked different. She would go aimlessly from one room to another and she would not be carrying her embroidery as I had seen her do all her life.

Then one day in Damascus, the following winter, she called her doctor on the phone, left the door open for him to get in the house— her maid Marietta had left a few months before – placed a twenty five pound banknote for him on the table for his fee, entered her bedroom and died. She died as quietly as she had lived, leaving no duty unperformed, or debt unpaid.

***

It was nearly fifteen years after my Aunt Rose died that I met a scholar at one MESA Conference in San Francisco. We were having drinks at the Sheraton bar. He said he lived in Arizona, at the same latitude as Jerusalem, and that he wanted so much to go there, to Jerusalem, the City of Peace, and suddenly I told him the story of my Aunt Rose. He said, handing me a piece of paper, "There is a contest for a short story about peace in the year 2000. Write your aunt's story and send it. Call it the *Interrupted Pilgrimage*." Then he added, "You know, life is a pilgrimage."

And so I did, and I submitted it. It did not get published and here we are in the year 2010, peace is further away than ever for Jerusalem and its inhabitants who are losing their homes daily. But let me say one more thing about my aunt. In her will she left two rugs, a big one for my brother, a small one for me. The small one turned out to be a Boukhara prayer rug, with a double *mihrab*, the kind Muslims carry with them on their pilgrimages, and so I evoke my aunt daily, as it is in my bedroom, and ask that no one be denied his pilgrimage in the years to come.

*Simone Fattal is a artist, critic and founder and publisher of the Post-Apollo Press.*

**Endnotes**

1 Bayara is a Palestinian term meaning an orchard plantation.
2 Rakwé is the pot in which one makes Turkish coffee.