



## Evenings in Upper Baq'a: Remembering Ajaj Nuwayed and Home

Bayan Nuwayhed Al-Hout

A view of the house at what is now No. 19, Rehov Harakevet. *Source: taken in the late 1990s by a diplomat friend of the author.*

April 26, 1948, was the last day I spent at our home in Jerusalem. My father had finally made the decision to send us to Lebanon to visit family and stay for a while until the situation calmed down.<sup>1</sup> Transportation was not easy to secure then due to a shortage of petrol, so my brother Khaldoun left the house early in search of a car that would take us to Amman. Meanwhile the rest of us – my father, mother, sisters and I – waited for him with our luggage.

“The car is at the gate,” my brother announced on returning. “Did you make sure the driver has enough gas?” my father asked. “Yes,” Khaldoun replied. “And did you tell him I would be coming back to Jerusalem with him after we reach Amman?” “Yes, I did.”

That was it. We left, just like that. Many neighbors had gone before us, wondering why we were staying in Jerusalem when we had family and a home in Lebanon. I



Khaldoun, the author's brother, with sister Jinan on the balcony from which the Jewish forces gained access and looted the library. *Source: the author's family archives.*

remember one neighbor, Sitt Zakiyyah, shedding bitter tears as she lamented to my mother, "I'll be all alone, Umm Khaldoun, I'll be the only one left," while my mother tried to reassure her that we would be back in just a few weeks.

I confess to having felt happy that day. I could hardly believe that my dream of seeing the green mountains of Lebanon was going to come true. I belonged to the youngest generation in the family who, because of World War II and its aftermath, had not yet visited their country of origin.

It did not surprise me that the streets were nearly empty of cars and people. What worried me was that as we were passing the Mamilla cemetery I noticed my mother and father exchanging sorrowful looks, and saw tears pouring from my mother's eyes. Why was she crying? I knew that my dear sister Maha's grave was there. How hurt I would feel when they refused to allow me go with them to visit her grave, saying they would take me there when I was older. I badly wanted to visit the grave, if only once. I loved Maha without knowing her. She was older than me, and God had chosen her to be near Him when she was three. Could it be that we would not be coming back, as Sitt Zakiyyah had said? No. Impossible... no, it can't be. But then why was mother crying as though she was passing Maha's grave for the last time?

Years passed before I revealed to my mother the anxiety I had felt at that time. But those fears were brief and transient. They were nothing compared to the fears of the subsequent years. Those lasted a lifetime.

My father was not given to talking much about his life in Jerusalem before the city's fall. It was the same with my brother Khaldoun, who took us from Amman to Damascus, where we spent four days with my maternal aunt Anisa, and then on to Ras el-Matn, my father's birthplace, before he returned to Jerusalem the following morning. What I know about their last days there took a lifetime to learn, as neither would say anything except in response to a question. This is part of the tragedy of losing your homeland. We think we talk a lot about the loss, yet an age passes before

we realize that the things we never talked about far outweigh the things we mentioned and the memories we shared.

The first time I heard anyone speak at length and in my presence about the fate of my Jerusalem home was in the early 1950s. We had left Lebanon for Amman, where my father had settled. Christmas was approaching, and it came as a surprise when Israel allowed Palestinians to visit relatives in Jordan, provided they only spend Christmas Day there and return through the Mandelbaum Gate checkpoint by the end of the day.<sup>2</sup> We eagerly awaited Sitt Emily and Sitt Edma, two sisters who had been our neighbors in Upper Baq'a, to visit a third sister living in Amman. Then they would visit us. We heard them knocking on our garden gate at three in the afternoon, and we all rushed to open the gate for them.

Sitt Emily reported that they – the Israelis – were at first unable to open the door to our house (it was an indestructible solid iron door standing half-way up the staircase leading to the first floor). But they soon brought tall ladders they used to climb up to the large balcony, and managed to open the balcony door. Sitt Emily described her amazement at the Israelis' persistence in entering the house in this manner: how could they inhabit a house accessible only by ladders? Then she went on to say that the reason for their behavior soon became apparent when a big, empty truck pulled up in front of the house, and she saw a large number of young men working together: some would toss down books from the balcony into the garden below, others gathered them in piles, while yet others would carry them to the truck, where the last group would stack them up. They worked tirelessly for several hours until they had looted the entire library. The Jewish family who seized and occupied the house later told her that they had found the bookcases completely empty.

Throughout this account my father uttered not a single word. When it was over he had only one question for Sitt Emily: "Reassure me about yourselves: how are you and the rest of the neighbors doing?"

The years passed, my father's new library in Amman grew in size, and eventually I dared to start asking him about this or that book. But one time he could barely answer, speaking in a low, pained voice, "I had this one in my library in Jerusalem." After this happened a second time I no longer dared to ask about any book: I would wait until he left the house then go look at the books myself.

More than half a century after hearing Sitt Emily's story I read an article dealing specifically with the fate of West Jerusalem's private book collections. It was by the Israeli writer Gish Amit, and appeared in the *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 33, Winter, 2008, under the title "Ownerless Objects? The story of the books Palestinians left behind in 1948." At the end of the article appears a list of the libraries' owners in Baq'a, Qatamon, Talbiya, Musrara, and other neighborhoods. "Ajaj Nuwaihid – Bakaa" (in Amit's transliteration) tops the list.

I knew that Gish Amit was writing a dissertation on the libraries owned by Arabs in Jerusalem. I was following his work and appreciated his efforts, particularly as he was the first to write about this thorny and delicate issue. It was from his article that I first came to know what had been written about the Jerusalemites' valuable book

collections in the National Library's report on the period between December 1948 and June 1949. Amit quotes the following completely mendacious statement from that report: "the Palestinians' books never had any owners in the first place. The books were simply 'found', scattered at the mercy of passersby, an anonymous pile of books one might stumble upon in the street."

I wonder who could have written such a report. A few books might have been stolen, or perhaps irresponsibly tossed away, but could this apply to all the libraries owned by Arab Palestinians in West Jerusalem? What have these blatant accusations to do with the reality of the matter? None of the owners of those volumes could bear to even imagine their books scattered in the streets. How would these lies stand up to Sitt Emily's eyewitness testimony on how our library was looted in a pre-planned and undisguised invasion of our house in broad daylight? Furthermore, my father never abandoned his books. He did not even leave Jerusalem. In fact he recorded the events of the last days through to May 15 and beyond in his memoir, *Sittoon 'aman m'a al-qafilah al-arabiyyah* (Sixty Years in the Arab Caravan, 1993, pp. 307-317), which may be summarized as follows. The Consular Committee in Jerusalem, which was composed of the consuls of the United States of America, France, and Belgium, had presented their "Provisional Draft: Articles of Truce for Palestine" to Ahmad Hilmi Pasha, a member of the Arab Higher Committee and the top official then. The most important of the fourteen articles stated that the truce would begin at midnight of May 12-13; that all violent and military operations would cease and no military forces belonging to either side would enter the country during the truce; that each of the Arab Higher Committee and the Jewish Agency would be considered responsible for areas in their respective possession; that the truce would remain in effect for three months, after which the matter would be referred to the Security Council. The consuls affirmed that this was all that could be done internationally to avert danger from Palestine.

My father would daily visit Hilmi Pasha's office at the Arab Higher Committee's headquarters in Lower Baq'a, about 200 meters away from our house.<sup>3</sup> He promptly set to translating the Provisional Draft, which my brother then printed. They left Jerusalem together for Amman the next day, bearing letters from Hilmi Pasha to King Abdullah in Amman, the mufti Hajj Ameen al-Husseini in Damascus and others. On the evening of May 13 my father was received by King Abdullah, who assured him that, God willing, the Jordanian army was about to advance. My father then asked to accompany the army, and the King welcomed the idea. The next day the Jordanian army did in fact advance through the streets of Amman, but halted its progress at Jericho, which surprised my father. After consulting with officials in Amman the commanding officer Abdullah el-Tal told my father that he would provide a military vehicle to take him and Khaldoun to Jerusalem the following morning, adding that they would surely arrive there before the army. They did indeed arrive the next morning, May 15 – while the army did not arrive until days later, on May 18.

By the time the vehicle carrying my father and brother got close to Jerusalem the streets of the Old City and the surrounding neighborhoods were in pandemonium. With great difficulty, and under gunfire, they reached Hilmi Pasha's new headquarters

at the Muslim orphanage, where he had moved the evening before. Needless to say all of West Jerusalem had been taken. All that my father had left of his library was what he had with him: two typewriters, one English, the other Arabic.

## **From the Library to the House**

Our house stood on the main street of Upper Baq‘a, across the railway station. From our balcony we could see part of the grand commercial street, the pride of our neighboring district, Lower Baq‘a, as well as the newer Qatamon neighborhood, perched on its hill, most of its residents living in elegant villas. In contrast our neighborhood consisted of old houses, capped by slightly faded red-tile roofs, and generally in the German style. In fact the German Colony was one of the closest places to us, as was the railway station. But the nearest place we were most eager to frequent was Frank’s bakery, with the aroma of its delicious bread pervading the entire building and yard. The Regency Cinema vied with Frank’s for top honors with us, particularly when we were allowed to attend one of its shows.

If asked about the most distinctive feature of our street I would without any hesitation say it was the lofty quina or quinine trees. From those trees I learnt pride tempered by submission to God. As for quiet, it was pervasive: cars would not pass through unless they were headed for a particular house, and it was very rare for a resident to own a car.

I recall that we were very happy to live in Jerusalem, that great historic city; and not only because that was what we were taught at home and at school, but also because of what we saw with our own eyes in the Old City while adult hands firmly held our own for fear of losing us in the crowds. We would see the al-Aqsa Mosque, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, or the Resurrection, and the long stairs Jesus Christ climbed. We would wonder at Jerusalem’s gates, its domes and narrow alleyways, its every corner fraught with history. But we also loved our street, unburdened by the past, and our happiness would grow with the feeling that our street was ours alone, as though there were two Jerusalems, one for everyone, and the other for us children alone. We would play hide-and-seek, or roll our hoops, with no one watching over us. We would fly our paper kites, envious of the girls in the nearby field of Upper Baq‘a, who got their kites to soar higher than ours. How foolish we were – they had the run of what looked like a boundless field, while we were squeezed between the railroad tracks on one side and the voices of grown-ups warning us not to go near the tracks. And in truth we were careless. The train was our close friend. We loved to hear its whistle, and were constantly amazed by its power, seeing it as if for the first time whenever it passed. We would so tire ourselves out with play that sometimes we went back home before sunset. I can never forget how wonderfully safe and secure I felt inside that house, though I can today think of no reason for that, especially since the situation had been worsening in the last few months we were there. Yet it never for a single moment occurred to us that that would be our last year in Jerusalem.



Jinan, the author's youngest sister, in 1947. Part of the iron door the Jewish forces could not open appears in the background. *Source: the author's family archives.*

Shall I indulge in reviving memories of my house, if only for a little while?

It was a spacious house with seven rooms and a *liwan*, a large hall in which we spent most of our time as a family. In one corner stood the radio, around which we would gather in a circle to listen to the news. Often my eldest sister Noura would sternly order my sister Sawsan and I to cease our prattling so she could listen to the songs of Abdul-Wahab. Near the entrance was the old immovable telephone set, number 4702. It gave me great pleasure to jot down for my father the names of friends who called, or legal clients who tried to reach him at home when he went back to practicing law. I still remember his office number, 5515. The *liwan* had a wide door opening onto the balcony, which in summertime would be redolent with the aroma of sweet basil

and varieties of jasmine that no Jerusalem home is ever without. But the undisputed floral lord of our balcony was the velvety, wine-red cockscomb.

We inhabited the first floor, above our neighbor the renowned Arab philologist Adel Jabr.<sup>4</sup> I recall the long evenings he would spend with my father in the living room, discussing some issue of history, jurisprudence, or philology. My father might summon me to fetch them a book or another, and those would be my happiest moments, for I was entrusted with the library, and knew where to find each and every book. I cannot remember that my father ever said to me, “Don’t go near that shelf,” or “You’re not allowed to see this book.” To him, books and freedom were one and the same thing.

I was aware that ours was not one of those wealthy households with opulent furnishings, and used to deride those who gave so much importance to appearances. I liked having books in every corner of the house, not just in my father’s room, which had seven identical bookcases. Every one of us had their own private book collection; even my younger sister Jinan had her own shelves crammed with children’s books. My father also liked paintings. He had acquired from I know not where an oil painting of the commander Khaled ibn al-Walid, which my mother hung in the most prominent place in the house. There were three things I particularly loved about our house: that painting, the library, and the atmosphere of serenity that dominated despite the disturbances outside. Indoors there was peace and security, and in that calm I would dream of growing up and studying law, just as my father had done.

Once the decision to partition the country was made, and the war against it started, with the schools closing and the sound of gunfire filling our ears from time to time,

Jerusalem ceased to be a safe place for many. The exceptions were my father and a few others like him who believed in the necessity of staying put. During those months I learnt the history of the Arabs through reading the historical novels of Jurji Zaidan.<sup>5</sup> I would also listen to the news and relay them to my father when he would be in conversation with friends. I would try to understand, as a ten-year-old, the reason for all the fighting, but it was hard for me to comprehend what was going on. The Jerusalem I knew was the Jerusalem of the people I love and know and hear about, the Jerusalem of Arabs and Jews and Armenians, of people of all nationalities who had chosen to live there. How can I forget my German school and all its staff, the headmaster, the director, the nuns? I was a pupil at the Schmidt School for Girls, and my knowledge of the world began there. My coming into the world was at the hands of a Jewish midwife named Haya, whom my mother never mentioned without raining blessings upon her, as I did too. Yet suddenly I found myself in the midst of a war that could result in the loss of my country and my home. How could this be?

I remember someone asking me, not so long ago and with no preliminaries, as if he already knew the answer to his question, “Surely your Jerusalem home was your own property, right?” Naively, I said “No, it was rented.” At this his face took on an expression of false surprise. “Then allow me to tell you that it is impossible for a non-owner to feel the way I do, for example. My house and the olive groves we owned are dearer to me than anything in the world. Tell me truly, sister, do you really own anything other than memories?”

I am not interested now with how I put an end to a conversation with a person such as that. What interests me is the issue that robs an entire nation of its sleep, the question of return. Some think that return means no more than going back to a house, farm, or orchard passed down from father to son. What manner of return would this be when Israel has transformed every one of Palestine’s landmarks and topographical features? It has destroyed entire villages, wiped out the names of cities, ripped up streets and torn down buildings at will, and plundered the contents of houses before seizing the houses themselves? What would such a return be like?

I wonder at such a question, and pose another of my own: when did we ever truly leave our country, to be able to talk of returning to it? Does not our country live in our hearts day and night? Is it not with us? Who says that the homeland is no more than a house, or stones, or a title deed, the kind of document we call “koushan” in Palestine?

The truth is that there are many who have never even seen Palestine, but who love the land a thousand times more than my erstwhile interlocutor.

I once asked my brother, if he were ever able to return to our house, found it just as we left it, and was allowed to bring back one thing only, what would he take? “The photo albums,” he promptly answered. I put the same question to my father, who answered with regret, “I’d bring the correspondence I had with my friends.” “What if you weren’t able to carry it all?” I asked. “I’d start with the letters from Emir Shakib Arslan.”<sup>6</sup>

Were I to ask myself this question I would say I would come back with the painting of Khaled ibn al-Walid. I admit that I have no wish other than to visit my home just

once, even under the pall of occupation. I know that our garden has changed, that the apricot, pomegranate and elder trees are dead and gone, and that the earth has swallowed the blossoms of the morning glory that would creep up the walls and spread over every bit of garden soil. Recently I saw how a section of the garden was lopped off and turned into a parking lot. I also saw, in pictures and video clips made for me by a friend who is a European diplomat, that my house has a number now. It is No. 19 on Rehov Harakevet, or Railway Street.

Perhaps all this is no more than mere nostalgia – which is no sin. Nor is visiting one's home. Yet the question remains: what is a home? What does the word mean?

Home is the homeland. When Palestine is the homeland it is not so only for its people, but for those who love it, who believe its history, every era of its history with no exception, and place their trust in its heritage, its Aqsa Mosque and its Church of the Resurrection.

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#### Endnotes

- 1 The author's father, Ajaj Nuwayhed, was born in Ras el-Matn, Lebanon, in 1896, and died in 1982. He served as Secretary of the Constitution Committee at the General Islamic Conference in 1931 and co-founded Al-Istiqlal party in 1932. Nuwayhed held many important positions in Palestine before the nakba, and in Jordan in the early 1950s. He was a prolific writer, having founded the *al-Arab* weekly magazine in Jerusalem in 1932, and authored several books and numerous articles.
- 2 The Mandelbaum Gate was the only crossing point between Israel and Jordan at the time. It was a United Nations peacekeepers' camp located between the two sectors of Jerusalem and named after a Jewish merchant whose house stood at the crossing point.
- 3 Ahmad Hilmi Pasha was appointed head of the All-Palestine Government established in Gaza on September 23, 1948.
- 4 'Adel Jabr was a Palestinian academic, activist, translator and leader. He was born in Jaffa in 1888, and studied Economic and Social Sciences at the University of Geneva in Switzerland. After his return to Palestine, Jabr taught at Khalil Sakakini's Dusturiyyah School in Jerusalem. From 1918 to 1921 he was Deputy Director of the Education Department and in 1923 he assumed the chair of Economics and Political Science in the Law Faculty in Jerusalem. He also served as custodian for the Islamic Museum and the Al-Aqsa Mosque Library, and was a member of the Jerusalem Municipal Council in the 1940s. Jabr died in Jericho on December 19, 1953.
- 5 Jurji Zaydan was born in 1861 in Beirut and died in 1914 in Cairo. He was the editor of the journal *Azamman* in Cairo and worked as a translator. In 1892 he founded the periodical *al-Hilâl* which he headed until his death in 1914. He was one of the pioneers of the Arab Nahda in the late nineteenth century and the author of several historical novels.
- 6 Shakib Arslan (1869-1946) was a Druze leader in Mount Lebanon, a pioneering reformer of Islam and one of the foremost thinkers and writers of his day. He was exiled by the French Mandatory authorities and spent the interwar years as an unofficial representative of Syria and Palestine at the League of Nations in Geneva, where he published *La nation Arabe* magazine from 1930 to 1938.