

Gabi Baramki Visits the Museum of Coexistence

Suad Amiry

Gabi Baramki (1929-2012) professor of chemistry, astronomer, educator, and former president of Birzeit University passed away on August 30. The following tribute is excerpted from a forthcoming book by Suad Amiry, Golda Slept Here, dedicated to his memory and scheduled for publication in the spring of 2013.

*Those who have children never die.
(Illi khallaf ma mat)
—Arabic proverb*

June 12, 1983 was a Sunday.

He, like everyone else, stood in line. The queue was long. Like his father, he was patient, So he waited.

Soon, he found himself in the midst of a turbulent ocean: An animated, loud crowd of young men and women. A bit irritated Still he waited.

What was I like at their age? he asked himself: A moment for contemplation.

At Their Age, Almost Eighteen

In October 1946, almost eighteen, he, like them, was very keen to learn about the world. He wanted to go beyond the boundaries of a protective family and a wounded country. Beirut, the jewel of the Arab World with its American University was his goal.

In April 1948, during his second year at the University, Gabi found himself cut off from both family and homeland. He waited many restless days, long sad months, and an endless year to re-unite with his family. It was summer '49 in the city of Gaza. "An orange cake but no *family albums!*" protested Gabi, tears filling his big brown eyes as he realized that there was no hope of saving his childhood and teenage memories.

Suddenly he knew he had lost his past. There was no proof that he had ever had one; there was no way home home.

A photo album meant existence.

But all he had the power to do at that moment was to vow not to eat orange cake ever again.

“For God’s sake stop it,” Gabi yelled at the two teenage boys who interrupted his daydream, or nightmare rather. They were bullying one another. He turned back and stared at them. He then checked the queue.

It was still long.

So he waited.

Realizing that neither justice nor normality were around the corner, Gabi decided to unwind. Out of a file he pulled the new museum’s brochure. The design was rather flimsy and unattractive, he thought. Let alone its content:

THE TOURJEMAN POST

For a better understanding of Jerusalem’s recent history

*Overlooking the former mandelbaum gate area,
the Tourjeman post was a frontier
position during the period when Jerusalem was divided (1948-1967)
it has now been restored and is dedicated to the theme:*

Jerusalem – a divided city reunited

*permanent exhibition
observation terrace
audio-visual programme
video films
reference library
open: Sunday – Thursday, 9 am – 4 pm
Friday 9 am – 1 pm
Chail Handassa st. 4 tel. 281278
buses 1, 11, 27, 99*

To him, it was obvious that the light blue color of the brochure recalled the Israeli flag, but still they could have chosen a more interesting shade of blue. He wasn’t impressed by the quality of the paper either. But worst of all was the layout, and the many typos. The latter truly got to him. As president of Birzeit University Dr. Gabi Baramki always read and re-read every single University publication. He made sure not to allow any typo to escape his scrutiny.

Gabi carried on with his impossible editorial mission: *Mandelbaum* and *Gate* should start with capital letters: “Overlooking the *former* mandelbaum gate,” it read.

He gazed at the word “former” and wondered how many of the Israeli youngsters



Gabi Baramki addressing students at Birzeit University, 1974. *Source: BZU photo archives.*

realized that the queue in which they were standing right now delineated the divide between East and West Jerusalem. The “Green Line” which far from being green, is rather dusty, he mused. This “No Man’s Land” which actually belonged to many Palestinian families, all of whom Gabi knew and could name. Even the choice of name for the first Israeli checkpoint, the Mandelbaum Gate, was partial. But he decided not to dwell on the fact that the name came from the only Jewish house in the midst of an Arab neighborhood. Perhaps the only neutral term to use was the 1949 Armistice lines, Gabi thought to himself.

For nineteen years (1949-1967), the Mandelbaum Gate provided the only access between the two parts of the divided city. This was where divided Palestinian families – those who remained in what became Israel and those who were forced to flee – had their annual family reunions. Yes, while families around the world had their family reunions in exciting places such as Paris, Rome, or on the lovely sea shores of Greece or the Caribbean islands, Palestinian family reunions took place on an Armistice line crossing, at a checkpoint called the Mandelbaum Gate.

Gabi recalled the exchange of presents between his relatives. While Uncle Hanna and Aunt Victoria brought fresh fish from the seaport of Jaffa, Gabi’s parents carried small coffee cups. As Israeli fast mud coffee slowly replaced the leisurely boiled Arabic coffee spiced with cardamom, it was becoming increasingly difficult to find the small Arabic coffee cups in the market.

Gabi realized at this point that these rowdy teenagers in line had been mere toddlers in the 1967 war, not to mention the 1948 war. These kids were the same age as his daughter Hania and his son Hani. Of course! It was only two days ago, June 10, that Hani celebrated his sixteenth birthday. Gabi could vividly recall how, during the ’67 war, he had to rush his wife Haifa to a Jerusalem hospital, in a bashed-up car and violating curfew, in order to deliver Hani in Jerusalem so he could have a Jerusalem birth certificate.

This realization made him see these kids in a new light; he should at least give them credit for waiting that long in line to see the new museum. Especially that none of his kids had agreed to accompany him, not even his little boy Sami. These kids had a long wait ahead of them to learn about tolerance and co-existence.

From his fat file Gabi pulled out a few more clippings. Ever since he had first heard of the museum and its grand opening, Gabi had started collecting all published material on the subject. He had clippings from different magazines and newspapers in Hebrew, Arabic, English, French and German, the language of Georg von Holtzbrinck, the publisher whose generous gift made this museum a reality.

As the queue started moving, Gabi's skimming through the clippings got faster, his eyes jumping from one line underlined in red to another:

“The Tourjeman Post”

The story of the period, and the history of Jerusalem as a divided city are well preserved in the Tourjeman Post. ... This house, now a museum, was once the last Israeli outpost overlooking the convoys on their way to Mt. Scopus. Some of the bullet holes in the walls still remain. The narrow, armor plated windows, a witness to nineteen years of Jordanian snipers firing at Israeli houses across the border fence.

A photo of the museum building accompanied the last review. Gabi stared at the photo and looked up. From where he was standing it was difficult to see the bullet holes; however, he clearly saw the bombarded front façade and the blown-up arches of the two balconies, as well as the cement-blocked windows.

The damage was not repaired: it was preserved by an Israeli decision as a witness... A witness to what? Gabi wondered.

In 1948 the Hagana seized the building to use it as a forward military position.

It was used by the IDF as an observation post. ... Could this war-scarred building become a symbol of understanding? Gabi pondered the same question.

As the queue finally started to move fast, Gabi flipped through a few more pages: *The Museum, the first of its kind in Israel. Dedicated to dialogue, understanding, and coexistence. A meeting point, a place to clarify and discuss questions concerning war, peace, conflict and reconciliation.*

Gabi was getting a bit confused about the museum's name, spelled variously in different articles, and given altogether different names in others: The Tourjeman Post, The Tourjeman House, The Turjeman Position, The Tourjeman Museum, The Unification of Jerusalem Museum, The Peace Museum, Museum of Co-existence, Reconciliation Museum, and Museum on the Seam.

He knew how to spell his friend's name: Hassan *Bek* Turjman. Even though the “man” ending of the name made it sound Jewish, this Turjman was an Arab family. Perhaps that was why the Israelis opted for this name. Turjman in Arabic meant translator. But most importantly, Gabi knew well that *this* was certainly *not* a Turjman Post. And Gabi also knew that historical accuracy was never Israel's forte.



The Baramki family, with architect Andoni Baramki newly graduated from the School of Architecture in Athens University sitting on the right. Jerusalem c. 1920. *Source: Baramki family collection.*

Just before Gabi put everything back into the file to move along with the queue, he read parts of an article written by one of the museum's ex-curators Efrat Ben-Zeef:

Although it was rather obvious, it took me a while to realize that the whole idea of turning it into a museum of co-existence is naïve and impossible under the current circumstances.

Inside The New Museum

Gabi could hear every step he took towards the new museum, a rhythm: Boom... boom... boom... boom for Gabi, like his father Andoni, sang bass in the Jerusalem Choir.

A numbness was stealing over his entire body as he ascended the steps of the three-arched balcony; excessive sweating spotted his elegant white shirt. He contemplated leaving the building at once. Not after all this painfully long wait! he convinced himself.

A few more steps and Gabi found himself inside the entrance lobby. He felt he was drowning in the crowd of bodies, loud speeches in poor Hebrew emanating from speakers seeming to wash over him.

At the Tickets Counter

“How many tickets? One?” Inquired the young woman sitting behind the high tech aluminum counter. “Tickets?” Gabi exclaimed absent-mindedly.

“Yes tickets!” smiled the ticket vendor.

“Tickets?” Gabi repeated.

“Yes sir, tickets.” She smiled again, then cautiously asked: “Senior?”

“Senior?” Gabi drew a big smile on his face and added, “perhaps too senior, exceedingly senior!”

“*Come on*.... For God’s sake hurry up, buy that bloody ticket and move on,” complained a young voice behind him.

For a fraction of a second Gabi looked back, then turned and gazed at the ticket woman for long moments.

“Did you say I should buy a ticket?” Gabi came back to it.

“Yes, sir. This is not a free museum, you *must* buy a ticket, I do not understand the problem.” She was perplexed, a little annoyed.

“*Must!* Indeed. And how much is that ticket?” Gabi seemed to give it a serious thought, as that smile continued to spread on his face.

“Thirty shekels regular, twenty-five for seniors.”

“Thirty shekels regular, twenty-five for seniors,” Gabi repeated.

The ticket woman lost her temper. “What is the matter with you, sir? Today is the Museum’s opening and as you can see we have tons of visitors waiting in line.” She rolled her eyes and sighed.

“Yes, yes, of course, what is the matter with me?” Gabi asked as his smile slowly transformed into hysterical laughter: hahaha, hahaha, hahaha hahaha... hahaha....

“For Fuck’s sake, something is seriously wrong with this man, would someone get him out of the queue? How much longer are we expected to wait?” The complaints from the queue behind him were getting louder and angrier.

“Do you want me to pay thirty shekels to enter hahaha... my hahaha ... this is.... hahaha.... my hahaha... fa hahaha...” Gabi’s attempts at speech were foiled by mad laughter. People stood there, watching nervously.

Gabi gave it another try. “Do you *really* want me to pay thirty Israeli shekels to enter my hou... hahaha... my family hou... hahaha.... The Baramki hou...hahaha my father Andoni hahaha ... Baramki..... hahaha ... hahaha

No one around him could figure out what he was trying to say.

“*Mazeh?* I do not understand what is going on here, sir.” The ticket clerk made one last attempt.

Gabi’s obscure words were transformed into nervous guffaws: as loud and as deafening as Herzl and Ben Gurion’s Independence Day speeches playing in the lobby.

He laughed and chuckled, then bent over clutching his stomach.

“I think he is saying this is his family’s house!”

Silence.



A wedding photo of Gabi Baramki and Haifa Tarazi, Mount of Olives, 1964. From right: Evelin and Andoni Baramki, George Baramki, G. Baramki, the Greek Orthodox patriarch, Haifa Tarazi. *Source: Baramki family collection.*

A True Account of the “House of Tolerance”:

From April 28, 1948, when the Baramkis left their home, until the Grand Opening of the “Tourjeman Post Museum” on June 12, 1983 – for thirty-six years, that is – none of the Baramkis had ever been able to set foot in their own house.

George Baramki, Gabi’s younger brother, had actually accompanied him that day. However their father Andoni, the architect who had passed away eleven years earlier (in September 1972) was never allowed in, hence never again saw the interior of “the light of his life” (*nour hayati*). Evelyn, his wife and Gabi and George’s mother, in whose name the house was registered, and their sister Laura could never stand in that “Museum” queue. Their tears would have flooded the whole of the Holy Land.

It was also reported that the sponsor of the museum, Georg von Holtzbrinck had died in Germany on the same night of the Grand Opening of the “Tourjeman Post Museum”.¹



The Baramki house in Musrara, after its conversion to "Museum at the Seam". *Source: Baramki family collection.*

Suad Amiry is an architect, and director of Riwaq – the Centre for Architectural Renovation in al Bireh. Her most recent book is Murad: Nothing to Lose but your Life (Bloomsbury, 2011). JQ is grateful to Feltrinelli Publishers in Milan for granting permission to publish this section of her forthcoming book, Golda Slept Here.

Endnote

- 1 Abraham Rabinovich, "The Story of a City," *Jerusalem Day* (supplement), May 11, 1983, 3.