



# JERUSALEM

## Memories of Al-Thori

Saliba Sarsar

### **I. I remember, I remember**

Being a Jerusalemite evokes thoughts from the past. It speaks of the land and its people, and of war and peace. Learning about Jerusalem and human relationships began in the al-Thori section of Jerusalem where my family and I lived, and in the Old City where I studied and occasionally worked.

Al-Thori, a Palestinian Muslim quarter, is a 10-minute walk from the Old City. Lying to the south of the wall, equidistant between Mount Zion to the north and the Hill of Evil Counsel to the southwest, it commands a sweeping panorama that evokes a sense of the age and the agelessness of the city.

Tradition has it that al-Thori, literally "the father of the bull," is named after Abu al-'Abas Ahmad ibn Jamal al-Din 'Abdallah bn Muhammad bn 'Abd al-Jabar al-Kudsi, who inhabited this area. He was known as "al-Thori" because he rode a bull as he witnessed the capture of Jerusalem at the hands of Omar ibn al-Khattab, the second Muslim caliph, in 637 C.E. The bull was actually his messenger. Whenever "al-Thori" was unable to go shopping, he would attach the list of goods he needed to the bull's neck, and the bull would go by itself to the city and make the usual shopping rounds.

My own family moved to al-Thori from the Old City in the mid-1930s, when the area was sparsely inhabited by a number of Jerusalem families, several of them Christian. This situation changed radically in the 1940s and 1950s when many of these families migrated to suburbs north of Jerusalem, to be replaced by Muslim families from Hebron who were seeking their livelihood in Jerusalem. Today, many businesses in the Old City are owned or operated by al-Thori families.

Our neighborhood has row houses, each row consisting of 10 to 15 houses with their main entrances on the road. All houses are built of stone. The older ones have high ceilings and domed roofs, features devised by the ancients who wisely planned for air circulation to mitigate the tremendous heat during much of the year. They also have arched windows that give way to verandas, courtyards, and, in some instances, gardens.

Until 1985, our road remained unpaved, its neglect surprising and incomprehensible since it was shared by all in the

neighborhood and was in constant use. The road was not only our thoroughfare, it was also our playground and courtyard. Women swept the dirt from the few cements or marble stones outside their doorsteps and then washed them down with soap and water, but they went no further so as not to infringe on their neighbors' stones. Still, what goes up more often than not comes down, and the dust and earth would end up on the neighbors' sides. Then the children would play and the mud would find its way onto the clean stones. Prior to the early 1970s, television still belonged to the world of fantasy and the rich. Children entertained themselves with games of football, hide-and-seek, and marbles. I was annoyed to learn that when the road finally was paved, the bulldozers, with their characteristic indifference to history, not only leveled the ground but also tore away the outdoor oven that had been used for some time by the quarter. Today, neighbors compete over parking space. Our street looks like a parking lot at night.

Until the late 1950s, there was no reliable source of running water. The government's laissez-faire attitude toward the area was occasionally expressed in complete failure of the system. I remember mostly women but also some men, carrying buckets of water on their heads, a common practice for transporting goods, which has created a community of people who, regardless of age, stand erect as a result of this exercise. Like Jacob's daughters, they sought water at an intermittent spring, sometimes called "Job's well" and at other times "the Virgin's well."

Similarly, there were only kerosene lamps and candles to light the interiors of houses until the year of the miracle, 1964.

"Let there be light," which was accomplished by extending electric power to our quarter, had a deeper meaning for us because it coincided with the visit of Pope Paul VI. The event was overshadowed by a general sense of beings, both seen and unseen: the wind howled more than usual through the valleys, and the ancient trees twisted in the onslaught.

We had one of the first telephones in the quarter and one could always expect a rap on the door and a request to make a call. Sometimes it would be to a son studying in Greece, which did not help the outrageous bills. Lines often got mixed or the phone failed completely. It was easier and quicker to grab a donkey and ride to Bethlehem than trying to reach there by telephone! Because of our knowledge of a few languages besides Arabic, some neighbors asked for our assistance in translating and writing responses to letters from abroad, or even in giving a crash course in a foreign language prior to a high school final examination. We were needed even more, especially my mother, where the neighbors' health was concerned. Having been a nurse at one time, my mother was consulted frequently, and often past midnight, by neighbors wanting a medication or suffering from a "severe" stomachache.

Children-instigated family feuds, conflict over land and property rights, and disrespect for someone's elders have sometimes not only incited heated arguments but driven some to violence. The shouting by scared relatives and the frequent intervention of the mukhtar, the local elder, or the police linger in my memory. In particular, I recall a tragicomic fight I was called to break up

between two brothers who went at each other, with ample splashing of blood. As I intervened, one of the two protagonists looked up at me and apologized for what was happening and then set upon his sibling with a bloody stick.

Crises also tended to generate in our neighbors' hearts a sense of communal responsibility and sharing. Many times they disregarded their differences and extended themselves to ameliorate a bad situation. Whenever sickness struck or a death occurred, scores of neighbors would genuinely offer not just moral support but physical and financial assistance as well. I cannot forget the morning when men rushed to rescue a neighbor's teenage daughter from a fire that had started in the kitchen. The experience was deadly. As shouting gave way to screaming and as the women began to wail, it became apparent that the worst had happened. Religious cries were heard: "la ilaha illa Lah wa Mohammedan rasul ul-Lah" ("There is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God"), and the familiar phrase "hathihi mashi'atu lah" ("This is God's will").

## II. The June 1967 War in Al-Thori

Etched in my mind is the Jordanian-Israeli frontier. Living a few yards from it, I was able to see a no man's land covered with shrubbery, prickly plants, and semi-impenetrable walls of barbed wire. Almost eyeball to eyeball, the opposing soldiers of the truce stood on the look out for the least minor infraction or desecration of the sanctity of their territory. Countless sounds emanated from across the border. Voices, which ebbed and flowed with the shifting of the wind, were hard to decipher.

The June 1967 War started when I was eleven. The days preceding it were filled with wild rejoicing. Many people took to the streets, overjoyed by the moves of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt's president, which included ordering the United Nations Emergency Forces to withdraw from the Sinai and closing the Straits of Tiran, and King Hussein's signing of a defense pact with Nasser. They shouted: "Ashaa Hussein wa Nasser" ("Long Live Hussein and Nasser"), "Bil ruh bil dam nafdikuma ya Nasser wa Hussein" ("We sacrifice our spirit and blood for you, Nasser and Hussein"), or "Litasqut Israeel" ("Down with Israel"). No danger was in sight. If there was danger, it was ignored. As such, no security arrangements or plans were made. The only sign of military movements, at least in our quarter, was the replacement of professional soldiers by new recruits, mostly students, from the Nablus and Jenin areas of the West Bank, a couple of days before the start of war. In comparison, the recruits looked inexperienced and young, almost as young as my 18-year-old brother. No one expected what was going to happen.

As East Jerusalemites awoke on 5 June and prepared to start another ordinary day, Radio Cairo announced the start of the fighting. Aside from a little surprise, there was no fear. Although we had heard some shooting over the years, no one really expected the severity of what was going to happen. It was not until mid-morning, when a few soldiers and able-bodied men began to prepare for a possible battle by digging additional trenches throughout the quarter, that everyone was struck by the reality of war.

Property was not a concern. Some were

saying, "Bil-mal wala bil 'yal" ("Your possessions nothing, your families' lives everything"). To help out, women and children filled bags and pillowcases with sand and earth. The sound of small arms fire in the near distance did not slow their effort. People were even encouraged by Hussein's appeal, which was broadcast from loudspeakers attached to the minaret in a clear and calm voice: "The time has come for us to do our duties and to achieve our aims.... We are decided to live or to die honorably for those things that are most precious to all of us."

Not everyone was home at the time. Many were still at work or on their way home. My father and one of my older brothers were stuck in the Old City with no way to reach home except by foot, which meant passing close to the no man's land and being exposed to crossfire. Hence, they avoided open spaces as much as possible. Nearing the quarter, they waited in an orchard until dusk before resuming their trek home.

As the gunfire increased and the hollow explosions of mortars joined the rattle of machine guns, the roads emptied rapidly. The quarter turned into a ghost town. Separating us from the Jordanian-Israeli border were rolls of barbed wire, semi-trained soldiers, and piles of sandbags.

We were stranded. Our only contact to news, our electric radio, stopped as the power was cut off. Having no electricity was not too bad since we were used to such an interruption under normal conditions and had plenty of candles. Anticipating a similar cut-off in water, we filled every available container.

Ten of us took refuge in the family bedroom. We assumed that its location at

the center of the house together with its thick roof, walls, and doors would provide some measure of protection. In spite of additional building around it, the room had massive walls, a relic of Turkish times, which gave it a fortress-like feeling. Even its windows, although in the interior of the present house, were barricaded with iron bars at least two inches thick. We were crammed into three places, under my parents' bed and in two built-in wall closets. Our hope of survival was to stay clear of doors and windows, in particular those of the adjacent veranda, which was only a few meters from a precipice that overlooked an open panorama from the Old City to the Dead Sea and which was a target of a continuing hail of bullets. Our movement was restricted to going to the bathroom or the kitchen. As the hours passed and the fighting worsened, we brought some kitchen utensils and food into the bedroom—or what came to be called the all-purpose room—in case sections of the house collapsed and we had to fend for ourselves for a few days.

Boom, boom, tac, tac, tac, boom. The noises still ring in my ears. To busy ourselves, we argued over whether the boom or the tac was Jordanian or Israeli. I tried to count the booms and the tacs, but they were so numerous and successive that the whole thing turned into a futile game.

An explosion here, another there. "That must have struck our next door neighbor's house." Boom. Boom. Most of us were crying. "God, don't leave us now." An enormous bang hit the front door. A sound of shattering glass filled the room. With tears running down her face, my sister Anastasia lifted her voice in prayer, and we joined her in reciting the Lord's Prayer.

Boom. The walls trembled. Our shelter's heavily reinforced door, suitable for a vault, moved a few inches inward. The smell of cordite permeated the air. We pushed further into the closet, hoping that layers of clothes and the closet's depth within the wall would protect us. "I am suffocating, let me out!" Boom. Boom. "Be quiet, something must have hit the house." "Is everyone all right?" Intermingled with the noise of shelling and gunfire, and the sounds of sobbing, weeping, and screaming, were the voices of my parents debating: "Do you think the roof and the walls will hold any longer? What about these cracks?" "What cracks?" As the noise subsided, I emerged into the daylight to find my father inspecting the bedroom's walls and ceiling for damage.

As the evening approached, we heard a knock on our verandah door. "It's just me, open up." One of our neighbors had come to borrow a few cigarettes and to check on us. "Are you all right? Is anyone hurt?" Following a short conversation we learned that the Jordanian army had captured Government House, the seat of the United Nations in Jerusalem since 1948, from the Israelis, only to have it recaptured a while later by the Israelis. Also a shell had fallen on a garden in the quarter, killing a neighbor's son. Given the severity of the battle, we thought it miraculous that no one else had been killed during those first hours of war.

That night, although the exchange of fire had diminished, we remained confined to our shelter. The nightmare experience of the day—the blindness of stray bullets and fear of the unknown—had immobilized us. A candle lit in front of an ancient icon glowed in the darkness and partially

illuminated our sad and frightened faces. The walls reflected abstract images that contracted and expanded with the flickering of the candle. The effect was hypnotizing. When the candle finally went out and the images disappeared, almost everyone was asleep. The heavy bombardment in the distance and the exchange of fire in the neighborhood could not keep us awake. Despite an occasional moan or snore, sleeping among friendly bodies had a reassuring and soothing quality about it.

But the feeling was only transient, for as soon as the neighborhood cocks and birds announced the coming of daybreak, the shooting intensified. Rising above the Jericho mountains, the sun projected its rays through the verandah windows into the house. Outside we could hear the exchange of incomprehensible voices. As the sun rose above Jerusalem, the experience of the previous afternoon was repeated, this time with the clank and clutter of bulldozers and tanks joining the ensemble of unwelcome and vexing sounds.

### III. Escaping Death in Al-Thori

By early afternoon, a neighbor came to our house and explained that the Jordanian army was withdrawing. My parents took a little bag of our most precious treasures and told us, "Let's go." We made no argument, for we were already convinced by more than a full day of continuous bombing and shellfire. "Place the ladder from the garden's edge to the street below," my father said, "and let's move quickly." One by one we descended, joining the exodus of neighbors and others a few yards away. Women balanced their possessions on their heads. A frightened girl with tears in her

eyes carried a tiny baby. An old man, supported by a lad, prayed as he dragged his feet along the stony path.

It was not until some time later that my older brother Michael and I realized we were separated from our family. We began to search, but with no success. I wanted to return home. Michael would not permit. The deadly sound of bombing on the far horizon from where we had just come prevented anyone from thinking correctly. Through this drama of the living and the dead, we continued running, uncertain about our exact destination. Hand in hand we jumped walls, traversed fields, and twice took shelter—in a cave and a chicken coop. Whatever direction we took, a shower of bullets seemed to follow. As darkness fell, we could see the horizon behind us glowing on and off. The hills were spitting fire. The fighting was still going on.

By late evening we reached a tiny mosque halfway between Jerusalem and Jericho, where we spent a sleepless night in the midst of other homeless people. The cries of children and even of adults, the whispered conversations about what to do next, and the mumbling of a few older men, while telling the beads that represented the virtues of Compassionate Allah—all echoed in the huge prayer room. Except for the inconsolable crying of one or two people who must have lost a close relative or friend, silence would descend soon as a fighter jet passed overhead or the sound of gunfire intensified in the far distance.

At dawn, as the others finished their required prayer, my brother and I resumed our flight. After some discussion, we decided to leave the shepherdless mass and

head by a different route toward home. Burning military vehicles, burned-out cars, the smell of death...nothing mattered; we wanted to find our family. Were they injured? Had they escaped like us? Will we find anyone on our return home? Memories kept surfacing, bringing us close to those people and things we missed most. We wondered if Jerusalem was destroyed. We asked the same questions over and over again. We grew tired of wondering and wandering. Our lips were sore, our feet swollen.

It was close to noontime when we spotted a few houses. No more wilderness. What miracle was this? Where were we? At a distance, hovering in the air and floating in the midday heat, was a Greek Orthodox convent we had once visited on the way to Jericho, where my nephew was baptized in the Jordan River. The head priest, Father Theodosius Makkos, was a close acquaintance of our father who worked for years at the Greek Convent Press in the Old City. We began to hurry. My feet were killing me and my knees almost gave way beneath me. I was hungry, thirsty, and hot.

A solid stone wall surrounded the convent. The entrance gate appeared to be shut, but we realized that a tiny side door was slightly ajar. My brother rang the bell. A gentle-faced middle-aged, Greek nun clad in black appeared. "Is Father Theodosius here?" my brother asked. A cool breath was coming from inside the convent. Upon hearing the name Theodosius, the nun invited us in. Entering the courtyard, it took my eyes a few seconds to adjust. A tiny church and a row of attached rooms on the right and a building on the left became visible.

Father Theodosius, trailed by several

nuns, emerged from the church and into the light of day. His black robe and black stovepipe hat contrasted wonderfully with his large, white beard. We hurried toward him, bowed slightly, and kissed his hand. "What sweetness?" we wondered. He and the nuns had just finished their noon prayer, and must have been suffused with the sweet smell of incense. Father Theodosius insisted on our staying at the convent, at least until the war ended. Gunfire and booms were still heard in the distance. He assured us that God would neither forsake those in need of help nor ignore the pleas of those in danger.

Inside the convent, the nuns served us lemonade and biscuits. In exchange we offered the bread and salty white cheese we had taken as we fled. Our offerings were now hard as rocks, but the nuns, pressed for food, pounded the cheese and used the bread to dip in a very thin soup.

Late afternoon we were shown to one of the tiny rooms adjacent to the church. As befitting the residence of a monk, the room was rather plain, with two single beds, a chair, a small table, and a cross hanging on the wall. There were two tiny windows, a square one overlooking the Jerusalem-Jericho road and a round one above the door that opened on to the convent's courtyard. Exhausted, anxious, but no longer hungry or hot, we retired to our room. I went to sleep. I do not even remember saying my prayers.

At dawn there was much activity at the convent. We learned that Father Theodosius and the nuns had been asked to care for the animals at an adjacent farm whose owners fled to Amman. As my need to be useful was great, and the groaning of the cows was unbearable, I offered to be

put to work. In al-Thori we raised chickens, pigeons, and birds, but since I had never had the opportunity to milk cows, one of the nuns provided me with a crash course. Given the few people around and the temporary interruption of electricity in Jerusalem, much of the milk had to be dumped.

That afternoon, our movement outside the convent was restricted by an Israeli-imposed curfew. Father Theodosius and the nuns sought sanctuary in the church. They prayed and chanted, and we joined in with them. The candlelight illuminating the darkness, the liturgical melodies, and the smoke and odor of incense had cathartic and hypnotizing effects.

Our stay ended on the third day when a Christian couple, the Salfitis, who frequented the Convent and lived close by, invited us to spend some time with them. The man turned out to be a personal friend of our family in Amman. He felt obliged to give us protection.

Aside from some errands to the convent or to buy bread (baked on red slabs) at a bedouin encampment in the adjacent mountains, we remained in the house. The prevailing impression was that it was dangerous and unwise to come face-to-face with Israeli soldiers. My brother was almost shot by an over-zealous soldier when he was trying to deliver bedouin bread during the curfew to the host family's relatives down the road from us.

The days I spent at the home of the Salfiti family were the longest of my life. From dawn to darkness my fear was exacerbated by the fears of those around me. Another person can comfort someone with a private sorrow, but when everyone is frightened there is no place to turn. My mind kept

bringing back thoughts of my family in al-Thori and of Jerusalem. I couldn't think of one without the other.

On the third day with the Salfitis, we heard that the war had ended and that people were resuming their "normal" life. My brother went scouting a route to make sure that our "trip" home would be safe. With much anticipation and fear, I waited through the long afternoon. Lying on a sofa on the balcony overlooking the Jerid mountains, I was carried away by concern and apprehension. I fell asleep and began to dream. It seemed I was standing at the edge of our garden in al-Thori, looking at the vista encircling the Old City. Suddenly the sky darkened, the clouds thickened, and torrents of rain gushed down to the earth. I had never witnessed so much water in my life. Miraculously, I remained dry. I tried to move, but my feet extended downward, penetrating the soil until they touched the deepest rocks. No one was there to help me. The rain kept falling and the level of water kept rising, submerging everything in its way. The city stood surrounded by water. In the distance a flock of tiny sparrows appeared. As they ascended, the clouds began to part and quickly disappeared, ending in a flash of bright light at the gate of the seventh heaven. I awoke!

#### IV. Returning Home to Al-Thori

My brother returned the next day. He indicated that the way home was accessible and described how upon approaching Job's Well, he found our family members, who were just returning from hiding in Beit Sahour, a town adjacent to Bethlehem. Overjoyed with the good news, we said good-bye to the Salfitis and resumed our trek. As we moved along, structures on the



horizon began to become familiar again. Swollen and trembling feet, thirst, and exhaustion did not matter. With a powerful homing instinct we headed from whence we came. Time passed quickly, and soon we could see our home in the distance. We even found that the ladder we used while escaping to safety was still there. Unlike Job of old, I saw no angels coming down to help, so I climbed up to the welcoming hands of those most close.

During our flight, my mother had realized that some of us were missing. Leaving the rest of the family in a temporary "safe" hiding place, she returned to search for us. The hissing sound of bullets zooming past her, the shouts of people instructing her to bend down while walking, and the recurring thoughts of worse things to come did not halt her advance. "Have you seen my sons?" She repeatedly asked passers-by. As she reached the hilltop, she heard a voice ordering her to stop. "I was looking for my sons; have you seen them?" she asked with a quivering voice. A moment of dreaded silence. No answer. With tears in her eyes, my mother described my brothers' features, hoping the soldier, despite his machine gun, would respond with sympathy.

While people fled in droves, the Israeli army had occupied the area by taking everybody in its way as hostage. The soldier pointed to a house across the way. It was packed with frightened people, some huddled together, others kneeling or lying down in hopes of escaping the bullets being fired from a distant hill. Standing guard and simultaneously responding to the firing of the opposing army were a half-dozen Israeli soldiers.

In a far corner of the house, my mother

spotted two familiar faces. With tears running down her face, she jubilantly cried, "Here you are. Thank God." Bending down and holding my three-year-old brother Elias as if to form a shield was my eldest brother Khamis. "These are my sons; I came to take them," my mother explained in a hurried voice to the nervous officer. "My oldest is only a student; he studies at the College de Frere; he knows nothing about what is happening." "Wait," the officer replied. A while later he returned. "My son is only a student; please release him," she pleaded. Luckily, Khamis had his school identification card with him. After the soldier inspected it, he was set free. Disregarding the shooting and overcoming her language barrier, my mother continued her plea: "Let me fetch the rest of my family. Allow us to return home. We don't want to harm anybody; we want to live peacefully."

The soldier relented, and my mother and brothers were allowed to climb up the ladder and return home. The family spent a sleepless night because of the worry about Michael and me, and because the battle continued into the night. The next morning Israeli soldiers ordered everyone to leave al-Thori. Instead of following in our footsteps, they headed south and after a day's walk reached Beit Sahour, where they remained for nearly a week before their trek back home.

The war presented our neighbors with a reality they were never prepared to handle. Some remained in shock. Others became compulsive talkers, reenacting everything they experienced. Stories of suffering and even death spread throughout the quarter. Some related how the Israeli soldiers intimidated those who stayed behind.

Everyone's inner world became easy to penetrate.

A teenager with whom I had played as a child spent most of his time in the garden watching the battle. He was hit by a shell and was instantly killed. Another neighbor, a quiet and nonviolent man, was on his way to join the fighters in the valley when he was gunned down a few yards from his house. The gun he carried, with false bravado, had been a souvenir, hanging on his wall, of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.

While the frontiers have been removed, they have become imprinted on people's minds. Palestinians and Israelis alike point to their former locations as if they were actually there. Although the no man's land is no more, it remains rich in wire, barbed and coiled. Occasional explosions and the sound of sirens have replaced the booms of June 1967.

Many adults have passed away. Children have become adults and are having their own children. The sun still rises over the Jericho mountains. It still projects its rays into our home.

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Saliba Sarsar, who grew up in Jerusalem, is an Associate Professor of political science and the Associate Vice President for Academic Program Initiatives at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, New Jersey.

صدر حديثاً عن مؤسسة الدراسات  
الفلسطينية في بيروت

## تاريخ فلسطين

في أواخر العهد العثماني

١٧٠٠-١٩١٨

(قراءة جديدة)

حزيران ١٩٩٩

عادل مناع

## عادة اكتشاف فلسطين

إلى جبل نابلس ١٧٠٠-١٩٠٠

نارث دوماني

تطلب من باعة الكتب

من مؤسسة الدراسات المقدسية في القدس