

# My Last Days as an Ottoman Subject

## *Selections from Wasif Jawhariyyeh's Memoirs*

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*The following are excerpts from volume one of Wasif Jawhariyyeh's three-volume hand written memoirs. They shed light on the atmosphere in Jerusalem on the eve of the collapse of Ottoman rule in 1917. The entire manuscript is being edited and will be published in Arabic as **Oud wa Barood: The Jerusalem Diaries of Wasif Jawhariyyeh (1904-1948)**, ed. Issam Nassar and Salim Tamari (Jerusalem: Institute of Jerusalem Studies, 2001). The selections were translated for the **Jerusalem Quarterly File** by Amal Amireh, Professor of English at al-Najah National University.*

### **My Leave of Absence in Jerusalem**

The leave of absence I had, which was signed by the commandant of Jericho, was to expire on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 1917. I added the number 3 so it became the 31<sup>st</sup> of October. I was living in Jerusalem, and we were impatiently waiting for Britain to enter. Brother Khalil had arrived from Beirut and we were finally together after a long separation. But time passed and things did not change, so I remained hidden in the house, going out only after dark with my brother Khalil, who was dressed as a gendarme. And we did not go beyond Mahallat Mamilla near my sister 'Afifeh's

house. I used to gather the news, going to the house of Hussein Effendi [H. al-Husseini, mayor of Jerusalem] and accompanying him frequently in the evening. Everyone was optimistic and waiting for relief. The people now saw the way the government and the leaders of the army were treating the citizens and the soldiers. They treated them with the utmost cruelty and were trying to take from the merchants everything they could lay their hands on. The leaders were forcing soldiers and workers to move to other countries, which was a source of concern for the people and shook Jerusalem in particular.

### **A Threatened Death Sentence**

I remained hidden in Jerusalem to a degree that worried my mother. November passed and things remained the same. We used to watch some of the air battles over our heads between the planes of the English on one side and the planes of the Turks and Germans on the other. I remember that the splinters of a bomb from a plane fell near the house of my sister 'Afifeh.

Then battles broke out on the internal front. Turkey blew up the train station in Jerusalem for fear that the English enemy would occupy it. It was a terrible day, but nothing really changed in the city. Finally, received a letter from my colleague Mina al-Halabi warning me about a written order from the leadership in Jericho. It declared that anyone who was not back in Jericho within such and such a time would be considered a deserter and would be hanged. Mina al-Halabi advised me to go back immediately and to take advantage of the sympathy of the Jericho commander since

we were directly under his jurisdiction in the army.

### Return to Jericho

And so, after discussing the matter with my family, especially my brother Khalil, the consensus was that I should leave Jerusalem immediately and return to my station in Jericho since the situation had not changed. Britain had not entered as the rumors went, although we could hear the distant artillery in the western side, especially from near the village of al-Nabi Samuel in the area of Jerusalem.

On Saturday afternoon, 8 December 1917, I took a walk with my brother Khalil

in the city since he was dressed in army clothes. I entered the Old City and in the Bab al-Silsileh neighborhood arranged with someone from the village of Silwan to rent me a donkey for the following morning. I gave him one quarter of a silver *majeedi* as down payment. Then we went to Gregor the Armenian who sold weapons across the Citadel in Jaffa Gate (Bab al-Khalil), where I bought some bullets for the revolver I kept. The stores in the city were closed and the atmosphere was tense. Officers roamed the streets, arresting the men they ran into and driving them away from Jerusalem towards Jericho.

It was a frightening day. With difficulty I got some presents for the commander of Jericho. Then we walked until we arrived at the alley next to the Casa Nova Hospice. There I was struck with paralyzing fear! For we had run into the *qulagasi* (commander) and Abdul Rahman Bey, who were feverishly going about the city accompanied by soldiers, surrounding deserters, and arresting them.

I was then wearing what was called *al-balareen*. It was the fashion in those days. It is similar to *al-'abah* (cloak). When I saw the *qulagasi*, I was struck by terror and said to myself that I was going to be arrested, especially since the date of my leave of absence had expired two months before. Therefore, I could not remove my hands from underneath the *balareen*. You will not believe me when I say that this *qulagasi*—a tyrant who oppressed the Arabs—raised his hand to his head and saluted me, saying, "Nasel keif awgulum," that is, "how are you, my son?" Then he continued on his way with Abdul Rahman Bey. I must say that it was a moment of



Khalil Jawhariyyeh in the uniform of a private in the Ottoman army during World War I.

mercy from God that he did not ask me about the permit according to which I was wandering in the streets of the city. This was because of his deep love for me. He did not forget the music and singing he heard from me during many evenings. As to Khalil, he was surprised and began to wonder why I was so upset. He did not know who the *qulagasi* of Jerusalem was or what he did to the residents during the war period. I began to tell him about him. ...

We continued walking till we reached the New Gate (al-Bab al-Jadid) and then from there to the house of my sister 'Afifeh. On this day my teacher Khalil al-Sakakini was arrested along with his Jewish neighbor Dr. Altrrafeen<sup>1</sup> and taken with a large number of deserters to Jericho. It was a fearful night in Jerusalem. The withdrawal of the Turkish and German armies had begun at night, and Turkish soldiers were looting whatever fell into their hands. Some of them attacked the houses in a horrendous way. The people were offering them food to get rid of their evil presence. We fed several Turkish soldiers. The sound of artillery hitting Jerusalem and its villages became louder. We heard the guns of Britain's artillery from Bab al-Waad. But who would have guessed then that that would be the last night for the Turks?

We stayed up and no one dared to open

<sup>1</sup> [Jawhariyyeh is referring to Dr. Alter Lavin, a Jewish physician and poet who hid in the Sakakini house from the Ottoman authorities during the war. He was arrested, along with Sakakini, and they were transported in chains to Damascus (and not to Jericho as Jawhariyyeh states) in 1917. Sakakini tells the story in detail in his memoirs, *Kadha Ana Ya Dunia*.  
*Manuscript Editors*]

doors or windows and the situation got worse until the dawn of Saturday, 8 December 1917. In the morning I went to the house of Hussein Effendi and stayed with him.<sup>2</sup>

### The Last Historic Meeting

When the general command of the Turkish army headed by Ali Fouad, in agreement with the Germans, concluded that the enemy were at the gates of Jerusalem and that forceful occupation of the city by the allied forces under the leadership of General Allenby was inescapable, a meeting was held. It was headed by his Excellency the Mutasarrif of Jerusalem Izzat Bey. I stayed with Hussein Effendi. This historical meeting in Jerusalem took place on Saturday evening 8 December 1917. It was attended by the highest level of government employees of all kinds along with the top Jerusalem police officials, including 'Abdul Qader al-'Alamy, Ahmad Sharaf, Ishaq al-'Asali, and other notables of the city of Jerusalem from all faiths. My teacher Dawud Da'das conducted the meeting. According to an official appointment from the English Patriarch Blythe, he had been responsible for the building throughout the war years, that is, since the closure of St. George's School in the middle of 1914. His Excellency the Mutasarrif spoke at length about the desperate conditions in the country and the need for surrendering Jerusalem at once. The following resolutions were taken:

<sup>2</sup> [There is some confusion regarding dates, for he moves from Saturday afternoon to Saturday dawn.  
*Manuscript Editors*]

1. To re-instate Hussein Bey al-Husseini to the position of mayor of Jerusalem, the office he had been removed from by Jamal Pasha al-Saffah in 1915.

2. To grant Hussein Bey al-Husseini an official authorization to surrender the city.

I kept a photocopy of this authorization in the Jawhariyyeh collection. It reads as follows:

*Due to the severity of the siege of the city and the suffering that this peaceful country has endured from your heavy guns; and for fear that these deadly bombs will hit the holy places, we are forced to hand over to you the city through Hussein Bey al-Husseini, the mayor of Jerusalem, hoping that you will protect Jerusalem the way we have protected it for more than five hundred years.<sup>3</sup>*

*Signed Izzat, the Mutasarref of Jerusalem.*

This letter was directed to the leadership of the British army. It was given to Hussein Bey al-Husseini. At the moment of parting and in the last moving moment, his Excellency the Mutasarrif ordered that his carriage (*hantour*) and its driver and the police commissioner Ishaq al-'Assali be made available to assist Hussein Bey in carrying out the surrender of the city in the morning.

The army force and the civil servants in the various departments—including the *Werko* and *Tapu* and official documents departments—started to withdraw at night

down the Jerusalem-Sheikh Jarrah-Nablus road, to depart with no return.

Thus, with this historical meeting, fate decreed that Jerusalem and its people should be rid of the injustice of the Turks. As the proverb says: "the house of the tyrant collapses, when the time is ripe."

### British Occupation

Sunday, 9 December 1917 dawned on Jerusalem to find it suddenly in the hands of the English and their allies. In this happy hour marking the end of Ottoman rule with all its tyranny and injustice—especially during the last four years between 1914-1917—we breathed a sigh of relief. We thanked the Almighty for his blessing. We did not realize then that this damned occupation would be a curse, not a blessing, for our dear homeland....

Despite this, I remember this day to have been a very happy one for the people. You could see them dancing for joy in the streets, congratulating each other on this happy occasion. In particular, I noticed that many of the Arab young men, both Muslim and Christian, the majority of whom were conscripted for the Turkish army in Jerusalem, had changed their army uniforms into civilian clothes in a funny way for fear that the occupying British army would arrest them and consider them prisoners of war. So you would see a man wearing army trousers, but with a pair of *qubqab* (clogs) on his feet; and wearing the jacket that he used to wear above the *qumbaz* (robe), but on his head an old *tarboush* (fez). Others were wearing the *qumbaz* and a *kalik* on their heads because they did not have a *tarboush*, and so on.

You could see some people cutting down

<sup>3</sup> [The Turks ruled Jerusalem for four hundred lunar years, which is the equivalent of 414 *hijri*. *Manuscript Editors*]

the Turkish telephone lines in the streets and taking them to their homes. Others were looting mules or donkeys or pull-carts abandoned by the Turks and eagerly driving them away to sell. It is worth mentioning that the British army had posted itself quickly throughout the city and its streets, even placing soldiers in some of the old Turkish departments such as the Post Office. Moreover, they started to install new telephone lines in place of the old ones using their motor cars, the so-called "box cars," which we saw for the first time. They were fast and small, and such novel sights amazed us.

As for me, as God is my witness, I was dancing in the streets with my friends, and we drank toasts for Britain and the occupation. Later I developed a fever and had to stay in bed for three days because of the intensity of joy and the ecstasy of victory and from the excess of drinking on the occasion of the occupation.

Early the next morning I went with my brother Khalil and some friends to the Sheikh Badr neighborhood at the very site where the city had been handed over to the British by Mr. Hussein Effendi al-Husseini, the mayor of Jerusalem. There in Romema we noticed how the Jews were befriending the British army. You could see the army on its way to the city surrounded by young Jewish women on both sides of the road, keeping company with the soldiers, talking to them in English with cheerful faces, and welcoming them with **excessive warmth** into the city.

After the Balfour declaration with its cursed promise, we remembered this warm welcome from them. Little did we know that with this occupation the Zionist dreams would be fulfilled. It was a shameful trick on the Arabs that ended our

existence and the future of our children and grandchildren, and we lost our most valuable thing—our dear homeland, alas.

On this day, along with my brother Khalil, my mother, and my brother Fakhri I was a guest at my sister 'Afifeh's in the house known as the house of Reverend Yousef, which is located on the west side of St. Julian street near the YMCA. The neighbors were Yousef Qurt and his family; Mina Butouli and his family; Um Hanna Zakhareya, the wife of the late Ismail Zachareya, and her daughter Fareda; the Mukmar family; and others. I remember that the Reverend's family was from Jaffa and lived with us in that house. The men in the family were then deserters from the Ottoman army.

On that day I remember that all the Christian denominations rang their church bells in celebration of this happy occasion and held prayers. After the official handing over of Jerusalem by Hussein Bey al-Husseini, an historic photograph was published by the American Colony in Jerusalem, which I keep in the Jawhariyya



Mayor of Jerusalem Hussein Bey al-Husseini surrenders Jerusalem to the British, 9 December 1917.

collection. It shows Hussein Bey, the mayor of Jerusalem; Tawfiq Muhammad Saleh al-Husseini; Ahmad Sharaf, police commissioner of Beyada; Haj 'Abdul Qader al-'Alami, police commissioner of Sawari; Shams al-Dein, policeman; Amin Tahboub, policeman; Jawad Bey ben Ismail Bey al-Husseini, wearing shorts; and Burhan, son of the late Taher Bey al-Husseini

Carrying the white surrender flag behind Hussein Bey was the driver of Jamal Pasha, named Salim. From Lebanon, he was married to the sister of Iskandar and Hanna al-Lahham. Next to him was Hanna al-Lahham.

The other team from the British army consisted of only two people. I should mention that I was the one who handed the white surrender flag to the driver Salim after taking it from his mother's car.

### Our Return Home

The new situation put our minds at ease and things improved for us. We had got rid of the Turks and, thank God, we were free from army service. So I returned with my brothers Khalil and Fakhri and my mother to our father's house and our birthplace, the Jawhariyyeh home in al-Sa'diyyeh neighborhood inside Jerusalem's walls. During the war mother and Fakhri had resided in the home of sister 'Afifeh in the Reverend Yousef building. It belonged to the Awqaf of the Orthodox patriarchy and is located on St. Julian Street near the YMCA building. This house included numerous members of the Arab Greek Orthodox Church in Jerusalem including Yousef Qurt and his family; my sister 'Afifeh and her family; the widow of Issa Zacharia, Um Hanna, and her daughter Miss Fareda; Mina Bestouli and his family; the Qu 'jar family; and others.

We returned and cleaned and tidied up the house in preparation for the Christmas of 1917. Truthfully, it was a joyous holiday for all our family because the British had come and the Arab people were rid of the nightmare of the tyrant Turks. We all had great hope for a better future, especially after what we had suffered from war, famine, and disease, in particular, Typhus, which had spread all over the country. Thank God for saving our youth from the damned army service.

It is worth mentioning in this context that from the strategic roof of the Jawhariyyeh house we could see the bloody battles still taking place between the British army and the Germans and Turks on the Mount of Olives and the land of al-Summar, which is on a level with our house on the eastern side. We often felt apprehension about these battles, dreading the return of the Turks, God forbid. But they were finally defeated. Then our hearts were peaceful, and we said, "go without return."

### General Allenby's Entrance

General Allenby entered Jerusalem with a great victory celebration, a celebration that marked the official conquest of Jerusalem. This was on Sunday, 18 December 1917, eight days after Jerusalem had been surrendered in Mahallat al-Sheikh Badr. I still remember that great day. He entered from the Jaffa Gate side. I still keep some historical photographs in the Jawhariyyeh collection, and in them appear some of the great personalities of Jerusalem. There was another celebration at his Christmas visit, at which he was ceremonially received at Bab al-Qal'a inside the wall. It is worth mentioning that when General Allenby read his famous declaration referring, unfortunately, to "the end now of the Crusades," Muslim leaders

met and some of them withdrew from the celebration. They were specially invited by the occupation forces as leaders and notables of the people in the city of Jerusalem.

### **Musliman, thank God**

During the Ottoman rule we the sons of Jerusalem of our different denominations lived like a family, with no difference between a Muslim and a Christian. But when the British occupied Jerusalem, as is usually the policy of the colonizer, they tried to muddy the clear waters, especially between Muslims and Christians. It was not enough that they issued the cursed Balfour declaration, which was the reason for the loss of our homeland. Immediately after the occupation, they also forbade Muslims from entering the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and Christians from entering the Haram al-Sharif. In the Jawhariyyeh collection I keep some photographs of the "Out of Bounds" signs that they posted on the entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

One Sunday morning in April, as I remember, I was with some friends from the Muslim community of Jerusalem: Dawud al-Fityani, Tahsin al-Khalidi, Mahmoud 'Aziz al-Khalidi, Saleh al-Dunf al-Ansari, Fakhri al-Nashashibi, Amin Tahboub, Munir Darwish, Nu 'man 'Aquel, and Muhammad al-Zardaqa, and others.

Each of us had a glass of an Italian drink known as "Vermuth Bianco." We had another glass in the Greek Arsheedi Bar. And since it was a warm, sunny day, we bought green almonds and planned a picnic to the outside court of the Dome.

Standing at one of the gates of the Haram al-Sharif, we saw troops positioned at each of its main gates. The forces consisted of the Muslim Indian army, who are fanatic

about their religion. Everyone who wanted to enter was asked, "Musliman?" If he was Muslim, he would be allowed in, but otherwise was turned away. Each of us after being asked said Muslim and entered. When my turn came and the Indian soldier asked me, "Musliman?" I said, "Thank God, Musliman." It happened that behind me was Abu 'Abdul Dallal, who wore a turban. Being a loyal friend of my late father, when he heard me, he confirmed what I said at the top of his lungs: "I swear to God, Musliman." Imagine, dear reader, the idea of Wasef ben Girgis Jawhariyyeh being a Muslim. Thus, luckily, after pointing to me with his hand and saying some Indian words, the Indian soldier let me in through the Haram gate.

When the turn came of our fun-loving friend al-Zardaqa, I turned to the soldier and told him, "this is a Jew and not a Musliman." And since al-Zardaqa's blond hair and blue eyes made him look like a Jew, the Indian believed me and prevented him from entering, raising his bayoneted gun in his face.

Al-Zardaqa became red with anger while everyone else was laughing. Then he started yelling at the top of his voice: "What, my name is Muhammad, and I'm prevented from entering the Haram, while you, Wasif, are treated like a graduate of al-Azhar and a pious Muslim?!" He went on and on till we almost passed out from laughing. When al-Zardaqa tried entering through another gate, the Indian soldier used his whistle to alert his companions not to let him in. We threw ourselves on the green grass in the court of the Haram eating green almonds with al-Zardaqa outside thundering against Wasif. This little drama was very funny and has been talked about by the people of Jerusalem until this day.