

JERUSALEM
NEIGHBORHOODS

Jerusalem, We Are Here

Reflections on the Collaborative Construction of a Living Archive and Its Offshoots

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Abstract

The interactive documentary *Jerusalem, We Are Here* (JWRH) (2016) digitally reinscribes Palestinians into the Jerusalem neighborhoods from which they were expelled in 1948. The project was created by filmmaker and film theorist Dorit Naaman in close collaboration with Palestinian participants and other contributors. Two of Naaman's closest collaborators are Marina Parisinou who started as a participant, and eventually also became an associate producer of the project; and Mona Hajjar Halaby, an amateur social historian of Palestine, who does the English narration and was the inspiration behind the map portion, having kept track of Jerusalemites' houses for years.

Following the release of JWRH, the three women continued to work closely together to expand and disseminate the project. Furthermore, they leveraged the synergy they had developed, as well as the power of the internet, to inspire and support each other in the creation of a number of offshoot projects about Palestine, focused mostly on Jerusalem. In this conversation, they take stock of their collaboration, the paths that led them to their current projects, what they have learned in the process and their plans for the future. The project is freely available online at jerusalemwearehere.com

Keywords

Jerusalem; Qatamon; 1948 War; British Mandate; interactive documentary; oral history; map-counter-map; online platforms; collaboration; living archive.



Figure 1. Screening *Jerusalem, We Are Here* in Jerusalem, July 2018. From left: Anwar Ben Badis, Marina Parisinou, and Dorit Naaman.

Jerusalem, We Are Here (JWRH) is an interactive documentary that digitally brings Palestinians back to the Jerusalem neighborhoods from which they were expelled in 1948.¹ Focusing primarily on the neighborhood of Qatamon, Palestinian participants and their descendants probed their families' past and engaged with the painful present. The short films thus produced were projected on their homes and can be encountered in a virtual "walk" of the neighborhood. The project includes an online map where each house that existed before 1948 has a live link through which information can be submitted by both researchers and the community. JWRH was released in 2016. It has since been screened in dozens of festivals, museums, cinematheques, and universities, and has received two awards.

The project was created by documentary filmmaker and film theorist Dorit Naaman. In September 2021, Naaman had a conversation on Zoom with two of her key collaborators: Mona Hajjar Halaby,² the English narrator and the inspiration behind the map section of the project, and Marina Parisinou, one of the project's participants and associate producer.³ In the past seven years, the three women have worked closely together to produce, expand, disseminate and promote the project.

This essay is based on the transcript of that conversation in which the three collaborators discussed the process of creating JWRH, as well as a number of offshoot projects that emerged as a result of their meeting one another. All of these projects disseminate knowledge about Palestinian Jerusalem through websites, blogs, social

media, and Zoom meetings. They use photographs and documents to reach multiple audiences, both within and beyond academia, and engage multiple generations in conversations. The projects have revived (albeit online) the vibrant community of Palestinian Jerusalemites and their descendants. In concluding the conversation, Naaman, Halaby, and Parisinou discussed their future projects.

Note: Before reading the conversation, we encourage you to experience *Jerusalem, We Are Here*; it is freely available online at jerusalemwearehere.com. Upon entering, you will find yourself inside the Regent Cinema. You will then exit, meet your guides, and select one of the three tours. The guides (Mona Hajjar Halaby in English or Anwar Ben Badis in Arabic) will lead you on a virtual “walk” (proceed by clicking forward) through the neighborhood streets. The stops of the tours are the participants’ houses; at each one you can view a short video and listen to audio. You can navigate to the other part of the project, the map, at any point, by clicking the green map marker labeled “Remapping Jerusalem.” The “?” at the top right-hand corner provides access to the supplemental information website which hosts a blog and other resources about the project (online at info.jerusalemwearehere.com).



Figure 2. Presenting *Jerusalem, We Are Here* at Dar al-Kalima University, Bethlehem, July 2017. From left: Mona Halaby (on screen), Dorit Naaman, Lubna Taha (translator and organizer of the event), and Marina Parisinou.

Coming Together

We began our conversation by remembering how the three of us met.

MARINA. In the summer of 2012, I received an email from my aunt Cynthia Shtakleff in New York, who was forwarding an email from a lady called Mona Halaby who, in her turn, was forwarding an email from a project that was about to begin regarding Qatamon, a neighborhood in what today is known as West Jerusalem. The project was looking to recruit old residents of Qatamon or their descendants as participants.

I jumped at the opportunity and responded immediately to the project, explaining that my mother grew up in Qatamon. I had always been interested in family history, had in fact been collecting stories from a young age, and I was excited to participate. Out of courtesy, I copied this lady who forwarded the email, Mona Halaby.

Within an hour, Mona replied telling me how glad she was I copied her because she lived in Berkeley, just across the bay from my home base in San Francisco. The two of us started a correspondence and eventually I visited Mona at her home. I discovered that we were kindred spirits: We were both passionate about family history, particularly as seen through old documents and photographs. We became fast friends.

After some preliminaries, the project disappeared until the summer of 2013. They explained that they had had some issues and now were ready to resume. In the fall, we began a series of Skype calls and that was the first time I met Dorit with whom I had an immediate rapport. It was not clear to me where this project was going; their plans at the time were very different from what it ended up being. But I felt comfortable and was prepared to go along for the ride, however it turned out.

DORIT. Of course, I am the lead of the project that disappeared!

I secured the funding from a Research-Creation Grant by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada, which is something like the National Endowment for the Humanities in the United States.

We had started with a team in Canada, with two Palestinians and myself, but we had many changes, as often happens, in terms of who was involved in the project and what their roles were. The initial idea was to work in Qatamon with the Palestinian rightful owners of the houses, that is, the people who were expelled during 1948 and had not been allowed to return. We planned to work with the families or their descendants and make short films. Additionally, we thought we would also work with the Israeli families that had lived there since 1948, to make short films with them, too.

What I had envisioned was projecting the films on the houses in a nightly installation over a period of time, aiming to complicate the story of the neighborhood and the houses, not only in terms of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict or impasse – this binary of “either-or” – but also in terms of some of the internal “others” of Zionism, specifically ultra-Orthodox Jews and Middle Eastern Jews who were in a way second- and third-class citizens, especially in the early years of Israel’s statehood.

But as processes tend to go, the project changed quite radically. In 2013, I went to Jerusalem on sabbatical. I had already made contact with Zochrot⁴ – which is the only

Israeli non-profit organization that calls for the return of the 1948 Palestinian refugees and for a bi-national state – and they gave me Mona’s name. She had some help from them when she organized a vigil in Jerusalem in 2008 on the sixtieth anniversary of the Nakba. We contacted Mona who offered to connect us with people. As she was not from Qatamon herself, she was somewhat reticent about being involved herself, which of course we respected.

By this time, it became clear that for various reasons, including lack of access, the Palestinian collaborators in Canada could not continue on the project. In Jerusalem, I met Anwar Ben Badis, Muna Dajani, Nahla Assali and others, and started new collaborations that eventually led to the design of the interactive documentary *Jerusalem, We Are Here*.



Figure 3. Testing a collage for the short video on the Kassotis house: Anna Kassotou in front of her Jerusalem home, August 1986. See online at jerusalemwearehere.com/#!/tours/tour-3/way-kassotis

In total, I worked with two dozen families and individuals at varying levels of involvement, forming organic collaborations, some with people I never met face-to-face. The project includes fifteen short films and a dozen audio files, all embedded into the locations they reference.

Marina and I had a series of Skype meetings and workshops. Marina took photos and brought in poetry, and we would have conversations in which she shared some photographs and stories of her family. Based on that, I started editing a video of a series of images that superimposed her mother in front of the house in its current iteration. In the summer of 2014, as Marina was preparing for her annual trip to Cyprus, she suggested she come to Jerusalem to meet me, which would also give her the opportunity to explore.

MARINA. During our Skype calls with Dorit, I kept urging her to get in touch with Mona. I had had enough contact with Mona to know that the material she possessed and the extent of her knowledge of the place and the people would be an enormous contribution to the project.

MONA. In 2013, Dorit invited me to help with the project. Because I was not from

Qatamon, and I was also dealing with my husband David's diagnosis of cancer, I initially declined. After David died in March 2014, I joined the project.



Figure 4. The Muna house on the JWRH map.

DORIT. Mona and I met for the first time on Skype (Zoom did not yet exist). We spoke for a couple of hours and I remember thinking, “This woman is a walking archive! We have to make something so that her knowledge can be shared.” It really was one of those moments in which I knew – not in my head but in the pit of my stomach – that Mona had a treasure. The amount of work she had done by scanning thousands of photographs, telling people's stories and identifying houses was just incredible. That was the beginning of our online map.

MONA. When I was contacted again by Dorit, I was willing to help but with some time restrictions. I also knew that Dorit was an Israeli woman, but I had no idea about her politics. I remember asking her if she could share some of her writing, and I shared some of mine. I thought that rather than waste time talking politics, it would be best to read each other's work. When I did, I was very



Figure 5. Filming in Jerusalem, July 2015. From left: Anwar Ben Badis, Dorit Naaman, and Mona Halaby at St. Simeon monastery, Qatamon.



Figure 6. Filming in Jerusalem, July 2015. From left: Mona Halaby, Dorit and Lily Naaman, and Marina Parisinou at the Regent Cinema, German Colony.

much taken by her work, her expertise and her integrity. I admired her politics and her honesty in tackling the issues as an Israeli Jew and as an academic. I was relieved and pleased to work with her. In 2015, I joined Dorit and Marina in Jerusalem where we did the walkthrough and narration of Qatamon.

Collaboration and Offshoots

From how we met, the conversation veered to how our collaboration on JWRH resulted in molding the project and also in helping each other spawn a number of individual or collaborative projects. These projects are, in effect, the children of JWRH.

MONA. One day in the spring of 2014, I was discussing with Marina my collection of digitized photographs of Palestine and what to do with it. I had thought of perhaps creating a book of photo essays, grouping photographs together based on certain themes or geographic areas, and accompanying each group with an essay.

In talking with Marina it became clear that, firstly, it would be very expensive to have such a book published and, secondly, not many people could afford to buy it and so it would not have as much visibility as an online presence would. Marina suggested I create a Facebook community page. As I did not have the know-how, she set it up for me and I started to post my photos. I called it “British Mandate Jerusalemites Photo Library” (BMJ).⁵

At first, I would post one picture at a time with just a few words. My goal was to share photos and I had hoped that doing so would also help me in writing my book about my mother’s life, providing me with more information, such as identification of people and places.

Little did I know that BMJ would have a life of its own! It has become a place where Palestinians in the diaspora meet and connect, and children of the Nakba survivors find each other. It has grown to be much bigger than I had expected, and I am no longer writing one or two lines with a single photo. I write a longer piece about, say, a particular family, with a group of photos, and my posts are very well received. I am happy that BMJ is providing a community for the Palestinians in the diaspora.

MARINA. Both the start of JWRH and Mona’s BMJ page show how, even though the plans you have for a project may not necessarily work out as intended, they still serve as the means to get you started on the journey. The journey then follows a path of its own and may lead you to an entirely different place from where you were originally headed. It can potentially be an even better place, or simply different but still very valuable.

DORIT. So true! I often tell my students, and also when I present JWRH, that I started with a very different idea for an output. I tell them not to be hung up on creating a book, a documentary or a website: Think about the questions you want to ask, what your passion is and who your audience is. When you consider these factors, the proper medium will emerge.

Mona’s page has 22,000 fans, which is incredible. It attests to the power of the

photograph to assert things that verbal narratives cannot, or to supplement the verbal narratives. It asserts: *Yes, we were there. Yes, we had a beautiful life.* It is not just about the loss, it is also about all the picnics and all the weddings and the baby moments and the family events that I find so beautiful.

When I met Marina she was busy working on the photographs of her father who was a wonderful amateur photographer. She had a Facebook page for his photographs but somehow the work on JWRH caused her work to shift and that is when she started her blog, “My Palestinian Story.”

MARINA. I have been interested in family history from early on. My father (who was Cypriot) had a wonderful collection of color slides he had taken in Cyprus and on his trips abroad, in the 1950s–1970s. As I was going through family documents one summer, I started organizing them and the following year I took a scanner to Cyprus and spent the entire summer digitizing them. As my father at the time was gradually being lost to dementia, I wanted to capture his memories while I could.

Then a friend suggested that I post them on Facebook so I started a page that became fairly popular (“Jules Parisinos’s Photo Library”). In fact, that is the page I showed Mona when we discussed her photo collection, suggesting she do something along similar lines. At the time, I was thinking of perhaps rephotographing my father’s Cyprus scenes, that is, scout out the places where he had taken them, shoot the same frame, and then publish the before-and-afters in a book. I had already started doing some of the rephotographing.

But that was a project on which I was working by myself. Then I found myself in the JWRH project, working with other people. It was a “real” project in the sense that it had funding, a team, and someone driving it. It was easy to get pulled into that.

In any case, the Palestinian side of my family has always interested me more. There is something about lost homes that has more pull rather than a place in which someone is fairly comfortably settled. Having met Dorit and Mona – kindred spirits with diverse pools of knowledge which they were happy to share – I got drawn into JWRH and also started my blog, “MyPalestinianStory.com” in May 2015. (My father’s slides project has been put on the back burner for now.)

DORIT. It is interesting to see how our roles and projects have changed through our interactions. The initial design of JWRH was for me to work with Israelis because I am an Israeli filmmaker, and for a Palestinian filmmaker to work with Palestinian families, and of course it would have been a very different project. But as I already mentioned, the Palestinian filmmaker was no longer on the team when I arrived in Jerusalem for a year. And I had already established relationships with people, so it made sense to work directly with them – it felt very natural and organic to do so.

Through my work with all the participants, I also realized that this project could not take place physically in Jerusalem. We could not project on houses when Palestinians had so little access to Jerusalem. It would have to be online. It would have to be available to all Palestinians, wherever they may be, without having to get permits or pass checkpoints or feel like they have to justify their right to be in the space or in front of their houses or knocking on the door, trying to get in.



Figure 7. Marina Parisinou and Ellie Savvides (née Louisidis) in Jerusalem, July 2014.

That was the essence of the process for me – a slow process. I was very fortunate in that the funding structure of my grant was flexible and I could extend the timeline to completion, to allow the relationships to make the project what it is. Which brings to mind a concept I read about: “Moving at the speed of trust.”

MONA. It is so true that collaborating with people you respect and admire makes for a different combustion, when we put all of our energies together. At first, I felt I had nothing really to offer. I am not an academic. I have done everything at a grassroots level. A little map I had created on Google Maps, with pins on the houses, was not an academic piece of work; it was just for my own benefit.

When I first talked with Dorit, I remember her saying that it would be great to have a website for the map, so that it would be separate from the interactive documentary, not part of JWRH. I was very grateful that she was willing to create a more sophisticated platform for my rudimentary map. Then she decided to incorporate it into JWRH and make it interactive so that people could provide more information, increase the number of houses identified and so on. It is interesting how that had a life of its own, too.

DORIT. When I met Mona and Marina individually, I knew that I had so much to learn from both. Not only do we all have a passion for history and for details and for animating archives, but also I do not think that somebody must have a degree in order to be an expert.



Figure 8. Ellie Savvides (née Louisidis), Dorit Naaman, and Marina Parisinou at the screening at the Regent, Jerusalem, July 2018.

Mona called it combustion. I think of it as a soup in which we each are a couple of ingredients, we bring a set of skills and then it can only become what it is because we have all contributed to it.

In hindsight, I think the bigger legacy of JWRH is the map.

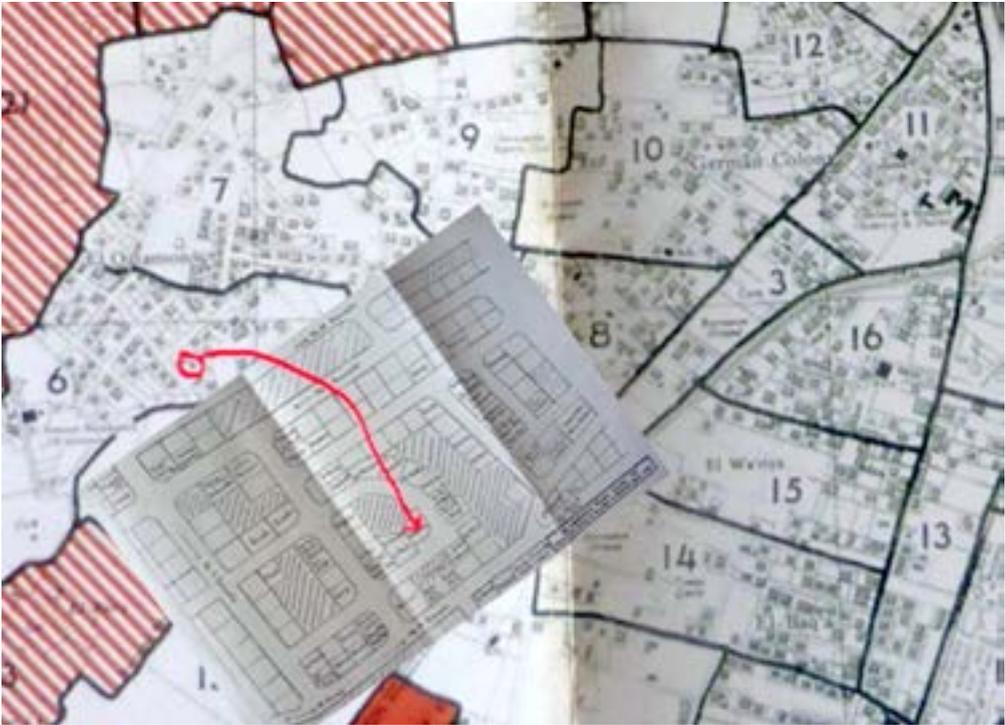


Figure 9. Hala Sakakini’s map, on top of a British Mandate map.

I came to the project as a documentary filmmaker, very much invested in participatory documentary practices and working with families and descendants to make short films, and creating a platform to show those films. I knew from the beginning that there were a few constants: the films would not be oral history, they would not be the whole story of the family, and they would not be just the story of the Nakba. They would be a nugget, each one like a poem. Some are more documentary, some are more experimental or lyrical or animation. I love the films and I love that you can go for a “walk” and see those films and get all that affect, all the feelings, the emotions that come up from the films.

But after working with Mona, the map has been developed in a way that every house that existed before 1948 is a live link through which to add information, thus mapping from the ground up. When I started working with Helios Design Labs,⁶ the design and technology company that built the platform, we spent the largest part of our time figuring out the relationship between the walks and the map. It was tricky – not technically, as there were many ways to do that, but conceptually.

I love maps, I can pore over a map for hours, and I know both Mona and Marina love maps. But a lot of people are confused when they have a bird's-eye view. The one thing that is often lost is an emotional connection. I wanted viewers to stay with the stories of the participants, not to lose the tours and the films.



Figure 10. An abstracted map during production.



Figure 11. The final map layout. Each red house has information/identification and each dark grey house existed before 1948.

In the end, we decided on two tracks: one with the walking tours, which is at street level and the viewer can “walk” by clicking forward, and one with the map, which allows the bird’s-eye view of the area with all the houses. The two tracks are linked, just a click away from wherever you are, in a way that is not confusing.



Figure 12. A stop on the JWRH walking tour. You can watch a video, read information, continue walking, or switch to the map.

This brings me to another challenge that we have faced in JWRH. Marina created our protocol for how to handle information on the map. Because when we are dealing with people’s memories – it has been more than seventy years since the Nakba – to put it in Marina’s words from her JWRH video: “Memory is fickle.”

So how do we handle oral – or even written – history when we have multiple accounts? I am not talking about other parties’ stories. Obviously, there is an Israeli story about 1948 in Jerusalem; there is a Palestinian story, a Jordanian story. I am talking about the Palestinians who remember the Semiramis bombing being in February, or who remember family so-and-so lived here and insist on it when we have information that leads us to believe somebody else lived there.

MARINA. In my “previous life,” I was a database manager. As such, I see the map as a live database and I recognize that data is useful, can actually become information, only if it is properly taken care of. Simply putting data out there does not have much value until you have developed a way of managing it correctly, which is why I suggested the protocols that I did.

To begin with, we add our initials on the entries each of us has worked on. That enables communication among us when working on the same entries. If I want to add information on a house, I can see that, say, it was Mona who initially created the entry,

so I can discuss it with her and try and resolve issues. Inadvertently, the initials have also served as a means for third parties researching a particular building to get in touch with whoever among us worked on that entry. We also make an effort to document our sources as much as possible.

The “Change Log” is also an important part of our data-entry standards. There can be two (or more) conflicting versions of who lived in a particular place. Perhaps I wrote about the one and then Mona comes and says, “No, no, I found out that this other person lived there.” It does not mean that either of us is correct, nor that whoever comes last is correct. I wanted to make sure that we do not lose any of the information that we find out about a place. Thus, before superseding the old data with the new, we move the old data to the bottom of the entry under a “Change Log” where the history of the changes can be preserved. It is about data integrity.

DORIT. I think it is so important because I am not trained as a historian either and our medium is not a history book. I think that with Marina’s “Change Log” protocol we found a way to respect people’s memories with integrity as well as the fact that it is OK not to choose who is right.

I remember when I met Michel Moushabek who was born in Beirut in 1955. He told me that the house of his grandparents and his father was near the Semiramis, and I found it on the map Hala Sakakini had drawn from memory in 1951, thinking that I knew which one it was. So I went to the Israeli archives to look for documentation for all our participants’ houses, which sometimes I found but most often not. For the Moushabek house, we did find documentation but it showed a different owner, which confused me. That was before Mona came on the project.



Figure 13. Finding the Moushabek house with the help of a map drawn by Hala Sakakini.

Michel suggested we talk to his uncle Jamil Toubbeh who lives in Arizona. Jamil was in his eighties at the time and his memory was fantastic. He was not comfortable Skyping, but he would send me detailed emails. I asked him to describe where the Moushabek house was located. He wrote: “Take the number 4 bus, all the way to the last stop” (thankfully the 1940s’ bus route and terminal were marked on Hala

Sakakini's map). "You get off the bus, you turn around and go to the corner, you go up, and three houses on the left is the house" – which was the house marked Moushabek on the map. Then Mona came into the picture and explained that the Moushabeks were renters. Until then, it had not even occurred to me that naturally there must have been renters in the neighborhood. They may not have had a legal claim to the house, but they still lived in the houses where they were born, sometimes for many years. So on our map, it is marked as the Moushabek house even though legally it was owned by somebody else.

MARINA. Because we are not tracking legal ownership, we are tracking lives and homes.

DORIT. When we screened the project in Bethlehem, one of the questions I was asked as an Israeli was, "Aren't you afraid that this will be used in legal claims for the properties?" My answer was and still is: I am not afraid. I think that we cannot have a just and lasting solution to this conflict until we handle the loss of property in 1948 as a collective right and as an individual right.

We are certainly mapping the Palestinian history. We are not mapping what happened afterwards, although in JWRH there is one video that tries to explain to some degree the kind of legal manipulation that Israel did in order to sell the houses to Israelis.

MONA. Another project that is an outgrowth of our connection is the Palestine Ethnographic Society (PES). Marina and I have created a new venue for Palestinian oral histories. It started in January 2018 as a modest setup in my Berkeley living room, with a dozen people, an audio recorder, and lots of cookies and cakes to enjoy together.

With COVID-19, we switched to Zoom, and the PES has become international. We are now able to access people from the Nakba generation but also younger people who have memories from their family stories. They are from the Middle East, Europe, and all over the world. I feel that it is an important archive that Marina and I are building, and I do not think it would have been created had those other projects not happened – as if they were leading us to this.

MARINA. Again, the PES is an example of a project that started with some limited scope in mind but became something bigger. I remember Mona inviting me over to float the idea: she wanted the younger members of her family (David's side of the family, who were here in the San Francisco Bay area) to know more about what life in Palestine was like.

In the beginning, some of the sessions did not flow so well. We were not sure what to do. We did not want to talk politics but rather about life in Palestine pre-Nakba. We thought we would pick one topic at a time – schools or celebrations – but we did not have the members who had those memories. We would read from books; I read a little bit from my blog when I was writing about my great-uncle's Regent Cinema in Jerusalem's German Colony.

Then somehow, Mona invited an elderly Palestinian she had met to come and talk

to us. That became the established format for conducting these monthly meetings: Invite a guest, have them tell us their story and show us their photographs, ask them questions. With that, new blood came in because with every guest, their family would come along, too, and some of them remained as part of the group.

MONA. That's right! We started with those topics and even though Marina and I had not grown up in Palestine, we knew a lot more about Palestine than our initial members.

There are other forums where Palestinian oral histories have been recorded, websites like *Palestine Remembered*. So we have not really pioneered anything with the PES. But as a retired educator, I wanted to teach the younger generations about the Palestinians, our rich history, culture, and society.

However, right now the biggest benefit of this group is in reviving Palestine for the older generation of Palestinians in the diaspora. It is having a sort of therapeutic effect, as they tell stories about their neighborhoods, their schools, their friends, their society, as well as the beginning of the end for them: the King David Hotel and Semiramis Hotel bombings, all those memories of the approaching Nakba.

It is wonderful that we are serving the Palestinian octogenarians and older generations, giving them a platform. Marina remarked how several of our guest speakers are intimidated by the whole process because being invited to share their story on the PES is considered a "big deal."

MARINA. It has become an abstraction of their community in Palestine.

DORIT. I would dare to say it is not an abstraction; it is just that the meeting place is remote. It is important because one of the tragedies of war is that people disperse and lose contact.

What the internet has enabled in various ways is for people to come together. Usually when you do community-based work, you come to the community and work with it. But, as I said from the beginning of JWRH, the community is not in one place.

Michel Moushabek, whom I met years before JWRH, introduced me to Jacob Nammar; Umar al-Ghubari introduced me to Mona, and so on. I met Muna Dajani in a conference. I just talked to her in the ladies' room. Then some of the people in the project met each other and became part of a community. Certainly, the PES is a community, both online and offline. That's the gift – a real gift.

Mona mentioned the Semiramis. Another offshoot is Marina's new project about the Semiramis.

MARINA. The Semiramis was a small neighborhood hotel in Qatamon, two doors down from my grandfather's house. It was always mentioned in family stories and I grew up with the story of how it was blown up by the Haganah in early January 1948. I remember my grandmother telling me about it. On the seventieth anniversary of that explosion, I wrote a blog post with most of the information coming from the book, *O Jerusalem!*, written by two journalists, an American and a Frenchman. My mother had given it to me when I was younger, probably when I had started pestering her with questions, once I grew past the stage of just buying into the family story and wanted to know more.

It was the only source I had found about the Semiramis in English. Anything else I had found online was based on *O Jerusalem!*. I even found translations of it in other languages. So I wrote the blog post and mentioned the fact that one of the victims was the Spanish vice-consul, Manuel Allendesalazar (aka Manolo).

Soon after publishing it, a comment was posted by Alvaro Gomez Pidal whose grandmother was a sister of the vice-consul, of Manolo. He was very excited to have found my blog because he had just started researching his great-uncle's death.

We exchanged a couple of emails at the time, in 2018. Then in May 2020, as we were all sheltering in place due to COVID-19, Alvaro emailed me a copy of a magazine published in Barcelona in 1949, with a four-page report on the Semiramis explosion, written by Juan Ramón Masoliver, a Spanish journalist. Masoliver had actually shared a room with Manolo in the Semiramis for a couple of months, but left Jerusalem in early December 1947. A month later he learned that the hotel where he had stayed for so long had been blown up and his friend had been killed.

I suppose he started researching the incident and in July 1949 wrote this long report. When I read it with my intermediate Spanish, I realized that it overturned many of the “facts” that *O Jerusalem!* had presented. And that set me on a path of research.

I started digging and then Mona put me in touch with Nadia Aboussouan, who is a cousin of Sami Aboussouan, one of the survivors of the Semiramis. Nadia provided me with a wealth of information and a few months later sent me the diary that Sami had written only a few months after the event, and published later that year in Lebanon. Upon seeing it, I recognized it as the basis for Masoliver's article. There were many similarities and certain parts were identical.

From that point on, I continued to dig deeper. My initial thought was to write a revised blog post. As the information accumulated, it became clear that even a multi-part post would not be enough.

In the meantime, I was also contacted by a young Palestinian woman who was related to another victim and who had a story to tell about him. Additionally, I became aware that the grandson of Rauf Lorenzo, the manager of the hotel, had been following me on Facebook all along, having discovered my blog with the initial Semiramis post. I connected with him and his mother, and they are excited to work with me.

Various people, like Mona and Nadia, suggested I write a book. I toyed with the idea. Of course, it was intimidating. I am not an



Figure 14. The Semiramis stop on the JWRH Red tour.

academic; I have never written a book. But I do believe that I can tell the story of the Semiramis more accurately and fully than it has been told so far. So I am now on my way to writing this book.

Lessons Learned

We then wondered what each of us has learned in the eight or so years of working together on JWRH and on our other projects – not so much in terms of facts as important realizations and insights gained.

MONA. I am acutely aware that a lot of the work that I have been doing is a race against time, because I want to preserve the memories of the Palestinian people who have known Palestine pre-1948. We do of course have access to books written about that historical period, but having these primary sources is important, even though we cannot always rely on memory. Nevertheless, it is important to record their emotions about what happened. The photographs and interviews bring things to life.

As I see it, this is archival material as well as therapeutic material, because as people reflect on their lives, they come to terms with many issues that they had to experience. We are not psychologists – that is not our role – but I am noticing that when people tell their story, they are looking back and reflecting on the events of their lives. I am hoping this process gives them a sense of peace.

MARINA. To add to what Mona said, our work also provides validation for people's lives. Particularly under conditions where there are attempts at denial. There are still people who deny the existence of the Palestinians, which I think is absurd and is not really worth arguing with – in fact, I feel strongly that we should not dignify such arguments by engaging. But when people tell their own story and then they hear another person repeat a similar story, it gives them validation.

DORIT. That is so important to remember, especially when the experience of telling the story is painful. We are so concerned about triggering past trauma, but the retelling and hearing of other people's stories can also be affirming of who they are, where they belong to, or even an understanding of their own story.

I remember when Marina and I were together with Ellie Louisidis and her daughter Evi (in July 2014), heading towards the Louisidis building in Abdin circle, in Qatamon. Marina and Ellie were walking ahead, Evi and I were following behind, and she said to me: "Oh, my gosh, I'm looking at all these plants, like the rosemary and lavender that are blossoming. My grandfather tried to grow all these in Cyprus but they never did well. We would always tease him that he was a bad gardener and now I understand. He was just trying to recreate his Jerusalem garden in a climate and soil that were not suitable."

Understanding the story of a family better is validating, positive. We cannot always shy away fearing that it will be painful, because despite the pain, it also has merit in so many other ways.

MARINA. One of the things that strikes me is how time gets distorted, particularly when

it comes to traumatic events. For example, the story of the Semiramis is something that I grew up with. The way it was talked about, it was as if the Semiramis had always been there, part of the neighborhood. I was very surprised to discover through documents in the archives that the actual construction of the building finished in 1946. The hotel operated for barely a year, maybe just over. But in everyone's memory, the Semiramis bombing was such a momentous event that the physical place became sealed in time.

Similarly, the British Mandate lasted a relatively short time: about three decades, which is not long at all. But in those three decades all these people had lived big parts of their lives and so for them, it was an important period that got fixed in time.

DORIT. On the one hand, there is the phenomenon that some facts get cemented as momentous events (like the Semiramis bombing). But there are other things that completely disappear from narratives because of political agendas and contemporary reality. For me, one of the big discoveries was how integrated Palestinian/Arab and Jewish life was before the war.

Among the two dozen families I worked with, I learned of about half a dozen intermarriages between Muslims and Jews, Jews and Christians, or Christians and Muslims. I have not heard once about somebody being shunned from their family or having to convert, or being forced to choose one society to belong to.

It is also important not to just say that we all got along then, so we can all get along now. Perhaps we can get along as individuals, but structurally/politically, we cannot – or not yet. I am cognizant of what is happening currently in Canada as it reckons with the atrocities of the settler-colonial project and its effects on the Indigenous peoples in Canada. In the spirit of reconciliation, many settlers (that is, non-Indigenous people in Canada) feel remorse as they have learnt of abuses in residential schools through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2010–15), and the 2021 discoveries of over 9,000 remains of children buried in unmarked graves. But settlers often think that apologizing should be a sufficient condition to reconcile and move forward. Indigenous people and their allies recognize that in order for reconciliation to be meaningful, accountability, justice and, most importantly, political structural change, specifically treaty and land rights, have to be renegotiated. So I am always wary – or I do not want it to sound romantic – about this idea that people can live harmoniously together. In the case of pre-1948 Jerusalem, I think it is more like a lesson about possibility, but only under just political conditions.

That is the importance of history, which then brings me to an issue we have already touched upon. Marina talked about integrity and Mona talked about accessibility. There is a term people use right now in archival studies – the *living archive* – the idea that the archive should not be something that sits in a vault. Certainly documents should be preserved in the right kind of temperature and conditions. But when it is in a vault and you need gloves and permissions for access, it is not truly accessible, it becomes an artefact of history.

The living archive focuses on ways to make the artefacts part of the present, not

just part of the past. I did not know that term when we were working, but when I think about JWRH, I realize it certainly is a living archive. In some ways, it is also a counter archive, challenging official Israeli archival narratives about the Nakba, and all the erasure that Israel is officially very busy doing.

But it is also a living archive in another sense: It is experienced, for example, by my undergraduate student who was born in Toronto where her father immigrated to as a child. His own father was four in 1948. She sits with her grandfather in their living room in Toronto and they “walk” through JWRH and he starts telling her stories. This multi-generational exchange, the virtual “return,” are all a live experience. I love that. I did not imagine when we started the project that JWRH would not only be a historical archive but also a living one.

MONA. Another point is that some of our speakers on the PES had not shared much of their stories with their own children or their own family and now they are inviting their children to attend our sessions. It is a way of passing on those stories to the next generation.

Perhaps for some of the Palestinians who experienced the Nakba, it had felt too painful to talk about with their children. Perhaps others have done it, but in little bits and pieces. The PES brings it all together and that is another benefit that was unexpected.

DORIT. I heard that so many times. The disconnect because people left and did not talk to their children perhaps because the trauma was so intense. By the time the grandchildren came around, when they wanted to ask questions, some of their elders were no longer alive.

Michel Moushabek at first told me: “I have no story to tell. I’ve never been there, I don’t know if I can go there.” And I said: “But that’s the story! Or that is part of the story.”

I wonder if David was still alive, whether it would have affected the tone of Mona’s book. She told me many times that David was much more outwardly political and liked talking about the present.

MONA. Yes, his narrative would be obviously very different from mine. I was talking with my youngest son the other day about how for David the loss of Palestine was critical. In addition to that, a very important aspect was that his status in the Arab world changed after the loss of Palestine. They lived in Jordan, had very little money and felt the shame and humiliation; they knew they were not totally accepted. As Palestinian refugees, his mother had to work in order to provide for the family, which was also seen as something negative and shameful.

So, for David, there was also bitterness for their loss of status from being comfortable in Jerusalem and having connections and good jobs.

DORIT. When people lose everything, when it is all taken away by war, the way nostalgia works is that you sometimes get fixated.

I wonder if Zionism and Israel did not exist, whether today those middle classes would have been able to afford the big houses with their drivers, cooks, and gardeners.

Maybe some doctors, but I do not think that the architects, teachers, and radio broadcasters would have been able to. This fall from class that Mona just described for David and his family might have happened for other reasons too.

MARINA. But it would have happened more gradually and they would have had a chance to adjust and become what they would become organically.

MONA. I am writing at the moment a piece about poverty for my upcoming book on my childhood in Egypt, about growing up privileged in a country where the majority of the population was poor. As a child, it seemed totally normal to be from the middle class, but slowly, as I got older, I felt uncomfortable about my privilege, and started to realize that I did not fit in. But as a young child you take it for granted; this is what you are. You have poor people begging in the streets and you are wearing comfortable, elegant clothes and you are walking among them.

MARINA. It is interesting to look at JWRH as the framework out of which all these other projects have grown: the BMJ, the PES, my blog, the Semiramis book, people telling stories to each other. It really all started from JWRH – and from us three having such synergy.

The Future

We concluded by contemplating the future of JWRH and our other projects.

DORIT. As far as JWRH is concerned, I would love to find a home for the map. I believe that it should be extended to the whole of Jerusalem and it should be done quickly because the map is priceless and time is of the essence for Nakba survivors' memories. I do not think it will be expensive to add the rest of Jerusalem, so that every house in the city becomes a live link and information is added. It would also not take much to train a few research assistants in adding data. As Mona said, it is a race against time.

I know the platform will not last forever for the Walking Tours. I think digital-born art is short-lived because there is a limit to how far it can be updated or when it becomes cost-prohibitive to do so without funding. The short films themselves and the audio files will exist. It may be easy to recreate, or it may not. So I worry about that.

I am part of a group that is thinking about digital-born art and posterity. If we do not think about it now, we may wake up one day and find we have lost thirty years of artwork because anything from the 1990s on is not being preserved. There are efforts now to digitize, and we remediate single-channel work from the 1970s, like VHS tapes. But there is so much digital art and there are no good mechanisms to upgrade it to new technologies.

As for my current project, I have been living in Canada for a very long time. This January, I will be twenty years at Queens' University. While working on JWRH, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada was under way; in 2015 they published their important report about the cultural and physical genocide of Indigenous children in residential schools. That made me realize, first, that I am part of a settler

society here – actually all three of us are, both in Canada and in the United States. But it also made me reflect that even though I am a sixth-generation Jerusalemite, I am part of a settler society in Israel, too.

Therefore, as I often say in any presentation I give, I am a double settler. Working on JWRH made me realize that I cannot do all this work in Jerusalem, and live, work and be paid in Canada, and not be accountable for living in Canada, or come to terms with what my settler identity as a Canadian immigrant means.

As a result, my current collaborative project is on Belle Park, a local park in Kingston, a place that experienced Indigenous life, colonial violence, and also environmental violence, because it is a place that was a landfill and is very toxic. The history of the park is not visible.

What I am carrying with me from JWRH is a commitment to make what is buried (both literally and politically) visible and legible so that we can think about a different, healthier, more just future. To me, it is never just about the past.

I am learning to work in “allyship” with Indigenous people, which is very different from JWRH. I do not have the same command of history to have the conversations I had with Palestinians where I understood the nuance. My position is, therefore, tenuous and changing.

MONA. I am completely absorbed in writing my second book about growing up in Egypt in the 1950s and becoming a refugee. In some ways, it is the prequel to my first book.

In my memoir *In My Mother's Footsteps*, I allude to the fact that I became a refugee in Egypt and I write a little bit about it. In my upcoming book, I delve into what that society was like in 1950. It was still influenced by colonialism and the international community that lived there. In some ways, my family never belonged in that society – my mother being Palestinian, my father being Syrian and born in Egypt but not truly feeling either Egyptian or Syrian. It is the whole complicated issue of identity and class.

But I also have beautiful memories of growing up in Egypt, of our housemaid who took care of us, and of playing with my sister. In one game, I chose to be the servant; it was as though I was trying out new clothes. I wanted to experience being on the other side of that class divide.

It is interesting how even though you are a child and you do not have access to knowledge about classes, you pick up on things and you try things out. Children in their dramatic play explore different roles in life and take on adult roles.

MARINA. My focus going forward, and for a long time, will be the Semiramis book. I suspect I have at least a year or two of research ahead of me. In the meantime, my challenge will be how to keep my blog going at the same time.

DORIT. On my last sabbatical, in the fall of 2017, I started writing a book about JWRH, and wrote about half of it. The writing came quickly, it flowed. And then my sabbatical ended and between administrative duties and teaching, I had no time to

continue. Now, four years have passed and part of me would love to finish that book because it addresses a few issues:

Firstly it explains how I – an Israeli who was raised smack in the middle of Zionist Ashkenazi society, privileged with all the blind spots that come with that – came to be in a position to want to engage this story and bring it to life, and how I negotiated my place in this story.

As I often say, because I am the filmmaker, because I wrote the grant, because I have an academic position, I became the nervous system of this project. But I am not its heart. You are its heart. All the participants are the heart of JWRH.

The book also tells all the stories that are not in the videos, which are very short. For each family or each person, there is a chapter or section that recounts our engagement, which adds a lot of past history, but also what it was like to film together, addressing present-day working in Jerusalem. The third section is about the method that we came up with which I believe could be very useful to people who try to do community-based art projects, whether they are interactive documentaries or not. I would love to be able to finish it.



Figure 15. The U.S. premiere of *Jerusalem, We Are Here* in Berkeley, California, February 2017. From left: Mona Halaby, Dorit Naaman, and Marina Parisinou.

Dorit Naaman is a documentarist and film theorist from Jerusalem, and a professor of

Film, Media, and Cultural Studies at Queen's University, Canada. Her in-production collaborative project The Belle Park Project is situated in Kingston, Ontario, and harnesses creative practice to make visible, legible, and audible both colonial and environmental violence, and also resistance, resilience, and re-naturalization, in a complex urban park/former landfill. Dorit is also engaged in a collaborative project on planning and mapping participatory media. She has previously researched film and media from the Middle East, specifically focusing on nationalism, gender, and militarism.

Mona Hajjar Halaby is a Palestinian American educator and writer residing in California. She is interested in the social history of Palestine, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, and has published several articles on that period in the Jerusalem Quarterly. Her archive of old photographs of Jerusalem and its people is on Facebook at "British Mandate Jerusalemites' Photo Library." She is a consultant, researcher, and tour guide in the Jerusalem, We Are Here interactive documentary. Her memoir In My Mother's Footsteps: A Palestinian Refugee Returns Home was published in August 2021 by Thread.

Marina Parisinou was born in Cyprus to a Greek Jerusalemite mother and a Cypriot father, and was weaned on stories of life in Palestine. Following a career in IT, she now splits her time between San Francisco and Nicosia working on family history projects. She publishes her research into her maternal family's history on her blog, "MyPalestinianStory.com." She is one of the participants in the Jerusalem, We Are Here interactive documentary and an associate producer of the project. Marina is currently researching a book on the January 1948 bombing of the Semiramis Hotel in Qatamon, Jerusalem.

Endnotes

- ¹ See *Jerusalem, We Are Here*, online at info.JerusalemWeAreHere.com (accessed 17 February 2022).
- ² See Mona Hajjar Halaby, online at [facebook.com/MonaHajjarHalaby](https://www.facebook.com/MonaHajjarHalaby) (accessed 17 February 2022).
- ³ See Marina Parisinou, "My Palestinian Story," (blog) online at mypalestinianstory.com (accessed 16 February 2022), and also online at [facebook.com/mypalestinianstory](https://www.facebook.com/mypalestinianstory) (accessed 17 February 2022).
- ⁴ Zochrot, online at zochrot.org (accessed 17 February 2022).
- ⁵ British Mandate Jerusalemites Photo Library, online at www.facebook.com/BMJerusalemitesPhotoLib (accessed 17 February 2022).
- ⁶ Helios Design Labs, online at heliosdesignlabs.com (accessed 17 February 2022).