

From Jerusalem

## Um Hani

### To Live and Work in Jerusalem

Penny Johnson and

Diala Shamas



Um Hani in her office, behind her a photo of the first NET office, January 2018. Image courtesy of Um Hani.

Only on Saturdays can one pay a daytime visit to Um Hani, Wedad Abu Dayyeh, in her pleasant old house on the Mount of Olives, sandwiched between the Mormon University and the Vatican representative's office. Otherwise, Um Hani, who is ninety-two years young, is busy with the accounts at the office of the Near East Tourist Agency (NET). "If you sit at home," she tells us, her eyes sparkling, "your mind goes."

Today NET is a highly successful enterprise with offices in five countries, but it began as a nameless business run from the modest refugee dwelling of Wedad and her husband Emil Abu Dayyeh after they were forced out of their home in western Jerusalem in 1948.

We had come to explore with Um Hani how Palestinians working in tourism and pilgrimage in Jerusalem attempted to begin again after their losses in 1948 and how they fared in the period of Jordanian rule. As usual with Um Hani, the conversation spanned and provided insight into much more, as she patiently and unassumingly walked us through her journey from the small village of Bayt Jala, just outside Jerusalem, to her home on the Mount of Olives.

## Fleeing Bayt Jala

Um Hani, born in 1926 in Bayt Jala, grew up a bright and ambitious girl in the large and at times restrictive Makhlouf family. With no opportunities for secondary school education in Bayt Jala, one of her brothers successfully lobbied her father to allow her to attend school in Jerusalem. Wedad, who took the bus from Bayt Jala to its Jerusalem stop and then walked the rest of the way every day, marveled at the world she found in the city. “Jerusalem had a different life,” she says, and one she was determined to make her own. At first, she enrolled in the ninth grade class at the Schmidt Girls’ School. Coming out of the Bayt Jala government school which did not teach English, she found the level of English to be challenging and still castigates the authoritarian rule of the nuns at Schmidt’s. She switched to the English school after a year, where she relished the more open atmosphere and where the teachers were more willing to work with her level of English. She did very well, and completed two years there.



Wedding party at Makhlouf house, Bayt Jala, c. 1944. Family album.

However, she was not allowed to complete her schooling. Um Hani's ambitions and marked tendency – which she maintains to this day – to criticize and battle the status quo did not sit easily with her family. When fifteen-year-old Wedad took issue with her village's practice of having young brides sign away their inheritance when they married, family members gave her an ultimatum. "No school," they told her, "you either stay at home or get married." With her brother abroad and no one else ready to defend her, she was brought back to Bayt Jala by the women in her family, a salutary reminder that is not always men that reinforce patriarchy. The proposed husband-to-be, Emil Abu Dayyeh, was thirty-two and had never finished school. Wedad was only fifteen but early marriage and a large age gap between husband and wife were not uncommon at the time. What was unusual was the rebellious girl's condition for marriage: to live in Jerusalem. She decided to accept her suitor, attracted by the fact that he both lived and worked in Jerusalem.

## **In a War with a Studebaker**

And live in Jerusalem they did, settling in Musrara, near where her new husband worked with his brother Hanna Atallah, who had established a tourist and pilgrimage business, the Jerusalem Orient Express, in Jerusalem's Mamilla neighborhood in 1932. Um Hani makes sure to note that the original investment for opening Hanna Atallah's office was provided by his sister Sirriyyeh, another very strong woman. Sirriyyeh was widowed at a young age and did what she had to do to provide for her young daughter, leaving her child in Bayt Jala and travelling to Peru, where, Um Hani says, "she worked like the men." Sirriyyeh was eventually able to return and support not only her daughter but also her brother, part of a pattern of unusual and industrious women in the Abu Dayyeh family. Um Hani would fit right in.

Abu Hani began his career at the Orient Express in 1932: with little interest in school, his family had sent him as a young man to learn car mechanics. He became a driver and facilitator for visitors to Jerusalem and the Holy Land. At the time, the foreign visitors "were professors and archaeologists," Um Hani remarked, with a shake of her head at the current crop of tourists, "and Abu Hani learned from them." Abu Hani picked up English and some German, and became familiar with the many archeological sites sought out by these learned tourists during their visits, which would oftentimes last for months. Abu Hani's gregarious, "close to the heart" personality, according to Um Hani, served him well with these foreign visitors.

Abu Hani's driving skills came in handy during the World War II period as he began work with the British Army, ferrying soldiers from Cairo to Jerusalem for periods of rest and recreation. "He wore an army uniform throughout the war so he would not be stopped at checkpoints," says Um Hani, reminding us that Palestinians and checkpoints have a long and arduous history. When the war ended, the British forces rewarded Abu Hani by allowing him to obtain a prized taxi license at the standard rate – thus avoiding the black market where licenses were sold for "thousands, millions." Um Hani does not recall the details of that arrangement, just that this was a coveted privilege – so much

so that in exchange for a share of his taxi license, Abu Hani's brother bought him a car, which he drove for the small family business: a light green, brand new Studebaker.

That Studebaker came in handy when disaster struck in 1948 and the couple, with two young children, began a long trek. They fled the Musrara neighborhood after the Jewish forces demolished three houses in their neighborhood but not until Abu Hani had evacuated their neighbor, a Jewish lady – a widow – and her children, to safety. The family first stayed in Bayt Jala for a few months and then, when bombs began to fall on that village, headed to Jericho, where they rented a small room in a mud house and remained for nine months. “We stayed in one room with a family. We had no money,” says Um Hani, “but at least we had a car.” With so many Palestinians fleeing to Jordan, the young family reasoned that Abu Hani would be able to work as a taxi driver with his car, ferrying refugees to Amman. Abu Hani began to drive his taxi from Jericho to Amman, but there was still no school open for the children, and the conditions were difficult. Um Hani remembers the flies and the sweltering heat in that house most vividly.

As the 1948 war commenced, Abu Hani's brother Hanna Atallah had garnered a small piece of luck from a British official who had overseen the Garden Tomb during the Mandate. The Tomb is a peculiarly British site “discovered” by General Gordon of Khartoum fame when he spotted a skull-like formation from the rooftop of the American Colony and decided it must be Golgotha. When Hanna Atallah had to flee his home, he asked the warden of the Garden Tomb, whom he knew from his work as a guide, if he could stay in the empty house on the property until the fighting quieted down. The warden allowed him to stay. But the warden didn't last, according to Um Hani, as the war dragged on and he realized that the conflict “was not a joke,” and that the British role in the creation of the state of Israel was widely resented. He turned over the care of the site to Hanna Atallah, who was able to sit out the war in the relative safety of a religious site. Abu Hani used to travel from Bayt Jala to Jerusalem and stay there with his brother occasionally. Um Hani chuckled as she remembered that before he fled, the warden, a British man, complained about Abu Hani's frequent visits. Abu Hani – who stood tall and was a big man – picked up the warden, a much smaller man, and told him, “Don't think that just because you're British you can tell us what to do. I'll throw you in the well.” The complaints ceased.

## **Rebuilding with a Typewriter, a Dictionary, and Ka'q bi Simsim**

The young family had another turn of luck, again stemming from troop withdrawals. When the British troops evacuated the area, their former army barracks in the Augusta Victoria church-hospital complex on the Mount of Olives became empty. The Lutheran World Federation began offering these small rooms to Palestinian Lutheran families who had been displaced during the war, and Um Hani and her family were then able to move back to Jerusalem, this time in the city's eastern neighborhoods, where they would build their life again.



Passport photographs of Wedad and Emile Abu Dayyeh, 1955. Family album.

A family on the move, scratching for a living, searching for any opportunity for a livelihood reminds us not only of the fate of Palestinians in the naqba, but of refugees and families displaced by war and conflict today. Working from their house to build a nameless business with only a post office box, Abu Hani went out to look for work. He soon met Dr. James Kelso, an American Biblical archeologist, who needed a driver and hired him for his digs. “He was a nice, straightforward person,” remembers Um Hani. She observed that after the war it was generally Americans who would come. “After the war, the British wouldn’t dare come,” Um Hani says with a look of disgust, “because they knew they were *‘asel balana*, the source of our troubles.”

Dr. Kelso referred his colleagues to Abu Hani as a trusted driver and a guide. Many of these academics were affiliated with the American School of Oriental Research, or perhaps were “spies,” as Um Hani wryly comments. Before returning to the United States, Dr. Kelso gave his typewriter to Abu Hani, “for your wife,” he said. Um Hani enrolled in typing classes on al-Zahra Street, and thus her own career began, handling all the correspondence and making her trademark precise accounts. “For the first few years we were not licensed and it was chaos,” she remarks. After Jordanian law began to operate, Abu Hani became a licensed guide. “It was illegal to both be a guide and run a tourist agency,” says Um Hani, an invisible one-woman agent for bookings in the four hotels (National, al-Zahra, American Colony – for the wealthy – and Mount Scopus after it opened in 1964). She would confirm the bookings in writing, after Abu Hani went to request the reservations in person.

Um Hani was pregnant with her third child, and was initially unhappy with the pregnancy given the family's difficult financial situation. She recalls that an American woman tourist in one of the groups asked her what she had prepared for the upcoming baby. Um Hani replied, "Nothing." The Lutheran World Federation was distributing assistance to refugees at the time and Um Hani assumed she would have to count on these basic baby supplies. A few months after the American woman returned to the U.S., Um Hani received baby clothes and supplies for her newborn girl, making her beloved daughter Maha "the best dressed baby in all Jerusalem."

With some income, the family rented a room in the Mount of Olives house she now lives in. Abu Hani would be absent for long stretches of time, leaving Um Hani with the children, the finances and the correspondence. Abu Hani traveled to meet the tour groups where they would land, in Beirut and occasionally in Egypt. The usual tour began in Beirut for several nights, proceeded to Damascus for a day to visit the mosque and the market, then to Amman, and on to Jerusalem. The young couple arranged hotels for all of the destinations. Um Hani managed the home front and tended to all administrative matters – her name, however, never appeared on any of the correspondence. The requests came in English, and Abu Hani had limited English – as did she at that time, she insists. But when there were words she didn't know, she would look them up in the dictionary. In a pinch, she hit the road herself, travelling once in the 1960s to Damascus to accompany a group to Jerusalem. Um Hani's exposure to so many foreigners gave her a perspective and experiences that were a far cry from her Bayt Jala roots. She recalls being one of the first women in Jerusalem to don a pair of jeans, having been gifted them by one of the American women who came to visit.

Frequently, tourists would travel through the Mandelbaum Gate to West Jerusalem to continue to other holy land sites inside Israel. Preparing and submitting the lists of these visitors to the relevant Israeli authorities was the only contact Um Hani had with the new state that had replaced Palestine. That would change of course, and drastically, after 1967. But one thing would not: Um Hani continued to live and work in Jerusalem.

The business did not have buses for the groups so they would use cars, renting several at a time, and Abu Hani would impart his information from car to car at all the sites. She recalls one logistically challenging group with a doctor who shipped a bus from the U.S. to Turkey. Abu Hani went to Istanbul to pick up the bus, then drove the American group from Turkey to Syria to Lebanon and to Jordan, then to Jerusalem. Because they couldn't take the bus into Israel on the final leg of the group's journey, it sat in front of their house for a whole year until they were able to sell it, a favor that Abu Hani did for the American doctor. (Tour buses didn't arrive until years later. Um Hani recalls "Jett buses" was the first bus company and Abu Hani bought shares in the company.)

Slowly, more religious pilgrims began to come, from colleges, churches and Christian groups. The house on the Mount of Olives became a tourist destination in itself, with itineraries reading "visit a home on the Mount of Olives" where pleased tourists found Um Hani serving coffee and Jerusalem's distinctive oval-shaped sesame bread (ka'q bi simsim) that still beguiles travelers and locals alike. "What was your biggest group?" we asked and the answer came quickly. In 1955, the Baptist Convention descended on Jerusalem

and its fifty members were guided by Abu Hani and invoiced by Um Hani, with her detailed lists of accommodation fees, entrance fees to holy sites, transport and the like. In the wake of this success, the couple finally opened a small office on al-Zahra Street which they continued to rent for years. Soon after, however, the 1956 Suez crisis affected the small office with what became characteristic of the tourism and travel business in Palestine: significant drought periods due to the ever-changing political climate. “We ate the wind,” Um Hani says. It was not the only time crisis sent NET and other Palestinian businesses spiraling downward.



Um Hani in her house, January 2018. Family album.

The tours guided by Abu Hani during the Jordanian period ranged over the West Bank (from Jerusalem to Hebron, Bethlehem, Jericho and Nablus), to the broader region. They all focused on holy sites and were billed as pilgrim tours. The family’s identity as Palestinian Christians was an attractive feature to Christian tourists, especially Protestants, seeking authenticity, an aspect the nascent NET discovered early on as they largely attracted Protestant groups. Although as Um Hani notes, she herself was “never religious,” did not feel a member of the Palestinian Christian community, and spent whatever little free time she had with her Muslim friends and neighbors – her chosen community – which she created away from her family in Jerusalem. Nonetheless, Um Hani notes that she had little knowledge of Muslim pilgrims and visitors during this period. If they came, it was not through NET.

Today, Um Hani’s two sons and their children run the business that she started with her husband and a typewriter out of a room in the Mount of Olives, although Um Hani still keeps a sharp eye on the accounts. The only time her eyes cloud over is when she is lost in the memory of her beloved daughter, Maha, who died in January 2015. A leading women’s and human rights activist, Maha often cited Um Hani’s strength as an inspiration, and Um Hani talks softly of Maha as a “light” from the moment she was born.

The same feisty spirit that led her to flee Bayt Jala shines through as she shares her insights on the most recent political developments, fed by her daily reading of *al-Quds* newspaper from cover to cover. She folds the newspaper, ready for another day in the office. To live and work in Jerusalem continues to be her watchword.

*Penny Johnson is an Associate Editor of the Jerusalem Quarterly.*

*Diala Shamas, a lawyer at the Center for Constitutional Rights in New York, is Um Hani’s granddaughter.*