

# Childhood Memories

## Leisurely Jerusalem Walks to Enjoy Its Commercial Hustle and Bustle



By Antoine D. Nesnas

**T**oday, in my octogenarian years, I often find myself sitting in my comfortable chair reflecting on my youth. Vivid images of those pleasant days and years cross my imagination, bringing before my closed eyes cherished memories that sometimes tend to trigger a wry smile on my lips.

Before 1948 and for a few years thereafter, I lived as the fifth child of the family in my parents' house, situated in one of the meandering streets of Jerusalem's Jawalidah Quarter that ran from the Collège des Frères at New Gate down to the portal of the Latin Patriarchate's main entrance, encompassing the northwestern section of the Old City. I was a student at the Frères' (as we liked to call it). During the scholastic year, the school gave us, of course, a part of Sundays as a day of rest, because Christian students were expected to be at school at 7 am to attend Sunday mass.

A short break was given after the church service, at the end of which all students gathered in their classrooms either for basic instructions in the art of drawing or in some other extracurricular learning skill. Yet, I recall, this turned out to be a full-fledged session mostly consecrated to Arabic language didactics by our teacher Issa Boullata, who later became a prominent professor in Canada. In addition, there was no schooling on Thursday afternoons, which gave us students some valued free time.

Since I was an Old City dweller, before 1948 (when I was not yet 13), I had my own way of spending most Thursday afternoons and a good number of days

during the long summer vacation. One of my favorite pastimes was to saunter around in the area either alone or in the company of my late older brother George, or with the late Joseph Meo, my close friend who was my senior by a year or two. In part, our walk took us outside the walls of the Old City. From our homes, both located in the Jawalidah Quarter, we would head towards nearby Jaffa Gate, exit the gate and wander along the city walls, occasionally heading to the new city, to eventually end up at New Gate, from where we negotiated our way down the serpentine alleys of the Old City to return to our respective homes. Or we would reverse this route. During these walks, it was natural to have the area map imprinted on our minds in ample detail.

The walk was one favorite option of mine while another was to play with cousins, relatives, and friends of my age, or a couple years older, on the promontory of a relatively vast land in the new city that today houses both the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, in part of its expanse, as well as the official residence of the

president of Israel on the other part that extends to Jerusalem's Talbiyeh Quarter. Of course, we played there each and every time we visited my late maternal aunt Jamileh Calis Habesch, the wife of the late Tewfic Habesch, a well-known businessman and one of the pioneers in the craft of printing in Palestine whose house, however, as all Palestinian properties, was confiscated. It stands proudly until this very day, facing the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute on the other side of the main road. This sizable promontory provided us with some good-sized rock formations strewn all over and embedded in the ground and also a relative number of naturally growing trees to play around and hide behind sometimes. It was fun to play in this natural playground, particularly in springtime, when we were able to collect some beautiful wild flowers that were growing there, and at certain seasons of the year pick up a couple of a variety of snails that had attractive shells. Here, I am generally talking about the years prior to 1947 and 1948 because during the first of these two years and until May 15, 1948 it

Looking towards Jaffa Gate. Adjacent to the wall you can see shops that no longer exist.



was absolutely not safe or possible to roam around in West Jerusalem or undertake any kind of free activities, due to the ongoing conflict that raged between the Arab and Jewish residents of the city as was the case in the whole of Palestine.

Now back to my preferred walks. Once I exited the paternal house, I walked down past the very first convent of the Rosary Sisters adjacent to my parents' house. Then, I would pass by the Ohanessian factory for paper bags and boxes and proceed past the official entrance of the Latin Patriarchate. As I headed down the street in the direction of Jaffa Gate, I passed by Anton Lawrence's printing press, the factory for vehicle wheel-retreading owned by Mr. Spyridon, and a number of merchant shops whose owners originally came from the city of Lod, including Noursi, Karkar, and other merchants whose names escape me at present. I can never forget Abu Asab's live poultry shop that was distinctive and hard to miss because of the continual crows of roosters and the unpleasant smell that emanated from the shop. Mukhtar Issa Tubbeh's Coffee Shop was the last venue I passed before turning right towards Jaffa Gate, also known as Bab al-Khalil (literally translated as Hebron Gate).



Mukhtar Issa Tubbeh.

The coffee shop faced one of the two tile factories established inside the Old City and run by two cousins of the Kassissieh family. As I turned right towards Jaffa Gate, one of the eight rampart gates built by Suleiman al-Qanuni (also known as Suleiman the Magnificent) in 1538–39, I would notice an iron grill that safeguards two beautifully designed tombs. I have always wondered whose tombs they were, but I never got a satisfying or clear-cut answer to my query.

On my left, as I turned towards the gate, there stood the grandiose building of the Morcos Hotel, a Jerusalem landmark that is known today as the Imperial Hotel. Separated by a small alley, there was the famous Boulous Meo Persian Rug and Souvenirs Store, a rich source for original carpets and a variety of authentic souvenirs. This Meo store is another landmark of the area since it was established in 1872 and remained in operation until 1996. The store was adjacent to the Hallak Souvenir Shop that offered quality souvenirs as well. The Jaffa Gate area



A tomb in the vicinity of Jaffa Gate, possibly built during the time of the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman al-Qanuni. The author never found out to whom it belonged.

is replete with historical narratives that call for a comprehensive, detailed study.

As I exited the Old City through the gate to carry on with my walk on Jaffa Road that ran north-south along the Old City walls, I was greeted by an array of shoe shiners who seemed to have been competing among themselves as to who owned the most beautiful and dazzling shoeshine box with walls covered in ornamentally designed brass, not to mention the shiny footrests on top of their boxes. It was a pleasant and amusing sight. Lifting my eyes upward I could see the balcony of a café where men of all ages sat smoking the *shisha* (hubble-bubble) as they watched the passers-by and the vehicular traffic.

That same building housed a number of wall-to-wall shops on the ground level, and so did the adjacent buildings that ran along Jaffa Road, offering a variety of merchandise and services. Although I do not recall names of all the shop owners and what merchandise they offered, I distinctly remember the Akrouk clothing facility, where on some occasion my mother bought two Sunday outfits, one for my brother George and one for me. Also, I remember, he had written in the Arabic language on each of the two opposing door leaves that were painted in beige "We sell 'oud strings." A couple of shops up the road, there was a Bata Shoes store, a coffee shop that also sold ice cream and iced drinks, where we often stopped, a Persian carpet sales shop, and a Jewish store owned by Isaac Cohen with The New Palestine Hotel riding on top of it.

I also recall that in the late winter and early spring seasons, a young man used to set up at the curb of the road, a couple of meters away from the gate, his push cart that displayed

a mound of zesty Jaffa oranges, alongside which stood a small mechanical, hand-operated juicer. Calling at the top of his voice, he invited pedestrians to purchase fresh orange juice to quench their thirst. To my own observation, he seemed to have been quite busy, as two or three prospective buyers were queued at his stand each time I passed him.

On the opposite side of the road (at the time, there were buildings on both sides of the road), there were some other interesting businesses, among which was that of Arafat el-Bitar's all-vegetables wholesale outlet where Jaffa oranges, lemons, other citrus fruits, and greeneries were tastefully displayed. Next to him were an Oriental Sweets shop and a number of other shops whose nature I do not clearly recall, up to the point where the road bifurcated with another major road, Mamilla Road, veering off to the left.<sup>ii</sup>

When I strutted along on Jaffa Road that continued to run northward along the walls on the western side of the Old City, I would pass by more prominent businesses. There were shops with beautiful display windows that featured articles of clothing, Persian carpets, and other amenities. I distinctly recall among them, on the righthand side of the road, the Boulous Said Bookshop that boasted two shop windows with a beautiful arrangement of books and magazines. The Damiani oculist shop was there as well, where during summer holidays I worked to secure a couple score of Palestinian pounds for personal expenses. Farther up the road, there was the Ishtakleif bakery that offered very nice and crunchy loaves of different types of bread. Next to it, there was another coffee shop that had a corner stand that sold ice cream in cones and ice-cold drinks.

On the opposite side of this stretch of Jaffa Road, I remember a big building that had a modest open court entrance with a couple of shops, most prominent of which was the Louisidis grocery store that was famous for a variety of meat cutlets such as ham,

However, if at times I decided on a little longer walk, I would negotiate Mamilla Road that, before 1948, extended to meet up with King George Avenue. Today, a good stretch of this road has been renamed as Gershon Agron Road.



A view of some shops inside Jaffa Gate.

bacon, etc., and an assortment of other foods and alcoholic drinks. In the vicinity, there were also other shops, one of which, I remember, was a small bookstore owned by Nakhleh Lawrence, a cousin of Anton Lawrence.<sup>11</sup> Often this shop was a destination for me to buy stationery, pens, and pencils and sometimes to repair my fountain pen or simply to replace its nib. Mr. Lawrence offered these repair services. Some twenty meters onwards from Lawrence's shop stood the majestic building of the Fast Hotel.

To proceed back home, I would make a right turn at the intersection up the hill where the city wall turns to the east, and trudge my way towards the Old City's New Gate.

Whenever I embarked on my slightly longer Mamilla walk, I would first pass by the barbershop where I had my regular haircuts. Because often, it seems, I had to sit at the barber's waiting for my turn, I spent my time with my eyes fixed on the opposite side of the road, looking at the people who climbed up and down a long flight of stairs that led to the Arab Bank. A couple meters along the pavement across from me, there was another flight of stairs that ran down to the Rudolph Habesch printing press. This gentleman is the brother of Tewfic Habesch and my mom's first cousin. Next to this, there was the National Restaurant that served delicious local Arabic food, which to my observation was quite a popular

place. It also offered services for *shisha* lovers. This smoking gadget was quite as popular then as it is today. On a couple of occasions, whenever accompanied by my dad, I had the pleasure of tasting some of the restaurant's tasty salads.

I also recall that in front of the barber's shop there was a stop for bus no. 37 that served the Talbiyeh Quarter and which my parents and I used to take to go to my aunt's. A little farther down, there was the stop for bus no. 4 that served the Qatamon area. Next to the barber's, there was a small shop maintained by a young man known by the name of George who ran a steam-ironing business for clothing. Facing this shop was Arsenian's pharmacy whose entrance was accessed by climbing up a couple of steps. Strolling on the pavement of the right-hand side of the street, I would stop at the large and wide entrance door to the St. Vincent de Paul Hospice and admire its beautiful design. I always knew that this organization owned about 14 or 15 shops on Mamilla Road that

were leased to local merchants. A businessman by the name of Sahhar leased a two-shop configuration from the hospice where he maintained a household furniture store. I can never forget, and I still see in my mind's eye, the display behind one of the two shop windows with a beautiful double bed dressed in a lovely satiny, light-honey-colored cover with a couple of similarly covered pillows, though of a lighter shade. The Matossian Cigarette Company also had its offices and workshop above a number of the shops on this road.

On the other side of the street and facing the Sahhar enterprise, there were more interesting businesses. The one that attracted me most was that of Zanani, for it was basically a toy store. How often did I stop at its two shop windows to admire the various toys on display of which I would have liked to own a couple? Among others, there were two-wheeled bicycles, small mechanical automobiles in different shapes and sizes that a child could actually ride and run with, and many other toys that would have



A view of Jaffa Road in the direction of Jaffa Gate.



The Fast Hotel.

attracted a child of my age at the time. Next to Zaniniri's, there were two or more shops that belonged to Costandi Salameh where Buick and Chrysler vehicles (if I remember the make correctly) were on display. I often stopped there to admire those beautiful grandiose vehicles. Farther down the road, there was a Jewish-owned store by the name of Stern. I recall this store in particular because my dad was friendly with Mr. Stern and often had been to his shop either to buy batteries, shaving blades, and other paraphernalia, or just to chat with him, and I at times accompanied my father on these visits. The shop remained open and functional, run by two daughters of Mr. Stern, until the year 2007 when the Mamilla renovation plan was embarked upon. Above those shops, there were a hotel facility that I believe was known by the name of Park Hotel as well as other business offices, one of which, I remember, was for Mr. Elias Jallad, a real-estate agent. Strolling further down the road, I would be standing

at the top of a staircase that led me down to the Shamma'a Quarter. There, on one of his pieces of land, Mr. Tewfic Habesch constructed a new modern building to house the new printing press, replacing the one at the Old City's New Gate. Brand-new machines still in their crates were inside the building just before the war of 1948 broke out. Running further down the road, I would reach Spinney's Grocery store, the Hamoudah hairdresser, and another barbershop.

On the right side of Mamilla Road, though, there was a coffee house with an elevated and quite large frontal terrace accessible by four steps. It always hosted lots of *shisha*-loving patrons of all ages. By now, I would have arrived at the intersection with Julian Road to my left and Princess Mary Road to my right. I would turn right to climb up the street for about twenty meters, before I turned right once again to take St. Louis Road and run past the Shamieh Photo Studio, where I had some of my

photographs actually taken, to reach the intersection of Jaffa Road and Suleiman Road. I would negotiate this last section to get to New Gate and enter the Old City to return home, passing by the Frères' School and the second Kassissieh tile factory that was run by Khalil Kassissieh.

This was always a pleasant walk for me that I either took alone or in company as I mentioned above. The 1948 war brought an end to these pleasant days and wonderful walks and restricted our access to the areas lying outside the Old City wall. I was able to revisit these places only after the war of 1967, prior to the implementation of the renovation project that changed the entire area, completely altering the old features of Mamilla Road and building modern structures that turned it into the Mamilla Mall that is strictly for pedestrian use, while preserving only a couple or more of its old buildings. It seems that among the old, still-standing structures is the Arafat Bitar house that was rebuilt with its original stones, reinstated to its former shape and on its previous site. This is evident because each of the building's stones bears a visible number in black paint. The entire line of shops on this section of Jaffa Road that ranged from Jaffa Gate to the intersection at the top of the hill was razed to reveal the rampart of the Old City.

*Antoine Nesnas was born in 1935 to Dominic G. Nesnas and Hanneh A. Calis Nesnas. Schooled in the Old City of Jerusalem and with a GCE Certificate of Education from London University, he gained extensive experience in a wide range of fields, working initially as teacher and translator in Arabic, English, and French at various positions locally and abroad, including with the British Army in Cyprus and as translator/news editor at the Near East Arab Broadcasting Station, in Cyprus. He then worked at the travel agency that represented Kuwait Airways in Jerusalem and gained experience in the art of printing as an employee of Tewfic Habesch Commercial Press in Jerusalem. For 23 years he served as a senior employee at the American Consulate General, Jerusalem, receiving several awards from the consulate and from Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, before he retired in January 2000.*

SCAN  
TO SHARE



<sup>i</sup> This café was at a right angle with the tiny portion of the city wall that was only apparent at the time. It was on the southern side of the first range of buildings that covered the entire western section of the city wall.

<sup>ii</sup> Mamilla Road no longer exists, and the part that remains is the renovated pedestrian-only Mamilla Mall.

<sup>iii</sup> This gentleman was a countrywide-known teacher of Arabic and, I believe, an editor of books as well. He established the Lawrence Printing Press facility and, as he was also a hotelier, constructed the Lawrence Hotel on Saladin Street in Jerusalem.