

There's No Place Like Home



By Nahil Aweidah

“There’s no place like home,
Home, home, sweet, sweet home,
There’s no place like home.”

Ever since we lost our home in New Jerusalem in May 1948, tears run down my cheeks whenever I remember this song. On the evening of May 13, my parents – who never imagined leaving their home – thought it would be safer for the family to spend two nights at Saint Charles Borromeo Hospice that was a five-minute walk from our house. They made this decision because, unexpectedly, the British soldiers had left their posts at the Zone A checkpoints on May 12, leaving Lower Baqa’a unprotected from the Zionist terrorists who had already occupied Qatamon neighborhood on May 1.

Although the hospice, located in the German Colony, was under the protection of the International Red Cross, Zionist terrorists forced their way into it on May 14 and rounded up fifteen civilian males from among the residents. That day, my two brothers, Sari, 19, and Rafiq, 17, were taken prisoner. My father, Adel Aweidah, was taken two days later. They were among the first 15 prisoners forced to stay in the unfinished buildings north of Jerusalem during the siege; the first prisoners having to trek across Burma Road, opened in the mountains to connect Jerusalem to the coast; and the first civilian detainees to arrive at Sheikh Mwanne Detention Camp near Jaffa after the prisoners from the Egyptian military had arrived in March. On July 22, hundreds more civilians arrived from the occupied cities of Ramallah and Lidda, so all prisoners, including my father and brothers, were moved



The author as a little girl in her father's garden in 1944.

to Atleet, a coastal camp farther up north that previously had been used by the British army. They remained imprisoned there until Jordan signed the Rhodes Armistice in March 1949.

After the evening of May 13, things changed drastically. The first phase of my life came to an end. Those twelve years of my life were the happiest. I was the fifth of six children born into a happy family that consisted of a handsome and responsible father, a beautiful, loving

mother, three brothers, and two sisters. But on May 16, my mother, Husniyeh, was left homeless with four kids: Lamis was turning sixteen in the summer, Samir had already turned fifteen on May 1, and I, Nahil, was twelve, two years older than Nawal, the youngest, who was born on my second birthday.

I am not going to describe the sufferings we went through as a family during the 1948–49 war. I grew up faster than my father could ever have imagined while he was absent. But we survived and were happy to be reunited, even though we had to start from scratch, like most displaced Palestinians, making our new home in Ramallah. Despite the hardship, we remained an intact family, which helped some of us excel in our chosen fields, holding Jerusalem in our hearts wherever we spent the remainder of our lives.

How could we forget New Jerusalem with all the happy events that used to take place? Personally, even though I lived there for only a few years, I still cherish the memory of those days.



On the right, the home of Adel Aweidah, the author's father.

I was lucky to come from a Jerusalemite middle-class family. My grandfather, Aref Khalil Aweidah, was in the tourism business which has always flourished in Jerusalem. He worked for Thomas Cook Touring Agency, located inside Jaffa Gate, and therefore moved out of the family quarters in Harat al-Sa'idiyeh neighborhood and built a three-story building on Mamilla Road, where my father was born. Mamilla was the residence of the Europeans then, and at the beginning of the twentieth century gradually became the main commercial center of Jerusalem. My grandfather supplied means of transportation (horses and carriages) and tourist guides for Thomas Cook Touring Agency. My eldest uncle, Khaleel, and his grandchildren inherited this business. With time, they replaced the horses with motor cars and arranged reservations at hotels as well. After 1948 the Aweidahs started anew. They had to build or lease hotels in Jerusalem in order to accommodate their full-package touring business that included ticketing agencies.



Traditional tiles from the Aweidah's home.

My father was the youngest of five sons.

Khaleel was in tourism, as already mentioned.

Abdel Salam followed his hobby in horse racing and traded in expensive Arabian horses. Hassan and Subhi graduated during World War I from the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut (which became the American University in 1920). Hassan was a successful businessman and directed *Fundoq al-'Asry* (The Modern Hotel) in his father's building, while Subhi never used his degree in pharmacy. He was interested in real estate and prospered in Haifa where he was appointed as the Arab director of the Land Registry Department (*Tabo*). He also built twin two-story buildings in Haifa; one remains intact, whereas the other was replaced by a six-story residence building after the *Nakba*.

My father was more ambitious than his brothers. With the cars arriving in Jerusalem, he was no longer contented with driving his own *Tek*, a small private carriage pulled by one horse for personal use. He had no worries, being the youngest and well taken care of after his old parents' departure because he was surrounded by his brothers and his married nieces and nephews who lived in their own houses around Mamilla quarter. He graduated from *Collège des Frères* and spoke Arabic, Turkish, French, and English. Befriending a Dutch immigrant who lived in one of their houses, he looked forward to studying in Europe. In 1922 he left for Konstanz Technical College where he studied German for a year and then mechanical engineering, graduating in 1926. Meanwhile, he worked hard to gain

experience and save money to fulfill his ambition. Unlike other Palestinian students studying abroad, he did not come back with a European wife. My father brought back a new car instead.

I described my father's life to show how lucky I was to have such an ambitious father. Water was scarce in Jerusalem, where an average of 500ml of rain fell per year; therefore, every new house had to build a water cistern first so that the rain falling on the red pyramid-like roofs could be collected for the summer. In 1926, Ain Farah Pump Station Project was launched, and on his return, my father was appointed as the mechanical engineer there. In 1927, for the first time, water flowed into homes through taps. This time, it came from north of Jerusalem, whereas over the past centuries water had been drawn from Hebron via Bethlehem in the south to fill the wells in Old Jerusalem.

Husniyeh Abu Souod, my mother, was a peacemaking, open-minded, flexible, and loving mother and person, ready to get along with anyone. She grew up as the

daughter of Taher Abu Souod, the mufti of the Shafi'i Muslims in Jerusalem and its vicinity who died in 1920, leaving my grandmother to raise six sons and two daughters. My mother's sister Lalmia was married in 1926 to Tahseen al-Khalidi in a large, luxurious wedding arranged by the groom's sister who was married to Hussein Salim al-Husseini, a former mayor of Jerusalem (1909–17). My mother, having completed the seven years of government schooling that was provided at the time, attended the Salesian Sisters' Secondary School, an Italian private school, for one year and then married my father the following year, at age 15.

Having signed the Islamic marriage contract in the summer of 1927, my father succeeded in imposing a modern-style marriage with no wedding party. He and my mother were engaged for two months, during which they together furnished a small apartment and prepared a trousseau filled with tailored European-style clothing, a practice very uncommon at the time when engaged couples were not supposed to go out alone. My father encouraged my mother to abandon the traditional Muslim clothes that covered her entire body and wear short dresses, silk stockings, and a very light chiffon veil thrown over her face. My mother loved this freedom, having grown up rather traditionally, and my grandmother accepted whatever my father suggested because he was her first cousin. Thus, my father succeeded in insisting on an untraditional wedding. As he had a private car, they enjoyed a modern honeymoon, travelling in northern Palestine in the summer of 1927 during his annual leave.

In 1930, Abdul Hameed Shoman opened the Arab Bank which now has branches worldwide. They needed an employee who could speak foreign languages, and since German had been added to his four other languages, my father applied for the job. This was an opportunity to relieve him from driving 14 kilometers to Ein Farah Water Station and back every day. Instead, he worked near Baqa'a at the bank's new offices in a second-floor apartment on Mamilla Road outside Jaffa Gate, near the bus stop square.

Working with money for three years was more than enough to make a mechanical engineer move on. His third job was at the Rockefeller Museum building project. The American historian and Egyptologist James Henry Breasted convinced the American millionaire Rockefeller to contribute towards building an Egyptian Museum in Cairo, but the offer was rejected for political reasons. Therefore, the same amount of money was allotted to building the Palestine Museum in New Jerusalem instead. All Palestinian secondary students remember James Henry Breasted because they had to have a solid grasp of one of his important history books in order to pass the matriculation (the final high school exam).

There was a post available for a mechanical engineer to build the museum, and mastering foreign languages was an asset since the project attracted foreign archaeologists. My parents had an active social life with the foreign co-workers. My mother could manage to speak English and spent nice times with foreign architect couples. She also spoke a bit of Italian, having spent



Adel Aweidah's expropriated home in Baqa'a.

her last year of schooling at an Italian secondary school. Building the unique museum took four years. By December 1937, it was ready. The museum director invited all employees and their family members to a tea party before opening the museum to the public. Even though I was very young myself, I remember the exact date and details very well because my youngest sister was two months old and my mother had to leave her in the care of my maternal grandmother who lived in Bab al-Sahirah Avenue next to the museum.

Photos usually help enhance our early memories. That party formed the basis of my memory. The first photo I still cherish shows a number of us sitting on the steps that lead to the pool in the center of the Palestine (Rockefeller) Museum in Wadi al-Joz neighborhood: Tony, Adelle, and Katy Lutfi Raad, and their cousin Rose Assaf, my sister Lamis, Samir and three other children, as well as my brothers Sari and Rafiq with their friends Angelo and Artoor Stephan, the sons of Stephan Hanna Stephan, the well-known sociologist and translator who served as the museum's

librarian. Hanna was from Beit Jala, and his wife was Armenian. As they had no daughters,

Hanna's wife loved Lamis and me so much that she knit yellow woolen shawls for us as kids. That was life in Jerusalem where love prevailed before religious conflicts were imported and imposed to ruin our peaceful life.

Looking back now, my early childhood in our villa in Baqa'a seems so far away, yet I can remember many details from our spacious house and garden. It was one of twin houses that Uncle Subhi had built after World War I, a century ago. My old grandfather had not expected that he would have more children towards the end of his long life when he gave his older sons the two floors and the shops on the first floor in his building which remains intact even today. His eldest son and his married sons had their own houses around the corner in the Mamilla neighborhood, facing the Cemetery Gate. Therefore, when Subhi and Adel (my father) arrived, my grandfather had to buy a plot for them as well. He purchased land in Lower Baqa'a and left money to Subhi and Adel to build their houses when they grew up. After Uncle Subhi graduated with a pharmaceutical degree obtained in the English language, which was the language of education at the American University of Beirut, he was offered a clerical post with the British government and forgot his pharmaceutical certificate forever after. He indulged and excelled in real estate. His first project was designing mirror-image twin houses with arches above the front terraces on the big plot of land that he and my father had



Rockefeller Museum employees and their families prior to the museum's inauguration in 1937. A photo cherished by the author which helped her enhance earlier memories.



Grandchildren, Huda Imam and Ahmad Aweidah visiting their grandparents' home.

inherited in *Baq'a Tahta*, the Lower Baqa'a neighborhood. They have remained masterpieces ever since.

Both villas were constructed with the best red stone and used white stone for decoration, obtained from the Beit Fajjar stone quarries near Bethlehem. A large garden surrounded the houses that had two garages for the cars of my father and his brother. Still, there remained enough space to build four more houses behind the two houses. Later, Uncle Abdul Salam got permission from his two brothers to build his own house behind our house that now carries the house number 45a on Emek Refa'im Street. Abdul Salam's house is no. 45b, and Uncle Subhi's house is no. 47. The plot of land extended farther towards the railway tracks and was large enough for a generous garden. Our houses are unique not because we emotionally rank them thus, but because UNESCO has recently identified them as worthy to be preserved.

Our life in New Jerusalem was full of events, especially in summer.

My three brothers joined the YMCA summer program. They took swimming lessons, played football, borrowed books from the library, and played indoor games, especially chess. My brother Sari joined chess championship rounds, and Rafiq was fond of football. My youngest brother Samir used to borrow one children's storybook daily from the YMCA library that Lamis, Samir, and I enjoyed sharing, reading it after lunch in order to exchange it for another the next day. We all enjoyed reading throughout the hot hours of summer, but we used to play in the spacious garden in the cool evenings. We used to look forward to sharing in the interesting activities organized for children at the end of the Summer YMCA Bazaar.

We also anxiously waited to watch the Greek annual summer dance event. The Greek Club known as Lasky was in the second block. The club had an open-air restaurant in the spacious garden in summer and a dance floor in the middle of the garden. A local music band was often contracted to play European pop music for couples to dance to, especially on weekends. Sitting in our garden, we could overhear this marvelous pop music. However, we enjoyed more hearing and watching the folkloric Greek tunes and dances that were performed once a year during the summer. As children, we were fascinated as we stood outside the club garden wall to watch the male and female dancers clad in their traditional white skirts and leggings and red hats and tops as they danced to the exotic tunes of Greek folkloric music.

Private schools for boys had football fields in the two Baqa'as where they usually competed towards the end of the scholastic year

to show their students' skills in sports. We enjoyed watching these competitions and sometimes shared in races when asked. The Zion School playground was next to our house, and the Terra Sancta school playground was within walking distance. Lamis and I sometimes used to join our brothers to watch football matches as well.

Although my father's car was a Morris Minor, it could easily take all of us. On weekends, my father used to take us for drives to Ramallah, Beit Jala, and Ein Karem and buy fresh fruits on our way back on Sundays. Before we got home, he would enter the German Colony to get fresh bread sold at the famous Frank Bakery. Although Abu Abbas used to deliver fresh pita bread six days a week, my parents preferred to buy fresh bread on Sunday evenings for our school sandwiches for Mondays. After all these years I can still smell the fresh bread coming from Frank Bakery.

On that same street, now named Lloyd George, was Regent Cinema, called Smidar now. We could see Shirley Temple films, Laurel and Hardy funny films, and Tarzan for half a shilling each, which we hardly could afford during World War II.

My parents, like most Jerusalemites, invested in the health and education of their children before they were exiled. Our school, Schmidt Girls School, was one of the best in Palestine and located north of Mamilla Cemetery. My brothers' school, Terra Sancta College, one of the best boys' schools in Palestine, was south of the cemetery. Having mastered good learning habits and one foreign language at least, the Palestinian children of the diaspora managed to

survive the *Nakba* and *Naksa*, and some of them excelled wherever they settled temporarily.

I miss New Jerusalem very much and all the memories related to it. Still, after all these years, Jerusalemites like all Palestinians look forward to our return to our stolen houses and land. The right of return is a personal right approved by all human conventions in the world, and we treasure it.

Born in Jerusalem in 1935, Nahil Adel Aweidah graduated from the Syrian University with a BA in English language and a teaching diploma. She taught secondary classes in English at the government secondary schools for girls in Ramallah, Al-Bireh, Jerusalem, Aqaba, Damascus, and Beirut. After earning a master's degree from the American University of Beirut, she taught English at AUB and the British Council Institute in Beirut. She currently lives in Jordan and Damascus. She is a researcher and author involved in writing articles and books on the Palestinian problem and the history of Jerusalem. She can be reached at nahilaweidah@gmail.com.

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