

The YMCA in Palestine



By Rizek Abusharr

In 1844 the YMCA was founded in London, England, by George Williams. In 1878, it was brought to Palestine by Dr. Bishara Cana'an, who had learned about the association and its heritage from his days as a student in London. The YMCA in Palestine had a humble beginning in Jerusalem with a storefront room on Mamilla Road. But it soon became a social meeting place for Palestinian Muslims and Christians and moved to a large location on Jaffa Road, not too far from Jaffa Gate, that even featured a tennis court.

The Cana'an family became the moving spirit. Dr. Tewfiq Cana'an, Bishara's eldest son, became the president of the new YMCA and served for three consecutive terms in addition to carrying out his duties as a brilliant physician. Lectures and concerts were held, and 16-mm films were shown as the association continued to be a social meeting place in the middle of town. Soon again these premises proved to be too small, and a larger space was needed.

In 1920, Dr. Archibald Clinton Harte was sent by the YMCA of the United States to assist the new fledgling enterprise, which by now had become a movement in Palestine where Christians and Muslims could interact in a place of calm. Looking at Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, Dr. Harte had a vision to create a YMCA center that would overlook the Old City. James Newbegin Jarvie, a philanthropist friend from New Jersey, believed in this vision and donated one million dollars to help fulfill this dream. Further donations came from Jerusalem residents as well as from hundreds of others from around the world. Eventually, the total donations amounted to US\$1,250,000.



The YMCA in 1933.

A region called Nukofrieh, which belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church, was found, and a plot of 28 dunams was secured for one Palestinian pound, with the blessings of the Church. Arthur Loomis Harman was selected as the principal architect, and Muslim, Christian, and Jewish architects as well as hundreds of builders and artisans were employed. The cornerstone was laid in 1926, and it took 7 years to build the edifice of the Jerusalem YMCA. Its dedication was celebrated on April 18, 1933, in the presence of huge crowds of Palestinians who heard Field Marshal Lord Allenby deliver the dedication speech wherein this sentence, "Here is a place whose atmosphere is peace, where political and religious jealousies are forgotten and international unity fostered and developed," became the motto of the Jerusalem YMCA.

The Jerusalem YMCA building is certainly the most beautiful building among the more than 4,000 YMCA buildings around the world and is referred to as "a sermon in stone." Elegant and impressive in every respect, it features a 152-foot tower that houses 33 bells, the largest of which weighs one and a half tons. Adjoining the tower on each side are two domed buildings.

The inscription on the façade reads in Arabic, "There is no God but God," in Hebrew, "The Lord our God, the Lord is One," and in Aramaic, citing Jesus, "I am the Way." The 40 magnificent columns around the cloistered areas represent the 40 friends of the Prophet Muhammad, the 40 years the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness, and the 40 days that Jesus fasted in the desert. The capital of each column is hewn with the plants and animals of Palestine.



A parade passing in front of the YMCA.

The vestibule at the main entrance of the building has a replica, in mosaic, of the Madaba Map. From the ceiling hangs a lamp with the globe of the earth, signifying Jerusalem as the center of the globe, holy to the nations of the world. The main building contains magnificent lounges, offices, and a coffee shop. The second floor houses the educational arm of the YMCA with a fully functioning library with 40,000 volumes and classrooms for the teaching of languages, economics, law, music, and voice training. The third and fourth floors house 80 rooms for students and visitors to Jerusalem.

The two domed buildings are connected by underground corridors and outside cloisters. One domed building has a fully functioning gymnasium with a basketball court, two squash courts, a weight room, and four outdoor red clay tennis courts. The red clay was trucked from Khan al-Ahmar, halfway towards Jericho. The tennis courts were inaugurated by the then mayor of Jerusalem, Ragheb Bey Al-Nashashibi. The one-kilometer track and the football stadium hosted all sorts of sporting events from day one.

The YMCA had the only indoor swimming pool in the whole region. Every drop of rainwater was collected from the roofs into giant cisterns to fill the pool and provide for many the only available showers. The inscription on the that domed building is in German and reads: "The only temple of God is the body of the human," and also "They can who think they can."

The second domed building features a magnificent 600-seat auditorium with excellent acoustics. Concerts, theater performances, lectures, and movies were scheduled regularly in the auditorium for the community. Palestinian musician Salvador Arnita played the four-manual Austin organ and made the carillon bells in the tower ring with joy on special occasions. Four brass lamps hanging on the auditorium walls are beautifully perforated and show the Crescent, the Star of David, the Cross, and the YMCA triangle that reflect on the wall when lit. The symbol of the Y is the triangle, signifying Spirit, Mind, and Body. The inscription on the building reads: "In Essentials, Unity; in Non-Essentials, Liberty; in All Things, Charity."

The Jerusalem YMCA has served thousands of citizens from all walks of life who were touched by its mission of peace, stability, and tranquility for all.

In 1946, that dream of peace and tranquility was devastated among the Jerusalem community when a wing of the King David Hotel was brutally bombed and collapsed, leaving over 100 dead and hundreds injured. All windows of the YMCA were shattered, and staff had to remove human remains from the building's façade, with bodies thrown across Julian's Way.

As an 11-year-old boy living in Mamillah, I heard the explosions and saw smoke rising, after which there was a deathly silence followed by a cacophony of sirens and shouts, and I saw open trucks driving up Mamillah carrying the dead or wounded.

The back of the building with spectators watching a football game on the YMCA football field.



Presenting themselves on the YMCA terrace, the newlywed couple Ass'ad and Ellen Khader.



Youth of the YMCA Boys' Department with Shafik Mansour, the head of the department (first person standing on the far right).

In 1948, the Palestinian staff of the YMCA helped the large number of refugees and wounded who were brought to the YMCA by the Red Cross, which made the YMCA its center for shelter and treatment. A huge Red Cross banner hung from the tower. One senior staff

member of the Y, Labib Nasser, in Beirut on a business trip for the YMCA, was not allowed to return to his job and home. He made his way to Jericho and established the YMCA rehabilitation center in Aqabat Jaber near Jericho, which became a first-rate educational facility.



The dedication of the YMCA in 1933.

Hundreds if not thousands of Palestinian refugees learned all kinds of vocations and became skilled. The YMCA in Beit Sahour, home of the Shepherds' Field, began rehabilitating refugees as well. The Nazareth YMCA and the YMCA in Ramallah continued the work of the YMCA in Palestine. The Y, as we frequently call it, is proud indeed of its heritage and its service under very hard conditions. The newly appointed director general is Fadi Suidan. We wish him and the Jerusalem YMCA success in all endeavors.

Rizek S. Abusharr was born in Jerusalem, Palestine, into a family whose roots go back several hundred years in Palestine. The Abusharr family are part of the Sakakini and Kudsi clans. Educated in Palestine and the United States, he married Alice Krikorian in 1961 and is father to Raja and Nabil and grandfather to four. Rizek and Alice left Jerusalem in 2006 and settled in Claremont, California, but have returned to Jerusalem annually since 2007 and led five pilgrimages, the last in 2018. Rizek served the Jerusalem YMCA for fifty years, was named one of the legends of the YMCA in 2003, and was elected to the YMCA Hall of Fame in 2004.

In 1993, the Jerusalem YMCA was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by the Austrian Parliament.



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