

# The New Generation

## Using Technology to Search for Home



By Tarek Bakri

Every week, I get three to four requests on social media from Palestinians in the diaspora asking about their houses and properties. “I have this picture of my grandfather in Qatamon. What’s happened to our house?” “My grandmother told us many stories about this fountain in their garden in Jaffa in the attached picture. Can you please tell us if it’s still there?”

In 2016, Nasser Dakkak, a Palestinian American, came with his children Khaled and Yasmeen to Jerusalem. He had an old picture of a beautiful house in the Baqa’a neighborhood in West Jerusalem. His great grandfather Chakib

Nasser Dakkak with his children Yasmeen and Khaled in front of his grandparents’ house in Baqa’a.



Dakkak built and lived in it until the *Nakba*, after which the house was confiscated based on the “Absentee Property Law.” Nasser does not have any clue what happened to the house or whether it is still standing. All he has is the picture. We did some research based on oral documentation, and then we studied the architecture of the building – its windows, stone, and balconies – alongside a little homework with “Google Maps” and its street-view feature. Now we are ready for the last step: being on the ground. Nothing on earth can compare to the smiles drawn on the faces of those kids;

**Such visual connection is important on many levels, but especially on a human level: for first-generation refugees to see and recall, for the grandchildren to feel more connected and believe in their right of return, and finally for us in Palestine to document these stories on the ground.**



The team of “We Were and Still Are ... Here” holding a video call with a Palestinian refugee in Syria who is originally from Tantura, an ethnically cleansed village south of Haifa.

with their broken Arabic accent they expressed to Nasser what they were feeling and how lucky they were to be connected to their grandfather’s house in this way. Yasmeen said: “If the *Nakba* had not happened and if my family had not been expelled from here, I would be living in this beautiful house, maybe on the ground floor near the garden.”

The “We Were and Still Are ... Here” initiative was launched more than ten years ago. During this period, hundreds of stories of destroyed

Palestinian towns and villages have been documented with the aim of preserving the Palestinian narrative in a different way through visual documentation with old pictures using modern technology such as social media and mobile applications. Third- and fourth-generation Palestinian refugees cannot get enough stories from the elderly; they want to explore and increase their feeling of attachment to their roots. A refugee born in the 1990s in Lebanon’s Shatila Camp arranges

with us to make a video call with her grandmother to see where in Haifa she was born. This experience is no longer something you merely use to remember and tell as a story. Now you are in a livestream with your homeland, tell us the story again, and maybe even remember it better now.

Holding a map drawn by his uncle, aged 96, Maher Chamma, born in Al-Yarmouk Refugee Camp in Syria, arrived in Palestine on a foreign passport in search of the family house in Acre. The story started when Maher told us that he intended to come to Palestine, for the first time in his life, to look for his family house. We had nothing to guide us except a word-of-mouth narrative describing it and a simple map drawn by Maher's uncle who was born and

Open Maps" project – founded by Palestinian engineer-in-exile Majd Shihabi in collaboration with "Visualizing Palestine," where they stitch together maps created by the British Colonial Authority in the 1940s before the *Nakba* and juxtapose them with recent satellite imagery – we were able to locate the neighborhood block but still not the exact house.

When we arrived in Acre and started our search in what is now called New Acre, with maps, photos, and mixed feelings imposed by the city, I was struck by the strong intuition of Maher after we initially got a bit lost. This Palestinian Syrian who had been born in a refugee camp and who had never before seen Palestine guided us: "Tarek, go left and then take the first right." And I did.



Maher Chamma returning to Palestine in search of his family house in Acre.

raised in the house. "You enter from Beirut-Haifa Street, half a kilometer from the West Sea. On the opposite side is the house of Abdul Fattah Al-Saadi. Our house is surrounded by tens of cypress trees." It was almost impossible to rely solely on this map. We used a British Mandate map of Acre in an attempt to locate the house, and with help of the "Palestine

There stood the house of the deceased Moustafa Chamma. The 25 cypress trees surrounded the house from three sides. The entrance, the windows, and the garden are just as Maher's uncle described. He simply stood there, amazed and in tears, sad and glad at the same time, gazing at his house in contemplation. The house has been turned into a nursery



The Gellat family in Talbiyeh.

under the Israeli Ministry of Education after being inhabited by an Israeli family right after the *Nakba*. Maher took his smartphone from the car, opened a WhatsApp group with his relatives around the world, sent a photo, and then saved and shared his current location.

More than 500 villages and towns have been ethnically cleansed during the last 74 years. Many of them are hard to recognize and others have vanished altogether under the forests of the Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael (Jewish National Fund). The Israeli occupation is systematically defacing Palestinian collective memory and changing historical names and places, but now you can easily download an application and navigate with your smartphone to any destroyed village in order to reach it and interact personally and digitally with the place. There are other applications that take you on a guided virtual-reality (VR) tour in your homeland. These VR tours are important not only to Palestinians in the diaspora but also to people living under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza who are denied freedom of movement.

Day after day, more initiatives and projects are being implemented through smooth, user-friendly means to change the new generations' understanding of Palestine. Classic documentation should not be monopolized by academics and institutions, archival materials should be an open source for pioneers to create interactive digital projects and databases. Nowadays we bring together personal narrative and the memories of our grandparents with modern digital technologies. This merger allows us to reconnect with places and bring memories alive.

*Tarek Bakri, a Palestinian engineer and researcher based in Jerusalem, is the founder of the initiative "We Were and Still Are ... Here." He received the 2018 Jerusalem Award for Culture and Creativity and is the chairman of the Palestinian Art Court in Jerusalem.*

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