

# A Journey through Sheikh Jarrah



By Huda Imam

**M**

y childhood home, where I live to this day, is situated in the middle of the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood that runs along Nablus Road, a few hundred meters from Bab al-Amoud or Damascus Gate. As we witness Palestinian families resisting forced

displacement from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah, we should ask why we Palestinians cannot return to live in our original homes in Baqa'a, Qatamon, and Talbiyeh. Let us imagine that a Jewish family before the 1948 *Nakba* lived in a house in Sheikh Jarrah in the area called Kubbanyet Jaouni or Um Haroun (Israel calls it Shim'on Hazadik). Why would the settlers who do not belong to the place be allowed and even invited to repossess their property while we Palestinians are not allowed to do so? I am holding authentic deeds that prove that my father, Fareed Imam, is the owner of our home that is located on 17 Uzya Street, Baqa'a, yet I am not allowed to live there.

During these past few weeks, as Jerusalem inhabitants and their homes in Sheikh Jarrah have come under intensified threat, childhood tales recounted by my father during our afternoon walks to St. Joseph Hospital (my birthplace) remain rooted in my mind, heart, and soul. Having reenacted stories about the Crusaders and Salah ad-Din al-Ayyoubi during history class, I was proud, at a young age, to already be familiar with tales of Richard the Lionheart and Sheikh Jarrah (*jarrah* meaning surgeon). Hussam al-Din al-Jarrahi, was Salah ad-Din's personal physician, after whom my neighborhood was named.

The socio-geopolitical significance of our neighborhood in East Jerusalem, under Jordanian rule at the time, was not regarded as a threat. We felt close to all our neighbors who belonged to different nationalities; we were one family. When my mother urgently needed my father (and there were no mobile phones at the time), she would send one of us children to the house of our neighbor, Judge Nihad Jarallah, where the annex of *Al-Mashrou' al-Insha'i* (the Arab Development Project) was located. Here, we would find Jerusalem's elegant men sitting and debating Palestine and other issues. Among them were Musa Alami, the founder of *Al-Mashrou'* and a prominent nationalist and politician who

represented Palestine at various Arab conferences, as well as Victor Hallak, the antiquarian of Jerusalem, wearing his *chapeau melon* (bowler hat).

We loved our neighbors. Gina Abuzalaf, my soulmate, with whom we climbed all the trees in Sheikh Jarrah and explored its hidden caves, was my next-door neighbor. Before 1967, her house, owned by *Al-Quds* newspaper, was rented to the Syrian Consulate. Emile and Odette Safieh, the parents of Diana, Jean, and the Palestinian diplomat Afif, who served in many countries, were also

**“Why, since they were at war, would Salah ad-Din send his personal *tabeeb* (physician), the surgeon al-Jarrahi, to cure the Lionheart, Baba?” His answer was clear, “This is exactly what tolerance means, my child.”**

■ Sheikh Jarrah, Jerusalem. Photo by Mounir Kleibo.





■ "Welcome to the steadfast neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah." Photo by Huda Imam.

next-door neighbors, as was Amani Kanaan. It was at our teenage parties at Amani's house where I first met Archbishop Hilarion Capucci, the Syrian patriarchal vicar of the Melkite Church whom Israel later deported for his political position toward Palestine.

With origins and buildings that trace to the sixteenth century, Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood hosted all Arab diplomatic missions before 1967. The Lebanese Consulate used to be in a house that belongs to the Husseini family and that now serves as the residence of the Irish representative. During the British Mandate, the mufti of Jerusalem, as well as the Lebanese diplomat and author George Antonius and his wife Katy, lived in this part of Sheikh Jarrah. The Egyptian Consulate used to be in the building where the French Consulate is today. Next to it, a house built in the 1920s style, owned by the Palestinian notable Rawhi Abdel Hadi, remains the Belgian Consulate to this day. Opposite Mount Scopus Hotel was the Saudi Arabian Consulate, occupied today by the *Shabak*

(Israeli intelligence). Many years later, when I met the Murad family during one of my visits to Jordan, I would regale them with tales of the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood and tell their grandchildren, "Your house, built by your grandfather Mureed Murad, is beautiful! It's right next to our house. So come back and kick out the *Shabak* so you can return to live in it!" As a result of the 1967 War, the house was confiscated, which was "justified" on the basis of one of the most unjust and biased laws in history, the Absentee Law that prevents Palestinians who even happened to be in the country during the 1967 War from claiming their homes. While this violates international law, many Palestinians are categorized as "absentees" despite the fact that they, the owners of these properties, were in fact physically present! Exactly the same as what happened in 1948, when our home in Baqa'a, Jerusalem's Greek Colony, was expropriated even though my father was present on his land in Jerusalem at the time.

The colorful past of the Sheikh Jarrah quarter and Baqa'a evoke nostalgia for many of us – family and friends who recall its history and people. "La Belle Epoque," this is our heritage, and we Palestinians will continue to belong to our landscape, culture, trees, birds, and fresh breeze. We will remain in our homes and draw our strength and hope from the honorable shabab al-Quds (Jerusalem youth) whom I salute, and who currently stand up and resist marginalization and ethnic cleansing with a spirit of unity, determination, and dignity, fighting for our rights in Jerusalem, until the occupation ends.

Today, Israeli occupation police headquarters are based in a building that was slated to become the Austrian Hospital in order to replace the Austrian Hospice on the Via Dolorosa. Overlooking Wadi al-Joz and the Mount of Olives, newly built settlement units occupy the site of what was once the most charming hotel of Jerusalem, the Shepherd Hotel, which was demolished in 2011. The Parklane Hotel, today the Turkish Consulate, used to house the first PLO office.

When I was a child, our favorite, most adventurous spaces to play hide and seek with the neighborhood children were the Tombeau des Rois and the caves of Kubanyet Jaouni/Um Haroun (exactly where families are currently threatened with expulsion). Before 1967, these were open spaces where no one would have thought to install a barrier or close the door on us.

The ongoing extreme physical, social, and spiritual transformation of the Sheikh Jarrah quarter scares

me. The beautiful architecture and the long-standing pine trees reaching for the blue sky offer such relief against the backdrop of the ugly reality that lies beneath them, beyond the reach of nature. Today as you walk through our neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, you smell its air polluted by "skunk water" followed by tear gas, rubber bullets, and grenades. You observe armed settlers walking around, calling "Death to Arabs." While Israel is expropriating property and violating

■ Nabil al-Kurd, a resident of Sheikh Jarrah whose family was expelled from Haifa during the *Nakba*, has become an icon of the Israeli evictions. Photo by Huda Imam.



the rights of Palestinians, its native residents and inhabitants, such as my sister, brother, and thousands of Palestinians, crave a mere visit to Palestine and to our beloved Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the military occupation invites settlers who have no links or ties with the place, the space, the city, the landscape, or the culture of Jerusalem, to come and live in Sheikh Jarrah.

As we walk south towards Damascus Gate and the Old City each day, we are hit over and over again by the sight of Palestinian homes that display an increasing number of Israeli flags, offered by the Israeli government – as if it owned the city – to arrogant groups of colonizers who do not belong to this place but who have been brainwashed to believe that they have rights that are weightier than those of the Palestinian owners. Meanwhile our homes in Baqa'a, Talbiyeh, and Qatamon, in the

western part of Jerusalem, are still waiting for us. The people who live in our beautiful houses in the new city only because they trampled on our rights and expropriated our homes do not belong and have no right to be there. The historic eleventh-century cemetery in the Mamilla (*ma'manillah* or the sanctuary of God) neighborhood, which connects the Old City to the new city, is being desecrated by the Wiesenthal Center and the Israeli occupation municipality to build the Museum of Tolerance – another atrocity that proves how the Israeli occupation attempts to delete Palestinian heritage and identity. Yet Palestinian nationhood has never been as powerful as today!

Colonization is eating up our beautiful neighborhoods in Silwan, Issawiya, and the Old City while the native inhabitants of Jerusalem have no right to build and are not protected from armed aggressive settlers.

Continuing our walk through Sheikh Jarrah on Ragheb Nashashibi Street, we pass the British Consulate and eventually reach a blue mosaic facade you cannot miss. Here lies the beautiful palace of Issaf Nashashibi, the renowned poet who invited friends such as Ma'ruf al-Rusafi, Khalil Sakakini, Ibrahim Tuqan, and other intellectuals from Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon to his literature salons in Al-Quds.

The Jewish colonization in Jerusalem has more negative implications for Israel than for us Palestinians because it opens the hidden files of 1948 and exposes the lack of restitution/repossession of Palestinian property in the new city, known today as West Jerusalem. (Seventy-seven percent of pre-1948 West Jerusalem is Arab/Palestinian-owned according to a study by Professor Salim Tamari.)



■ Issaf Nashashibi Center for Culture and Literature (Dar Al-Tifel Al-Arabi). Photo by Huda Imam.

In my eyes, the Sheikh Jarrah quarter, where I was born, grew up, and continue to live to this day, is Palestine. This is my home. My other home, also my place of belonging, perhaps even more, is our house in Baqa'a, (confiscated in 1948 by Israel and in 1998 sold for US\$5 million by Netanyahu). Today Arie King, the godfather of colonization and the settler movement, tweets that Al-Kurd house in Sheikh Jarrah is for sale!

*Huda Fareed Imam was born in Sheikh Jarrah, Jerusalem. She is the founder of Al-Quds University Centre for Jerusalem Studies and serves as a trustee in a number of institutions that include the Jerusalem Quarterly, VIP Project, and Hands Up Project. An engaged activist and occasional actress, Huda contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage and Palestinian identity in Jerusalem.*

The Consulate General of Belgium in Sheikh Jarrah. Photo by Huda Imam.

