

Why Can't They Fix the Shutters?



By Nahla
Shawkat Assali

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henever I visited our house in Baq'a, I parked my car opposite the three-story building

that my father built in the 1930s on what they now call Hamagid Street. The building has the aspects of architecture that distinguish it as an "Arab house" – in contrast to the matchbox-style apartment buildings that sprung up after 1948 in the space between our house and an adjacent row of lovely houses that belong to the Nammari family. We lived in the first-floor west unit, my grandmother and uncle in the roof terrace unit, and the other units were rented out.

Our neighborhood was very pleasant: streets were paved, buildings were neatly cared for, and the gardens were charming. Today the street is still fine and proper, but old buildings look a bit haggard, and the mix of new layers and old patinas causes dissonance to my 1948-trained eyes.

I often wonder about the Israelis who first occupied our house: how could they sleep in our beds, use our kitchen pots and wares, dig into our drawers, read our books, and eat at our dining table while enjoying the view of our back garden with its huge berry tree? They had to be quite hard-hearted to intrude upon a family's life and belongings. They remain unchanged: the people of Israel are still living in denial with regard to the wrongs they committed against us.

To add insult to injury, we have to witness further injustice: Settlers are using biased Israeli law to expel Palestinians

(again) from their rightfully owned homes in areas such as Sheikh Jarrah, making them homeless, and taking their place. Meanwhile, we Palestinians have no chance of winning any legal action in Israeli courts to reclaim our properties in West Jerusalem. So Israel's injustices persist, our bitterness and suffering grow, while the world wears its blinders.

My mother often recalled an argument she had with my father back in late April 1948, the date of our flight from Jerusalem. Following the infamous Deir Yassin massacre by Israeli forces and after a stray bullet went through the balcony door of my parents' bedroom and lodged in the bottom drawer of their dresser, my father decided to send us all – mother and five kids – to Damascus to stay with my

It was two years after the June 1967 war that my brother came to visit us. He appealed to my father to go visit our house in Lower Baq'a in West Jerusalem. This essay tells the story about the painful reaction my father had upon seeing his house.

An old photo of the Assali family home dating back to the 1940s.





Recent photo of the Assali family home in Lower Baq'a.

maternal grandmother until things settled down. Mother was packing a couple of suitcases, adding some woolen sweaters, when my father blurted out at her that there would be no need for woolen wear since we were only going to be away for two or three weeks at most. Mother packed a piece for each of us saying that Damascus was cold at night. It has now been 73 years since that incident.

In 1950, we came back to East Jerusalem to rejoin my father, leaving my two elder sisters in Damascus to finish high school. No longer a landlord, my father rented half a house in Ras al-Amoud: a kitchen, two bedrooms, no lounge, no electricity, no running water, and minimal furniture. Mother borrowed some concrete blocks and wooden boards from the landlord from which

she assembled makeshift beds for a multipurpose room: a living/dining/visitors' room during the day, and bedroom at night. Mother's can-do spirit and creativity also provided us with running water: she installed a small tank with a faucet over the kitchen sink, to which she added boiled water on the freezing cold winter days. We experienced our share of refugee life, though for a long time we were not registered as refugees because my father didn't like us to be associated with his image of refugees: destitute people standing in queues waiting for their monthly rations. His pride did not allow his name to be entered in the UNRWA records.

Between 1948 and 1967, we all made it through school and university. It was my parents' conviction that at least we were not

going to be robbed of our education. This attested to how Palestinians in general, no matter their income level, put great value on learning and gave it their all.

After the June war of 1967, West Jerusalem became accessible to Palestinians living in its eastern part. But my father refused to visit our house in Baq'a. He resisted for two years, until my brother, who was then working in Kuwait, came to visit us and appealed to him to come along to visit the house. Through cajoling and repeated arguments, my father finally relented and we drove to Baq'a. It was summer of 1969.

I was driving. Sitting next to me in the passenger seat, my father did not utter a word, but I could see the blood congested in his face. As I parked the car, he remained seated, looked up at the building and noticed one of the shutters facing the road

slanted sideways. He mumbled a few unintelligible utterances and then burst out: "Can't they fix the shutters?" Without delay, he asked me to take us back home.

My father's comment about the shutters was, and still is, one of my most hurtful memories. My brother and I regretted subjecting him to that agonizing ordeal. Was it that it really mattered to him at that moment to at least see his house in good shape? Some kind of consolation for his loss?

In Arabic, we have a word that aptly describes what my father, and countless other Palestinians who were dispossessed, felt, and still feel: *qahr*. There is no direct equivalent term in English, but one can say it conveys senses of bitterness, resentfulness, typically arising from being defeated by oppression.

Six years ago, I was again back at our house, this time with an Israeli filmmaker, Dorit Naaman, who was making a project about Palestinians' houses in West Jerusalem. One of the building's residents, a middle-aged Israeli woman, came out and talked to us. The woman claimed that the British awarded the house to her father in 1947, for his service in the British Army during the First World War. It was a blatant lie – we were living in the house then! Such are the lies they tell their children to hide the fact that they literally stole our houses. I wondered: Baq'a, Qatamon, Talbiyeh, and the rest of the Palestinian neighborhoods in West Jerusalem... How many lies have been told in those places? Those lies are part and parcel of Israel's oppression that we have to resist. These days, I don't drive any more, and it is my sons and my daughter who occasionally make the



Recent photo of the Assali grandchildren in front of their grandfather's house in Baq'a. We will not forget.

trip to Hamagid Street: they go there in order to show their children their great-grandfather's house.

Nahla Shawkat Assali is a member of the board of trustees at Birzeit University. She holds a bachelor's degree from the American University of Beirut and a master's from Indiana University. Nahla taught English in local schools until 1967, then worked in the English Department at Birzeit University as a lecturer until her retirement in 2001. She founded

Project Loving Care, a charitable organization, and Al-Saraya Center for Community Services in the Old City of Jerusalem. She has participated in several conferences abroad and spoken about the rights of Palestinians and, specifically, Palestinian women.

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Jerusalem railway station, Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection; Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-DIG-matpc-00844.