

Semiramis Revisited



By Marina Parisinou



Destino magazine,
Barcelona, July 16, 1949.

On the seventieth anniversary of the January 1948 bombing of the Semiramis Hotel in Qatamon, Jerusalem, by the Haganah, the Jewish militia, I published a post on my blog – *MyPalestinianStory.com* – about the incident. Not only was it a story I had grown up with but also a milestone for the neighborhood of Qatamon.

Qatamon was the place my mother and her family – her parents and two sisters – called home until it was no longer so and they found themselves as refugees in Cyprus. The end of their lives in their neighborhood began with the explosion at Villa Semiramis, a small, three-story hotel, two doors down from their home. And it was the beginning of the end for Qatamon itself for it caused its residents, like my own family, to abandon the neighborhood in search of safety elsewhere.

When I wrote my blog post in 2018, the bulk of the information I had on the Semiramis incident had come from the book *O Jerusalem!* written by two journalists, Larry Collins (American) and Dominique Lapierre (French), and published in 1972. It follows a number of real-life characters, weaving their stories together in order to narrate from the human perspective how the state of Israel came into existence. It is “popular history” and also the only source in which the Semiramis incident has been given more than a couple of paragraphs – or at least the only one I’d been able to find in English. It dedicates about seven pages to the Semiramis, including the background to the decision to make the hotel a target and, in the spirit of the book, the personal story of one of the survivors of the disaster.

According to *O Jerusalem!* the Haganah, wanting to stanch the exodus of Jews from “outlying areas and mixed neighborhoods,” decided to “strike a major blow inside Arab Katamon” so as to “force the Arabs out of the quarter.” Having spotted the jeep of Abd al-Qader al-Husseini, one of the commanders of Arab resistance, outside the Semiramis where al-Husseini with a couple of others had stopped for tea, Jewish intelligence concluded that the Semiramis was one of two Arab resistance headquarters in Qatamon and chose it as their target.

At around 1 am on January 5, in the midst of a fierce storm, two cars carrying Haganah operatives arrived at the hotel. They blew the cellar door open with grenades, planted

two bags of TNT at the base of the building, and exploded them a few minutes later. “The whole front of the two-storey building was blown into a mass of powdery rubble,” reported the *Palestine Post* the next day.

As far as the people of the Semiramis are concerned, the book converges with the story – apocryphal in many respects, as it turns out – that I’d always heard from Jerusalemites who remember the explosion, including my own family. The hotel was reputedly owned and operated by two Christian Arab families, the Lorenzos and Aboussouans. About two dozen people died in the explosion. Among the victims was the Spanish vice-consul, Manuel Allendesalazar (aka Manolo).



Sami Aboussouan's article in *Les Cahiers de l'Est*, 1948.

"... the Aboussouan family was virtually obliterated" states *O Jerusalem!* Only it wasn't...

The British administration condemned the attack, refuting

Haganah's claim that the hotel served as the base for the local Arab militia. The Jewish Agency "deeply" regretted "the loss of innocent lives."

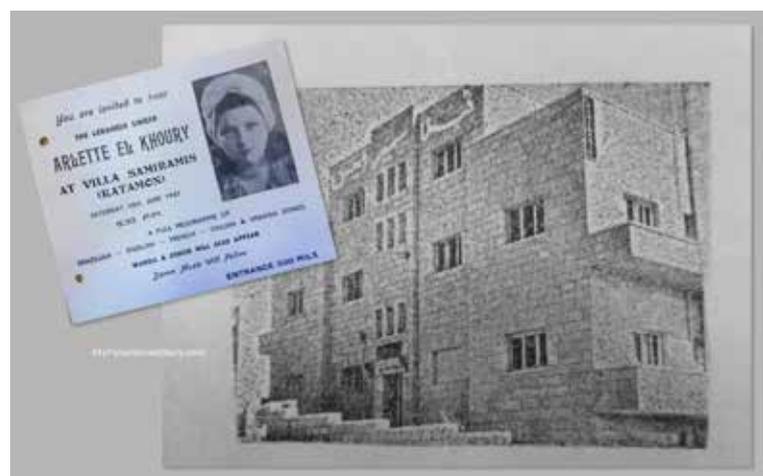
I was in my early twenties and mostly ignorant of history when *O Jerusalem!* made its way into my hands. At the time I only managed to get as far as the chapter that describes the Semiramis incident. For the first time I realized how monumental this event was which my family had experienced. I remember going to my grandmother to ask her for details. She told me how shaken up they were and how in the days that followed they would make tea for the British soldiers who were excavating the rubble, looking for survivors and dead bodies. She also told me a story that's in the book: how a dog wouldn't leave the ruins until the body of his master was recovered. Only the book didn't get the dog right...

My original post travelled as far as Spain to the screen of the



Excavating the rubble of Semiramis, January 1948, from Walid Khalidi, *Before Their Diaspora*, Photographic Collection of the Institute for Palestine Studies.

Excavating the rubble of Semiramis. Source unknown.



Semiramis Hotel, 1947.

nephew of one of the victims of the explosion. In 2020 it was also discovered by a young woman from Gaza who is related to another victim. Those two encounters in cyberspace looped me back into the story, causing me to dig deeper and farther.

In May 2020, as I was "sheltering in place" in San Francisco during the COVID-19 pandemic, an unexpected gift arrived through cyberspace: an email from Alvaro Gomez Pidal, a young photographer and filmmaker from Madrid, who had first contacted me after I published my January 2018 post. His grandmother was

Manolo's sister. Back then Alvaro had started looking into the incident and was excited to discover my blog post with references to his great-uncle.

He was now sending a copy of a 1949 issue of *Destino* magazine published in Barcelona. It included a four-page report on the Semiramis incident by Juan Ramon Masoliver, a Spanish journalist who had stayed at the hotel, sharing a room with Manolo. The journalist left Jerusalem in early December 1947, about a month before the hotel was blown up. His friend and roommate was one of the victims.



Ruins of Semiramis Hotel, August 1986. Photograph by Marina Parisinou.

Masoliver's detailed article directly contradicted several of the claims of *O Jerusalem!* I spent hours on Google, digging through Israeli state archives, and poring over old Jewish

(English-language) press, seeking verification. Not everything checked out but as I looked for answers, more questions emerged and the web of search and discovery spread wider.

Before long I had put together a tentative spreadsheet of the survivors of the blast. Then, based on documents from the Israeli archives dating back to the British Mandate era, I built a timeline for the life of the hotel. I was surprised to see how short it was – barely more than a year. It took longer to build the hotel than it had time to operate. There's something about traumatic events that seems to sear the places they impact in memory, creating the illusion that they've been there forever.

As serendipity would have it, around the same time, I was contacted, again through my blog, by a young Palestinian woman, currently studying in the United States, whose uncle was also killed in the Semiramis at age 16. She too had a full story to tell with corrections and enhancements to the record – and to my survivor spreadsheet.

As my research picked up steam, I was put in touch with a relative of one of the survivors. Dr. Nadia

From the *Palestine Post*, January 9, 1948.

Madrid Funeral Service For Spanish Consul

The funeral service for Manuel Allendes Salazar Travesedo, Viscount Tapia, the Spanish Vice-Consul who was killed in the Hotel Semiramis explosion in Jerusalem on Sunday night, took place in Madrid on Wednesday, A.F.P. reports.

Among those who attended were his father, Count Montefuerte; the Foreign Minister, Alberto Artajo; the Under-Secretary of Foreign Affairs; and members of the Diplomatic Corps.

Commenting on the death of Viscount Tapia the Madrid newspaper "Ya," which generally represents Spanish Foreign Office opinion wrote yesterday that the Jews were using terrorist methods in their fight, as well as constant, sentimental "anti-fascist propaganda."

Non-Arab consular officials in Jerusalem are wearing white arm-bands with the letters C.C. (Consular Corps.)

Many Jewish consular officials working in Katamon have still not returned to work.



From the *New York Times*, January 7, 1948.

Aboussouan is a first cousin of the late Dr. Sami Aboussouan who, together with his two brothers, walked out of the Semiramis alive that fateful night while their parents lay dead under the rubble. Nadia was most generous and provided me with a wealth of information.

To begin with, she clarified that the Aboussouan family had no stake whatsoever in the Semiramis. Also, only two Aboussouans died: Sami's parents, Lutfi and Eleanora. The latter was one of the sisters of Rauf

Lorenzo, the hotel's manager. If there was one family about which one could say they were "virtually obliterated," that would undoubtedly be the Lorenzos. Among the two dozen victims were Rauf, his wife, their eldest son, Hubert, and four of Rauf's sisters (Eleanora being one of them). The other five of Rauf's children survived.

Later Nadia made available to me a diary that Sami had written about the event. Having a first-person testimony is more than I could have hoped for.



Ruins of Semiramis Hotel with the author's grandfather's house in the background. (Source: Israeli Archives).

suppose, a touching incident like this packs more punch if a foreign diplomat is involved.

Another surprise was discovering that Rauf Lorenzo was not the owner either. I found documents in the archives indicating who the owners were – the brothers Yusef and Salim Shishan – and appointing Rauf to the position of manager. However, I can easily see how, being the manager of the hotel, Rauf had become identified with it. The Semiramis being a small, neighborhood hotel, rather than part of a big chain, the manager would have been its public face. I could imagine people referring to Lorenzo's hotel – and even himself talking about *his* hotel – without anyone being particularly concerned as to who actually owned it on paper.

In another stroke of serendipity, I became aware that Silvio's son had been following me on Facebook all along, having come across my original Semiramis post. Mark Lorenzo and his mother have eagerly and generously offered to help me in my research. Thanks to them, I now have another first-person testimony, that of Silvio, which again matches closely Masoliver's article and expresses outrage at *O Jerusalem!*

Getting the facts of a story right is hard on a good day. When it comes to major disasters that shake people up and cause rumors to fly all over, like birds in a shape-shifting murmuration, it becomes near impossible. Much time needs to pass before the dust can settle and a clear picture can emerge. *O Jerusalem!* stepped into a gap in time and, for whatever reasons, provided some erroneous information which in the absence

of other sources has practically defined the Semiramis incident.

In an August 2021 blog post (*Semiramis Revisited*), I announced my intention to write a book about the incident. I'm not an academic, certainly not a historian, but I am confident that I can tell the story of the Semiramis more fully and accurately than it's been told so far. Having had the benefit of the information this preliminary research has yielded, I owe it to all the people whose lives have been altered by this event – whether terminated, traumatized, or impacted in one way or another – to tell their story.

Marina Parisinou was born in Cyprus to a Greek Jerusalemite mother and a Cypriot father. She publishes her research on her maternal family's history on her blog, MyPalestinianStory.com. She is also one of the participants and an associate producer in the interactive documentary Jerusalem, We Are Here (info. JerusalemWeAreHere.com). Marina is currently researching a book on Qatamon and the Semiramis bombing.

Letterhead of Semiramis.



The diary had been written within a few months of the incident and was published later that year in Lebanon in *Les Cahiers de l'Est*. A first look revealed that it had been the basis for Masoliver's imaginary diary. Some sections were exact copies, others had been added to with information Masoliver received from Silvio Lorenzo (the eldest surviving son of the hotel's manager), and from other sources. Masoliver credits both Silvio and Sami as sources. The latter is also credited as a source by *O Jerusalem!* He was in fact one of the people featured in the story, and his diary was mentioned in the bibliography. To my great surprise, however, in

more than a few instances the book was not consistent with the diary. Nadia told me that Sami had been very upset when the book was first published. Now I could see why.

For instance, in addition to the discrepancies regarding the ownership of the hotel and the number of victims from the two families, Sami confirmed something Masoliver also mentions: The dog that wouldn't leave the rubble until his master's body was recovered was not that of Manolo, as *O Jerusalem!* claims, but rather Brackie, the Lorenzo dog, who hovered over the area where the body of Hubert was found. But, I

