

# Generations of a Family in Palestine



By Nadia Aboussouan



GENEALOGIE ANNOTEE  
de la  
FAMILLE MATHIAS ABOUSSOUAN  
Ca 1816

Comte de Forbin on a visit with the Aboussouan family.

Carmel in Haifa, the French consulate in Jerusalem, multiple convents and churches, and the buildings of Point 4 and Point 5 for the British army, consisting of barracks, officers' family quarters, and military installations. He also built multiple private villas, including the villa of Constantin and Katy Salameh (Katy was my father's sister) on Salameh Square. Constantin Salameh was a very capable and well-known businessman. At a banquet he hosted at the Salameh Villa in honor of Prince Talal of Jordan, he presented each of the hundred guests without referring to any notes.

Some of the buildings for which my father was the engineer and contractor were designed by the French architect Marc Favier. The two of them rehabilitated the Church of the Pater Noster on the Mount of Olives. The church has a covered walkway, somewhat like a half cloister, with large stone facades on the wall, carved with the Lord's prayer in many languages.

I was born in Jerusalem, in 1932. My brother and I had a wonderful childhood. We lived in Upper Baqa'a, on the second floor of a rented house with two bedrooms and a bathroom, plus facilities for our help, Salma, who was from the small town of Birzeit (lit. the oil well), north of Ramallah, where her parents owned olive trees. Like most women of her class, she wore long dresses, generally black or white, hand-embroidered in very small cross-stitching across the chest and down the side seams, mostly in red silk. The everyday dresses were black and the embroidery less abundant but still quite rich. She would allow me to help with the cross-stitching, to my delight. The headdress was a simple cap that fit the head but it, too, was abundantly embroidered. A light, white shawl was draped over the cap. The Sunday outfit, preferably white but often black, was much more luxurious. On



Gilbert and Nadia ready for Greek Orthodox Palm Sunday.

We can trace our family history in Palestine as far back as 1643. The family became rapidly involved with the Catholic church starting with the Franciscan fathers who were in charge of the Catholic pilgrims who flocked to the Holy Land. One of our ancestors became the right hand of the Custodian, with the title of First Dragoman of the Holy Land. Since that time, the job became hereditary, being passed on to the oldest man in the family. As dragomans they had to be highly educated and literate in many languages in order to communicate with all Catholic churches. They spoke Arabic, Turkish – to communicate with the Ottomans – Latin, German, French, and Spanish. We have official letters from corresponding countries recognizing the efficiency of these dragomans. My grandfather held this title and was effectively working at the Latin Catholic Patriarchate that had been established in 1847. When he became blind, his son Loutfi helped him with his responsibilities, even though he was only the second son. His older brother, Negib, studied law in Istanbul and eventually became governor of Beirut, taught law at the Jesuit university, and later became a supreme court justice in Lebanon. Loutfi, who was director of a European bank, was blown up with his wife and seven members of her family in the bombing of the Semiramis Hotel in Qatamon, in January 1948.

My father was the first engineer to build with reinforced concrete, after his graduation from the Ecole Centrale de Paris in 1921. He has many buildings to his name in several Arab countries but primarily in Palestine and Jordan: the Church of Gethsemane, the monastery of the Carmelite nuns at the top of Mount



In Jerusalem in front of the YMCA. From the left, Nadia, her mother's sister, Nadia's brother, and her cousin Jacques Yamine from Nazareth.

the cap they stitched money – from copper all the way to gold, depending on their or their husband's fortune. She used to take my brother with her to visit her home. He was very close to her and was always well received and enjoyed the food, the family, and roaming around in the olive grove.

Once a week, a woman clad in an outfit similar to Salma's, would come to wash the clothes and linens. A large Primus, fueled by kerosene, would be set up in the narrow yard, with a large metal container on top. Soap and bluing were used for sparkling clean laundry.

Six days a week, shortly after the crack of dawn, similarly dressed women would walk down the streets, each with a very large basket on her head, selling fruit and vegetables, picked that same morning in the nearby village of Battir. They rode the train as there were no roads between

Jerusalem and Battir. Besides picking wild strawberries and blueberries in France, I have never tasted such fresh and flavorful products.

We had no electric iceboxes so ice was delivered weekly. In Palestine, much of the cooking was prepared in large round trays that would not fit in a home oven. Communal ovens were the norm. When you made your own pita bread, you'd take it there to be baked. In my child's memory, these ovens were about six feet deep and nine feet wide. A good fire would be burning in the center. The *suniehs* (large, round baking containers) were placed closer to or farther from the fire according to their contents. The



Nadia and classmates during her last year at the school in Jerusalem. Nadia is the last on the right. The ribbons reveal their class standing.

pita bread was placed far from the fire and had to be turned regularly. One big advantage of going to the oven was that you could buy the top or bottom of the pita bread on which olive oil would be spread, covered with *za'atar*, a thyme concoction, and rolled. Children would stop every morning on their way to school for this specialty.

My father went early to the office, came home for lunch at about 2pm, took a nap, and then went for a game of bridge. One of his partners was

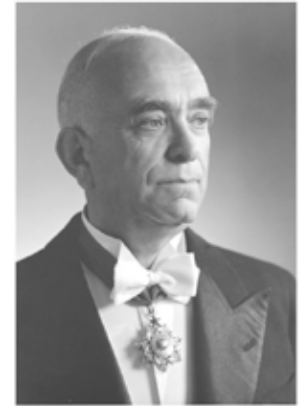
a wonderful Jewish lady who lived in Talpiot. Then dinner and bridge again, unless my parents were invited out for the evening. We did not need babysitters as our help lived in the house. My mother passed away after a long sickness when I was 12. After that, our social life was limited to our extended family and close friends.

As we were Roman Catholics, Sunday church was a must. However, on Palm Sunday we went to the Orthodox church that typically celebrated one or more weeks later. All the children were dressed in their best Sunday outfits and carried their best Sunday outfits and carried their palm branches decorated with fresh flowers, wax eggs, and figurines. At some point in the service, all the children stood up, formed a circle and went around the church several times, proudly holding their decorated palms.

I was a perfect tomboy and went against all the rules of dress for a girl. With my brother's shorts and a pith



Nadia's father with coat and tie inspecting the iron reinforcement. He often sent Nadia to check it, but what does a little girl know!!! The house no longer exists. It may have been unfinished and belonged to Anton Batato in Upper Baqa'a.



**Sélim Aboussouan**

"Il Kawkab Il Watani"  
(The Star of Jordan Medal)

Nadia's father Selim Matthias Aboussouan.

helmet, no one suspected I was a girl, and I was free to roam to friends and family within walking distance. In retrospect, I am amazed at how safe we were. We played in our street which was practically a dead end. A British girl my age and I were captains of our soccer team and spent many hours playing in our makeshift stadium. Two older cousins of mine – sons of a great-uncle who owned a pharmacy close to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher – taught us how to build kites with bamboo and newspaper, and also how to use our Easter eggs for the best results.

We colored our Easter eggs but instead of coloring, we boiled the eggs either in onion skins which gave them a beautiful copper color (much prettier than the ones in the grocery stores now) or in a piece of an old fez to make them red. We did not have egg hunts. Instead, we carried our eggs in a basket to challenge the other children. We learned to evaluate the hardness of the eggshell against our teeth. Then one child would hold



From the left, Nadia's father, Selim Aboussouan; her mother, Therese Morcos Aboussouan; the French architect Marcel Favier, and the contractor in Selim Aboussouan's office.

the egg in his fist with the hardest part between his index and his thumb. Another child would hit that egg and the egg that broke would go to the winner.

We did not own bicycles but would rent them from a place not too far away from our house, and then we would go riding on the road to Bethlehem. No one ever bothered us although we were not accompanied by any adults.

One day we visited the village of Battir by simply walking on the railroad track. Arriving in the lush valley of Battir, where our fruit and vegetables came from, we discovered that there was an echo. One of us called out:

"You, Jews, get out of our country." A few minutes later an Arab farmer came down to scold us. "You kids are being nasty. We do have Jewish farmers in this valley and they are hardworking and our neighbors. Shame on you!" I have always wondered about him, hoping that he and his family did not suffer in 1948.

My younger brother, Gilbert Selim Matthias Aboussouan, like all the male members of our family, went to Collège des Frères, the Christian Brothers' school. They were not priests but educators. He subsequently studied medicine in France where he practiced and also became very active in trying to explain the Palestinian problems, sometimes feeling threatened. He belonged to the Palestinian physicians group in France and continued his activity until his death in 2019. His son has a PhD in physics and teaches math and physics in English at high school and college levels in French schools on the Riviera.

Like all the women in our family, I went to the French school created by Marie-Alphonse Ratisbonne, a rich Jewish gentleman, and his brother Marie-Theodore, both of whom had converted to Catholicism. The convent was called Notre Dame de Sion (Our Lady of Zion). The church, which had been built in the Old City

of Jerusalem, on the Via Dolorosa, encompassed a beautiful old arch in the chapel, and the whole complex was built over the courtyard of Pontius Pilate. You can see the huge slabs of stone with ruts made by the chariots over 2,000 years ago. At some point, my father became the engineer and contractor for the school.

I started school at the age of five and I think that I was immediately a boarder as I remember going on outings on Thursdays and Sundays. The older girls would take care of me and occasionally carry me so I would not get too tired.

I was a poor student and quite lazy. The mother superior, Mère Godlaine, had to make a decision every year whether to allow me to be promoted to the next grade. I was, however, very good in math, so she would say: "She can learn all the rest later." She was a severe and imposing person. My father used to tell me: "If you knew as much as one of her fingernails, you would be very smart!"

The school had two levels of nuns and three levels of students, according to their financial capabilities. For the nuns, the ones with a higher education and dowry (nuns carry a dowry, when possible, as they enter the order) were the teachers and had the educational responsibilities. The others were the caretakers of the school, in charge of the laundry, the kitchen, the cleaning. As for the students, the ones who paid full tuition were definitely privileged: they only had to study and behave. Those who paid only partial tuition were a small group. The third group went to the school for free but had to work with the nuns to take care of the school facilities. Their free education consisted of four hours

daily during which they learned the basics.

All of us had to learn embroidery. The school was on the Way of the Cross, and many pilgrims who stopped by daily to visit were eager to buy any embroidery made in Jerusalem. This served me well, as I embroidered our own linen and made gifts for friends after my marriage. We had interesting organized games on the terraces. Basically, we were happy there. Two interesting things happened while I was at school. The most important was the news of the signing at Reims of the Instrument of Surrender, ending World War II. Given that most of the nuns were French, it was exhilarating. The second was an invasion of locusts. Very dramatic.

We had to learn three languages: French, English, and Arabic. As Palestine was under the British Mandate, we had to strive for the British Matriculation, but being in a French school we primarily learned French history and geography. Arabic is a rich, beautiful language. In the French dictionary, even before 1948, the Israeli flag was prominent and geographically Israel extended from the Mediterranean to, if my memory is correct, the Tigris. We spent many hours trying to blot out all this from the dictionary. Although the student body was primarily Christian, we had several Muslim students. I remember Leyla al-Husseini, the mufti's daughter, and Leyla Nashashibi, the granddaughter of Ragheb Nashashibi who also was an important political figure. The latter Leyla and I were very close friends and I spent many a week at their large property that had a huge carob tree.

My first memory of trouble in Palestine was when I was about five years old, in 1937–38. We were living in Haifa while my father was building



Members of the Aboussouan and Salameh families at Constantin Salameh's villa on Salameh Square.



Nadia's maternal grandfather's family, the Morcoses.

the Carmelite monastery. When travelling to Jerusalem for business, he took me with him. I had to sit in the back, not for safety but because I had the responsibility of handing him the correct headdress: pith helmet in areas of Jewish snipers and *tarboush* (fez) in areas of Palestinian dominance. Each group would shoot at the enemy's passing headdress.

In 1947 I left for Strasbourg, France, to complete my education there. After pre-med and medical school in Strasbourg, I also attended medical school in Lebanon at the French School of Medicine, one of four women making up 10 percent of the class. Also in 1947, my father was asked to add a wing to the Philadelphia Hotel he had built in Amman. Because he had to commute between Jerusalem and Amman and the situation was worsening, he thought that it would be safer for my mother and brother to stay in Alexandria, where my father's brother

and sister were living, until things would settle down. He ended up living and working in Amman after the *Nakba*.

In my last year in Lebanon, while visiting my father in Amman, I met a group of oil prospectors from Mississippi who talked me into applying for my medical residency at a university hospital in the South. The oil specialist of the group, Robert Woodruff Tyson Jr, became my husband a year later in Mississippi. We have three children and two grandsons. I was the first woman in a radiology residency at the University of Mississippi Medical Center as well as the first woman in most of the hospitals where I worked, always in Mississippi. I have been a Southern lady for 64 years. I adopted the South and the South adopted me. The South has a lot in common with the Middle East. With my husband and my brother and his wife, I went back twice to visit the Old City, staying at the American Colony Hotel.

*Nadia Aboussouan Tyson, MD, studied medicine in France and Lebanon. She settled in Mississippi, USA, with her husband, Robert Woodruff Tyson Jr, and worked as a radiologist until her retirement. Nadia and Robert have three children and two grandchildren.*

SCAN  
TO SHARE

