

Memories of Jerusalem



By Samia Nasir Khoury

In 1945, while my sister Rima, my brother Hanna, and I were in the boarding section of Birzeit High School, my parents moved to Jerusalem and were living at the YMCA as the house they had rented in Upper Baka'a was not yet ready. The YMCA had a nice hotel as well as a restaurant and a coffee shop, besides its auditorium and the well-equipped gymnasium, swimming pool, and library. During the summer holidays, we would join the YWCA located on Mamilla Street, but because of its limited space, we were allowed to use the facilities of the



Party at Saba Abdo's in Jerusalem.



Samia's sister Rima and her cousins loved to meet with friends for parties and gatherings.

YMCA. After the gym session on Saturdays, my regular treats were jelly buns and a milkshake at the soda fountain. I still remember that the play *Tight Corner*, in which my sister Rima and two of my cousins, Laura and Diana, took part was performed in the YMCA auditorium. We also enjoyed attending the yearly international dance festival and other performances, such as the musical *The Mikado*, which I still remember. Our piano teacher at Birzeit, Mr. Salvador Arnita, was also the director of music at the YMCA as well as the director of the Palestine Broadcasting Station Orchestra. We were fascinated by the way he played the great pipe organ in the YMCA auditorium with both his hands and feet. And more so, when he played the carillon, which would ring the bells of the tower. I cannot think of Jerusalem without these lovely memories.

These memories include, of course, the Sunday treats at the National

Restaurant hosted by our twin aunts Victoria and Lizzy. They were social workers who both lived in Jerusalem for some time before Lizzy moved to Jaffa and Victoria to Nablus. The National Restaurant was near Barclays Bank, not far from New Gate. Afterwards we would walk to the end of the road near the post office where we would have delicious Syrian ice cream at the famous Umayyah shop. All that after we were done with our regular visit to the orthodontist.

In 1946 we enjoyed being in our new home in Upper Baka'a where we would spend weekends and other holidays. It was a beautiful quiet area with nice neighbors. I remember in particular Fouad and Muhebbba Saba, their two boys Suhail and Fawzi, and their daughter Nadia. Easter breakfast at their home was a memorable event. We all used to worship at St. Paul's Church, and while the older generation had their coffee at Rev. Marmourah's



Rima's high school graduation in Jerusalem 1947.



Rima's confirmation at Saint Paul's Church in Jerusalem.

house up the hill from the church near the Palestine Broadcasting Station, we would enjoy playing the pianola, pretending to produce our own music. Nadia was close in age to Hanna and myself, and even though I had not seen her since those last days in Jerusalem, I was very happy to hear her news when her son, the renowned flautist Wissam Boustany, came to visit the Edward Said National Conservatory and performed at the YMCA hall in Jerusalem in November 2002. He dedicated the concert to Wilhelmine Khoury Baramki because she had helped him locate his grandmother's house. After that, I kept in touch with Nadia, until sadly she passed away in August 2020. It felt like losing her twice.

Across the street, there was a forest where Fayez Khoury and his wife Vera and their two young boys Shukri and Rajai lived. Down the hill lived Dr. Daoud Boulos and his family, the Otaqis, and the Kawars. It was a beautiful neighborhood, and we used to spend time working in the garden and sitting on the veranda reading the books we borrowed from the YMCA library and watching the boys heading to St. Francis Club, down the hill from our house.

In our neighborhood there was also the Ummeh College founded by Shukri Harami, and a new apartment building where young Dr. Kamal, one of the first Palestinian veterinarians, was living. He named his first daughter Rima, after my sister.

On the main road to Bethlehem, not very far from our house and across the street from the Orthodox Club, we used to rent bicycles and enjoy biking around the area. The Orthodox Club was open to the entire community, irrespective of faith, and we used to enjoy many activities and different kinds of bazaars. We also had two aunts, from the Baramki and the Farradj families, who lived in Jerusalem long before we moved there, and my older sister Rima had much fun going to parties with their children. One of our regular activities on Sunday afternoons was going to the movies either at the Regent Cinema in the German Colony or at the Studio above the Rex Cinema on Princess Mary Street. Life was simple and joyful.

In 1947, Birzeit held its graduation ceremony for the classes of 1946 and 1947 in the YMCA auditorium, the first ever celebration outside of Birzeit. The graduation seemed like

a farewell to that beautiful place that was full of memories of our teenage days. We did not realize at the time that it would be our last summer in Jerusalem. My sister Rima and three of our cousins, Laura, Diana, and Shafik, were among the graduates, as was my cousin Gabi from the class of 1946, whose graduation had been postponed at the time.

Later on, while Rima was studying for her matriculation exams, my brother Hanna and I joined the YMCA evening school to learn how to type in English and Arabic, taking advantage of the good bus transportation network. Number 6 would take us to Mamilla, and from there we headed to the YMCA evening school that was held in a flat that was separate from the main YMCA building, located behind Princess Mary Street. The bus stop in Mamilla was located in front of Piccadilly Hotel which had an open terrace and was a meeting place for young and old men, intellectuals, writers, and politicians. It belonged to the Aweidah family, whose three children were studying at Birzeit at the time. In that neighborhood lived a woman from whom we used to rent clothes for the plays we performed in Birzeit. After 1948, she brought all

her paraphernalia to Birzeit and we never saw her again.

In the fall of 1947, Rima went to college in Beirut, and Hanna and I went back to the boarding school in Birzeit, and that was the end of our lovely and memorable Jerusalem days.

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