

Editorial

Of Memoirs, Miracles, and Sanctification

The current issue of *Jerusalem Quarterly* returns to the themes of biography, autobiography, and memoir, celebrated in several previous issues. Contributions in this selection address their authors' personal coming of age in the city of Jerusalem or its environs (Silwan, Bayt Jala, Lydda). But these biographical vignettes address broader issues of biography's contribution to the social history of Palestine. Autobiographic literature – that is, the subjective narratives of actual people – can help trace changes in the texture of urban social consciousness in the Holy City. Thus it allows for the examination of the emergence of new mores, normative ethics, and the decline of old conventions and solidarities in, for example, the city's transition from Ottoman decentralism and the emergence of a separatist Palestinian nationalism, or in the aftermath of the momentous events of 1948, as well as in historical periods that are often overlooked because they are seen as mundane.

Jerusalemite autobiographies of the early twentieth century have been confined (mostly) to individuals who experienced the period from a relatively privileged position – it was mostly professional and upper-class men (and hardly any women) who left memoirs and diaries. Here, we include a broader cross section of Palestinians. These selections, and those in the forthcoming issue of *JQ*, nuance and even redefine the categories and boundaries that have so often been imposed upon the Holy City. Here Jerusalem characters, downtrodden or elevated, sacred or worldly, have bequeathed to us written narratives of their lives that illuminate the transformation of the city and its people over the last century and a half.

These lives, sometimes contemporaneous, reveal worlds of contrasting possibilities. In a town that can be crossed from one end to the other in less than three hours walking, or one

hour by carriage, they shared a certain common life, while exhibiting different ideologies, tastes, inclinations, and hopes that may now be unthinkable in a world of homogenizing globalization. They uncover a city that, despite its grim reputation and communal warfare, is surprisingly alive with intellectual, cultural, and political debates. Religion itself is not cloistered and inward looking, but ecstatic and miraculous.

Jacob Norris writes a biography of Saint Marie-Alphonsine Ghattas (1843–1927), founder of the Sisters of the Rosary in the nineteenth century and the third Palestinian woman canonized by the Catholic Church after Mary of Nazareth (28 BC–32 AD) and Saint Barbara of ‘Abbud (first century AD). Norris draws on magical realist and Arabic folkloric methods of storytelling to recount a widely attested miracle that occurred in Bethlehem in 1909 – the death and subsequent resurrection of a Bethlehem merchant named Jubra’il Dabdoub by St. Marie-Alphonsine – and the lives that unfolded around it. Magical realism serves as both a literary genre and an approach to history, capturing lives entwined in processes of rapid technological change, migration, and political belonging, but also in the worlds of piety, magic, and religiosity. Marie-Alphonsine’s interactions with the supernatural, central to her life narrative, come alive in Norris’s telling:

As Marie-Alphonsine was sifting wheat with the orphan children in the playground of the Sisters’ school, she instinctively began to pray the Rosary and make the sign of the cross. Getting up to fetch some water, she opened the well to find a strange snake writhing in the water, changing its size as it moved and flicking its enormous forked tongue. People gathered from all over the town, including a Salesian priest who poured holy water into the well. But none could remove the hideous beast from the water. In the morning Marie-Alphonsine opened the well to find the snake had disappeared. For the rest of that summer the Sisters drank from the well until the water had run dry. When they washed the base of the well they found no hole from which the snake might have escaped, and so were left with no option but to conclude they had been visited by the Devil. As Marie-Alphonsine recorded in her notebook, “We deduced al-Shaytan had been so enraged by our recitation of the Rosary that he was thrashing around inside the well. The experience brought no fear to us, but rather increased our veneration of Mariam our Mother.

As Norris weaves such popular religious beliefs and practices into his retelling of St. Marie-Alphonsine’s life and miracles, he also explores remarkable tales of Palestinian migration in the nineteenth century. Recent scholarship has offered rich and nuanced access to the experiences of nineteenth-century Palestinian migrants to North and South America, but Jubra’il Dabdoub, the man for whom Marie-Alphonsine performed her most famous miracle, had traveled different routes, embarking on merchant voyages first to Copenhagen and later to the Philippines.

Several decades later, a different kind of remarkable journey led George Rodenko from the town of Klinty in Russian Ukraine to the Palestinian city of Jaffa. One of the many

uprooted by the twin forces of war and revolution, Rodenko – known to many in Palestine as al-duktur al-maskubi, the Maskobi Doctor – found himself studying medicine at the American University of Beirut, from which he graduated in June 1927. After practicing medicine in Tripoli, Rodenko set out for Gaza and eventually settled down in Jaffa, where he married Frida Bahou, the head nurse of the clinic, and started a family. The Rodenko family fled Jaffa for Ramallah in 1948 and remained there after the Nakba. Dr. Rodenko passed away in 1974, before he was able to finish his memoirs, but his reminiscences of his early years are excerpted here, a testament to the great upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century, but also the resilience of those who survived them. Despite its many hardships and tensions, Dr. Rodenko recalls pre-Nakba Jaffa fondly: “In the afternoons, I used to go to a coffeehouse called Abu Shakush. I played pinochle and rummy with Dr. Burdkush and Mr. Saba, who was a pharmacist. In the evenings, we went to play cards at our neighbor Mrs. Halliway’s.” This is one of the characteristics of life narratives – how they reflect unabstracted lives, where distinctions between public and private, the social and the professional, are blurred to the point of obliteration.

This is also one of the contributions of “A Young Man of Promise,” Sarah Irving’s Ibrahim Dakkak Award-winning profile of Stephan Hanna Stephan, archaeologist, ethnographer, translator, broadcaster, and scholar of Jerusalem during the British Mandate period. Beyond an examination of the scholarly output of this polymath, Irving also foregrounds “the complexity of life under the Mandate, in which relations between Palestinian Arabs and Jews and members of the British administration overlapped on a daily basis, defying clear lines and easy ex post facto assumptions about personal and professional relations between the different communities.” At the same time, Irving performs an invaluable excavation and reassembling of Stephan’s largely forgotten, but remarkable and varied, career. “The breadth of his duties and knowledge is highlighted by the range of publications and projects which bear his mark,” Irving notes, “ranging from translations of Ottoman legal documents, to co-authorship of Dimitri Baramki’s report on excavations at a Nestorian hermitage in the Jordan Valley.” And these are just samples of Stephan’s scholarly pursuits. He also made accessible his wealth of knowledge via a number of guidebooks for travelers and tourists.

Of course, as Tarif Khalidi’s playful but eloquent life-narrative reveals, books are not just the product of an intellectual life, but its sustenance as well. It is perhaps not surprising that Khalidi, one of the leading intellectual historians of the Arab world, author of *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* and *The Muslim Jesus*, and translator into English of the Qur’an, has decided to structure an autobiography – *al-Kutub wa Ana* (Books and I), from which his article here is extracted – through his engagement with books. Books serve here as a source of delight, tension, solace, and intellectual inquiry. Khalidi’s adventures with books – and with history, for the two are intertwined – start at al-Umma School in Jerusalem, whose principal was Shukri Harami, “from whom one glare was enough to silence the rowdiest of classes.”

He taught history and perhaps at the time I sought his approval. Hence, from that distant time, history became my favorite subject. My passionate

interest in history pushed me from Kamil Kilani to Jirji Zaydan, whose novels I devoured: *al-‘Abbasa*, *Sister of al-Rashid*, *al-Amin and al-Ma’mun*, *The Conquest of al-Andalus*, *The Fugitive Mamluk*, *Salah al-Din and the Intrigues of the Assassins*, and many, many other tales that I cannot now recall. No doubt, a whole generation of Arab youths read these alluring stories that revived Arab history as vivid literature, full of lifelike characters that the reader could almost see, touch, and converse with, feeling happiness during their joyous occasions and crying for their losses. Zaydan’s stories included fast action within precise timing and location. The scenes within his stories were cinematic, stealing the readers’ breath and leaving them unable to put the book down, even during meals or at bedtime.

From these early childhood textual encounters, Khalidi proceeds to bring alive the important intellectual and political debates from his life in Jerusalem, Beirut, Oxford, and Chicago.

Any collection of modern Palestinian life narratives must also reckon with themes of loss. Of Reja-e Busailah’s long-awaited memoirs, *In the Land of My Birth: A Palestinian Boyhood* (Institute for Palestine Studies, 2017) – appearing some forty years after his seminal recollection of the fall of Lydda in *Shu’un Filastiniyya* – and from which we are publishing an excerpt here, Elias Khoury writes:

In apprehending life through sound, through touch, and through the presence or absence of the echo of objects, the blind boy leads us to Palestine through his experience of loss. We accompany him to the blind schools of Jerusalem and Hebron and then back to Lydda and Yafa (Jaffa) to complete his secondary education. Along the way we are offered a rich account of Palestinian life and of the boy’s world, a world largely dominated by family, teachers, comrades, and neighbors, of visits to relatives, of school boys’ games and pranks and rivalries, of customs and rituals, folk remedies, and incantations and Qur’anic lessons. Increasingly, there is the growing boy’s excitement about his studies and passion for literature. Locales are lovingly depicted, and throughout the memoir, the feel of objects and their contours become our guides to a place that is simultaneously lost and present. Loss affirms presence, imbuing it with a different flavor.

The intertwining of loss and presence are further explored in reflections that delve into the impact of two of the most notorious and tragic periods of Palestinian history: 1948 and 1967. In “To Live and Work in Jerusalem,” the story of Um Hani as told to Diala Shammas, her granddaughter, and *JQ*’s own Penny Johnson, Um Hani describes how, in 1948, her family “fled the Musrara neighborhood after the Jewish forces demolished three houses in their neighborhood but not until Abu Hani had evacuated their neighbor, a Jewish lady – a widow – and her children, to safety.”

Thus, the loss of the Moroccan quarter affirms the presence of Jerusalem's holy sites, while al-Aqsa, the Dome of the Rock, and the Buraq Wall bear witness to the loss of the Moroccan quarter. As these life-narratives indicate, however, Jerusalem is not merely a place – even if it is a space of rich history and symbolic significance – but a lived terrain, in which people read and write, move and interact, heal and even perform miracles. And just as no two individuals live Jerusalem in the same way, the narratives of these lives express their variety, whether it is a life structured around books, a life narrated to a granddaughter, a life experienced through sound and touch and smell, or a life whose subject is conjured through magical realism and Palestinian folklore.

In addition to its biographic and autobiographic content, this issue of *JQ* also features material that addresses the current dynamics shaping Palestinian lives. In “Institutionalized Separation and Sumud in Jerusalem's Periphery,” anthropologist Oren Kroll-Zeldin examines the implications of the construction of the separation wall on the community of Shaykh Sa'd, which technically falls outside of the Jerusalem municipality but which is intimately linked – socially, economically, and geographically – with Jabal al-Mukabir, located within the municipal boundary. In fact, a checkpoint in the separation barrier now blocks “the only way in and out of Shaykh Sa'd – except for an unpaved road from the village down to Wadi Nar/Kidron Valley and up a treacherous slope that connects to the West Bank,” stifling the local economy and putting intense pressure on local residents. Kroll-Zeldin explores the impact on holders of Jerusalem residency and West Bank identification papers and production of hierarchy and tension as a result. He also addresses the resilience of Shaykh Sa'd residents, focusing in particular on the establishment of a taxi drivers collective to organize and regulate transportation equitably in the face of a dwindling customer base eroded by Israel's chokehold. It is not a picture of triumphant victory that the taxi drivers paint, but the grim reality of survival under unbearable pressure. As Ziyad, one of the drivers in the collective, says: “If the world isn't going your way, you go its way.”

The collective struggle for dignity and survival that the taxi drivers of Shaykh Sa'd exemplify is under attack not only by Israeli policies, but by the insidious individualization encouraged by global neoliberalism. This is one of the dynamics addressed by the noted Birzeit University economist Samia al-Botmeh in her review of Toufic Haddad's *Palestine Ltd.: Neoliberalism and Nationalism in the Occupied Palestinian Territory* for this issue of *JQ*. Botmeh notes that Haddad's title has a double meaning, pointing to Western donor development/peace-building/state-building interventions on the post-Oslo Palestinian economy and institutions as producing a “Palestine Limited,” not only in terms of a Palestinian Authority with limited political sovereignty, but also “with this entity functioning as a variant of a limited shareholding company (Ltd.) with international, regional, and local investors of one type or another. While the dividend to this investment is both direct and indirect financial gain, the primary motivation is to reap political, administrative, and security returns for its investors.”

The economic structures that are the subject of Haddad's book are made architectural structures in Larissa Sansour's *Nation Estate*, a “dystopian scenario” in the form of a video

installation and film series analyzed by Carol Que in “Mechanisms of a Settler Colonial Architecture.” As Que writes, Sansour “extends Palestine’s one-state reality through an architectural and spatial optic, to shed light on the slow violence of militarization and capitalist production that is built into the settler-colonial environment.” Yet despite the violence to which they are subjected – be it slow or swift, structural or personal, symbolic or corporal, mundane or spectacular – Palestinians continue to craft lives of dignity and meaning. It is this fact that lies at the heart of our focus on biography, autobiography, and memoir in this issue and the next.

Announcing the Winner of
Ibrahim Dakkak Award
for Outstanding Essay on Jerusalem
for 2018

Sarah Irving

Teaching Fellow in International History of the Modern Middle East
King’s College London

for her essay

**“A Young Man of Promise”:
*Finding a Place for Stephan Hanna Stephan in the
History of Mandate Palestine***

The award is U.S. \$1000, and the winning essay is published on page 42

Jury: The Editors of the *Jerusalem Quarterly*