

Childhood Memories of a Jerusalemite

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Editor's Note:

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Farewell to the Old City

In late 1966 our new house was ready to welcome us. We were moving out of the Old City where I was born and had lived my eleven years, where I knew every detail, its alleys and people. The new house was less than a hundred meters beyond Jerusalem's southern wall, located in Wadi Hilwa, a green neighborhood with gardens and access to Jerusalem's only spring. Wadi Hilwa was part of Silwan, a quiet village adjacent to Jerusalem's walls, and historically in its shadows. The new house represented a step up in my family's social status, since it included all of the conveniences lacking in the old one: electricity, running water, our own bathroom, a small garden, and privacy, which we had never enjoyed in our shared courtyard. The best feature was a shower, imagine – a shower! Up to that moment I had never known that bathing outside of a plastic tub was even possible!

With our move, new sites were added on my daily path. Al-Haram al-Sharif continued to have a special place in my heart and daily schedule. To reach my school, al-Omariyya, located above the northern wall of al-Haram al-Sharif, I had to enter the Old City through Bab al-Maghariba (Dung Gate) and pass through part of the Moroccan quarter, past the houses of the Abu Su'ud family, and then into al-Haram al-Sharif through Bab al-Maghariba (al-Haram's Gate). On my return home I would first stop at my father's spice shop in Bab al-Silsila Street (Chain Street), as per his strict orders, to pick up any groceries or supplies he wanted me to take home. I would then go through Bab al-Silsila to 'Aqabat Abu Madyan (Abu Madyan al-Ghawth's Ascent), crossing the Moroccan quarter from north to south, and then out of the Old City to Wadi Hilwa and the new house.

The Moroccan quarter became part of my daily adventures and explorations. I was fascinated by the Moroccans' colorful traditional clothing. My favorite was a hood that hung over the shoulders and back. I was also intrigued by the Moroccan fez, which differed from that of the familiar Ottoman *effendi* which was popular in Jerusalem in the 1960s. The Moroccan fez was softer and shorter, and did not boost the height of the person wearing it. The clothes of the Moroccan women were also unfamiliar to me, and featured a *jalabiyya*. This was unusual for Jerusalemite women who wore Western clothes or the traditional black dress of the Levant.

My vocabulary was enriched with new terms and phrases as my ears became familiar with the Moroccan dialect although I did not understand everything, especially the dialect of tourists and *mujawir*, those who come to live in seclusion in al-Haram. Some words were close to our dialect, but the accent was different and the rhythm faster to the Jerusalemite ear, which was accustomed to slower, stretched out sounds, and dropped letters. Attention was required to understand just what people were saying. The truth is that I did not understand everything, but I usually understood the gist. I also noticed during that period that Moroccans could be distinguished by shared facial features.

I will forever remember the large fig tree that leaned over the high gates of al-Masluhi's garden on 'Aqabat Abu Madyan. I used to look forward to the ripening of its fruit every year in early September, watch them grow, and mark some so that I could pick them when ripe whenever I had the chance. I also got to know many of the neighborhood's children. It was not unusual for me to lay my school bag and grocery basket on the side of the road to go play football in the alleys. We would follow the football sometimes inside the yards of houses, as if the streets and empty plots were not enough, and we would be met by swearing and cursing, sometimes in a Moroccan dialect.

There were two types of residents in *Zawiyat* (corner) Abu Madyan, and they were not all Moroccans; there were the Moroccans who resided permanently in the city, and who became Jerusalemites with time, and there were visitors who stayed temporarily, even if these visits might be prolonged. The number of Moroccan visitors usually increased during the month of Ramadan, and after the pilgrimage season. They were distinctive from their clothes, the way they walked and of course their accents. The other residents of the quarter were primarily Moroccans whose ancestors had arrived in Jerusalem generations ago and eventually became local residents. Also, every year a few more of the *mujawir* would decide not to return home and stayed close to al-Aqsa Mosque. I learned a lot also about Moroccan food. Couscous was no longer strange to me after I learned it was what we call *maftul*, with some important differences, since I found that Moroccans are offended when their couscous is confused with other dishes. The strong aroma of spices coming out of the quarter's kitchens became a familiar fragrance to my nose.



Nazmi al-Jubeh in 1971. Family album.

And so the Moroccan quarter became a part of my small world: the “other,” the Moroccan, intrigued me, and I was always keen to learn more. I cannot really explain my lightning-fast friendship with the Moroccan quarter except by connecting it to my thirst to explore every alley and passageway in old Jerusalem. I came to know the Moroccan quarter inside out, starting with the main road that branched out from Bab al-Silsila Street and went through Abu Madyan al-Ghawth’s Ascent to the south snaking between the houses, and then descended down numerous steps, because the Moroccan quarter was built in the lowest part of the Old City. This road conjoined with another branch road that went to the east leading to Abu Su’ud’s houses (Zawiyat Abu Su’ud and the adjoining buildings) and finally al-Haram al-Sharif. An alley from this road led to al-Buraq wall. I explored thoroughly all the alleys in the quarter, and I believe now that they were the smallest and narrowest in the Old City. Almost none were straight roads; the network of streets twisted and turned. The houses in the Moroccan quarter were not the most beautiful in the Old City, or as high as houses in other quarters. But I recall the numerous small home gardens, and the many fig and pomegranate trees, more abundant in the quarter than in other neighborhoods. This is how the Moroccan quarter became one of my favorite childhood hangouts.

The “Iraqi Army” Demolishes the Moroccan Quarter and Dances over the Ruins

My time exploring the Moroccan quarter turned out to be quite limited, less than a year, although I yearned to learn more about it. I was particularly interested in the apertures in the quarter’s northern walls, which led to an “unknown” that intrigued me. Although my relationship with the quarter’s children was cut short, I can still vaguely remember the features of faces I no longer see.

In June 1967, two days after the war erupted, my father decided – with a Jordanian military camp less than 100 meters from our home on the eastern slope of Jabal al-Nabi Dawud (Mount Zion), and following an exchange of cannon fire between the Jordanian and Israeli army and several bombings by aircraft – to take the family to the Old City for refuge, to my grandfather’s house in al-Sharaf neighborhood, near the Moroccan quarter. We left in a hurry and took only a few belongings with us. My father was certain that he would not be away from his life’s achievement for long. But he believed that being some distance from the military camp would reduce our risk, and the gates of the city and its sanctity would protect us from the worst.

We overcrowded my grandfather’s place, which was a peasant-style single-room apartment with a *mastaba* (platformed area) elevated three steps from the lower level. Al-Sharaf neighborhood overlooked the Moroccan quarter and was adjacent to its western side. The building’s large courtyard and multi-levels accommodated all of us during the day, but we all had to squeeze into the single room at night. The house residents and guests fell immediately into three groups. One group of men, children and adolescents

sat around the radio to follow the latest developments and news about the “victories” of Arab armies, and how close they were to “liberating Palestine.” They also went to the roof, from where they could see Jabal al-Zaytun (Mount of Olives) and Jabal al-Masharif (Mount Scopus) to the east, to monitor military developments in the field. From there they could also see the battles between the Jordanian and Israeli armies on Jabal al-Mukabir, six kilometers south of the Old City. The second group consisted of women and girls who seemed to be praying, reciting verses of the Qur’an and praising God most of the time, and, of course, also preparing coffee and tea over and over, and cooking to feed all the hungry mouths that had nothing to do except eat and drink. The third circle consisted of children who did not want to join either of the two other groups and for whom the occasion seemed like a carnival. They enjoyed jumping, screaming, and watching the acrobatics of adults as they rushed up to the rooftop whenever they heard an explosion or the roar of a military airplane, or whenever a neighbor came with breaking news or a “detailed,” “confirmed,” or “verified” report about the latest events and developments in the various battlefields.

My grandfather’s house, which was not far from our previous house in the Old City, was located in a large building constructed in the twelfth century and used as a hospice during the Crusader period. Of course, I did not learn this information until forty years later. The building was massive in size, and the rooms added to it in later centuries accommodated several families, including my grandparents who occupied a room on the ground floor. Their room did not have a kitchen, so they made a corner into a kitchen area; the toilet was shared with several other families. The house had two complete levels, and a partial third one that was occupied by our relatives. It seemed that some families, for one reason or another, decided as we did to take refuge in this building, and hence it very much resembled a refugee camp.

We were a family of thirteen members, and remained so after my eldest brother married and his wife joined us, while my second brother left to study in Damascus. But we did not manage to keep the magic number for long, since soon after, my eldest sister married and moved to Transjordan. My brother was in Damascus when the war started, and this was a cause of extraordinary stress. We did not hear from him until he arrived in Jerusalem two weeks after the war ended. He travelled from Damascus to Amman, and from there he had walked on foot to Jerusalem.

Countless stories could be told about what took place within the walls of that house during the time we spent there, but this is not the place to relate them. One day, while the “experts” in the first grouping were loudly discussing military strategies and analyzing the situation, others in the “control tower” on the rooftop announced the arrival of “Iraqi tanks” to the Mount of Olives, which they said were approaching the Old City. The women started at once ululating and everybody started clapping fiercely for several minutes until the adults asked the children to stop. The men prepared to take out their few, primitive weapons, which they were eager to use in this national wedding for which they had been waiting so long. They began to prepare themselves to attack the western part of the city, although no one had received any training in how to use weapons. Plans and priorities

were swiftly being drawn, and their enthusiasm and chivalry dominated the situation.

Some of the group members, I no longer remember whether residents or guests, even started to prepare themselves to return to their homes in West Jerusalem, from where many of them had been displaced in 1948. But the wisdom and experience of my grandfather, who was the eldest among them, prevailed. He asked everyone to be patient until the dust settled, and then to act accordingly. He insisted that a right will never be lost as long as claimants strive to restore it. Several hours after the “Iraqi tanks” were spotted on the Mount of Olives we heard loud noises in the street in front of the house. My grandfather rejoiced, with the signs of undeniable victory evident on his face. He decided to grab the large tea pot prepared for the residents of the house and to take it outside to the “Iraqi soldiers.” He explained that they would undoubtedly be exhausted from the long travel from Baghdad to Jerusalem, and they would certainly appreciate a cup of tea, their favorite drink, preferably well brewed, because “their tea” was darker than “ours.”

My grandfather was gone only seconds when he came back frantically, the sound of the huge iron gate slamming behind him echoing in the house’s hallways. He dropped the teapot and cups yelling, “Jews!” with his local accent, then fell unconscious. It was then that we realized that the Old City had fallen into the hands of the Israelis and that what we had presumed were Iraqi tanks were actually Israeli tanks. Today, five decades after the big tea pot fell from my grandfather’s hands, I can still hear the chaos, the cries and wails that filled the house afterwards. I will spare you and spare myself the painful memories of defeat, and how it affected those who were so certain of victory. My father, who was the head of the household, was overwhelmed with worry. He was not sure what to do in this new situation, especially after we heard loudspeakers announce a curfew in Hebrew, and order residents to hand in their weapons or leave them in the streets. He was even more worried about his house in Wadi Hilwa, and whether it was possible to return to it or not. He felt the world closing in on him, and his face, which was always rosy, turned bluish and his usual smile evaporated.

As soon as the curfew was lifted for an hour to enable residents to get food supplies, my father rushed to gather us from all around the house, like a shepherd gathering his flock, announcing that we will return to our house outside the gates in Wadi Hilwa in Silwan, amidst the protests and dismay of everyone, horrified by my father’s irrational and irresponsible decision. My father, however, was ill with worry over his new house which he had not yet enjoyed, and that is why he insisted on going back. He said that he would die only in his house and that he would never leave it, and neither he nor any of his offspring would ever become refugees anywhere. We left my grandfather’s house quickly to face the unknown. Afraid, we headed slowly and cautiously north towards Bab al-Silsila Street. We went down the steps, steps we had trodden thousands of times in the past, and knew so well that we could walk down even blindfolded. We saw nothing suspicious along our way: we did not see any soldiers or any destruction despite the sound of bulldozers and explosions that we had heard while at my grandfather’s house. We did encounter, however, people running silently without uttering a word, with anger and fear written all over their faces. Some of them were carrying heavy suitcases, while

others were dragging children behind them and even an older woman who couldn't walk. Given the circumstances none of this raised our suspicions. As soon as we reached Bab al-Silsila Street we turned right toward the east, and continued for fifty meters before turning south to enter Abu Madyan al-Ghawth's Ascent, where we walked through a small alley and then began descending down the stairs.

What we saw upon reaching Zawiyat Abu Madyan al-Ghawth, facing east, was indescribably horrific. Right there, at the bottom of the stairs, we saw soldiers, so many of them, heavily armed from head to toe, dancing and singing in a language that we did not understand, and behind them – emptiness. The Moroccan quarter no longer existed. The fig and pomegranate trees were gone, and so were the alleys I used to walk and play in. Muhammad, Sa'id, Si Yusif, Masluhi and his fig tree were not there, the only thing visible under June's hot sun was a cloud of dust hovering over a heap of rubble. Bulldozers, which I had never seen before in my life, were roaring along their metal chains to the tunes of victory music, completing a job as yet unfinished. That day I saw Ashkenazi rabbis for the first time; they were there in their black attire and strange hats (shtreimels),¹ dancing over the rubble ... dancing over my memories, over the homes of my friends and the paths that I so often frequented. For the first time in my life, I saw the Buraq Wall so huge. It looked unfamiliar, because it had been small, and difficult to see without going down an alley and through a gate first. But now the wall was in the center of the scene, and it was even possible to see al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock from that point, which had never been possible before, blocked by the crowded buildings in the Moroccan quarter.

I cannot say that any of us, the twelve people walking in the ruins of the Moroccan quarter, grasped what was going on, and I still don't know how it was that no one fainted, other than the fact that we were already expecting the worst. Within seconds soldiers surrounded us, raising their guns to our faces. They forced us to stop and bombarded us with words that we did not understand. Arrogantly, a soldier whose face was blue and indistinguishable from the dust that covered it, inspected us slowly and finally selected my eldest brother, who was in his late-twenties, and pulled him away from us, blindfolded him, and ordered us to continue walking. We walked without my brother, heading towards Bab al-Maghariba, leaving behind us a neighborhood reduced to rubble, dancing soldiers, a huge jarring wall, rabbis swaying their heads in front of it, bulldozers razing what was left of the quarter, and an arrested brother whose fate was unknown. We carried with us our humiliation, disgrace, tears and defeat, glancing back every now and then until the whole scene disappeared from behind us as we descended to the unknown, down the hill to the southern gate to leave the Old City through Bab al-Maghariba. Soldiers were everywhere. They followed us with their eyes as we walked the short distance of less than 100 meters, where their military vehicles were parked on both sides of a road that seemed endless to us.

I have been obsessed with bulldozers ever since. I watched them as they removed the stone blocks that had barricaded Jaffa Gate, New Gate and Zion Gate since 1948. I watched them closely as they razed the Arab buildings that had stood in what had been

mostly no man's land, between Jaffa Gate and Ma'man Allah (Mamilla) Cemetery, and Jaffa Street. I watched them as they flattened dozens of buildings from al-Musrara, and used force to unify the two parts of the city. Bulldozers still have a special significance in my life, but it was my first encounter with them during the demolition of the Moroccan quarter that led me to see them, until today, as tools of destruction and war.



Bulldozing the Mughrabi quarter, June 1967.

In September of 1967, and after the family was reunited, I went back to my school, al-Omariyya, which changed quite a lot during the summer. Although my route to school and to my father's shop technically did not change, I now passed through a plaza that had been built over the Moroccan quarter ruins. The road leading to al-Haram al-Sharif no longer twisted among the quarter's alleys but was now a heap of dirt. Entering al-Haram through Bab al-Maghariba meant crossing an Israeli military checkpoint, which controlled the gate and held the keys from the awqaf administration (Islamic Endowments). The courtyards of al-Haram al-Sharif lost their usual morning serenity, as they filled up now with Israeli tourists gaping around; "visitors" wearing military uniforms and carrying automatic weapons and "civilians" showing off their weapons became a normal scene.

In truth, nothing was the same, nothing was like it used to be, and Jerusalem was no longer Jerusalem. I no longer had time to quietly observe, I was always in a hurry, running in all directions for no apparent reason. I was running from myself, running away from the Israelis' eyes, running from my memories of the Moroccan quarter. As for the residents in the Mamluk mausoleums on the way to Bab al-Silsila, for whom I used to recite al-Fatiha, the first Sura of the Qur'an, whenever I passed by, I now made do with bestowing a very quick unapologetic glance.

There were big changes in the school too since most of the old teachers had not returned, not wanting to teach in schools controlled by the Israeli occupation authorities. They were replaced by young teachers, whoever had a high school diploma was employed, and even that requirement they were not strict about. More than half of my classmates did not return to class; some had left to Jordan, some had left school and joined the labor market, and the whereabouts of others are still unknown to me.

The occupation decided to pretend that life was normal, that it was business as usual in Jerusalem, that the Arab citizens of Jerusalem accepted the new situation and that there was no dramatic change. Therefore, it was important to them that the schools start at their usual time in September following the three-month summer vacation, and that everybody resume their lives as usual.

The second major change in school was that the occupation imposed its own school

curricula, which was the same as that taught to Palestinians living in the territory occupied in 1948. One of the interesting things in the new curricula was the disappearance of King Husayn Bin Talal's photo, which usually appeared on the first page of all school books, and of the kingdom's name and crown from the schoolbook covers. More interesting was the appearance of a Jewish teacher, with a short skirt, who taught us Hebrew. I still remember her name, Mariam. Another change was a book called "Israeli Civics," which prompted our home teacher to tell us: "Ignore this book completely as if you've never received it, and there is no need for you to bring it to school." Al-'Umariyya School was not the same school, just like Jerusalem was not the same city anymore.

It did not take long before teachers and parents alike rejected the occupation's curricula, and insisted that students should continue to study the Jordanian curricula, given that they will go to Arab universities after graduating from high school, and that these universities only accept the Jordanian high school diploma. But I did not wait for these changes. I took matters into my own hands. The change took years but this was how we gradually went back to studying the Jordanian curricula. I attended Israeli-administered government schools until I graduated from eighth grade. My last two years were spent in 'Abdallah Bin al-Husayn School in Shaykh Jarrah, four kilometers north of the Old City (al-Omariyya School taught only until sixth grade). My walk there from Silwan was across the Old City on foot to Bab al-'Amud (Damascus Gate), and then north on Nablus road past the American Consulate, YMCA, St. George's School, the American Colony Hotel and Zawiyat al-Shaykh Jarrah to the lowest point in the area. Then I climbed up the steep hill, passing the houses of the Ghosheh and Jarallah families until I reached 'Abdallah Bin al-Husayn School. In the afternoon, I detoured through Khan al-Zayt and Suq al-'Attarin, the spice market, to drop by my father's shop in Bab al-Silsila Street to take home the usual load of groceries, in addition to my heavy school bag.

The additional change that occurred on my school life was due to my patriotic instinct which started to develop at a young age. In 1970 there was a call to protect the Arab Kuwaiti Collage in Abu Dis from expropriation. I do not remember who was behind the call, but they were saying that the Israelis intended to turn the institute into a military camp, but that turning it into a school would save it from expropriation. As a result, I decided to leave 'Abdullah Bin al-Husayn School and registered myself at the newly established Arab Kuwaiti Collage without even consulting my parents. I felt that I was doing something very heroic. I discovered that the huge new school buildings and its big yards were totally unequipped to accommodate students, so we worked with teachers, employees and volunteers to remove the rubble from inside the buildings and clean them. We worked for days until we managed to install tables for students and provide the minimum requirements to start the school year. Enrolling in the Arab Kuwaiti College in Abu Dis did not only lead to an additional change in my relationship with the place, but it also raised my patriotic feelings and I became acquainted with the national movement, which I joined later that year. I was only 14 years old at the time. In that school, I was greatly influenced by my Arabic teacher, the writer Mahmud Shuqayr, who contributed greatly to the formation of my future. I do not know if he was aware of that, but his words and his teachings about patriotism had a great impact on me. Since I believed I was an

exceptional student, I decided to enroll myself in one of the most important schools then, the Hashemite School in al-Bireh, which only taught the eleventh and twelfth grades, scientific stream. It was the only school applying this system in the West Bank and there were five sections for each grade. A few months after I completed sixteen years of age, and six months after I started attending the eleventh grade at the Hashemite School, I was arrested, and that is how I got to know who demolished the Moroccan quarter, from others.

Reading on the Walls and Throwing Stones from Behind Them

My memories in Jerusalem are not limited to experiences of the early days of the occupation. I had a life before that. I took up reading, or rather became addicted to it at an early age, for no reason that I am aware of. Since Jerusalem did not have public libraries, at least none accessible to me, when I was eight or nine years old I found two sources for books and magazines, both in Bab al-‘Amud. The first one was Shabanah, a street vendor, whose family sold daily newspapers and magazines for a living. He displayed his merchandise in a corner outside Bab al-‘Amud. I had two types of agreements with him; by one, I borrowed magazines for half a piaster and sat next to him in front of Bab al-‘Amud, until I read and returned them to him, provided they were intact, clean, without any tears or crumples. I used to sit there for an hour or more until I grew tired, hungry, or thirsty. The second option cost me a whole piaster, but it allowed me to borrow the big magazines, like *al-‘Arabi*, for a whole day since I couldn’t possibly read everything while sitting in front of Bab al-‘Amud. He allowed me to take a magazine home, which I did proudly, provided that I returned it the next day.

My second outside source of education was not very different from the first, and it was also located in Bab al-‘Amud, in front of Shaykh Lulu’s Mosque. The vendor was known as al-munadil al-jarih (the “wounded fighter”) and I assumed that he fought with the Holy Struggle Organization (al-Jihad al-Muqaddas) under the command of the martyr ‘Abd al-Qadr al-Husayni. He had a prosthetic arm with two fingers, to replace the arm he lost in the war. I never saw the prosthetic, only the two fingers covered in black rubber showing from below his sleeve. His shop was no more than a metal stall from which he sold used books, and he would lend me the books I chose for three days in return for three piasters. It was in that phase of my life that my journey with Nagib Mahfouz, Mohammad ‘Abd al-Halim ‘Abdallah, Ihsan ‘Abd al-Quddus and several others started. My relationship with these suppliers of education continued after the occupation in different ways, even after Jerusalem’s public library opened its doors, and I became one of its most active members. Shabanah still displays his newspapers in front of Bab al-‘Amud today, but I do not know what happened to the “wounded fighter,” or when his stall disappeared.

Understandably, my favorite place to read was not our full house in the Old City, but actually a nook in Jerusalem’s southern city wall, which was not far from our old house in al-Sharaf neighborhood. The city’s wall there is only a few steps higher than the built-up area of the Jewish quarter. I used to sit in a crenel of the wall, my back resting on one

merlon and my feet stretched out to the other side of the gap. The wall's height further down was over ten meters, and the view from there was as breathtaking as it was scary, as Silwan, Ras al-'Amud, Jabal al-Zaytun (Mount of Olives) and al-Sawahira extended in front of me. However, the most beautiful scene visible from that point was al-Furaydis Mountain, known as Herodian or Herod's Palace, to the east of Bayt Sahur. It appeared like the mouth of a volcano, but I was not destined to visit it until decades later. I used to stay in my favorite location until I finished reading whatever I had brought with me. I would sit there for hours, and sometimes I also brought along a small sandwich made of whatever I could find at home: labanah, jam, or dibs (grape molasses). I do not remember ever returning a book late, or returning one unread. I do not claim that I understood everything I read, but I was determined to read anything that fell into my hands to the end, as long it did not cost me more than one piaster, because a piaster was my allowance for two days. I never hesitated to put aside a piaster I earned from working in my father's shop to give to the "wounded fighter." I may have secretly taken a piaster from my father's drawer without him knowing for the same purpose, although my conscience would torment me for days afterwards, until I managed to convince myself that my action was legitimate and that this small lapse would not send me to hell.

After moving to our new house, my "office" moved to a small grove at the eastern foot of Jabal al-Nabi Dawud (Mount Zion), which was not far from the new house. There I got to know some members of the Arab Jordanian Army who were all from Transjordan, mainly from al-Karak. They were always welcoming, and greeted me with chocolates, maybe because I reminded them of their children, or maybe because they were impressed with how focused I was on my reading. In my turn, I was very impressed with, and will never forget, their kindness, generosity, and simple nature.

Among the trees there were several tunnels and pathways that the Jordanian Army had dug in preparation to defend Jerusalem and defend itself. Worry over the fate of these soldiers caused me to lose sleep as soon as the war started, when sounds of explosions could be heard from the direction of their camp. My fear increased while I was at my grandfather's house during the war.

As soon as we returned from the Old City, I snuck into Jabal al-Nabi Dawud, and searched through the burnt tunnels until I found five bloated corpses which I assumed were the corpses of my soldier friends, days after they were martyred. I pulled them one corpse after the other into one of the tunnels, and covered them with dirt and tree branches, without looking closely at any of them. It seemed to me that they had been killed by napalm bombs dropped from the air, as there were traces of fire in the location. I recited al-Fatiha, and asked for forgiveness on their behalf, as I used to do in Bab al-Silsila Street. I left the place with a dry throat, and blocked the image from my memory completely. I chose to remember them as they were before the war. I never knew what became of the other soldiers, and if they had endured the same fate and were buried by others in the same manner, or if they survived and returned to Jordan. I do not remember their names, and do not know their addresses. I do believe that I remember their faces, although I am not sure anymore, because the burns had changed their features. Perhaps I avoid remembering their faces. They were left to die alone, far away from their families,

and they were buried in a manner not befitting those who died defending Jerusalem. I still feel guilty that I never searched through their belongings to find something to remind me and their families of them, but the shock of what I saw and my young age prevented me from doing anything besides honoring them with burial.

I do not know what became of that collective grave that does not even have a headstone, where al-Fatiha was never recited by anyone but me. The occupation authorities bulldozed the whole area later to build a bus parking lot in front of Bab al-Nabi Dawud (Zion Gate), so I was not able even to read them al-Fatiha anymore, because I could no longer identify their grave. I have never told this story to anyone, not even to my family, and I do not know why. I am documenting it here for the first time.

As for my “awareness” of Israel before 1967, if I could call it “awareness,” it was based on my numerous questions and my endless wandering in the alleys of the Old City. I inquired more than once about the city’s closed gates: Bab al-Khalil (Jaffa Gate), Bab al-Jadid (New Gate), Bab al-Nabi Dawud (Zion Gate), and the deployment of the Jordanian army over the wall connecting these three Gates, and from Bab al-‘Amud (Damascus Gate) to Bab al-Maghariba (Dung Gate), occupying the western half of the northern wall, west of Bab al-‘Amud, all the western wall, and part of the southern one. These together formed almost half of the wall’s length. The sight of these blocked gates from inside the city was ugly; they were closed with unchiseled stone and cement, and were constructed haphazardly as if in a rush, grotesquely clashing with the fascinating Ottoman gates. To me these gates were the end of the world and behind them was the unknown, the unfathomable. I knew that the homes of some of our neighbors in the Old City were on the other side of the walls; refugee children in our neighborhood used to tell me that their home was behind Bab al-Khalil. As a child in the Old City, I never had the chance to examine what was behind the western wall of the city.

The second opportunity for awareness was in Musrara neighborhood, just north of Bab al-‘Amud, where al-Baziyan used to rent out bikes and I would practice riding. At the end of the neighborhood was a wall that, while not very high, blocked the view behind it. Soldiers from the Arab Jordanian Army were deployed there, and there were small openings, similar to the apertures in Jerusalem’s wall, that I used to peek through at the “other world.” I participated on several occasions with children my age in throwing stones at the other side, in front of the soldiers who were cheering us. The children of the “other” were retaliating by doing the same, and I managed several times to catch a glimpse of them while we were exchanging stone projectiles.

But it was not until later that I finally saw the “other.” I saw it in its shtreimels, dressed in black and heavily armed, I saw it dancing victoriously over the rubble of the Moroccan quarter.

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Endnotes

- 1 Large fur hats worn by Jewish Orthodox men on Jewish holidays and festive occasions.