

On Wings of Memory

Schmidt's Girls School: Jerusalem's Star School

Bayan Nuwayhed al-Hout

Living memory is not what we remember from the past without effort, but it is the events that we intentionally keep alive. Memory is often defined as “the psychological ability to store things in mind and retrieve them when needed.” It is also defined as “the mental capacity to remember things” such as “facial memory” or “spatial memory.” When we say “etched in memory” we are referring to unforgettable events, such as memories from our childhood or adolescence. These definitions, however, do not explain the meaning of “wings of memory” for although memories, by definition, are stored in the human mind, wings of memory are the bits of it that not only live in the human’s depth, but are interwoven in the mind and psyche. These memories eventually grow wings that carry them aloft.

The attack on Palestine is not limited to its identity, history, land, and people, but it also targets the collective and individual memory, and is what gives oral history in Palestine additional importance. The subtitle I chose, “Wings of Memory,” is only an attempt to stress the importance of individual memory, for I think it is time for it to go and breathe life into this group or that, or into this village or that.

These pages describe life in Schmidt’s School,¹ Jerusalem’s first girls school, which dates back to the nineteenth century.

Editor’s Note:

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One of my most vivid childhood memories is of my older sister Nora, holding my hand and leading me to a room full of little chairs, where three or four little girls, my age, were sitting. She explained to me that this is my classroom, and that the teacher and the rest of the students would be arriving soon. She also promised to come and check on me after the bell rings. The room filled up with students, and the teacher finally entered. That was the first hour I spent in the kindergarten of

Schmidt's Girls School, one October morning in 1941.

Since I found myself in an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar faces, naturally I burst into tears, and everybody began to look at me. The teacher came up to me and said: "Why are you crying, little one?" I answered: "My sister left me here ... I want my sister." She asked:



Figure 1. Bayan Nuwayhed al-Hout few years after leaving the Schmidt's Girls School. Amman, 1953. Courtesy of Bayan Nuwayhed al-Hout.

"Who is your sister, and where is she?" Welling up again I replied: "My sister, Nora, she is in the big kids' class." She said: "When the bell rings you will see your sister. We are all here now, and we will learn a nice song together. ..."

As I listened to the teacher's gentle voice, I slowly stopped crying, and only then did I notice that all the other students were sitting silently in their chairs. I was the only one crying. I felt very ashamed.

How could I, at the young age of four, have known that my best memories would be within these walls and in this big playground? How could I have known that someday I would be cruelly deprived of my school, my home, and my city?

Schmidt's Girls School in Jerusalem, or Schmidt's Girls College, as it was known since it awarded students an education diploma after high school, was one of the most beautiful schools I have known or visited in my life. The school had one entrance, an iron gate located almost in the middle of the wall, which surrounded the school from one side only, separating it from Mamilla area I remember our short daily trip every morning in the school bus as it drove through the neighborhoods of upper Baq'a and lower Baq'a and Talbiyya, descending slowly down King George Street, and finally turning right to arrive at the school. We took pride in the location of our school and its buildings, which were the most beautiful on the whole street.

I once asked my father²: "Why does the teacher tell us that our school was built next to Jaffa Street, when it is closer to King George Street? My father laughed and said, "And how do you know that, smart little girl?" I replied, "From the school bus. Yesterday the bus dropped off a new student in Jaffa Street ... " He explained: "When your school was built, King George Street was not there yet, and neither were the British. Back then Jerusalem was under Ottoman rule, new construction began to appear outside the old city from the last century, and back then Jaffa Street was the closest to your school."

The gate was usually closed after the students or visitors entered. It was a beautiful iron gate with two stone pillars, one on each side. Once inside, you would see a spacious

unroofed courtyard, with a wall on the side of the entrance, and buildings on each of the three other sides. Then, you would walk in a long beautiful path that separated the garden from the playground. On the left side, a beautiful colorful garden full of flowers and green trees stretched alongside the path, and at the end stood a beautiful building with a rectangular facade stretching alongside the garden. This building, which dates back to the nineteenth century, was one of the oldest in Jerusalem and definitely one of the most beautiful (figure 2). The building was constructed in 1886; back in our days it was a nuns' hostel, with a section of it allotted to the boarding school students. On the right, you could see a big playground and a large building stretched alongside it. This building, constructed in the beginning of the twentieth century when the need arose to expand the school, housed all classrooms; for this reason we called it "the classroom building" or the "teaching building."

Finally, you see the place that was dear to all students, an independent one-floor building that housed within its walls the auditorium. This last building was located at the end of the playground, facing the wall, and stretched vertically alongside the playground. The auditorium was where the end of the year celebrations took place. It was also where we, the non-boarding students, ate lunch every day, and then ran into the big playground.

Every morning, we stood in line in the playground facing the classroom building. We would then head in orderly fashion to our classrooms, one class in turn after the other. Each class with its teacher would enter the building where elementary and secondary classrooms were distributed on two floors. The playground was a few steps higher than

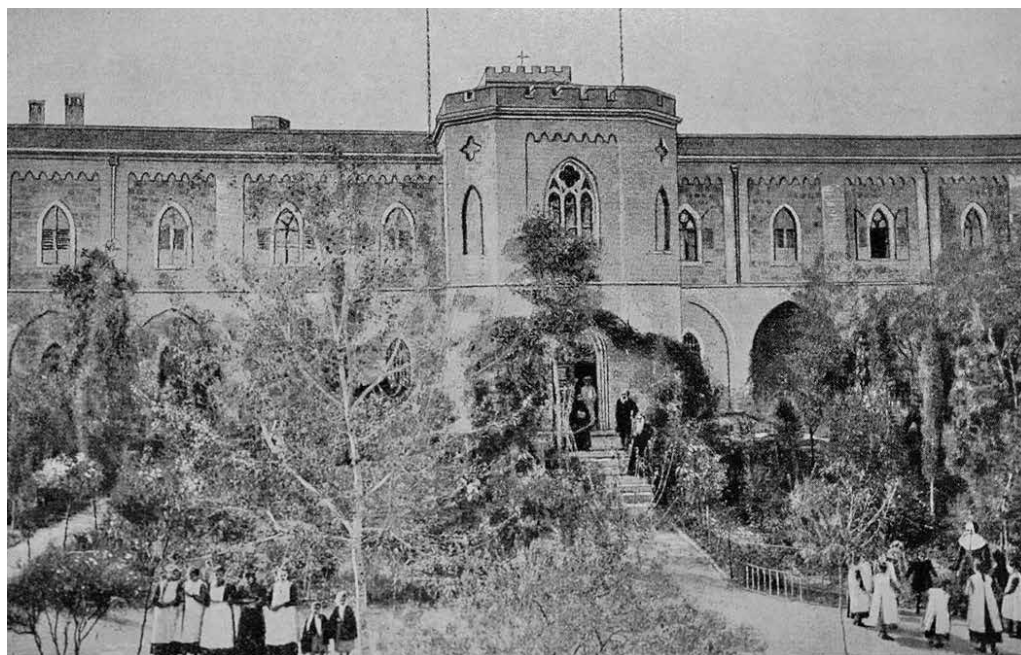


Figure 2. The school building in 1887, one year after it was built. Back then the school occupied only part of the building, later the administration occupied the whole building, and built two additional ones. Online at schmidtschule.schule/index.php/en/schule/schulgeschichte.

the first level. We, the younger students, used to descend the steps with serenity, crossing the path separating the playground from the classroom building, where I spent some of the happiest years of my life. The ground floor included the dining hall for the boarding school students. Next to it was my favorite place in the school, the stationery shop. The nun stationed there would open the window that overlooked the external hallway, so that we could buy supplies we needed during the recess. There we would find the best notebooks, pens and coloring pencils, and all the writing supplies we might need. I loved the place, and buying stationery continued to be one of my pleasures, even if I did not have a real need for them.

I was in the second grade when the math teacher, Mrs. Khoury, who was a new teacher back then, entered our class for the first time. I was startled when she asked me after reading my name: “You, Nuwayhed, do you know Khaldoun Nuwayhed in al-Umma College?” I said proudly: “Khaldoun is my brother.” She smiled and said: “I taught him in al-Umma College, and he was one of my best students. I sure hope you are as hard working as he is. Please give him my regards.” I couldn’t believe what she said. As soon as I got out of the bus with my sisters, Nora, and Sawsan, who was two years older than me, I leapt up the stairs, and there was Khaldoun, the eldest, waiting for us at the end of the first school day. I told him while still gasping for air: “Mrs. Khoury sends her regards ... and she said that she hopes I am as hard working as my brother....” Consequently, Khaldoun diligently helped me study math, until I became, as she hoped, one of her best students.

I also remember Miss Hannoush, my Arabic teacher, from when I was a bit older. She was an excellent and serious teacher who seldom laughed, but I liked her because I liked the Arabic lessons. I also liked English but, unfortunately, I do not remember any of my English teachers. As for German, it was banned under the British Mandate.

The nuns did not teach elementary classes, but nevertheless I still remember some of their names, faces, and voices because we saw them in the playground every morning, and at numerous events. I will start with the director, Sister Elia.³ She was strict, and her loud voice was often heard resonating in the playground. The school principal Father Sonnen was very quiet, and although we barely saw him, I will always remember him. Neither can I forget Sister Angelina, Sister Ghida, Sister Renata, and Sister Ludmilla. As for the priests, the most famous of them was Father Curles, the art teacher, whose talent and gentleness prompted the girls’ eagerness to learn painting.

When I was in the fourth grade and Sawsan in the fifth, we went home with the first semester’s report card of the three-semester academic year. Our grades that semester were apparently bad – I must admit that actually they were the worst. According to the school system, grades were arranged starting with the best in class, but not ending with the worst as one would expect, as the administration did not write down the grades of the last three or four students, probably to spare them the humiliation. The lack of written grades, however, obviously meant that the student in question was at the bottom of the class.

My mother opened the two envelopes and read the cards. When she found no grades,

her anger became evident on her face. She said sternly: “This is an unpleasant surprise! What shall I tell your father when he gets home? Listen carefully, these marks should change next semester, and until then you are banned from playing with your friends in the neighborhood.”

My brother Khaldoun saved us by helping us with our homework every day. He used to say, for example, “You have two hours to study, a little bit less or a little bit more maybe.” He checked on us every now and then and answered any questions we had. After he made sure that we studied well he would set us free. I couldn’t have guessed the results of the second semester, but given the teachers’ encouraging words I was sure I was doing better. We took our report cards and went home, my performance had improved significantly. I came in fifteenth place out of thirty students. Sawsan also made a significant leap, but I do not remember her ranking. Khaldoun continued to help us with our studies, and when we received our report cards at the end of the third semester, I remember that it was one of the happiest days of my life. How was it possible that I was seventh in class despite the very low marks I got in the first semester? That was definitely my first taste of success.

After this success we were finally allowed to play with the neighbors as much as we wanted. Our home was in upper Baq’a on the street parallel to the railway, and the street separating between our houses and the railway was our main playground. Busses never drove in our street, not even the school bus, which we waited for on the other side of the railway. As for cars, only a few of them drove through our street, which was not paved yet, but the lack of asphalt was not a problem for us. On the contrary, it was a welcomed buffer that spared us many broken bones.



Figure 3. The famous picture that appeared in Walid Khaldi’s *Before Their Diaspora* featuring the principal, nuns, and high school teachers in 1947.

Our favorite game was “Xs,”⁴ and there were different ways to play it. We would draw the shape we wanted with chalk on the ground in one of the gardens. Then we would bring a flat stone, and the winner was the girl who could carry the stone through the squares and other shapes while hopping on one foot without making any mistakes. We also used to play with a metal hoop, very similar to a hula hoop, that we would roll down the street while running next to it, and the winner was the girl who could roll it the longest distance.

The mother of all games, however, was kite flying. We used to make kites with our own hands and tie them to a strong string that rolled out of a string ball. We used to run as fast as we could until the kite would gradually start to rise, the higher it went the more string we pulled until it flew very high. That was our favorite game. We were exhilarated whenever a train passed by while we were flying our kite, the passengers would clap and wave at us from the train’s windows. But we often took a break from playing, and talked about the next year; will the British really leave Palestine in a year as they said? Will the Mandate really end?

October 1947 finally arrived, and we went back to school. I was in the fifth grade now, and I had already tasted success, but I wanted to excel this year. During the first two months it was expected that I would be among the top five students in my class. The competition between us was fierce, and I would have been very angry had I found out that I was the fifth as I was expecting to do much better. But I never got to find out; the UN adopted a resolution on the partition of Palestine on 29 November that year and immediately a country-wide uprising began in protest of this grave injustice. Soon after, schools closed their doors, although the fall semester was not yet over.

At first, we thought that schools would reopen soon, but that was not possible since the whole country was in turmoil. It saddens me to say that we never got to say goodbye to our school, for we couldn’t have imagined that the last day we spent there would actually be our last day forever.

At first I tried to continue my studies alone. That year we had started studying all subjects – math, geography, history, and botany – in English. I liked botany, which was a new subject to me, so for my birthday, my brother got me an English book featuring colored pictures of various trees, plants, and flowers with an explanation of every picture. I always made sure to take the book with me to school to show it off. A classmate of mine, Nelly Albina, who was the best student in class, and who was by nature very calm and well mannered, asked me if she could borrow the book. I was a bit reluctant, but the hopeful look on her face made me agree. I asked her to return the book the next week. Nelly was so happy, and she promised to bring it back. Little did we know that we would never see each other again.

I did not give up hope on going to school again until the Palestinian Broadcasting Service (PBS) started broadcasting lessons, and I still remember the title of the history lesson: “Khufu the son of the Nile and his tomb.” I often thought about my favorite book and said to myself: “I wish I had never lent it to Nelly.” But when I realized that we had become “migrants” like the others or, to be more accurate, “refugees,” I thanked

God that he inspired me to give her the book, for hopefully it stayed safe with her. But if I had refused to give it to her, the valuable book would have stayed in our house in Jerusalem, and the Zionists would have taken it, just like they took my father's library, which contained more than three thousand books. They did not even spare our shelves, the children's shelves, which were placed in different parts of the house –but wait, I think I should apologize, for the word “stole” is more accurate here and rather than “took.”

The question we constantly asked ourselves: Are we leaving Jerusalem for a few weeks or a few months? Are we returning at the end of the summer to our Jerusalem, to our home, and our school? Or did we immigrate like others without even realizing it? What was really happening?

My uncle Nasri Sleem (my mother's brother) lived in Amman, and he visited us several times to try to convince my father to move to Amman, even if it was temporarily, but my father always refused. I still remember what Uncle Nasri said in his last visit: “Abu Khaldoun, there are no houses left for rent in Amman, but I found you a big house in Zarqa. It is very spacious; it has space for all your books and the books of your law firm, too. Jordan is the closest country to Palestine, and as soon as things settle down you can go back to Jerusalem.” But my father refused, and he actually never left Jerusalem. But under the pressure of my mother and the family in Lebanon he was finally convinced to send us, my mother, sisters, and myself, to Ras al-Matn, a quiet little village surrounded by pine trees. Since he insisted on staying in Jerusalem, my brother Khaldoun, and my cousin Adel, who was like a brother to us, decided to stay with him. Nevertheless, Khaldoun accompanied us on our trip. We arrived in Damascus on 26 April, and stayed there at Aunt Anisa's house for four days. We then continued to Ras al-Matn, where we arrived on May 1 at sunset. Khaldoun left on the very next day and went back to Jerusalem on the dawn of 2 May.

Summer was over and we did not return to our Jerusalem. We stayed in Lebanon for three years, during which my sisters and I went to Miss Malek's school, a boarding school in Shuwayfat. During these years, my father moved between Amman and Ramallah, and after he settled in Amman in 1951 we were finally reunited as a family. I graduated from Queen Zayn al-Sharaf School, and then enrolled in the Teachers Training College in Ramallah, which was the only college for girls at the time in Jordan. The college was established a few years after the unification of the two banks of the Jordan river, and it accepted women from both the East and West Banks.

The two years I lived in Ramallah in the midfifties were a golden opportunity for me to learn about the cities and villages of the West Bank, and get to know their people, traditions, and ways of life. I always chose the bed next to the window overlooking Jerusalem to watch the lights glimmering from the city every night. I would be overwhelmed with nostalgia, and I would wonder: Isn't it possible that one of these lights is coming from my house? I knew that the house was occupied by Jews now, but I had no idea what kind of Jews. Were they Zionists, and if they were, from which group were they? Were they Jews misled by Zionists to believe that our country was theirs, and upon arriving they found homes, furniture, and family pictures that belonged

to others? We heard a lot of stories about them – some turned into hardcore Zionists, while others never ceased to long for their homelands.

As for me, my yearning for my own homeland misled me to believe that every Palestinian was a refugee, and maybe even to say that every Arab was. Wasn't Palestine the core of the Arab cause, and the inspiration to Arab poets? But I never understood what being a refugee really meant until that day in my first year in the Teachers Training College.

Ms. Olga Wahbe, the director, came into class with three UN employees. Without any introductions, the director said with her usual dry voice: "Would the refugee students please stand up." At first the use of the word "refugees" alone without mentioning the nationality aggravated me, as if Ms. Wahbe was speaking on behalf of the UN that deliberately dropped the word "Palestinian" and sufficed with "refugees."

Nevertheless, I stood up, thinking that all the students would stand up except our Jordanian colleagues from Salt, Amman, or Madaba. In other words, I thought that all Palestinians would definitely stand up, but to my surprise only four students in addition to me did, while the majority remained comfortably seated in their chairs. I was so furious when I saw Samira Nussaybeh, my best friend, and also a Jerusalemite, sitting there as if the whole thing did not concern her. What is going on? God, was I the only stupid one? It was clear that everyone except me knew the rules of the game and knew exactly what the word "refugees" meant. Of the students who stood with me, two were colleagues from Jaffa, one was from Ramleh, and another was from Talbiyya neighborhood in Jerusalem. I was the fifth one, from the upper Baq'a neighborhood. Jerusalemites from the Old City or Shaykh Jarrah did not stand up, and neither did the students from Nablus, Hebron, Ramallah, or Bethlehem.

I went to the Teachers College to study education, a subject I found myself excelling at, as I was first in my class in both years, but it was obvious that I did not know the A-B-Cs of my people's history. Who exactly were the refugees? Who were they from the Palestinian perspective – not the legal one.

One spring day my colleague in the Teachers College came up to me and said: "There are two visitors here for you." I ran down the stairs to the first floor to find Aida and Buran al-Khadra, my cousins, waiting for me. Aunt Anisa and Uncle Subhi al-Khadra and their children were our only relatives in Palestine. My aunt's house in al-Namamreh neighborhood was not very far away from ours. This pleasant surprise made me very happy. Uncle Subhi's family left Jerusalem after he was appointed as representative of Palestine in the Arab League's Military Committee based in Damascus. I will never forget that cold morning when we stood at the balcony waiting for my aunt and her family. Around 9:00 am a big taxi parked in front of our house and my Aunt and her children Aida, Buran, and Faysal climbed out of it. As for Salma, she had already married, became a mother, and moved with her husband Burhan al-Jayyusi who was working abroad. Uncle Subhi had already moved to Damascus as soon as his appointment was announced. We had breakfast together and then we said goodbye. I accompanied them to the car to say the final goodbye. I held my aunt's hand, as I loved her very much, and seeing her leave was painful for me.

It occurred to me to pull Buran, who was walking beside me, by her coat and ask her without my aunt noticing, about which relatives they had left at home to take care of it, because we heard from the neighbors about the horrors that happened to abandoned houses. But I do not know why I didn't at the end. We were walking together, but the truth is we were each in our separate worlds. As soon as we crossed the garden and reached the street, I felt my aunt lovingly squeeze my hand, which was still in hers. Before she let go of it, she patted me on the shoulder tenderly, turned to look at a big truck parked under the eucalyptus trees and signaled to its driver to come closer. The truck came closer ... and to my surprise it was followed by another one. I thanked God I did not ask Buran – because it was obvious that their house's furniture and everything in it was on those two trucks.

Even after all these years, I still can't explain my feelings at that moment or that day. How can I forget the date? It was 9 January 1948, which was also Jinan's birthday (my little sister). I locked myself up in my bedroom and cried for a long time. I did not cry because we were left alone without any relatives in Palestine, or from the pain of separation. I cried because I couldn't ignore the feelings that suffocated me whenever I heard that another family was leaving town. Moreover, I saw with my own eyes today how the people who were the closest to me left. I did not believe my mother when she said that they were only leaving temporarily because of Uncle Subhi's new job. I knew she was just saying that to calm me down, but to no avail. I remember asking my mother a few days later: "If Uncle Subhi decides to go back to practicing law one day, will he load all the furniture and books and come back again?" My mother's silence was my answer.

To see Aida and Buran that Sunday was a pleasant surprise. I was unaware that they had been visiting my family in Amman, and that they were coming to visit me in Ramallah. Aida asked, "Would you come with us to Jerusalem?" I said in return, "Do you even have to ask?"

Aida was several years older than me. She had been a senior in Schmidt's School when I was in my first elementary classes. I used to intentionally stop her while she walked with her friends in the playground to ask a question or ask her for a piaster or two to buy something from the peddler standing at the school's entrance, and she always showered me with love. The truth is I had no use for the piaster or two, but I wanted my friends Elsie, Nadia, and Widad to see me talking to her, to prove to them that she was my cousin, which means someone I can go to if we fight over who starts in the X game or jump rope. Buran, who was the youngest of her sisters, and almost as old as my older sister Nora, gave me special attention. She often asked my mother if she could take me with her to visit a friend or take a walk. We used to take long walks in the main commercial street in lower Baq'a. I liked the shops there, especially an elegant one that sold books and magazines and another that sold flowers.

The trip from Ramallah to Jerusalem took about twenty minutes by car. We soon got out of the car next to Damascus Gate. My God, how beautiful the place was ... we walked around for a while, and then we stood in front of "Schmidt's School" in its

new location, where it had moved after al-Nakba. I had passed by it several times with my friends from college, but it never occurred to me to go in and announce myself. I feared that I would not be able to hold my tears when I found myself a stranger in a place so dear to my heart. Salma, my eldest cousin, was a Schmidt graduate, and so was Aida. Buran, however, had not yet finished high school by 1948, the year of al-Nakba, yet she was sure the nuns would remember her. I said: "What about me? Nobody will remember me, but at least I remember, and that makes me happy."

We rang the bell because the gate was closed. Soon after a nun came to open the door and asked us what we wanted. Aida told her that we were "Schmidt" students. The nun smiled and led us inside, Sister Angelina was the first to see us, her face shone with happiness and she said: "I am so happy to see you all, very happy. Of course, I would never forget the three Khadra sisters, and the three Nuwayhed sisters. She looked at me and said: "I believe you were the youngest. I remember your sisters, but why can't I remember you? I should though." She started asking me questions about my class and teachers. We were still standing at the entrance, but word got out, and Sister Ghida and Sister Renata came to greet us. I felt like we went back in time on a magic carpet; the faces were the same, and the nuns I knew as a child in school were there standing in front of me. This meeting, full of love and joy, was an unexpected surprise.

They invited us to the reception room, and the nuns started relating in detail how they managed to bring all the school furniture and files from the old location, and how they did not even leave one shred of paper behind. Sister Angelina said that Father Sonnen went through hoops to get a permit from the Israeli authorities to move the school furniture. Sister Ghida added that they needed more than sixty trucks to move the furniture and everything from the school. The only thing they couldn't take with them was a big marble table attached to the floor in the geography room. Some suggested that it should be pulled out in any way possible, and moved to the new location, but others did not agree. Finally, the table stayed alone in the old classroom building, vacant of furniture but not of its eventful past. The table remained there as a witness of the good old days.

Years later, in the twenty-first century, in the age of internet and Google, I read about the first geography teacher in Palestine, Mr. Nicola Qattan from Bethlehem, and the author of the first geography book published in Jerusalem, titled *The Geography of the Near East*. I also learned that in the early 1940s, Qattan was a geography teacher in the Arab College and Schmidt's School. I remembered what Sister Ghida said, and I thought to myself, if I had met Mr. Qattan I would have asked him to describe the contents of the geography room to me: the equipment, maps, and learning tools, and I would have asked him or even pleaded with him to describe the marble table to me.

Suddenly I heard a voice I haven't heard since I was forced to leave my school after the 29 November 1947.⁵ Sister Elia, our director, had suddenly appeared and she was shocked to see us. She greeted us with love, and even spoke in Arabic not English, maybe because her feelings flowed out spontaneously, or maybe because she was the only one whose mother tongue was Arabic. I was very sad when I noticed how much she had aged, and how she looked thin now, unlike her usual round, vivacious self.

Sister Elia asked me: “How is your father? We tried to call him during the last two weeks because Father Sonnen wanted to speak to him, but nobody picked up the phone, neither at the office nor at home. You probably don’t remember anything about these days. We learned that you went to Lebanon with your mother.” I replied:

Well, there was nobody to answer the phone in the law office because it was closed. As for the house, I know that my father spent most of his time in Ahmad Hilmi Pasha’s office, head of the Arab Higher Committee, to work and discuss matters, and he mostly took my brother with him. The committee’s office was in lower Baq’a, not very far away from our house. But you know what, Sister Elia? I can still remember something from these days, an important thing actually. It just occurred to me when you mentioned the phone – our home telephone number was 4702, and the office number was 5155.

Sister Renata said with a sad smile on her face, “War pains are the same everywhere, they are in Palestine just like they were in Germany. Many of us lost their homes after the world war, and they found consolation in their memories, in a telephone number or a post box number.” Sister Angelina looked at me and said, as if quizzing me: “Do you remember the post box number?” I replied excitedly: “Of course Sister Angelina, it was 425. I was in charge of organizing father’s mail, and he usually kept the envelope with each letter.”

Each nun invited us to her room, and offered us beverages and sweets. We were overwhelmed by their hospitality. They were expressing their happiness in remembering with us the “original Schmidt school.” It was noon when Aida said, “We wish we could stay longer, but we must go now. We promise to visit whenever we are in Jerusalem.” Sister Elia protested saying, “I won’t let you go before you see Father Sonnen.” We entered the old priest’s office, his desk covered with books, folders, and papers. He raised his head as Sister Angelina leaned in to tell him who we were. He slowly stood up taken by surprise. We couldn’t hear his voice, as it was clear that he was overcome by emotions and wasn’t able to speak. I will never forget the way he looked that day. In front of me stood a dignified old man, approaching the end of his life, yet he was still working just like he did for more than fifty years. Father Sonnen came to Tabariyya in Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century, and since he settled in Schmidt’s School, he never left again.

There was silence in the room, the priest’s hands were shaking, and he was focusing his eyes on the table. We were not sure what he was trying to do, until Sister Angelina interfered and asked for permission to take over. He was trying to open a box of German biscuits famous for their delicious taste and offer us some. That is how he wanted to express his hospitality. Father Sonnen did not say a single word, and his inability to speak was perhaps the most eloquent representation of his glorious past. For I cannot imagine that it is easy for such a dignified old man to speak about the fear he had felt in front of the threat of closing down the educational institution he devoted his life to build and advance.

If you believe that al-Nakba is a past event, then you don't really understand it. The Nakba is actually ongoing to this day. Whoever thinks that al-Nakba is a catastrophe that hit the Palestinians alone, does not know what intellectual struggle is, as it is the ultimate form of struggle that does not belong to any nationality, for it is above nationalities. Father Sonnen was German by birth and Palestinian in his intellectual struggle and belief in the importance of raising new generations on the land of Palestine, and this is what makes him a unique person.

We said goodbye to the reverend principal and headed to the entrance accompanied by the nuns. I noticed Sister Angelina watching me closely, as if she was trying to trigger her memory. We finally reached the gate, and Buran was telling a funny story about school, the original Schmidt school. We all started to laugh, and it seems that I laughed loudly as I usually do, and suddenly Sister Angelina's face brightened up as she grabbed my shoulder and said quickly: "I just remembered now ... your laugh! Yes, now I remember the youngest Nuwayhed sister."

I always tried to figure out the secret for my love and passion for my school. One incident that further proved my love for Schmidt was during a visit to my friend, Sally Makarem, in Beirut during the late eighties. I met Raghida Sa'adeh there for the first time, and our conversation branched into a discussion about colors, their beauty and how they complement each other. Raghida asked me, "What is your favorite color?" I excitedly replied, "Dark blue." When she asked me why, the question took me by surprise, and I answered after some thought, "Well...I don't know why!" She said, "There must be a reason. Let's see, as a child did you like your school?" I replied that "I actually loved it very much." She said: "I wonder what the color of your uniform was?" I answered smiling: "But of course... it was dark blue with a white shirt". We all laughed at this obvious connection that I failed to see – because I was too close to it.

If I was asked to give concrete reason for this love, I would say it is the connection between my life and the life of my people and al-Nakba. The Nakba deprived me of my home, school, and homeland, and I lived my life longing for this triangle that I had lost. But during my visit to the school and the hospitality and love the nuns showered us with, I found another reason. It is the fact that the love was mutual; it wasn't that only the students loved the school, but the nuns' love for it was indescribable too. They showered us with a love I was not destined to know as a student, but experienced as a visitor. I realized that Sister Angelina's interest in me did not come out of politeness, but because of genuine interest in all students.

Father Johan Sonnen, the school principal and educator, died at the end of 1957, a few years after his eightieth birthday, may God bless his soul.

That visit in the midfifties has a special place in my memories, and it always emerges with the constant yearning for my homeland. We, who lived al-Nakba, understand the meaning of deportation and being away from our homeland, and we always felt genuine happiness whenever we spoke with the people closest to us about our dearest memories, but more importantly about what we left behind ... a picture on the wall, a tree in the garden, the ice cream man who used to call out at the top of his lungs:

“Eskimo, eskimo, eskimo-o-o!” and how we used to run in his direction as soon as we heard his voice to buy the ice cream. What stayed with me from that visit was: it felt like a family reunion. In the reception room and the school’s entrance we were not nuns and former students, we were a group of people who shared the same experiences and hopes. It was the genuine human bond that forged this kinship between us. That is why we loved our school so much: it was not a place for preaching, counseling, and indoctrinating, it was an infinite space for love and friendship.

Almost every year I meet with a friend I knew from Jerusalem. I recall one of those incidents in the early seventies in Lebanon. That day I had gone to the German school in Dawha (Dawhat Aramun) on the beach near al-Na'ama, to watch my three kids perform on stage in school. I had learned a bit of German at the Goethe Institute, hoping to catch up with my kids. I meant to arrive early to find a seat in the front rows, not to see them better, but to make sure that they could see me watching them perform.

I noticed the school’s bulletin board which was elevated from the ground by about three steps. Since I arrived earlier than intended, I climbed up the steps and started reading the announcements that reflected the school’s development in educational methods. I heard a voice asking me about the announcement I was reading. I answered the woman briefly, and went back to reading, but she kept asking one question after the other. Irritated, I turned to face the person, but to my surprise she smiled and said: “Now I’m sure, I recognized you from your voice. You are Bayan, aren’t you? We were together in Schmidt. Don’t you remember me? I am Elsie ...” I gasped, “Elsie ... you are in Beirut, and our children are at the same school?” We hugged each other, and I asked: “Tell me, are your kids as good as you were at playing the X game?”

Elsie Haddad had been one of the boarding students. She was from Jordan, and I remember that her father came to take his daughters to Amman to attend the coronation celebrations of King Abdullah, which took place on 25 May 1946. A few days later, while we were standing in line before going to the classrooms, I heard one of the teachers asking our home teacher: “Are the Haddad girls back yet?” When the answer was negative she said: “I don’t understand how Sister Elia allowed the father to take the girls when exams are coming up so soon. Will they be crowning the king themselves?!” We found it weird that the teacher was making fun of our friend, who was so excited about attending the celebrations in Amman. I wonder if that teacher felt guilty later for mocking her, especially when Elsie passed her exams with honors.

Decades have passed ... al-Nakba’s time for my generation is counted by decades not years, but memories of my school did not fade away. They actually emerge vividly whenever I hear about how well the school is doing in East Jerusalem, or when I see photos of it, like the rare one that appeared in Walid Khalidi’s book *Before Their Diaspora*. Some of these pictures I hadn’t seen before, while others are very similar to ones we had in our family albums in Jerusalem.⁶

The oldest photo of Schmidt goes back to 1887, where some priests and nuns appear on the steps in front of the entrance and on both sides of the garden. Back then, the school was not called Schmidt yet. It had already existed for two years, but was still

known as the German school, and it only occupied part of the historical compound designed by the German architect Theodore Zendel, next to Jaffa Street. The building was constructed in 1886, and the classical facade featured Gothic pointed arches.⁷ The building – one of the most beautiful in Jerusalem – belonged to the German Catholic Institute. Since its construction, it was used as a hostel for German pilgrims, and a center for philanthropic work. The institute allotted part of the compound to the first German school for girls established in Jerusalem, which accommodated students from the German minority population in addition to Arab students.⁸

In 1890, four years after the school was founded, Father Wilhelm Schmidt, who was the head of the Catholic German Society in Palestine, was assigned to run the school, which was named after him. He was responsible for improving the educational level in the school until it became one of the most prestigious in the city, respected and appreciated by Muslim and Christian families alike.

In the summer of 1898 Emperor Wilhelm II journeyed to Palestine, after his famous visit to Sultan Abdul Hamid in Constantinople. The German emperor used to address the Ottoman Sultan as, “Father.” The sultan ordered the demolition of the highest wall in Bab al-Khalil (Jaffa Gate) so that the emperor’s procession could pass. The emperor and his wife spent a week in Jerusalem. During the visit they were very impressed with Schmidt’s School, its accomplishments, and its popularity.

Father Schmidt remained head of the school until his death in 1907, when he was succeeded by Father Ernst Schmitz, who developed the curricula. The latter played a major role in expanding the school and developing it. The German hostel and philanthropic center were moved to a new building that was constructed near Damascus Gate, known as Paulus-Haus, and hence Theodor Zendel’s beautiful and famous compound became used for the school. Soon after Schmidt’s School took over the whole building, it began to expand and a new building was erected opposite the old one for housing the classrooms.⁹

In 1925 a third level was built, designed by architect Heinrich Renard, and although his style was beautiful, it was very different from Zendel’s. The new level was much less elaborate (which appears very clearly from the window style), in order to be able to finish the construction quickly.¹⁰

Schmidt’s School did not close its doors during World War I as other schools did. The good relations between Turkey and Germany allowed it to continue teaching, provided that it taught the Turkish language. However, after the world war, it had to close for three years under British military rule, before it opened its doors again in 1921 to receive students from all over Palestine. Then there was the inevitable suspension of teaching after al-Nakba. The Nakba affected Jerusalem first, as most of the Arab neighborhoods were occupied during the first night of 14–15 May. By the end of the year 80 percent of the city was under occupation; and it has become known ever since as West Jerusalem. As for the Old City and surrounding Arab neighborhoods – that is, what was left of Jerusalem – this became known as East Jerusalem.

Under this partition Schmidt School in Hillel Street was located in West Jerusalem.

Consequently Father Sonnen decided to move the school to East Jerusalem since most of the students came from East Jerusalem and the West Bank. For those students who had lived in what was now “West Jerusalem,” they had to leave with their families and were not able to return to their homes because of the occupation. Father Sonnen, the priests, and nuns had to overcome great difficulties to move all of the school furniture, documents, books and papers, as the nuns told us during our later visit.

Schmidt’s School reopened its doors in October 1951 in Paulus-Haus, the building the Germans built at the beginning of the twentieth century near Damascus Gate. The students went back to school, and more students enrolled every year. After three years the number of students increased to 400, the size the school had been before Al-Nakba.

Schmidt’s School managed to remain standing despite all the difficulties that Palestine was going through, and particularly in Jerusalem. The administration even decided to construct a new building in 1962 to accommodate the growing number of students. The construction began, but the digging that was going on in the neighborhood by the Israeli government caused delays. The construction work was finally resumed and completed, and the new building on Nablus Street was opened in 14 May 1967.¹¹ Nobody could have predicted that a new war would erupt twenty two days later – a war that would swallow what was left of Palestine, and that would yield pain and ramifications worse than those left by al-Nakba. Wasn’t it what the Arabs called al-Naksa (the setback)?

I followed the news of the German nuns, and I learned that some of them moved in the seventies to the German school in Bab al-Luq in Cairo. Later, political and administrative developments that began with Israel’s annexation of Jerusalem in 1980 forced the nuns to say goodbye to their beloved school one by one.

Jerusalem is known for its schools; Sumaya al-Khalidi’s book, one of the latest works on the schools, includes descriptions of them from the Mamluk era to the British Mandate. The book also features a collection of pictures, among them is a photo of Schmidt’s School in its second location near Damascus Gate. Al-Khalidi says in the conclusion: “... In an area of one square kilometer you find dozens of schools and educational institutes. Their architecture is remarkable, unmatched in other cities, and they are impossible to obliterate or ignore, no matter the power of the other. ...”¹²

There is no doubt that the events Jerusalem witnessed since al-Nakba left an impact on its schools and defined their future paths: some had to close down, others managed to overcome all the difficulties and moved to East Jerusalem, while others were originally located there. One of the main signs that prove the greatness of the city and the tremendous love for it is the numerous authorities standing behind these schools. In Jerusalem we find schools associated with various religious bodies, Islamic and Christian, local and foreign, in addition to non-religious bodies, official schools from the various eras, UNRWA schools, and private schools.

We will talk about two schools in particular, as both were established as a result of the bloody events in Jerusalem. Hind Taher al-Hussayni launched her project in 1948, Dar al-Tifl al-‘Arabi, after encountering a group of children who were weary from hunger, fear, and pain. She decided to embrace them and establish an organization

intended to provide care for children orphaned by the battles and massacres in Dayr Yasin and other towns and cities. The orphanage developed in time into a school and humanitarian educational organization interested in science, art, and literature.

Another school was established by Elizabeth Nasser, who was moved by the sight of young girls begging in the streets of Jerusalem in the early 1950s, and established a private organization to accommodate these girls, called Rawdat al-Zuhur (Flowers Kindergarten). The organization grew and turned into a school of which Jerusalem is proud. These two women are a symbol of the bravery, resilience, and humanity of Palestinian women.

Hind al-Hussayni described her institution two years after establishing it: Dar al-Tifl al-‘Arabi started with 30 orphans from Dayr Yasin, two humble rooms in a building in the old city, a capital of 200 pounds and only one care provider. After a few months the institution expanded to accommodate 70 children and occupied the whole building. But this was not enough to realize the organization’s goals. In addition to being small, humidity and lack of sun made an unhealthy environment for innocent children.”¹³

In the mid-1950s, when it was easy to travel from Ramallah to Jerusalem, and when Dar al-Tifl al-‘Arabi was in its seventh year, I had the chance to visit it following the advice of Ms. Labiba Salah, my education and pedagogy teacher in the Teachers College. The premises consisted of two buildings just outside the Old City, and Hind told me that they moved there after less than one year after establishing it. Soon, the children had playgrounds, gardens, and a small pine grove, and with this the humidity problem was solved. But the more complicated problem that required years to be solved was the horrifying nightmares that woke the children screaming at night. Many of them would wake in the middle of the night calling for their mothers. Sadness and grief engulfed Ms. Hind as she spoke, but she soon collected herself, regained her smile and hopeful demeanor, and went back to talk excitedly about the children’s future.

After Ms. Labiba Salah read my essay about Dar al-Tifl, she called me to her office and said, “This essay made me cry ... but I am expecting another piece from you, a piece about the topic you mentioned last month.” I didn’t understand what she was referring to at first and asked, “Which topic?” She smiled and said, “Don’t you intend to write about your visit to “Schmidt’s school?” I replied: “Of course... I remember telling you about it, but that was a personal experience.” She asked me, “How real are boundaries between the public and the personal when Jerusalem is the meeting point for place, time, and human?” I promised her that I would try.

It has been sixty years since that visit. I sat at my computer pouring my feelings, big love, and memories into it, and I do not mean here that I was retrieving deeply buried memories, as we so often say. But I meant to release the wings of my memory, which are looking for a space of freedom to become alive again.

A Star School

As I was reviewing these pages I stopped at the title, and asked myself: “Doesn’t a student from another school have the right to say that her school is the “star school of Jerusalem”? I answered myself saying that she definitely can, but my feelings and my memories were not the only inspiration behind the title. I researched my school’s history and, I have to say, it is an admirable one.

I conclude with ten points that distinguish Schmidt’s School/Schmidt Schule from other schools in Jerusalem:

1. Schmidt’s School was the first school for girls in Jerusalem. It was established during the Ottoman rule in 1886;
2. It focused on scientific advancement and, since the first decade of the twentieth century, it was known for its excellent level in botany, and its rich library;
3. The school was the first to teach education and pedagogy, and began graduating teachers for Palestinian schools since the second decade of the twentieth century;
4. It never stopped except twice under severe circumstances, the first for three years under the British military rule and the second, for another three years, during the Nakba;
5. Today the school is one of the pioneer schools in Jerusalem;
6. Schmidt’s students are allowed to sit for the Arabic tawjihi, the British G.C.E., and the German Abitour;
7. Schmidt students are known for excelling in their studies in Palestinian universities. Among the 15,000 students that graduated from Palestinian universities in the 1980s, five of the top ten students were Schmidt graduates;
8. Its website features pictures and videos of its students. They practice various kinds of scientific, technical, and sports activities with great efficiency and craftsmanship;
9. Throughout its history Schmidt has always been an educational institution with a universal humanitarian message;
10. Moreover, the Catholic Schmidt’s School is a symbol for freedom of religious belief and tolerance.

I am writing these thoughts in 2017, and it has been seventy years since the partition of Jerusalem, since I was deprived of my city, home, and school. May peace be upon my school, and sincere regards from all your students, for despite the distance, the walls, and checkpoints, Jerusalem will always be the capital of all religions.

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Endnotes

- 1 The school was called Schmidt's School, after its principal Father Wilhelm Schmidt (1890–1907), but evolved to Schmidt's Girls College, and more recently, the German "Schmidt-Schule," online at www.schmidt-schule (accessed 23 June 2018).
- 2 The author's father, Ajaj Nuwayhed, was an Arab historian.
- 3 The language of communication and titles used with the German faculty and administration was English. The use of the English titles in this article, whether for the nuns or the teachers, is intended to maintain the atmosphere of the period.
- 4 Similar to hopscotch.
- 5 UN General Assembly Resolution 181, the UN partition plan for Palestine.
- 6 Walid Khalidi, *Before Their Diaspora: A Photographic History of the Palestinians, 1876–1948* (Institute for Palestine Studies, 1984).
- 7 U. Nahon Museum of Italian Jewish Art, "The Story of the Italian Synagogue," online at www.ijamuseum.org (accessed 3 July 2017).
- 8 Schmidt–Schule Jerusalem, "Aspects of the History of the Schmidt School Jerusalem," online at www.schmidtschule.schule (accessed 26 June 2017).
- 9 Schmidt–Schule Jerusalem.
- 10 U. Nahon Museum of Italian Jewish Art.
- 11 Schmidt–Schule Jerusalem.
- 12 Sumaya Mohye al-Din al-Khalidi, *Madares al-Quds min al-ahd al-Mamluki ila al-Intidab al-Britani* [Jerusalem's Schools from the Mamluk Era to the British Mandate] (Jerusalem: al-Risala Press, 2016), 46.
- 13 Dar al-Tifl al-'Arabi, "Mu'assasat Dar al-Tifl al-'Arabi bil-Quds: al-bayaan al-sanawi, 1949–1950" (Annual Report 1949–1950), 7.