"Get into the car! Quickly!" A brief lull in the fighting. They must hurry, pack their two cases and the eight of them somehow into the taxi. The driver kept urging them to hurry. He was frightened and clearly anxious to get out of their perilous, bullet-ridden street. Rex could not come with them. He must stay behind. She held his furry body tightly against her and stroked his long soft ears. She wanted to say, "Please don't worry. It's only for a week. They said so. You'll be fine and we'll be back."

But she knew somehow that it wasn't true. Despite her parents' assurances, a dread internal voice told her so.

"Ghada! Come on, come on, please!" Rex inside the iron garden gate, she outside. The house with its empty veranda shuttered and closed, secretive and already mysterious, as if they had never lived here and it had never been their home. The fruit trees in the garden stark against the early morning sky.

Every nerve and fibre of her being raged against her fate, the cruelty of leaving that she was powerless to avert. She put her palms up against the gate and Rex started barking and pushing at it, thinking she was coming in. Her mother dragged her away and pushed her into the back seat of the taxi onto Fatima's lap. The rest got in and Muhammad banged the car doors shut. She twisted round, kneeling, to look out of the back window.

Another explosion. The taxi, which had seen better days, revved loudly and started to move off. But through the back window, a terrible sight which only she could see. Rex had somehow got out, was standing in the middle of the road. He was still and silent, staring after their retreating car, his tail stiff, his ears pointing forward.

With utter clarity, the little girl saw in that moment that he knew what she knew, that they would never meet again.

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Part One

Palestine

In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story
by Ghada Karmi
(Verso, 2002).

One

On a cold autumnal day I stood with my mother, sister and brother in London airport. It was not then called Heathrow. "Oscar Wilde" were the only two English words I knew because one of the books in my father's library had borne this title, and when I was seven, he taught me to read the English alphabet.

It was September 1949 and I was nine years old. I didn't know exactly why we had come to London, or how long we would stay. In fact, I knew very little about anything. We were waiting for my father to meet us and I thought that that was why we had come, to see him again. The BOAC propeller plane we came on had taken all night to get us from Damascus to London and we had stopped in Malta on the way. Such new places, such new experiences for me who had hardly been anywhere before. The airport was a daunting place; it had immense halls with polished floors, vinyl and wood, which was the strangest sight of all. In Palestine, floors were tiled or made of stone. And there was such a crush of people, strangers pushing, rushing, jostling. Until then, I had never been anywhere in my life where I did

not know any single person. Even when we went to the big souk in Damascus, which was the nearest thing to London airport that I had ever experienced, we had gone with the rest of the family and some of the neighbours as well. The people here looked different to the people I was used to. They were taller and bigger and had pale skins. The men didn't have moustaches and I wondered why none of the women seemed to be pregnant; I could see no swollen bellies anywhere. Not like Palestine.

We had not seen our father for over a year, not since he had left us in Damascus in my grandfather's house. I missed him terribly at first. Then I somehow began to forget about him. Everything was so strange in Damascus. It wasn't where we normally lived, and we scarcely knew our grandparents, although my mother had been born and bred in Damascus. But I don't think she was ever happy there and was glad to leave for Palestine when she married. "I never thought the day would come when I would be relieved to come back here," she had said on our arrival in Damascus. "I don't know what we would have done without my parents to turn to at this terrible time."

And indeed it had been a terrible time, so terrible that I have blotted many of its most painful moments out of my consciousness. The troubles in Palestine started even before I was born, such that my childhood (and indeed that of my brother and sister, who were both older) was overshadowed by the great political events which were happening around us in Palestine and in the world beyond. For a long time, we did not understand their significance, nor why we, an obscure Middle Eastern people, and our country, an undeveloped, backward place, should have been chosen to play such an important role in the affairs of the world.

My life began some two months after the start of the Second World War. Later, my mother added this historical coincidence to her list of reasons for not having wanted to have me, or indeed any child, just

then. Of course, this was not an unfamiliar situation for the women of Palestine at that time. Without contraception or access to abortion, many a woman was desperate not to add yet another mouth to feed on top of her already large family. But in my mother's case, where poverty was not a factor, there was another reason. Life in Palestine was very troubled at the time and no place, my mother said, to bring up a child. Hardly a day went by when there was not a shooting in the street or news of an ambush somewhere in the country. No one felt safe. "If it wasn't Jews after us, it was the British and finally other Palestinians as well."

Despite my mother's reluctance, I was eventually delivered at the government maternity hospital in Jerusalem, with the help of Dr Hajjar, her gynaecologist.

"Come on, Um Ziyad," he told her. "Cheer up. The troubles won't last for ever and things will be normal again." Um Ziyad is how my mother was known; it literally means "mother of Ziyad", after the name of her eldest son, my brother Ziyad, and is a usual form of address in the Levant for a woman once she has given birth to a boy; correspondingly, my father was known as "Abu Ziyad", father of Ziyad.

I was born possibly on November 19, 1939. I say possibly because my exact date of birth is not known. My mother had only an approximate memory of it – "it was winter, I know that." This is not as odd as it might seem because birthdays were traditionally not important in the Arab world. They were never usually celebrated in any way and certainly not with parties or presents. It was only in more modern times and with the advent of Westernisation that people began to adopt the foreign way of marking birthdays (accompanying which has appeared an absurd Arabic rendition of "Happy birthday to you" complete with the original tune and a rough translation of the words). Neither my mother nor my father knew their exact dates of

birth, which were not registered. They should have been because the Ottoman authorities, who ruled Palestine when they were both born, required all births to be notified. But it was not the custom and my grandparents did not bother. This could be an advantage, allowing my mother to make herself younger than she was without fear of contradiction.

The British authorities who had succeeded the Ottomans, on the other hand, rigorously registered my birth (and those of my brother and sister). When she left the hospital, my mother collected my birth certificate which had my full name on it, in English, Arabic and Hebrew (Palestine's three official languages, as decreed under the British Mandate): Ghada Hasan Karmi, after the name of my father in accordance with Arab custom. It was blue in colour and she kept it with all the family documents in the drawer of my father's desk in our sitting room. She also put our photographs as babies and toddlers, and then as schoolchildren, in an album in the same drawer. She liked to keep them safe in our father's desk, but in the agitation and chaos of fleeing from Jerusalem, she left them behind. "How could I have remembered to take them?" she said afterwards guiltily. "All I could think of was what clothes to pack for the five of us."

And there, I suppose, they remained until the Jewish family which was moved by the Israeli authorities into our empty house found them and, for all I know, threw them away. So, I never got to see how my birth certificate looked or what my exact date of birth was, nor any of my childhood photographs either. For many years, the first photograph of myself I ever saw dated from when I was eight, taken after we had left Palestine for Syria. (Much later, one or two other childhood photographs turned up in my uncle Taleb's possession.) There I was with my brother, my sister, our mother and our uncle Taleb, all looking posed and neatly arranged before the camera. Whenever I looked at it as a child, I used to think that my real life

only started with that photograph. What went before left no record and had no reality except in my dreams.

On Christmas Eve, when I was only a few weeks old and while my mother was attempting to breast-feed me, shocking news came to our house. My eldest uncle Mahmoud, who was only fifty years old and had eight children, had been shot dead in Beirut. He was returning home at night when a masked man jumped up at him from beneath the stairs leading to his flat. It was dark and the lights were not working. "Are you Mahmoud?" the man demanded. "Yes," replied my uncle unsuspectingly. Whereupon the man shot him twice in the chest. No one heard it happen, as the family lived at the top of an apartment block. But the police caught the assassin and he subsequently confessed that he had been sent by Hajj Amin al-Husseini to kill him because my uncle did not support his camp, of which he made no secret since he was a journalist and rather outspoken.[1] Once before, in 1937 when he and his family lived in Nablus, Hajj Amin's men had come for my uncle. He fled just in time, leaving his eldest son, my cousin Zuhair, behind to look after the family. "So, they took me instead!" said Zuhair. "I was only fourteen, but they didn't care. They said, 'We'll take you hostage and get your father that way.' They pushed me up on a horse behind one of them and took me to their encampment outside the town. I was terrified, but I soon saw they were only a group of peasants, like our own peasants in Tulkarm, and

[1] At this time, there were two major Palestinian political parties in Palestine, one led by Hajj Amin al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and head of the Supreme Muslim Council, and the other by Raghib al-Nashashibi, the mayor of Jerusalem. Both aimed, but in different ways, to halt Jewish immigration into Palestine, which they feared would lead to a Jewish takeover of the country. The Nashashibis believed in a negotiated agreement mediated through the British, but the Husseinis rejected all negotiations. Their disagreement on method led to bitter enmity and internecine fighting between the two sides.

I didn't feel afraid any more. They kept me for two weeks and I think they felt sorry for what they had to do."

Another of my uncles, Abdul-Ghani, also a journalist and also opposed to Hajj Amin, whom he openly accused of being a British agent, had barely escaped an assassination attempt a few months before. Another man had been killed by mistake for him and he had taken to living in Tel Aviv where the Mufti's men could not reach him. "Why don't they fight the Jews instead of each other?" cried my mother. "God forbid that it should be you next," she said to my father. "I still haven't forgotten what happened last year."

A year before I was born, a man had come to our house. My mother had opened the door to him because it was safer – no one was after harming the women. He asked to see my father in a strange voice. He looked a rough sort of man, and when he came into the light, she could see that he had a bandoleer strapped around his chest. But before she could do anything, my father came out and the man suddenly said, "I was sent here to kill you by Hajj Amin's men. But God help me, I can't go through with it. You have nothing to fear from me."

This did not reassure my father, who was thoroughly alarmed. That very night he moved out, leaving my mother, sister and brother behind, and took refuge in the YMCA. This was nearer to his workplace, which was in the Russian Compound complex on the Jaffa Road and meant that he could take cover quickly if he had to. "For a while," my mother said, "he couldn't even come to visit us at home because he knew they were waiting for him." In order for them to see each other, he would have to go to the house of Muhammad Kamal, his cousin, which was in Qatamon and a safe distance away from the area controlled by Hajj Amin. And my mother would take my sister Siham and brother Ziyad and meet him there at night. She was a courageous, capable woman, but these stolen meetings and the danger

my father was in taxed even her strength. Women did not normally expect to have to fend for themselves, there were no "single parents" in our society, and she started to feel the burden of bewilderment and insecurity. She sometimes wondered if it would ever end.

For, if life in Palestine was turbulent at the time of my birth, it was worse in the years which immediately preceded it. From 1936 to 1939, the Palestinian protests against the policies of the British Mandate authorities who governed Palestine were at their height. The uprising began with the General Strike calling for the suspension of Jewish immigration, which had reached alarming proportions. The whole country came to a standstill for six months. The British ended it by force. Its leaders were executed and hundreds of others were imprisoned. But even then the protests and violence continued, and what had started as a strike turned into a full-scale rebellion. Well over 3,000 Palestinians were killed in three years. Even decades later, my father could barely bring himself to speak of that time. Everyone thought they could see what the British were doing. They seemed determined to let more and more Jews into the country and stamp out any resistance. People became frightened, but their leaders could not agree on a common strategy to defeat either the Jews or the British. The rebellion involved enormous sacrifice for everyone; people were actually starving. But it came to nothing in the end. Jewish immigration continued and so, perhaps in frustration, the Palestinian leaders turned on each other and ordinary people like my parents paid the price.

In order to control the situation, the British brought into Palestine the much-dreaded *tatwiq* (round-up). This was a pernicious practice used by the authorities to root out Palestinian resistance fighters and to search for hidden arms. It formed some of my mother's bitterest memories of that time. "They would suddenly swoop down without warning and then round up all the men they suspected." At that time,

our family lived in the Old City near the Palestine Archaeological Museum. "The soldiers would suddenly come and bang on all the doors with their rifles, looking for the men. They didn't care if they were guilty or innocent. They just dragged them out of the houses and rounded them up like animals. Then they took them off for questioning." They dragged my father away one day, and when she screamed her protests at the doorstep, the squad sergeant barked at her to shut up.

My father never spoke of the humiliation and the shame of these incidents. How depressing, I thought when I heard this, the selfsame brutalities, sickeningly re-enacted under every occupation and by every military regime and practised in identical fashion by Israelis on Palestinians today. And how strange and almost unbelievable to hear such terrible things said about the British, so many of whom I later grew to love and respect when I went to live among them.

My sister Siham learned to fear the British soldiers from a very young age. In the summer of 1935, when she was just four and our mother was expecting my brother Ziyad, the two of them saw British soldiers suddenly arrive in an army truck and spill out into the garden of the house opposite with rifles at the ready. Leaving Siham behind to look fearfully on at the armed men trampling the flowerbeds as they ran towards the house, my mother came out onto the street to find that they had surrounded the whole building. They had come to arrest Talaat al-Seifi, a good friend of my father, who lived there. When she realised this she rushed forward, but one of the soldiers turned round and, thrusting his rifle butt in her face, shoved her back into the house, trembling and shaken. For years afterwards, she swore that it was the terror of that occasion which gave Ziyad his bad childhood eczema.

One day, when my sister was seven years old, the soldiers came again to our road. They rounded up every adult they could find,

including our mother, herded them together and cordoned them off at the end of the road. My father was at work and only my sister was left behind at home. As the soldiers marched my mother out, she shouted to Siham to tell them we had nothing in the house but books and not to search us. She said this because soldiers on such occasions were known to barge into people's houses, kicking furniture around and knocking things over. They particularly targeted the storage areas where people kept their staple foods like flour and sugar and olive oil. After a visit from the army, a kitchen floor would be left swimming in muddy puddles of oil and rice and flour. My mother lived in dread of this happening to us. Each year, she spent much money and effort to prepare and store our winter provision. To stand by and watch helplessly while the soldiers trampled over them with their great, heavy boots was a nightmare many of her friends had suffered and she prayed to avoid.

My father was an avid reader and book collector even then, and he kept several chests full of books in our house. These would have looked suspicious to a soldier searching for hidden arms, and indeed the man who came to our house suddenly stopped in his tracks and started to poke at them with his rifle. Siham was terrified and stuttered that the chests only contained English books. She stressed the word "English", thinking to placate him. He spoke a little broken Arabic and seemed to understand her. He tried to pat her head, but she shrank away in terror. He shrugged and turned to leave, virtually colliding with my mother who had broken through the cordon and was running towards the house screaming for fear that Siham was being murdered. She had grabbed another soldier who was standing outside by his jacket, oblivious of his heavy rifle, and was crying in the few English words she could muster, "Baby! My baby!" and pointing at our house. The man shook her off and strode inside our front door. Seeing my sister, he burst out laughing, "Good God, missus! Call that a baby?"

My mother sighed deeply, remembering. "Is it any wonder that I didn't want to bring a child into a world like that?"

My uncle's body was taken from Beirut back to Palestine and to the town of Tulkarm for burial. This was because our family originates from Tulkarm, hence our name of Karmi (Arabic surnames often derive from their place of origin). It was then a small town, situated in the middle of Palestine halfway between Lydda and Haifa and to the north-west of Jerusalem. (Today, it is designated as being in the West Bank of the River Jordan and was from 1967 until 1995 under Israeli military occupation.)

My mother did not want to go to the funeral because she was breast-feeding me and could not take me with her. Also, for some time she had had her eye on a bedroom suite which was on sale at a store on the Jaffa Road in the commercial part of Jerusalem. The owner of the shop was a German Jew, who had immigrated recently to Palestine and was not doing well, which was strange because many of his fellow Jewish immigrants received generous help from the British Mandate government and prospered. As an English official in my father's department once quipped, "The Jews used to say they came here to help their brethren. But from what I can see, the majority of them are not so much doing good as doing well!" This sort of remark, my father said, was typical of the anti-Semitism so common amongst British officials in Palestine at the time.

My mother had managed to beat the shopkeeper down to a bargain price of £30 for the whole suite and was to take him the money and make her purchase. But my father said she had to do her duty and come with him to Tulkarm for the funeral. So, she dropped both me and the suite, and by the time she came back to Jerusalem, it had been sold.

In her absence, I had to drink diluted cow's milk with aniseed to make it more digestible. Our doctor advised that I should get accustomed to cow's milk as soon as possible, because in these troubled times, he said, powdered milk might run out. My mother had no one to leave us with because none of her family in Damascus could come to Jerusalem nor could any of our family in Tulkarm on account of my uncle's funeral. So she left us in Fatima's charge for seven days, "which was wonderful", said Siham years later, "because we could do what we liked and we loved Fatima. You cried a lot which was annoying and Ziyad said, why don't they send you back to the hospital. But we were happy all the same."

Fatima would put my milk in a concave glass bottle with two rubber teats at either end of it which she warmed over a small spirit-lamp. How antiquated such a device would seem to us nowadays, but nothing better was to be had at the time. Fatima did not normally live with us, but she had to move in on this occasion while our parents were in Tulkarm. Of course I did not know at that stage what Fatima meant to us children or what she would come to signify for me personally, how the precious memory of her after 1948 would merge with the rest of my irrecoverable childhood. To my mother, she was merely a hard-working village woman who cleaned our house and helped her with the cooking. It was usual then for the better-off Palestinian families in the cities to employ peasant men and women (fellahin) to do domestic work. For my mother, who came from a modest background, servants would have been an unthinkable luxury while she was growing up. However, having married a man with a reputable position and a promising career, she could now enjoy the advantages of her status.

Fatima al-Basha, as was her full name, lived in the village of al-Maliha, some three miles to the south-west of Jerusalem. In her early teens she had been married off to a man who treated her badly and

from whom she escaped back to her parents whenever she could. She had two daughters by him and at some point he had either died or abandoned her, we never knew. When she came to work for us, she was about forty years old and lived with her children in the village close to her brother Muhammad. My father found him a job as a caretaker at the Umariyya school where Ziyad went. Each day, when he finished his work there, he would come over to tend our garden and do odd jobs.

Fatima's other brother had gone to South America to join the growing community of Palestinians and Syrians who had been emigrating there since the end of the nineteenth century. Many of these were Christians and had left because they saw no future for themselves during the turbulent last years of the Ottoman Empire. With the coming of British Mandate rule over Palestine which, far from giving the Palestinians independence, actually encouraged Jewish immigration into the country, the upheavals looked set to continue. And so some of those who could afford to take their families with them, or single men like Fatima's brother, set off for a new life. He was, like the rest of her family, illiterate and very poor and Fatima never said whether he did well or not.

At first, my mother took Fatima on to work for us just twice a week. But when we moved into our second house in Qatamon, where we lived until our departure from Jerusalem, she started to come daily. We wanted her to stay at night as well and would beg and plead with her, but she always went back to her own home. She used to walk from her village to our house every day which took about an hour. Halfway along the route, there was a large oak tree which she sat under to take a rest before going on. We knew this tree very well from when we went to visit her at al-Maliha. We loved going to her house – "though God knows why," my mother would comment – and always set out eagerly from Jerusalem with her and her brother.

Because Ziyad and I were still small, she and Muhammad used to carry us on their shoulders as they walked. But when we asked to get down and walk by ourselves, we soon got tired and wanted to be picked up again. And just as we were growing hot and thirsty, there suddenly would be the wonderful oak tree with its thick gnarled trunk and huge leafy branches. Seeing it, everyone would sigh with relief and run to sink down gratefully on the cool, shady ground beneath it.

Fatima lived in a tiny, square-shaped mud house with a wooden roof which stood, as is usual for Palestinian villages, in a close cluster of similar houses. It consisted of one room where everyone ate, sat, slept and conducted their business. Against one wall was a raised platform or ledge where the mattresses and covers were kept for the night-time. We all sat on the floor in the body of the room while Fatima cooked for us. She made simple vegetable stews, since meat for her and the other villagers was a rare luxury. At other times, she put out dishes of olive oil and ground thyme, crushed green olives and fresh sweet onions, all the staples of Palestinian peasant food. We ate whatever she made and the flat round loaves of peasant bread she baked, as if they were the most delicious foods we had ever tasted. After the meal, we would go with her daughters to the freshwater spring just outside the village. This spring served the whole village and next to it was a trough for animals invariably surrounded by a flock of goats pushing and jostling against each other to drink from it. Fatima's daughters would fill a large earthenware jug each from the eye of the spring and place them on the top of their heads. They always managed to walk upright, gracefully keeping their balance, without the full heavy jugs ever falling off.

From the start, I adopted Fatima for my mother. I knew of course that she was not my real mother, although my devotion to her was such that Ziyad and Siham used to taunt me with being a peasant child. "You're not our sister at all," they said. "We found you in the

garden. Your real parents are peasants from Fatima's village and we're going to send you back to them." This used to torment me and I would wail loudly. "Leave her alone!" my mother would shout at them. But my distress was only partly because I did not want to be an outcast from the family. Most of it was to do with the idea of being associated with peasants. Even at my young age, I had already absorbed the prevailing social distinctions between the three major sectors of Palestinian society at the time: the peasants, the rural landowning families and the townsfolk, with the peasants at the bottom of the heap. In many ways, this was an unjustified snobbery since the fellahin of Palestine constituted the majority of the population and the backbone of the country. Palestine was above all an agricultural country and had scarcely a single industry until the twentieth century. Urban elites had always existed to a certain extent in the major cities, but they only really developed from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. The traditions and customs that distinguish Palestine from its neighbours derive not from these people but from its peasant class. The famous Palestinian handicrafts like the glass-making of Hebron, the cloth weaving in Majdal, the pottery making of all Palestine's villages; or Palestinian music and Palestine's folk dance, the *dabka*, or its traditional embroidery were all carried out by rural people.

And yet, there was a persistent snobbery amongst the better-off classes which relegated the peasants to a lowly and despised position. Even the word for peasant was used as a term of denigration. To call someone a fellah or a fellaha – the feminine form – was to imply that he or she was primitive and uncivilised. My father had a favourite description for people with peasant origins who had "jumped classes" and were trying to present themselves as something better. "So-and-so may call himself a university lecturer, but mark my words, the man is a peasant," he would say. "How do you know?" "Just look at his

trousers," he would answer. "They're round." As peasants traditionally wore a type of loose trousers, they were unaccustomed to wearing city clothes and hence, according to my father, when they adopted city wear they did not know how to iron their trousers properly. Why he should have believed this, we never knew, since none of us had ever seen any of these round trousers. But hearing him say such things used to annoy my mother.

"As if your family were any better than peasants themselves!" she would scoff. This was in fact rather harsh. Although my father's family was indeed predominantly engaged in farming, my grandfather was a well-known scholar and *qadi*, that is, a judge in the shari'a courts (the religious institutions which regulated the life of Muslims). His reputation for learning had spread well beyond the confines of Tulkarm.

But he was also a landowner of considerable tracts of land in and around Tulkarm (most of it later confiscated by Israel), which he gave his brothers to farm on behalf of the family. He himself, however, never engaged in farming but was primarily concerned with literature, poetry and jurisprudence. My father used to say that it was his influence which led to his own literary education and that of my uncles. However, my mother, though of much humbler origins, was nevertheless a daughter of Damascus, one of the Arab world's most important capital cities. She never forgot that and would from time to time taunt my father with his origins from what was, in her view, no more than a large village.

Tulkarm was indeed a small agricultural place with a population of no more than a few thousand in my grandfather's time. But its people were proud to point out that the Ottoman authorities had seen fit in about 1850 to grant it the status of a *qaimmaqamiyya*. This was an Ottoman administrative category which made it into a township and gave it precedence over the villages. In addition, it acquired a Turkish

My grandfather, Sheikh Said al-Karmi, photographed around 1920

qaimmaqam, or governor, which was a further mark of distinction, since it brought the townspeople closer to the government. To be sure, it could not compare with Palestine's major cities, Jaffa, Jerusalem or Hebron. But neither was it totally insignificant, even in the nineteenth century, and when in 1908 it acquired a branch railway line and train station which connected it to the great Hijaz railway of Palestine and Syria people felt proud to be its inhabitants.

Although my mother would have unreservedly deprecated the people of Tulkarm and all others she regarded as fellahin, most Palestinians in fact had ambivalent feelings towards them. For the fellahin, judged uneducated and backward on the one hand, were also seen as symbols of tenacity, simplicity and steadfastness on the other. They represented continuity and tradition and the essence of what it

was to be Palestinian. And people believe that it was these qualities which saved them from disintegration in the refugee camps after 1948 where so many of them were sent and still remain to this day.

In the immediate aftermath of the expulsions from Palestine, they showed themselves steadfast and stoic, especially the women. Having worked hard all their lives in the home and on the land, these women soldiered on in their tents in much the same way. One can see them from time to time on TV screens today in Europe and America, wearing their embroidered caftans and white headscarves, angrily berating Israeli soldiers or demonstrating outside the Israeli prisons where their menfolk are held. Whenever I have seen such scenes, I would remember Fatima and wonder where she ended up and how she died.

For she used to wear just such a caftan, black with a bodice of intricate dark red embroidery. Panels of this embroidery ran down its skirts in parallel lines and rode up its back to form a large colourful rectangle. She tied it round her middle with a broad black silken belt. Her hair was covered by a soft hat tied under her chin with straps, and over the hat she wore a fine white cloth. In winter, she had a long velvet jacket, also embroidered, with a ribbon to tie its lapels together at the top. It was quilted on the inside to keep her warm in the cold Jerusalem winters where it sometimes snowed.

This traditional dress was typical of the villages of Palestine, and each region had its own distinctive embroidery pattern and colours. People could tell at a glance whether a gown was from the Jerusalem area or from Bethlehem or Gaza, since most embroidered caftans were made in these places. Elsewhere, as for example in Tulkarm, the women wore plain dark-coloured gowns without embroidery. Village girls learned young from their mothers how to embroider their dresses according to the set patterns of their village. In the main, they were meant for daily use, but each woman also made a special caftan for her

My uncle Mahmoud, around 1929, and (right) my mother, just before we left for London in 1949

wedding. The stitching here was often remarkably detailed and highly ornamental.

At the time of my childhood in Jerusalem, no woman who was not a peasant would have been seen dead in such a caftan, however beautifully embroidered. Middle-class women like my mother were keen on the latest fashions coming from Europe, as portrayed in Egyptian films. They aped the hairstyles which Egyptian film stars sported, the dresses and the silk stockings they wore. A 1948 photograph of my mother shows her in a two-tone dress with large shoulder pads and wide lapels. Her permed hair is curled back at the forehead in a large roll and her mouth is finely outlined in dark lipstick. Her eyebrows are pencil thin and her eyes are accentuated with black, although this touch may have been added by the photographer later. For my mother, Fatima's caftan was a badge of her peasant identity and as much a part of her as the colour of her eyes. To wear Fatima's clothes would have been as unthinkable as becoming Fatima herself.

No one then could have known that after the loss of Palestine in 1948 this despised peasant costume would become a symbol of the homeland, worn with pride by the very same women who had previously spurned it. In exile, it became obligatory for each Palestinian woman to have her own caftan and to show it off at public functions. "Here, I brought you this," said Jane Willoughby, presenting me with a black embroidered caftan from Ramallah. It had a richly embroidered bodice and red velvet shoulders. This was in 1977 when Ramallah was a part of the occupied West Bank of Jordan. Jane, who was on the council of a British charity caring for refugees, had travelled out to the Occupied Territories, as this part of old Palestine was known. "They told me that every Palestinian girl has to have one of these and that it was the best present I could buy for someone like you," she said.

I wore it often and later found an embroidered jacket with the same patterns and colours which I bought from a Palestinian in Amman. It had been embroidered by his wife and sisters, and he made his living by selling their handiwork from his van. He parked this on the street, draped all over with gaily coloured caftans and embroidered cushion covers, and told me he dreamed of having his own shop one day.

Whereas embroidery had originally been an individual craft, after 1948 a whole new industry grew up employing village women to produce caftans for trade. Much of this work was centred on the refugee camps and helped raise revenue for the women who made the caftans. Later, it was developed to include the production of embroidered cushion covers, table runners, napkins, wall hangings and the like. The range of colours and fabrics has been expanded

beyond what was traditional, but the basic patterns remain the same. It has become usual for well-to-do Palestinians who live in Britain or America to display these embroidered cushions and hangings in their lounges and to explain their origins at length to visitors.

After 1967, when the rest of Palestine came under Israeli rule, the embroidery trade increased, spurred on by the renewed feeling of loss amongst Palestinians. Specialists in Palestinian embroidery began to appear on the scene, lectures were given, embroidery books were written, exhibitions were held, and antique or rare caftans were avidly collected. What had started out as a solely peasant custom was now transformed into a precious national heritage.

Fatima, rolling up the sleeves of her caftan to clean our kitchen, had no inkling of course that what she wore would one day have such value. She was fair-skinned with hazel-coloured eyes and her hair was dark, although she usually had it covered up. I think her nose was aquiline and her mouth was full. But her face has a blurred dream-like quality about it because I cannot quite remember it. It was more the sense of her I retain, a kindly patient motherliness. When she came to our house in the mornings and before I was old enough to go to school, I used to follow her around everywhere. I would prattle away at her, telling her all kinds of stories to which she pretended to listen.

When it was lunchtime, usually about two o'clock when my father came home from work, she would lay the table for the family in our dining-room and retire to the kitchen to eat her own lunch. And I would always eat with her, sitting opposite her on a low wooden stool with a plate of food on the floor mat between us. She had a habit of eating the radish leaves which were left behind after the radish heads had been cut off and placed on the family lunch table. And I loved eating them with her; they had a crisp, slightly bitter taste. "You're a funny girl," she would say. "Fancy wanting to eat these poor leaves when you could have proper radishes like the others."

There was no particular reason for me to have had my lunch with Fatima, since no one had excluded me from sitting with the rest of the family. But I wanted to feel that she and I had a special bond, different from her relationship with my sister and my brother. When she lay down in our veranda sometimes to have a sleep in the afternoon, I would sit next to her and talk so as to keep her awake. She was good-natured and never objected but would nod with her eyes closed and I suspect that she often slept through my chatter. But I went on believing that I was very special to her and later, in memory, I appropriated her entirely to myself. But though I was devoted to her, in fact, Fatima cared for all of us equally and probably had no special favourite amongst us. Of course, she also had two daughters of her own, but I used to dismiss them as of no account because I saw her as being exclusively mine.

I hardly remember my mother at this time, I think because she went out so much. Ever since we moved to Qatamon, she had formed a large circle of friends with whom she exchanged daily visits. These were predominantly Christian because Qatamon was a mixed area where many foreigners lived alongside Arab families. We had English people who worked for the Mandate government around us, and also a small number of European Jews. Qatamon at that time was regarded as a desirable residential area where the better-off Palestinians lived. We were not particularly well-off ourselves, as my father had a modest salary which had to cater for our needs as well as those of his mother, brother and unmarried sister who all lived in Tulkarm and were entirely dependent on him. My father had only arrived at his position in the government education department after years of struggle and penury as a schoolteacher. Thus, we were distinctly at the lower end of the scale in terms of wealth, and could not compete with some of the other families who lived there.

Qatamon had wide streets and large detached villas built of sand-

coloured Jerusalem stone with green shutters and tiled verandas. Many were surrounded by leafy gardens lavishly planted with fruit trees and flowers. We had five apricot trees in our garden, an almond tree, a plum tree, a pear tree and a lemon tree just under my parents' bedroom window. We also had a vine which bore heavy bunches of oval-shaped green grapes in the late summer. But my sister and I liked to pick them before they ripened when they were hard and sour. We would screw up our eyes in agony while we ate them and our teeth would feel sensitive for hours afterwards, but we still did it. Our neighbour's garden had a climbing rose-tree all over its walls. When the roses bloomed, they were huge and pink and scented and so beautiful that people passing by in the road would pluck them off the bush which annoyed our neighbours immensely.

Our house was similar to the others, stone-built, on one floor and raised above street level by steps which led up to a large veranda in front. Or at least, so it seemed to me because in my child's memory everything was large in comparison to my own small size. Once, many years later, when I tried to draw a picture of our house, all I could come up with was a huge structure with a tall front door and immense veranda with high steps leading up to it, as if it were being viewed from a crouching position. In the years of our absence after 1948, Qatamon underwent much depredation. For a while, it fell into disrepute and was regarded as undesirable and old-fashioned. Poor Jewish families moved in, many of them religious, and even its name was changed to "Gonen". However, in the 1970s, the fashion changed and middle-class Israelis began to find its old Palestinian villas appealing and stylish. House prices soared, and acquiring an old Qatamon house became increasingly difficult.

When we lived there, the fact that many of the people in Qatamon were Christian Palestinians was no accident. The Christian community in Palestine had a tradition of commercial and professional success, going back to the last days of the Ottoman Empire. At that time, various European countries had established their consulates in Jerusalem and had started to introduce foreign influence into Palestine. Soon after, missionaries from Germany, France, Russia and Britain came in the wake of this movement and set up denominational churches and hospitals and schools. Their aim was to convert the population to their own various Christian denominations – we had German Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Anglicans and other smaller sects. The people of Palestine targeted for these conversions were predominantly Muslim, but even the ten per cent minority of existing, long-established Christians and the three per cent of Jews were not spared the attentions of the missionaries.

"It was a stupid idea and we left them to it," my father said. "Of course, none of the Muslims or Jews converted, so they worked on the Christians amongst us. Most of the old Greek Orthodox guard resisted, but a lot of them changed and became Catholics and Anglicans and I don't know what else."[2] A certain tension grew up between Muslims and Christians after these conversions because the latter drew closer to the European missions and consulates which had adopted them. These in turn favoured such Christian converts over their Muslim compatriots and encouraged them in trade and business. They learned foreign languages and foreign customs and even started to use European first names for their children. Hence it is that one finds such names as Edward, George and Philip, or Margaret, Mary and Patricia amongst Palestinians today.

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[2] Palestinian Christians traditionally belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church. Until the nineteenth century, and apart from a tiny Catholic community which had survived since the Crusades, all of them were Greek Orthodox.

By the turn of the century, this process had brought forth a new and prosperous class of Palestinian businessmen, entrepreneurs, middlemen and professionals, most of whom were Christians. This lead over the Muslims was maintained under the British Mandate after 1920. People said that it was deliberately promoted by the British authorities as a part of the divide-and-rule policy which they used to keep the Palestinians disunited and unable to resist Jewish migration into the country. "Imagine," my father said, "in the education department where I worked, most of the others were Christians – that is, apart from the Jews whom the British also brought in. And it was the same in every branch of government. How could that have been when Christians were a minority and we Muslims were in the majority?"

None of this, however, impinged on my parents' socialising, especially my mother's. Our immediate next-door neighbours were a Christian family called Jouzeh who were in and out of our house all the time. We also made friends with the Tubbeh family, Christians who lived opposite our house. The head of the family, Abu Michel as he was known, was the *mukhtar* of Qatamon, a post dating from Ottoman times and something akin to a mayor. My mother's other close friends, Emily Saleh and the Wahbeh family, lived several streets away. She and Emily were devoted to each other and we were brought up to play with her children, the youngest of whom, Randa, was the same age as myself. I was also friends with the Wahbeh children, Lily and Nellie. Ziyad's best friend, Hani Sharkas, came from a Muslim family who lived two streets below. His mother, Um Samir, and ours were very close and he had a dark-haired sister called Lamis for whom my brother harboured a secret admiration; to his chagrin, even the poem he wrote her when he was ten failed to provoke any interest.

Though we saw a great deal of these largely Christian families because they lived in the neighbourhood, my mother also had a wide

circle of Muslim friends who lived beyond Qatamon, in Sheikh Jarrah, in Baq'a and in the Old City. She socialised with some of the oldest Jerusalem families, the Husseinis, the Nashashibis, the Afifis. There was in Palestine at that time a certain snobbishness with regard to these established families. Each of the major cities had its own upper crust, but the Jerusalem families were considered to be of the highest order.

Their pre-eminence was due partly to wealth and to the ownership of extensive *waqf* property (pious Muslim endowments held in perpetuity for the benefit of the community, which included both land and buildings), but also to their having held high office under the Ottoman administration which ruled Palestine until 1918. In addition, some of them had traditional responsibility for Jerusalem's holy places. For example, the Nusseibeh family had held the keys to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre from the sixteenth century. In the scheme of things, our family, not being from Jerusalem and having little wealth, did not feature amongst the elite. But this did not prevent ordinary social interaction, and my mother was as popular with the wives in these families as she was with our less prestigious neighbours.

Families visited each other in the evenings after supper. Lunch being the main meal, supper was usually light and taken at about seven in the evening, after which people went out or entertained. Socialising and mixing with people was my mother's principal pastime, indeed her main activity in life. Like the other women, she regularly engaged in the practice of what was called the *istiqbal*. This was a women-only reception, held in the afternoon, when the men were out of the house. Once it so happened that my father was at home and sitting reading in the *liwan* (the main reception room) as the women began to arrive. They were quite horrified at seeing him and told my mother so in no uncertain terms, whereupon he took himself off chuckling into his bedroom.

Each woman had a certain day for her *istiqbal*; I think ours took place on Tuesdays. There was a routine to these events. First, we were made to keep out of the way while our mother spent the morning making savouries and sweetmeats. (The best thing about that from our point of view was the wonderful food left over for us to feast on after everyone had gone.) Then, the front room, or salon, to the right of the *liwan* was dusted and swept to be ready for the occasion. There was an air of excitement as the women began to arrive, all dressed up and bejewelled. A great hubbub arose that echoed throughout the house as they greeted and kissed each other. Everyone admired and commented on each other's clothes, which was the main aim of the exercise. At *istiqbals*, no woman adorned herself for men; it was a practice meant only to excite the envy or approbation of other women.

When they had assembled in our salon, the smell of their various perfumes wafted outwards powerfully. I gawped at them through the open door, they looked so glamorous. The talk was all about their households, children and husbands. They exchanged news, gossiped and let off steam. Someone asked if anyone had noticed how one of the Nashashibi women never ate a thing whenever she came to visit. It was a waste of time going to the trouble of making or offering her anything. She would just smile primly and say that she would have loved to, but her appetite was so poor she hardly ever ate.

"I thought there was something fishy about it. I mean you only had to look at her waistline to know it wasn't true." The women were agog, as they all thought that some of the Nashashibis were snooty and condescending. "I was determined to get to the bottom of it. So, I walked in on her just before she was due to visit me one day and least expecting it. And there she was, stuffing her face with cakes and pastries! That's what she does each time she goes out."

"No wonder she had no appetite! Fancy that, trying to make us feel like gluttons," exclaimed the others.

If there was one place where a woman could complain about her husband, it was here. The others usually advised caution and patience, as well they might, since a disaffected wife had few other options in our society. In some of these gatherings, although not in ours, women sang or danced for each other. The ones who were especially good at it were usually egged on by the others to perform. A western eye might have seen something erotic in this, but it was nothing of the sort. It was joyous, uninhibited fun and everyone who could joined in. The dancing they did was that known in the West as belly-dancing, which we all learned as children. No one taught us how to do it, we just picked it up. I used to sway my hips and twist my hands around in rhythm with the music when I could barely walk, and by the age of three or four, I was dancing quite adeptly and entertaining the neighbours. My exhibitionism used to distress my brother who would drag me off the table where I was performing and take me home. "You should see your daughter," he would exclaim to our parents, pushing me angrily towards them, "dancing and singing like a . . . like a . . . " and he would run out of epithets.

Although by the 1940s several women's organisations had come into being in Jerusalem, my mother was never attracted to join, even when friends like Tarab Abdul-Hadi were involved. This woman, whom I was to meet living in exile in Cairo many years later, had been one of the founders of the first women's organisation, the Palestine Arab Women's Congress. This was established in the late 1920s and was political in nature, a remarkable phenomenon for the conservative Arab society of that time.

The women who joined Tarab Abdul-Hadi in setting it up came from those very same notable Jerusalem families with whom my mother mixed, but she found their overt political activism not to her liking. From the start, they made clear that they would protest against the Zionist presence in Palestine and would support their men's

national struggle for independence. My mother was uneasy about their bold declaration that they had left the traditional female arena of the home to engage in public life. Shockingly, many of them went on to discard the veil which was then ubiquitous and which my mother also wore. They wrote hundreds of letters and telegrams to anyone they thought might be sympathetic to the Palestinian plight.

But they also had a humanitarian side to their work which my mother did support. They ran a campaign on behalf of the prisoners whom the British authorities had incarcerated for resisting government policy on Jewish immigration into the country. They entreated

One of the Jerusalem women's organisations active during the 1930s (reproduced courtesy of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs)

the British High Commissioner to reduce or commute harsh sentences and they collected money, clothing and food for prisoners' families who had been impoverished by the loss of their breadwinners. Some of them even sold their jewellery to raise money for their work. In 1938, they sent representatives to the Eastern Women's Conference in Cairo to defend Palestine. This had drawn women from the Arab countries and also from Iran, and demanded an end to British rule in Palestine, a prohibition on Jewish immigration and land sales to Jews. "Good for them!" my mother said approvingly at the time. "If you ask me, they're better than the men."

Towards the end of the 1930s, the Arab Women's Congress split into a political and a social branch. The latter proved more appealing to ordinary women and, in the early 1940s, my cousin Aziza, who was then married to Zuhair and living in Jerusalem, joined the social branch. Soon, this association developed branches in other Palestinian cities, including Tulkarm, and Aziza was able to continue her membership when she went back there. She never tried to interest my mother in joining. She was content to socialise in a more informal way.

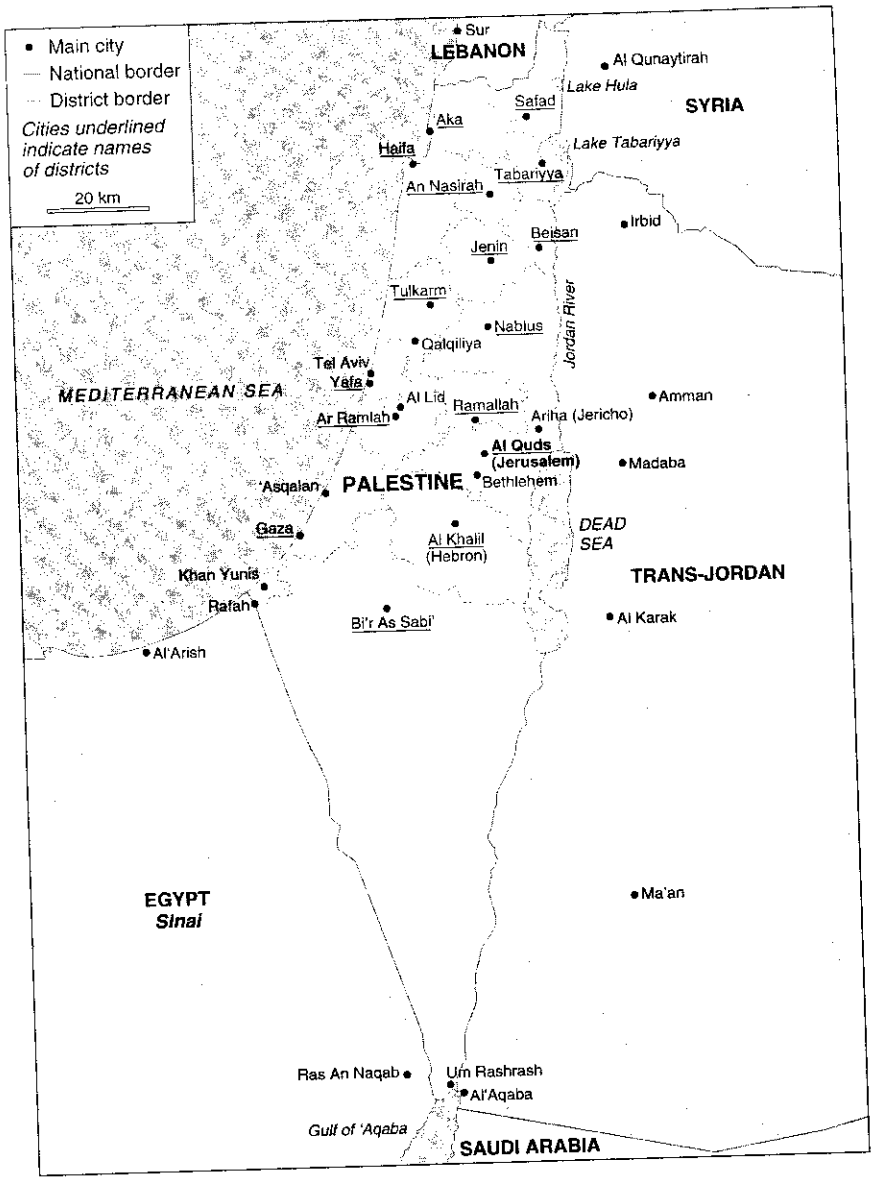
Socialising came naturally to my mother, as she was talkative and vivacious and in her element when telling stories and anecdotes. Had she been born in another society and at another time I think she could have become a professional comedienne. As it was, her audience consisted of our friends and us. My father's one form of relaxation was listening to her gossip about our neighbours or people we knew. He would pretend to be reading his book while she talked. But if she stopped her narrative for a moment, he would look up and say, "Yes? What happened next?"

Those early years of the 1940s were probably the best of her whole life. The general troubles besetting Palestine had calmed after I was born and did not resurface to affect our area until after 1945. In that

brief period, my mother could enjoy her comfortable social position attained after many years of hardship with my father's straitened circumstances and struggling career. He was now set to rise in his job and could look to a better salary. With her maid and her gardener and all her friends about her, she felt contented, and the last thing in the world she wanted was for it all to come to an end.

The fact that men and women mixed freely in our area on social occasions was by no means the norm for the rest of Jerusalem. Society was predominantly Muslim and conservative, and men and women did not meet socially. Indeed, many women in the Old City wore the veil and, unlike my parents, people performed all the Islamic rituals of daily prayer and going to the mosque on Fridays. This was in keeping with the traditional life of Jerusalem which had always been viewed by Palestinians as a holy Islamic city and a great religious centre. During the major part of Ottoman rule it was even something of a backwater to which only pilgrims and religious scholars went, many of them hoping to die there. "I suppose in those days, you could best describe it as a large village with a religious atmosphere," said my father. Jerusalem only began to change in the nineteenth century when the Christian missions established themselves there. In just fifty years, they built over a hundred churches, schools, hospitals and other institutions. From 1900 onwards, European Jews came to join the rest of the new arrivals and establish their own institutions. Twenty years later, the British made Jerusalem what it had never been, the seat of government and the de facto capital of Palestine. As a result, it became the most important city in the whole country.

The change in Jerusalem's character which ensued was not uniform throughout the city, but occurred in patches, reflecting the pattern of foreign and immigrant settlement. The Old City and its environs remained Muslim, but newly built suburbs like our own had a more mixed population, including a number of Jews who had come to live



Palestine during the British Mandate, at the time of my birth

there because they could not afford the rents in Rehavia, the Jewish settlement directly next to Qatamon. Otherwise, Jews usually confined themselves to certain areas in Jerusalem like the Hebrew University complex on Mount Scopus, or the part behind the King David Hotel known as Montefiore (after the British Jewish philanthropist Moses Montefiore who founded it), and the Jewish quarters in the Old City and at Mea Shearim.

Mea Shearim was an odd orthodox Jewish enclave very near to the Old City, established in the early 1900s and full of black-coated men with long beards and ringlets for sideboards. Some of them wore what seemed to us outlandish round fur-trimmed hats and knee-length breeches and formed a bizarre sight amongst the Arabs. People said they looked dusty and unwashed. They were immigrants from Eastern Europe, and we often wondered how they could bear going about in their heavy clothes during Jerusalem's hot summers. There was little residential mixing between Jews and Arabs, but in commercial areas like the Jaffa Road people mingled, usually without friction. "In fact," chuckled my father, "all the young Arab men liked to go down to the Jaffa Road to look at the Jewish girls. They found them attractive and used to whistle at them and try and chat them up." But my mother disapproved. "Yes and you know why. Because they were all easy. They were anybody's."

By the end of the 1930s, Jerusalem had acquired a cinema, cafes and something of a social life. The Zion Cinema (which was Jewish-owned) was also used as a stage for shows and plays. Visiting Egyptian film stars, singers and comedians performed there to packed, excited audiences of Jerusalemites who felt themselves part of a new glamorous world. In the 1940s, several other cinemas appeared, and one day my mother took us with her and the neighbours and their children to see a film. It was showing at the Rex Cinema, which was Arab-owned, and soon displaced the Jewish cinemas for Arab audiences. I must have been no more than four years old at the time. We saw the film *Frankenstein* with Boris Karloff, now considered a cinema classic, but then something of which my mother knew little except that it was foreign (she was used to seeing only Egyptian films). The effect on me was quite horrific and long-lasting. I had nightmares for months afterwards, not helped by my brother's Frankenstein impersonations. We would sit in the deep window seat of the *liwan* and he would pull down the shutters to make everything go dark. And then he would invent stories on the Frankenstein theme to make me scream.

The YMCA of Jerusalem opposite the King David Hotel also had an auditorium for concerts and lectures. Young people loved to go there because it offered a variety of entertainments. It had tennis and squash courts, a large swimming pool, a library and a cafeteria. Not the least of its attractions was that it provided a venue for young men and women to meet. This of course was nothing like the sort of mixing between the sexes to be found in Europe and was based much more on people meeting together in families, but nevertheless it enabled the sons and daughters to see and talk to each other. These were predominantly Christians, who also had other opportunities of meeting each other at picnics and gatherings organised by the various Christian churches to which they belonged. Social custom amongst Muslims did not encourage such activities, but many Muslim men and the more modern amongst the Muslim families also used the YMCA. Our cousins Zuhair and Iyyas, who normally lived in Tulkarm but came and stayed in Jerusalem with us frequently, used to take the three of us to see plays there, but Ziyad and I were too young to join in the sports and other activities.

The most popular cafes in Jerusalem were Jewish-owned. "They had tables on the pavements and some of them had a real Viennese atmosphere," Leila Mantoura, a Christian Palestinian friend, told me. "You could eat the most delicious chocolate cake there." Iyyas

sometimes took Ziyad to such cafes on the Jaffa Road. They had ice-cream and sat outside, watching people go by. This was a new feature in Jerusalem's life imported by the European Jewish immigrants. The traditional Arab coffee-house, a feature of every city in Palestine and indeed every city in the Arab world, was of course a place where only men went to talk, play backgammon and smoke a narghile (or hookah).

Our father used to take us out to a Jewish European place in Baq'a which served ice-cream. When we walked back and it was dark, we could see the sky lit up with a brilliant patchwork of stars. Our father would then give us a small lesson in astronomy, telling us the names of the stars and the constellations. One day, while scraping the bottom of the ice-cream bowl in his eagerness to get at the last mouthful, Ziyad dropped the bowl onto the floor and it broke. As our father was about to tell him off, the owner, who was a Hungarian Jew, held up his hand and hurried over. "Never mind, never mind," he said, bending down to sweep up the mess. "If all our worries were so small, what a good world it would be!"

Families often went to the new garden cafes outside Jerusalem, in Ramallah and around the village of Beit Jala. We went for outings to the Grand Hotel in Ramallah, except that everybody still called it the Odeh Hotel after the name of its owner. It had a large garden restaurant with shady pine trees where they served charcoal-grilled meat, tasty salads, olives and freshly baked bread. But well-to-do Palestinians still preferred to go to Jaffa for picnics, to swim and saunter about. This had traditionally been Palestine's major city, where the best families lived, where the first Palestinian newspapers were established, and where the intelligentsia met. "The bride of the sea," people called it; "bride" in Arabic is used to denote a thing of great beauty.

Jaffa had wide roads, big houses, picturesque views over the Mediterranean and a lively, busy harbour. It was a place for fun, for

business and, as Palestine's major port, for travel. Before Jerusalem livened up, people went there to get away from its fusty religious atmosphere. Whenever my father went to Jaffa to work at the Near East Broadcasting Station established by the British, he would take Siham and Ziyad along with him. As soon as they saw the sea, they would beg to go swimming and then my father would leave them trustingly in the care of one of the men who looked after the beach.

Jaffa also drew Jews from nearby Tel Aviv who went there because the food was cheaper and better than any they could get in their own European restaurants. From the 1930s onwards, they had taken a special shine to two of our most prosaic national dishes, falafel and hoummos. These were easy to make, cost little and were generally eaten as snacks. Most neighbourhoods had a local falafel shop where you got them hot and freshly cooked. For many of the poor people, they were often the main staple foods, along with bread and olives. The Jews who came to Palestine in the late 1920s and early 1930s were often so impoverished that they used to come into the restaurants where people were eating and beg for money and food. They soon discovered the cheap, yet nutritious Arab foods, and learned to make falafel themselves. However, they never tasted as good as the original and they still came to the Arab restaurants to eat. Many years later when visiting Israel, I was told, to my astonishment and irritation, that falafel, hoummos and some others of our recipes were regarded as authentic "Israeli dishes", and few people seemed to have any idea of their real origin.

There was an active intellectual side to life in Jerusalem. Prominent Palestinians and visitors from other Arab countries gave public lectures and poetry readings. I remember my father talking about the poetry evenings at the Arab Orthodox Club in Baq'a where my uncle Abu Salma and his fellow poet Ibrahim Tuqan read their nationalist verses. This kind of poetry was new to Palestine, since it concerned

itself with political subjects and expressed opposition and resistance to what was happening in the country with a passion which drew enormous sympathy from the audience.

His nationalist fervour landed Abu Salma in trouble. At a time when he was employed as a teacher by the department of education (my father's same employer), he published a poem called "Jabal al-Mukabbir" – the name of the hill just outside Jerusalem which was famous in Arabic history for being the place from which Jerusalem's great conqueror, Umar ibn al-Khattab, surveyed the city for the first time in 638. On seeing it, the Muslim troops cried out, "Allahu akbar!" from which it thereafter acquired its name.[3] In the 1930s, it was the site of the British High Commissioner's house. Using a mixture of allegory and symbol, the poem vowed that no Palestinian would rest until he had brought the British citadel of power in Palestine crashing down. The literary and historical allusions which aimed to disguise the verses' real intent did not fool the authorities, and my uncle was dismissed from his government job forthwith. But Abu Salma's literary reputation was not harmed by this. Far from it; he gained respect and admiration for what people saw as his patriotic stand against British colonial rule and Zionist infiltration. My father was never invited to give a lecture himself at the Orthodox Club, but his close friend Khalil Sakakini, who was a neighbour of ours in Qatamon and a well-known Palestinian intellectual, was a frequent speaker there. Such people also travelled to literary clubs in Jaffa, Haifa, Nablus and Gaza.

As Jerusalem's general character changed, so in particular did our part of it too. Whereas it had at one time been a predominantly Arab

[3] Jabal al-Mukabbir literally means the mount which proclaims Allah *kabir*, great.

neighbourhood, Qatamon was becoming increasingly settled by Europeans, many of them Jewish. In our street alone, there was a German Jewish doctor and two other foreign families – one White Russian and one Jewish. The latter were called Kramer and had come from Eastern Europe; we did not know exactly where, but Mrs Kramer was Scottish. They had two children, David and Aviva, who were closest to my sister in age. Their parents spoke to them in Hebrew, but they had learned English from their mother and the father also spoke Arabic. He was a soldier in the Haganah, the underground Jewish army in Palestine which, though supposed to be illegal, was in fact semi-officially recognised by the authorities, and which the Palestinians regarded as nothing less than a branch of the British army. After all, the British trained, armed and paid for them, people said. Siham became friendly with Aviva and her brother David who was quite cheeky and used to tease the Palestinian girls, especially the daughters of the Farraj family who lived directly opposite.

"I don't remember any feelings of animosity towards Jewish people," Siham said. "Once when I was a girl guide, we decided to invite the Jewish girl guides to our school. They spent the day with us and then invited us back to their school, which was all-Jewish. They were friendly and we all got on quite well. We knew they were different from 'our Jews', I mean the Arab Jews. We thought of them more as foreigners from Europe than Jews as such." (By "Arab Jews" she meant the small Jewish community who had lived in Palestine for centuries and who spoke Arabic and were physically indistinguishable from Arabs. Before the start of European Jewish immigration to Palestine in 1880, they numbered some 3,000 people out of a total population of 350,000.) "I don't know that anyone thought much about why they'd come to Palestine in the first place. They were just visitors like so many other people in Jerusalem and we accepted them."

Many of the Jewish immigrants who came to Palestine in the 1930s

were Germans fleeing from Nazism and included a number of doctors, like the man who lived at the end of our street. Local people were soon impressed with their standard of medical practice, even though the Mandate administration had provided a range of medical services for the population. Despite this, people sometimes consulted the German Jewish doctors without demur. My father took Ziyad to see a German doctor in Rehavia, the new Jewish settlement to the West of Qatamon. "He was really good and Ziyad got better," my father reminisced. "The German Jews were a class apart. They kept to themselves and looked down on all the other Jews as inferior."

The German Jewish doctor in our road often went out of his way to speak to us and to the other Arab families. He said he wanted to live peacefully with the Arabs and he knew many other Jews who felt the same. But the Jewish leadership wouldn't let them, he said, they had other plans. "Many of them were afraid of their leaders," my father said. "I actually felt sorry for them. I can remember a German Jew called Roth who worked with us at the education department, coming to see me and after making me promise that I would tell no one what he said, asking how he could convert to Islam. He never explained why, but this was 1941 just after Rommel's success in North Africa, and I suppose he was thinking, as we all were, that the Germans would win. And if they reached Palestine, then the Jews would be in danger, and so he was better off being counted amongst the Muslims. I could understand how he felt."

At about this time, two other Jews, Leon Blum and Shlomo Goitein,[4] who worked in the education department with my father, invited him to one of their meetings. The Jews in the department were responsible for Jewish education in the country and, astonishingly,

[4] This was the same S.D. Goitein who was later to edit and translate the famous Geniza collection of manuscripts held at Cambridge University Library. His work was subsequently published in the three-volume book entitled *A Mediterranean Society*.

they had a standing at least equal with that of any Palestinian and often higher. "How could this have happened when they were only a minority amongst us?" demanded Salim Kattul angrily. He was a school teacher and friend of my father. Goitein's knowledge of Arabic was so good that he once corrected an Arabic draft of a report which my father had been writing. He and Blum belonged to a small organisation called Brit Shalom, established in Palestine in the 1920s. This had a membership of European Jews dedicated to coexistence with the Arabs. "Didn't you mind going?" I asked my father years later. "Not at all", he answered. "In fact I went to address them twice. There were about twenty-five to thirty people each time and I found them pleasant and friendly. They were not like the hard-line, aggressive Jews who wanted to pretend that we did not exist. I thought that at least they were trying to find a solution to the problems which were being created between us and them in Palestine."

We remained friends with the Kramers until the end of 1947. One evening, in November of that year, Kramer came to see my father at our house. "Mr Karmi," he said in Arabic, "I have come to tell you at some risk to myself to take your family and leave Jerusalem as soon as possible. Go to Tulkarm while you still have time, it will be better for you. Please believe me, it is not safe here." Life in Jerusalem had by then become turbulent. There were armed incidents virtually every day. But no one believed it could get much worse and no one contemplated moving. My father thanked him for his advice and tried to pump him for more information. But Kramer would say nothing else and shortly after took his leave. My father shrugged his shoulders and ignored the whole incident. Why should he have believed him, seeing that Kramer was working for the other side? But I wondered, years afterwards, if my father looked back on that conversation as we were leaving in panic and haste and remembered Kramer's prophetic words.

My father met many English people at his work. One of these was a

man called Clayton who lived near us in Qatamon, and whose son Philip we were friendly with. Philip was an amiable boy of seventeen who attended the school established by the government for English children, but kept failing his exams at school because he was poor at mathematics. Since my father taught mathematics at the school, beside his duties as an education inspector, Philip used to come to see him for private coaching. I liked it when Philip came round because he had a dog called Peter which was frisky and affectionate. Philip always used to bring presents for us with him, but whether this was in lieu of payment for my father's help or not, I never found out.

One day, he brought me a toy dog and then a big teddy bear which I named Peter, but because I could not pronounce the "p", as the letter does not exist in Arabic, I used to say, "Beta". This Beta slept in my bed, sat up with me in the morning, got dressed with me – he had a pair of blue pants which Fatima made – and even sometimes had a wash. I kept him right up to the time we left Jerusalem, bedraggled by then, with one of his yellow bead eyes missing. Eventually, Philip stopped bringing toys and gave us a real dog. This was a saluki, a skinny hound which Arabs use for hunting, and we called him Snooky. We loved him but he did not last long with us, for he disappeared one day. Whether he was run over or taken in by the British authorities, which was a common fate for dogs assumed to be strays and hence a potential source of rabies, we never knew.

Heart-broken as we were, it was not long before we acquired another dog. This one was a mongrel, half saluki and half spaniel. He was short-haired and tawny-brown in colour. Ziyad found him roaming about in the street, apparently without an owner, and immediately befriended him. In no time, he became a well-loved member of the family except for my mother who never liked dogs. She refused to let him come into the house and would chase him out with the broom if he ever tried to, which was why he ran off as soon

as he even saw the broom handle. My father chose an English name for him, Rex, since an Arabic name would have seemed odd in a society where it was not customary for Arabs to rear dogs.

Rex had a habit of following my sister to school, and when she shooed him away he would make as if to go and disappear from view long enough to fool her into thinking he had really gone home. But when she came out at lunchtime she would find him on the school steps waiting for her. "I couldn't tell him off," she said. "He had a way of looking at you pathetically and swallowing hard, and so I ended up patting and hugging him instead and telling him feebly not to do it again."

Once, he followed my father going to work on the bus. As my father climbed on he could hear cries of consternation from the passengers because, much as we might have liked dogs, the majority of Palestinians did not. They regarded them as unclean, and if they needed to use any as guard dogs they kept them in a shed well away from the house. The commonest expletives in Arabic all refer to dogs or to sons of dogs; to call someone a dog is to imply that he is a bastard or to indicate that he has no pride or dignity, as in the old English use of "cur". So my father, seeing people's reactions, turned round to find Rex close on his heels. He had to get off the bus and take him back to the house, telling Fatima that the garden gate must be closed at all times to keep the dog in. In fact, he did not need to say that for we were all afraid that what befell Snooky would happen to Rex. So we were all assiduous at keeping him from running out into the street. But he was smart and had ways of slinking out when no one was looking.

Ziyad loved him dearly and used to play with him for hours in the garden. Many years later, and living in a country far away from Palestine, he acquired a dog. It was a large labrador and nothing like our dog in Jerusalem except for his tawny colour. But my brother chose to call him Rex.

Two

It seems incredible that in the Palestine of the 1940s we could have had anything like a normal life. But the fact was that for several years our particular part of Jerusalem remained immune from the revolt erupting in every Palestinian city. We lived in a sort of fool's paradise. After my parents moved to Qatamon, in 1938, there was no further harassment against my father from the Arab factions who had been so threatening before, and the British army searches and interrogations also ceased. "The worst time was the General Strike," my mother said later. "We didn't think there could be anything as bad as that again. It all died down after Ghada was born and we thought the worst was over." The General Strike clouded my sister's early childhood and gave an unhappy backdrop to her life. She was only four when it began in April 1936. "Of course I didn't understand what it was all about," she said , "but father said it was because people had begun to see what was happening and they felt a terrible sense of betrayal."

At that time, our parents lived in a rented house in Wadi al-Joz,

just outside the Old City. My mother was expecting my brother Ziyad who was due to be delivered in hospital. However, because of the General Strike, a total curfew was imposed by the British authorities which meant that people could not leave their houses. So, in August of that year, Ziyad was born at home with only the local midwife in attendance.

"I wanted to stay with mother, but the neighbours came into our house to help and they pushed me out," said Siham. "They only let me back in when the baby was born and already being washed in a basin." Our father was reading in the sitting room and the midwife went to give him the good news that he had a son, an important event for Arab families, and stood around waiting to be tipped, as if it had all been her own doing. "But father paid her her fee without giving her a tip and told her to go." Ziyad's birth was the only exciting event of that time. Because of the Strike, shops and offices were closed, and children could not go to school. "It was so boring," said Siham. "When the curfew was on, we couldn't go out to play and no one could come to visit. The only excitement we had was when we were sent out to get things from the shops opposite Bab al-Sahira [Herod's Gate in the Old City]. We used to have a lookout kid with us to make sure there were no army jeeps or cars around, and when he said the coast was clear, we all went to the shops. They had grilles on them to look closed, but there were people inside and they sold us things."

"Sometimes, the kids threw nails or sharp stones on the ground to puncture the wheels of the British army cars and the police. And if they were spotted, the soldiers came after them with sticks. We particularly had it in for the lorries of the Potassium Company. It was owned by foreign Jews, Germans I think, and the lorries had permission to go around even though no one else did. The drivers were Jews as well and one day the kids threw a lot of nails in our road, just as the lorry was coming. It stopped and the driver began to shout at

the kids. Mother ran out and started to pull them away off the road." Later, describing the occasion, she shuddered slightly. "It was quite frightening really if you think about it, but at the time it also seemed like fun." After six months of this, the Strike ended and Siham went back to school. It was called al-Ma'mouniyya al-Jadida at Wadi al-Joz, the school I would also eventually attend. But though, to everyone's relief, the strikes and curfews were over, the basic conflict was not resolved.

The pro-Husseini and pro-Nashashibi parties leading Palestinian opposition to the widely feared takeover of the country by European Jews were even more at loggerheads than before. And now they began to attack each other more and more viciously, with uninvolved or apolitical people like my father increasingly caught in the crossfire. Unlike my uncles, he had never been a member of a political party or a political activist at any time. Of course, he cared passionately about what was happening and, like most other Palestinian men, spent much time discussing the political situation.

"Let's leave the men to their politics," my mother would say when people came to visit, and the wives would all sit together and talk about other things. When we went to live in England after 1949 this practice continued amongst the men but, if anything, with greater intensity. As in Jerusalem before, all that I learned about Palestine in those days was picked up from the conversations which took place at home between my father and our Arab friends. My mother might send me with the coffee tray into the lounge where they sat, and it was then that I would hear snatches of conversation. Brought up to believe that political discussion was men's natural activity, I was amazed to find that in English society of the 1950s hardly anyone mentioned politics at all. In fact, I learned that it was considered bad taste, like talking about religion or one's voting intentions at the next election. What a difference, I thought to myself, between this country and my own. It

never occurred to me that societies not torn apart by conflict, as mine had been, did not have the same incentive to care about politics.

Despite my father's interest in politics, he preferred reading and scholarship to anything else and was mainly concerned with furthering his career. And indeed, at about the time of the General Strike, he was promoted to inspector of education and could leave behind his lowly job as a schoolteacher of mathematics and English in Jerusalem. In the next year, 1937, he was sent to London by the Mandate government on a six-month training course in education. He could not leave my mother and the children without ensuring that she either join his family in Tulkarm or her family come to stay with her in Jerusalem. Women in our society were not normally left to live on their own; they always had to have a male guardian, father at first and then husband. In the absence of either, their brothers or brothers-in-law were responsible for them. When my father came to leave for England, my uncle Mahmoud, who was the eldest in the family and therefore had the greatest say, pronounced that my mother would have to go and stay with our grandmother in Tulkarm. By the normal standards of the time, a woman in this situation would have had to comply, since women had little power to affect their own lives. But my mother was different because my father, although brought up in a conservative household, had a liberal outlook. From the beginning of their marriage he had allowed my mother to run the home freely and, what was most unusual, to have money of her own to spend. As a result, she had acquired the habit of independence and refused to move to Tulkarm. Because of the curfews, the family could not come to Jerusalem to stay with her, which would have been the alternative in normal times. So she managed with help from the neighbours.

"What a terrible time we had," she said, "what with the *tatwiq* and the armed men and everyone protesting about the Jews coming in. It

was only when we moved to Qatamon that we began to feel normal again."

In the winter of 1938 the family moved into a rented house in Qatamon. The landlady was a woman called Um Jabra whose son had married a Polish Jewish immigrant. Marriages between Arab men and Jewish women (but not the other way around) had become increasingly common with the advent of European Jews into the country. In cases where the husbands were Muslim the women often converted to Islam, but the couple was then in danger of reprisals by the wife's family and the wider Jewish community. After 1940, and the increase in tension between the two sides, the Arabs also began to disown these unions, and the couples either escaped or went into hiding. My mother didn't much care about Um Jabra's son and she didn't like the house either, so they moved again after a year into our last Qatamon house, the one which we occupied until the end. And here at last my mother could build a family life for the first time since she had married in relative prosperity and free from disruption.

She was an enthusiastic home-maker and wanted a well-furnished home, generously stocked with staple foods, as was the prevailing custom, and having all the necessary facilities for entertaining. My mother kept her stock of provisions in what might be called a loft. This was a large open shelf built into the space below the kitchen ceiling and usually reached with a ladder. Here my mother kept sackfuls of rice, flour and *burghul* (ground wheat). Huge jars of olive oil and olives stood against the wall. Smaller jars held lentils and chickpeas and dried pulses. She stocked salt and *samn* (clarified butter for cooking), soap and candles. She also made different kinds of jam and pickles, and during the summer she dried vegetables like *bamia* (okra) and *mulukhiyya* (a spinach-like leaf vegetable) against the winter. To see our food stores, one might have thought she was catering for an army. But her obsession with stockpiling only led in

the end to all that food falling into the hands of the Jewish family which took over our house, whoever they were. "My God, they must have had food to last them for a year," my mother said. "And when I think that I left them all my best blankets as well. I took some old ones with holes in them because I didn't think we would stay away for long in Damascus." Nevertheless, hoarding was a habit she never lost. In England, with shops on her doorstep to go to every day if she wished, she still stocked up supplies as if everything were about to run out.

Our house was ideally suited for entertaining. The front door opened directly into our *liwan*, a spacious square room with two large windows on either side of the door. It opened through double doors at the back onto the rest of the house. My mother mainly enjoyed the fact that it could hold a large number of people and was roomy enough for the women to sit well apart from the men. Not that there was any formal segregation, merely that men and women automatically sought the company of their own sex. This was considered natural because each had similar interests which were not shared with the other. On either side were two rooms: the first acted as the main sitting room where people were entertained on formal occasions – what might be called the parlour in England. It was also the place where the men sat when they came to visit my father, and at other times the women who came separately to see my mother. The second was my parents' bedroom. At the back of the villa was our bedroom, the family dining room, kitchen and bathroom. A corridor which separated the *liwan* from the bedrooms opened onto the garden from the side of the house. The three of us shared a bedroom, but I don't remember feeling crowded; the two beds in which my brother and I slept stood against the wall on opposite sides of the room and my sister's bed was in between. Two large windows opened onto the back garden. The floor was tiled throughout, but in winter my mother put

rugs down to keep the house warm; in spring they were removed, beaten, washed and folded away.

On summer nights, people sat out on the veranda, where it was cooler than staying indoors. My father used to say that the Jerusalem climate was the best in the world. "We had proper seasons, a cool autumn, a cold winter, a warm rainy spring and a hot dry summer. And even at the height of summer, it always cooled down at night, so much so it could actually get cold." When we went to live in London, his chief complaint was that there were no seasons in England. "It seems to be about the same the whole year round," he would say. "Or maybe there are two seasons here, cold and less cold." When I close my eyes and think of that time in Jerusalem, I can feel the still summer afternoons when the adults were sleeping and the heat of the day lay heavy on the empty streets and the quiet houses. After lunch, when I played in the garden with Leila and Najwa, my friends from nearby, one could almost touch the warm stillness.

Our mother had a daily routine which was enforced rigidly on the household. In the mornings she did the cooking, with Fatima helping. This meant that Fatima washed the meat, crushed the garlic, peeled the vegetables, washed and strained the rice and got everything ready so that when my mother entered the kitchen, all she did, master-chef-like, was to put the ingredients together in her uniquely magical way. And indeed she was a good cook. She brought to Palestinian cuisine a special quality from her Syrian background. This expressed itself in a general increase in the use of clarified butter and garlic and in richer flavours which produced delicious results. Her stuffed vine-leaves were legendary; she rolled them up into small neat rows on top of a layer of lamb, mint and tomatoes and cooked them slowly until their varied flavours mingled and they melted in the mouth.

However, alone amongst us, our father never ceased complaining about these dishes. For years, he blamed his various abdominal

symptoms on her fatty cooking. But as far as I know, it never deterred him from refusing a single mouthful. At mealtimes, it was always the same with him. After eating heartily what she had prepared, he would begin to frown and mutter and pull at his trouser belt, grumbling that he was overfull and distended and would my mother stop using so much *samn* and oil. But she never took any notice and he never stopped eating. We became so used to the rich flavour of her cooking that all other foods seemed bland and boring by contrast.

Sometimes she made bread which we loved because it was hot and tasty as it came out of the oven. Previously, each household made its own bread, since there were no municipal bakeries. The women would prepare the dough and then take it for baking to the public ovens which were present in every neighbourhood. But by the time we lived in Qatamon, things had changed, and we had a baker who came to the door every day with freshly baked bread.

When she had finished cooking, my mother would leave Fatima to clear up and go out to have coffee with her friends. She returned home just in time for lunch, Fatima having laid the table. After lunch in the summer, she and my father had their siesta which lasted until about six o'clock. When they woke up they drank strong sweet coffee, after which my father would usually sit at his desk in the *liwan* reading. It was at this time and into the evening that, if they were not going out or receiving visitors, we got a chance to talk to our father. I was very attached to him and considered myself to be his favourite. Just as I believed that Fatima was there exclusively to look after me, so it was with my father who I thought loved me the best. He was certainly indulgent and patient and often put me on his knee and kissed me. I would tell him what I had been doing that day and bask in his apparent interest in my prattle, even though I noticed that he went on reading his book while I was talking. In some ways we all felt closer to him than we did to our mother because she often went out in the