Talbiyeh Days: At Villa Harun ar-Rashid

George Bisharat

Hanna and Mathilde Bisharat (holding infants), with other family members, in front of Villa Harun ar-Rashid, ca. 1929. The infants are Ibrahim (Fred) and his twin, Habeeb, who died of pneumonia in Villa Harun ar-Rashid as a toddler. *Source: George Bisharat*

My paternal grandfather, Hanna Ibrahim Bisharat, built a home in the Talbiyeh quarter of Jerusalem, outside and to the west of the Old City, in 1926. This was the same neighbourhood where Edward Said was born in 1935. I'm not aware that my family and Edward's crossed paths during those years, although it is likely they did, given the intimacy of Palestinian society then and even today. Nonetheless, our two families, in many ways, followed similar trajectories. Like Edward's father, Wadi', my grandfather eventually shifted his business activities in Cairo. The family traversed the same Cairo-Jerusalem-Beirut axis, with its concentration of economic, political-administrative, and educational-cultural resources, that Edward's family and many others did. My father and his brothers attended the American University of Beirut. Like Edward, they eventually came to the United States for education (in my father's case, advanced medical training) and, after the *Nakba* (the destruction of Palestinian society in 1948), remained here.

My father shared Edward's deep appreciation of Western classical music, and was an accomplished painter, having been influenced by New England artist Charles Burchfield. He took up such quintessentially American pastimes as hunting and fly fishing. As a youth, I witnessed many curious encounters between my father, this shotgun-toting Palestinian psychiatrist with his elegantly-accented English, and American farmers and ranch hands whose fields we sought to hunt. Occasionally, my father would attempt a kind of folksy American vernacular, which, to me as a young teenager, was acutely embarrassing. These exchanges between figures almost emblematic of cultural poles always seemed to me fraught with potential disaster (although, on the positive side, at least we were armed, too!). But, to my amazement, they inevitably ended warmly–a tribute, perhaps, to some facility in crossing divides and making human connections that my father brought with him from home. More than once my father dispensed on-the-spot medical advice to these Americans, who opened their lands and hearts to him.

Like Edward, my father could have easily turned his back on Palestine, and his past, and enjoyed a comfortable and fulfilling life in the United States–but chose not to. Instead, they both remembered. This tradition of remembering has continued in successive generations of the Palestinian Diaspora.

So why do those of us who could forget choose not to? That is the question that I will try to answer, by way of an account of one sliver of Palestinian society of the pre-1948 period, the one lived by my family, and some reflection on what it signifies to remember it.

My grandfather, whom we all called 'Papa', was born in 1893 in as-Salt, now in Jordan, although then a part of an Ottoman district called the Belqa', that straddled the Jordan River. His father, Ibrahim, and two uncles, Salti and Saliba, had settled there only 15 years or so before, having migrated eastward from Rafidia, a village adjacent to Nablus, and now absorbed in the latter's urban sprawl. The three brothers were the offspring of Bishara Ibrahim al-Qirreh and Dilleh Khabis; they also had three sisters, Sa'da, Mariam, and Nassra.

I am not entirely sure of the reasons for the brothers' eastward migration, nor do I know whether their sisters accompanied them. But they were certainly not alone among Christian families from northern Palestine who established themselves on the east bank of the Jordan River in that same time period. The Abu Jaber family, from Nazareth, may have pioneered this eastward movement, settling 'al-Yadudah', south of Amman (now in the vicinity of the Amman International Airport). The Kawar family, also from Nazareth, followed the same trajectory. It seems highly likely, as well, that once established, this small core of Christian families encouraged and supported other

Christian families in following them. Whether a cause or result of this process, the Bisharat, Kawar, and Abu-Jaber families all intermarried.

Some in my family conjecture that the brothers moved to as-Salt to exploit trading opportunities with the Bedouin of the region. Alternatively, it may have been access to agricultural land that they sought. Indeed, it was not long before 'al-Bisharat' (the pluralized form of their father's name, Bishara) as the brothers become known had acquired access, and then ownership, of land just to the south of Amman, reputedly with the support of the Abu Jaber family. The estate was called 'Um al-Kundum'. 'Um', of course, means 'mother' in Arabic, but 'Kundum' is not an Arabic word, and no one in my family knows what it means. The compound was also called '*al-Khirbe*' (the 'Ruin') or '*Khirbat al-Bisharat*' (the 'Bisharat Ruin'). This reference was to the abandoned and dilapidated buildings that stood on the property when the brothers arrived. Strategic marriages and cagey deals with the indigenous Bedouin tribes were the keys to this process of land acquisition.

Ibrahim Bisharat married Fida Abu Jaber. The Abu Jaber family had become 'clients' (in the sense of receiving protection) of Ibn Rashid, at that time the ruler of Saudi Arabia. Yadudah, their hilltop compound, was also a re-supply point for Ibn Rashid's caravans coming out of the Arabian Peninsula. Ibrahim, who had seven children, was reputedly a bit of a sharp dealer and, according to some family members, somehow cheated his then-childless brother Saliba out of his land at Um al-Kundum. Later Saliba had a son, Shehadeh, and my uncle Emile remembers being in court in Jordan when my grandfather ceded half of his share in Um al-Kumdum to Shehadeh out of a sense of fairness. The other brother, Salti, had no sons, only daughters. At one point he apparently locked up two of Ibrahim's sons (my grandfather's older brothers) Wasif and Shibli, and wouldn't release them until they agreed to marry his daughters, Selma and Salima. In return, however, Salti had to give up his share of Um al-Kundum to Ibrahim. Thus Ibrahim managed to consolidate much of the family land in his own hands.

My grandfather, Hanna Ibrahim Bisharat, was the fourth of Ibrahim and Fida's seven children. At some point in his youth, Papa came to the attention of Father Maurice Gisler, a Swiss missionary and archaeologist, perhaps during one of the latter's digs around Madaba, near Um al-Kundum. Gisler apparently recognized something special in my grandfather, and invited him to come to Jerusalem to study. This was a time in local society when education was disdained as the career strategy of minor government functionaries, at least among the landed classes and rough farmers like my forebears. Thus my grandfather, family legend has it, stole away to Jerusalem at dawn on horseback, one of his brothers firing a rifle at his retreating form!

Hanna studied in the Schneller's Boys School (also known as the 'Bishop Gobat' school) in Jerusalem, gaining fluency in English and French to complement his native Arabic and Turkish. Around 1908 he was sent, under Father Gisler's auspices, to an institute outside Freiberg, Switzerland to study agricultural engineering. Two colourful anecdotes stem from this period: first, Papa landed in Bari, Italy, on his way to Switzerland and for the first time saw a man using a phone booth. Apparently, he thought the man was a madman and had been chained and manacled in the booth. Subsequently, when he arrived at the school dorm, he wasn't warmly received by the European students and one challenged him to a fight. The story goes that Papa knocked him down and was ready to do him serious injury, if not dispatch him, when school officials intervened and said, in essence, "Look–that's enough."

Hanna returned home prior to the outbreak of World War I brimming with naïve optimism, hoping to modernize local agriculture and even to found an agricultural institute modelled after his Swiss alma mater. He also imported agricultural machinery (presumably from Switzerland) in the hope of mechanizing farming on the family property. The equipment soon broke down, however, and parts were impossible to find. My father remembers playing on the rusting hulks of these machines during childhood visits to Um al-Kundum.

Hanna's dreams of agricultural innovation were submerged in the roiling political waters of the time and place. Radical changes ushered in by world war were soon on the way. British, Australian, and New Zealander troops swooped into Palestine from Egypt. In March of 1918, a British/ANZAC offensive sought to sever the Hejaz railway near Um al-Kundum. At night, three members of the Colonial Forces lost their bearings and were trapped behind Turkish lines. Hanna and his brothers found the three, sheltered them, disguised them in Arab garb, and guided them back to Allied camp.

Was this a personal and tangible expression of nascent Arab nationalism, and hostility to the Turks? Did it reflect solidarity with co-religionists? Was it a manifestation of a culture of hospitality, and compassion for those in need? Or a meaner calculation of the direction that political winds were then blowing? I do not know the answer. It appears, however, that Hanna and his brothers actively supported the invaders in a variety of ways–for which they ultimately paid dearly.

The Turks learned of their disloyalty and sacked Um al-Kundum, killing the livestock, burning the crops and buildings, and taking most of the family into custody. The family was imprisoned in 'al-Moskobiyeh', the so-called 'Russian Compound' that still exists in Jerusalem and is used by Israel today to jail Palestinian political prisoners. All of the family members were scheduled to be hanged.

Salti Bisharat, who had eluded custody, slipped off to Syria where he contacted Mithqal ash-Sha'lan, sheikh of the Rwala tribe of southern Syria. Mithqal was indebted to our family as they had harboured him some time before after he had killed someone and fled south to Um al-Kundum. The Rwala tribe was a large tribe and the Turks needed their continued loyalty, and so when Mithqal appealed to Turkish general Jamal Pasha on the family's behalf, they were pardoned and released.

The war was over shortly thereafter, and the family returned to Um al-Kundum more or less destitute. My grandfather went around gathering affidavits from the soldiers they had rescued, and testimonials from various Australian, New Zealander, and British army officers concerning the aid the Bisharat family had provided. Based on these, he sought compensation from the British, who, by this time, were ruling Palestine and Jordan. Eventually they gave him something like 5,000 British sterling–far short of the 70,000 they had documented in losses–but it served to "leaven the bread", as my uncle said, and helped the family get back on its feet.

In the early post-war period, my family and many others tried to gather themselves together and recuperate from their wartime losses–which were considerable for all. Shortly after the war, my grandfather married Mathilde Habib Faris. Her father, Habib Faris, was an official in the Ottoman government in as-Salt. Papa's brother, Raji, had fallen in love with Mathilde's sister, Najla. Habib agreed to give her hand to Raji only if Hanna also married Mathilde–and Hanna assented.

There is an unsubstantiated claim that the Faris family may have come originally from Mosul, in Iraq, and were Assyrian. Part of this is because of a tradition in our family–which we still observe today–of saying "*bustrainti* '*alayk*" the first time one speaks to another after the New Year; whoever outwits the other and says it first gets a coin. Apparently, it is not an Arabic expression or tradition, and my uncle Emile speculates that this may have been an Assyrian custom.

Hanna and Mathilde began a family, bearing twins 'Adil (Victor) and my father Fayeq (Maurice, named for Father Maurice Gisler) in June, 1920. 'Adil emerged first by minutes, and so my grandfather and grandmother became 'Abu 'Adil' ('Father of 'Adil') and 'Um 'Adil' ('Mother of 'Adil') respectively. About this same time, they began to shift the centre of family life from the East Bank to Jerusalem. Musician Wasif Jawhariyyeh mentions in his memoirs performing at a party held in my grandparents' home in the Musrara quarter to celebrate the births of 'Adil and Fayeq.[1]

One day my grandfather went to the barber shop in Jerusalem, and there met Ibrahim Haqqi, a Palestinian Muslim friend who was receiving a haircut. Walking out, Papa discovered that he had accidentally taken Haqqi's overcoat in place of his own. In the pocket of the coat he found a document in English that turned out to be a tender offer

Hanna and Mathilde Bisharat (holding infants), with other family members, in front of Villa Harun ar-Rashid, ca. 1929. The infants are Ibrahim (Fred) and his twin, Habeeb, who died of pneumonia in Villa Harun ar-Rashid as a toddler. *Source: George Bisharat*

from the British Mandatory government to purchase surplus army goods. On returning to the barbershop, Hanna queried his friend about the document. Haqqi responded that he couldn't read English and therefore didn't know. My grandfather then offered to interpret, on condition of being let into the deal. That began a profitable relationship between, on the one hand, my grandfather and Ibrahim Haqqi, and the British Mandatory Government on the other. My uncles believe, in fact, that it was this deal that secured the financing for the family home in Talbiyeh, an area then virtually unsettled, and consisting of olive orchards and vineyards.

My grandfather, although a Christian, named his new home 'Villa Harun ar-Rashid', in honour of the celebrated Muslim caliph renowned for his passion for justice, generosity, and love of learning. These were principles that Hanna valued and emulated. My family lived in the Talbiyeh home for several years, during which several of my uncles were born. One, Habib, died as a toddler of pneumonia. His surviving twin, Alfred, still remembers watching the swirling heat waves rising from the kerosene heater in the house, and wondering if that was his brother's soul rising to heaven.

My father and his brothers played in the slowly-disappearing fields and orchards nearby, and went to school at Terra Sancta College up the hill from the house. Facing

dire financial straits in the early thirties, my grandparents moved out of Villa Harun ar-Rashid for more modest accommodations on the Bethlehem road, and rented their home to officers of the British Royal Air Force.

Papa's fortunes periodically rose and fell, but essentially his course was set. Exploiting his mastery of European languages and comfort with Western culture and sensibilities–and his considerable charm–he became a contractor, supplying goods and services to the British mandate government, and buying surplus things from them and selling them locally. Generally, the things he supplied were foodstuffs–vegetables, grains, mutton. Much of this was done in partnership with his brothers, all of whom had different roles in promoting the advance of the family. Raji was the farmer, Wasif the accountant/banker, and Papa was the front man and dealmaker.

As World War II approached, he expanded his operations to Cairo, and developed similar relations with the U.S. military. After World War II, he bought an entire U.S. army camp that was to be abandoned in Libya and shipped it to Palestine–where it was eventually seized by the Zionists in the 1948 war. In Cairo, Papa rented a huge suite with bar and bartender in the Intercontinental Hotel, and entertained literally hundreds of people at a time. Papa was certainly in his element, but there was a calculated aspect of this. As he once remarked to my uncle: "If you are going to fish in the sea, you have to throw out some bait!" Papa also self-consciously went back and forth between Western and traditional Arab clothing, knowing quite well the dashing and exotic image he cut for British and American officials (and their wives) in his Eastern dress, always of exquisite quality.

Papa came to know and be known by all the major figures in the area, including General Allenby (who led the British expeditionary force out of Egypt that conquered Palestine in 1917). Lord Allenby and his wife lunched with the family in the Jordan Valley in 1928, where Papa presented him with a very fine Arabian horse, which Allenby transported back to England. For years afterward, Lady Allenby would send my father and uncles books in English at Christmas. Papa was eventually designated a "pasha" (an honorific title of Turkish origin) by King Abdullah of Jordan.

Papa's generosity, in a society that venerates it, was legendary, even to the point of recklessness. Once he was meeting a British officer and when the officer arrived, Papa offered him a cold drink, as it was a hot day. The officer declined, saying that he could not accept when his troops (who really knows how many, but the claim is they were scores) were waiting outside in the hot sun. Papa responded by ordering cold drinks for them all.

Nayef Kawar, member of a prominent Christian family in Jordan/Palestine, told me that he was on his honeymoon in Cairo when he ran into Papa, and Papa invited him

and his new bride to dinner. When dinner was nearly over, Papa grabbed Nayef by the hand and said, "Come, Uncle." He took Nayef to a private room in the hotel where a high-stakes card game was going on. Papa took his place at the table, and Nayef hovered around his shoulder. After several hours of play, Nayef was tired and about to leave, when the door opened with a flourish and in walked King Faruq of Egypt with his entourage. King Faruq was known to enjoy gambling, among other vices. He took his place at the table and began to play. Nayef stayed until the wee hours, but eventually excused himself, explaining that he didn't want to leave his bride alone.

Sometime later, Nayef heard a soft knock on his hotel door. He opened it up, and there was Papa, who quickly signalled him to be quiet. Papa had his *abaya* (the loose outer garment of traditional Arab garb) slung over his shoulder, with something of considerable weight in it. Papa walked into an unused bedroom, part of Nayef's suite, and threw down the *abaya*, revealing a huge pile of Egyptian pounds (banknotes, that is), which, Papa explained, he had won from "this fool" (referring to King Faruq). Papa gestured to the pile: "Take, Uncle!" Nayef initally declined, but Papa insisted, and he eventually counted out EL15,000. They then counted the whole take, and it was something like EL250,000. This was a lot of money at the time–maybe the equivalent of one million dollars.

My family's relations with Jews during the pre-1948 period were entirely friendly, if unremarkable. Jews were, like all others, simply members of Jerusalem society, and entitled to treatment no different than anyone else. So, for example, during the riots in 1929 that convulsed the city and other parts of Palestine, in which 120 Jews and 87 Palestinian Arabs were killed, my family sheltered a number of Jewish friends in Villa Harun ar-Rashid. Like the ANZAC soldiers during the war, the Jews they took in were human beings in need, to be shown compassion and hospitality. My father learned to love Western classical music in a listening group hosted by a young Jewish man. Palestinian Jews, Christians, and Muslims mingled at the YMCA, swam, and played basketball together. My grandmother, introducing my American mother to the lentil and rice dish *mujaddara*, told her that it was the preferred wash day meal for Muslims, Jews, and Christians, due to its ease of preparation and heartiness. Wash day was the first day after each community's holy day, so aromas of *mujaddara* wafted through the neighbourhood from Muslim kitchens each Saturday, from Jewish kitchens on Sunday, and from Christian kitchens on Monday.

My family was not naïve, nor oblivious to the shifting political currents in Palestine. I have a copy of a letter from my father to his mother, written in 1936 at the outset of the Palestinian Revolt. He was going off to join the fight against Zionism and the British colonial government that was turning his country over to another people. It was his farewell to his mother, and was signed in blood. My grandfather, who by this time had become somewhat prominent in Palestinian society, attended the deliberations at

the United Nations over Resolution 181, the partition plan for Palestine in 1947, trying in vain to use what influence he had to sway the outcome.

Our home in Jerusalem, like that of hundreds of thousands of other Palestinians, was taken over by Zionist military forces and has remained in Israeli hands for 58 years. My family's intended-to-be-temporary dispersal from Palestine preceded, and was essentially unrelated to, the 1947-1949 war. As I have already indicated, it was business and education that took my relatives from Palestine. Nonetheless, the war, the usurpation of their homes and assets, the destruction of their society–and the obdurate opposition of the new Israeli government to Palestinians' right of return–guaranteed that they would remain, to use Edward's phrase, forever "out of place".

Given his relative fortunes, my grandfather's preoccupation in the direct aftermath of the war was not the recovery of his own property–which, in any case, would have been a futile effort. Rather it was the welfare of the true Palestinian refugees–those who had fled in direct response to the violence and terror inflicted on them by Zionist military forces. Papa's first Christmas card after the war was a picture of young Palestinian refugee children, and it exhorted his friends and acquaintances not to forget the refugees' plight. My grandfather travelled extensively in the United States trying to raise money from American businesses for refugee relief. I have a file of his correspondence with Count Folke Bernadotte, the Swedish diplomat whose moral force and insight underpinned UN Resolution 194, affirming the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and homeland, or receive compensation and support for resettlement. That same file contains my grandfather's letter of condolence to Bernadotte's widow, after he was assassinated by Zionist terrorists from the Stern gang on September 17, 1948.

I have written about some of this history before–in particular, about our Talbiyeh home, and about my encounters with its Jewish inhabitants during a number of visits I have made to it, beginning in 1977.[2] I wrote as well about a very dear Jewish Israeli man, who once lived in our home, and who had the strength to step forward and in a person-to-person meeting apologize to me for the taking of Villa Harun ar-Rashid. I wrote about the potentially transformative power of apology, suggesting that an Israeli admission of responsibility for the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948 would place relations between Israelis and Palestinians on an entirely new and hopeful footing. These writings appeared in English, and then in Hebrew, in the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz. Nothing I had written previously ever evoked such a flood of responses from all points of the globe, including a great many from within Israel itself.

Reader reactions were alternately sobering and inspiring, ranging from crude racism and "Get ready for Nakba II", to heartfelt expressions of sympathy and respect. A recurrent theme, however–even among the most compassionate–was the assertion that

in resolving issues between Palestinians and Israelis "we cannot go back to the past", and indeed, that we must forget the past.

It struck me as deeply ironic that such an admonition could issue from people whose claimed attachment to Palestine goes back 2,000 years, and who apparently see no contradiction between this insistence on our amnesia and their seeking reparations from the Nazi Holocaust, that had, after all, preceded the Palestinian Nakba by a few years. What this all points to, of course, is that *who* can remember, and *who* can be made to forget, is fundamentally an outgrowth, and an enactment, of power. Viewed in this way, our remembering is a form of continuing resistance to the defamation and erasure of our people and our history.

Remembering Talbiyeh of the pre-1948 period is more than a form of resistance, however. Recalling that era, and the people it produced, is a way of positively envisioning a possibility for another future. Edward Said was, no doubt, singularly brilliant. But in his cosmopolitanism, humanism, and universalism, he was typical, not unique. He was a son of Talbiyeh–a place of tolerance, compassion, and enlightenment. In recalling and claiming this heritage, we are also promising that when Israelis are ready to recognize Palestinians in their full humanity, as no lesser beings than themselves, we will be there in all our ingenuity, imagination, strength, and perhaps, even love.

I had many long exchanges with my Israeli readers. Slowly, all but the hardest softened, some ending by inviting me to their homes for a meal on my next visit to Jerusalem. I know–because some of them told me–they thought me different from other Palestinians. "You are Christian–you think differently than the Muslims", or "you are Westernized, and educated, rational–we can talk to you on a reasonable basis." A Palestinian-American, with descendants on one side who died fighting Nazism in World War II, and including a participant in the American constitutional convention–I am, no doubt, different. But I am not better.

I am haunted by an experience that occurred during my last trip to the occupied territories–although, truly, it was only one of a kind that I have had over the last 27 years of visits to the region. On May 16, 2002, I arrived in Tel Aviv with a delegation of lawyers to investigate the impact of Israel's re-invasion of the West Bank over the preceding few weeks. The next day, in the Balata refugee camp just to the east of Nablus, a man and his son were walking down the narrow alley between their house and their neighbours', planning to exit a metal door into the public street and go to the mosque for Friday prayer. There was no fighting, no demonstration, no disturbance at all–but an Israeli tank turned into their street, and, rumbling forward, spewed heavy machine gun fire ahead of it. The man turned away from the metal door, ushering his son quickly back toward the house. Suddenly he felt a burning sensation on his

back and legs. His son, running ahead of him, stumbled, then fell face first into the stairs leading into the house. When his father reached him, his son had swallowed his front teeth, knocked out in the fall. His shirt was bloody, and his face and body were beginning to turn blue. His internal organs destroyed, Amid Abu Sayr, seven, died before he reached the hospital.

As the family related these events to us two days later, members of our delegation began to crumble. "Tell the world what they did here; they stole my heart," the father–a mechanic, as I recall–pleaded earnestly with me. When something betrayed my struggle to maintain my composure, this man took me in his arms and he comforted me. He–a poor man, a refugee living in a camp, and two days away from the most searing tragedy of his life–comforted me. Yes–perhaps this was not the same capacity that will be necessary to reconcile with Israelis. But people of that kind of magnanimity of spirit are capable of miracles. I hope to God that if I ever face such hardship as that Palestinian man, I can muster a fraction of his strength and dignity.

Edward Said is reputed to have implored us in the last days of his life, not to "forget Palestine". I wish to reassure him; that cannot happen. For to "forget Palestine" is to deny our humanity, to negate our identity, and to abandon the richest meanings of our lives. I would leave Edward with this image: two Sundays ago was the tenth birthday of my son, Austin Rashid. I was walking to the telephone to order balloons for his party, when I asked him, "What colours would you like?" He paused from his latest Lego creation, and, looking at me squarely, replied, "Red, black, green, and white". I stared at him, stunned, not even aware that he knew the colours of the Palestinian flag. I searched the wells of his beautiful brown eyes for the impulse behind that startlingly adult request. He held my gaze for a minute, smiled, and returned to his play.

So we do not forget. Instead, we remember a future of equality, justice, and peace for all the peoples of Israel/Palestine. We envision a time when homes like Villa Harun ar-Rashid can again be havens for all in need, whether Christian, Muslim, or Jew.

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Endnotes

[1] Wasif Jawhariyyeh, *Al-Quds al-Uthmaniyya fil Mudakkarat al-Jawhariyyah*, 1904-1917 (Beirut: Institute of Palestine Studies, 2003)

[2] Many of George Bisharat's articles can be viewed at www.counterpunch.org.