

# My Father's House



By Huda Imam



Tiles repossessed from my father's house in West Jerusalem are today in my house in Sheikh Jarrah.

Today is the anniversary of my father's passing. He died when I was a teenager, still young and reckless, and more interested in engaging with boys than with my parents. I didn't have proper time to say goodbye to him nor to share the secrets in his heart, which would have normally been my rite of passage had I been an adult. Looking back now, I realize that he didn't want to burden me with the grief that he kept inside himself all those years, the trauma related to those fateful events in 1948 when he lost his home, his city, and his country – a catastrophe that has become known as the *Nakba*, when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were displaced from their homes to make way for the new Jewish immigrants. It was an injustice that my father endured, along with the deeply buried pain which was passed on to me through his DNA.

Somehow, the longing that I have for my father, whom I miss immensely, has become inextricably linked with my longing to be near his house in Baqa'a. The home my father grew up in is near the Old City's Chain Gate, which leads to Al-Aqsa Mosque; however, the house he built and chose to live in still lies in the Greek Colony neighborhood in West Jerusalem. Not a week goes by that I don't go with my son to stand outside the house. It's a ritual that I have become accustomed to. While other families on Fridays go to the mosque to pray or gather together to share a meal, I take my son and we travel the three kilometers or so from Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem to West Jerusalem to breathe in the view of the house. I say "breathe" because that's exactly what it's like. We stand quietly side by side, and our eyes fixate on the stately well-crafted home with jasmine, lemon, pomegranate, and *azkadinya* (loquat) trees in the garden; we soak



The house of my father, Farid Imam.

in the atmosphere, and we reminisce. Memories of my father come flooding back, and my mind plays tricks on me: I imagine that I am living there with mother, son, siblings, nephews, and nieces; and at my grandmother's house, down the main road a few minutes away, we're playing "nails on the rails" after school...

I am abruptly awakened from my dream by the vision of an Orthodox Jewish family passing by and pushing a stroller, casting a gaze our way; or the new inhabitants of my father's home calling the police to forcibly remove me from the street overlooking my father's house. But we are not the intruders here, a fact that is lost on the new residents of West Jerusalem, who largely hail from Europe.

**The house is the primary space in which modern human beings live, the place where we form social ties and learn about our culture; emerging from our homes, we connect to and interact with our community. The appropriation or destruction of a home affects individuals and societies in ways that go far beyond the physical aspect of losing a roof over one's head.**



Baramki House, today the Museum on the Seam.



Haron al-Rashid House - the Bshrrarat family.



My grandmother's Aweidah House.



**Modern education combined with oral history is vital to preserve cultural identity.**

As part of our ritual, we follow up our visit with a French croissant from a patisserie in the German Colony area, not far from my father's home. One can easily gaze at the people passing by and scan their faces, hoping to recognize someone who seems to belong to the place; they may say we are the strangers; however, as my son instinctively reflects, "they don't seem to fit with this culture." It is as though there is a gap between the new inhabitants and the environment.

On the thirtieth anniversary of my father's death, I could choose to visit his tomb in *Bab al-Sahira* cemetery, but I don't. I go instead to my father's home, which is the place where I feel closest to him, and where I will always belong.

My story is shared by thousands of Palestinians all over the world who have also lost their homes and property and who dream of one day getting them back. Many Palestinian homes are in great demand due to their supreme quality and style. These homes have become the subject of several documentaries and websites produced over the past decade, and they have been used as well for educational and art purposes. Salim Tamari documented holistic information on Palestinian properties located in West Jerusalem that were lost in 1948,<sup>i</sup> as did Adnan Abdelrazek<sup>ii</sup> and Abu Sitta.<sup>iii</sup> Cinematographically, Carol Mansour's

*Stitching Palestine* reveals stories of women with the aspiration to "return."<sup>iv</sup> Sahera Dirbas documented on camera how she accompanied families to the homes that were once theirs to directly witness their interactions with and feelings about the occupiers who wrongfully reside in these homes, a most moving experience.<sup>v</sup> In her book *Golda Slept Here*, Suad Amiry narrates personal stories of people and their homes. On social media, Alexandra Handal created a fascinating website called *Dream Homes Property Consultants: Hot Properties*, which describes how Israel advertises Palestinian homes as "Arab Style" to bring in a higher price. The website won second prize at Freedom Flowers Foundation's 2015 Award Ceremony. She writes: "Expropriated Palestinian houses are ironically repackaged on the Israeli real estate market as 'Arab-style.' Their factual history is concealed behind this architectural euphemism. Taking the form of an online estate agency, this Web documentary art revisits the individual history of these homes, uncovering Palestinian stories of displacement, dispossession, and cultural cleansing from West Jerusalem."<sup>vi</sup> To mark sixty years of the *Nakba*, a demonstration with huge media coverage was organized. People who wore T-shirts saying "Survivors of the Nakba" stood in front of their appropriated houses

in West Jerusalem. The outrageous Sheikh Jarrah injustice demonstrates the blunt discrimination applied when Israeli Jews claim properties in East Jerusalem. They are given access to these homes with complete government support, whereas Palestinians who owned houses in West Jerusalem have no rights to their property! I was arrested twice in front of my father's house (at the request of the new occupiers/residents who did not wish to see me in the street) when I showed it to journalists or friends. But this applies not only to properties in what is now West Jerusalem. When I expressed solidarity with my neighbors who were evicted from our Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, I was arrested and put in prison; then the judge ruled that, for a period of three months, I was forbidden from entering Sheikh Jarrah, the place where I actually live!

Ben Gurion once proclaimed that the old (Palestinians) would die and the

young would forget, but the fourth generation of *Nakba* survivors have not forgotten, nor will they ever forget...

Young Palestinians today are actually busy preserving Palestinian heritage and culture through art, theater, storytelling, and cinema – a witness to their struggle to live the present with dignity even in the midst of the oppressive occupation!

*Huda Farid Imam is a Palestinian by birth and lives in Jerusalem. She has worked in both academia and culture. Through her passion and profession, Huda strives to preserve Palestinian identity in Jerusalem.*

<sup>i</sup> Salim Tamari, "Jerusalem 1948: The Phantom City," *Jerusalem Quarterly*, available at [http://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/3\\_Jerusalem\\_48\\_1.pdf](http://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/3_Jerusalem_48_1.pdf); and "Jerusalem 1948: The Arab Neighborhoods and Their Fate in the War," second revised and expanded edition, The Institute of Jerusalem Studies and Badil Resource Center, 2002, available at [http://www.badil.org/phocadownloadpap/Badil\\_docs/publications/Jer-1948-en.pdf](http://www.badil.org/phocadownloadpap/Badil_docs/publications/Jer-1948-en.pdf).

<sup>ii</sup> Adnan Abdelrazek, *The flourishing of Arab construction in occupied West Jerusalem* (in Arabic).

<sup>iii</sup> Abu Sitta, "The Atlas of Palestine (1917–1966)," *The Palestinian Land Society*, available at <http://www.plands.org/en/maps-atlases/atlas/the-atlas-of-palestine>.

<sup>iv</sup> Available at Forward Film Production, <https://www.forwardfilmproduction.com/stitching-palestine>.

<sup>v</sup> *Stranger in my home Jerusalem*, available at <http://www.cultureunplugged.com/documentary/watch-online/play/10496/-Stranger-in-my-home--Jerusalem>.

<sup>vi</sup> For more information, please visit <http://www.artraker.org/alexandra-handal/4578946139>; and Freedom Flowers Foundation Awards 2015, available at <http://www.freedomflowersfoundation.org/award2015.php>.