

RESEARCHING EAST JERUSALEM

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A Talmudic proverb ancient proverb about Jerusalem says: "When God created the world, he created ten portions of beauty. He gave nine to Jerusalem and one to the rest of the world." As we were working on the Jerusalem project I often thought that the quote should have added: "When God created the world, he created ten problems. He gave nine to Jerusalem and one to the rest of the world."

In July 1993, I accepted the position of research director of the Palestinian team representing East Jerusalem for the Jerusalem Program of the Festival of American Folklife. I knew that I had committed myself and the team to a most challenging, most sensitive, and as time has shown, most problematic mission. I am a Palestinian woman who has for many years been involved in a dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis. At the time of the invitation I was also a member of the Palestinian delegation to the Palestinian-Israeli peace talks in Washington. I saw in the Jerusalem Festival a valuable cultural venue to promote understanding, respect, and mutuality between our two peoples. For only through cultural events can people relate on an equal basis and see the human face of the Palestinians, who have for too long been deprived of telling their own story directly. At the root of the Jerusalem Festival was the principle of equal representation, parity, and mutuality between Israelis and Palestinians. This underscored the simple but elusive idea that only through equity and mutual recognition can the human race live peacefully together; only through creative thinking can we deal with such sensitive, emotionally charged, and beloved places as Jerusalem.

Both teams worked separately in the two parts of the city, reflecting the reality of unmarked physical and psychological boundaries between Arab East Jerusalem and Israeli West

Jerusalem. At every station of our "Via Dolorosa" (Way of the Cross) more "realities" had to be negotiated. As I moved between the State Department negotiations and the Smithsonian Folklife Program I often wondered which of the two negotiations was less problematic?

Despite the willingness and deep commitment on both sides and the mutual understanding that the festival was a cultural event, political realities were omnipresent. So many aspects had to be negotiated: the design on the Mall; the number of participants; the nature of the boundary separating the two Jerusalems or the two parts of the Jerusalem-is it Arab East Jerusalem and Jewish West Jerusalem, or is it Arab Jerusalem and Jewish Jerusalem-the "unity," division, and occupation of the city; and even the name of the festival: Jerusalem, al-Quds, Yerushalayim. There were many areas of contention: Israeli representation of the Western Wall and the Jewish Quarter, both located in East Jerusalem, and the Palestinian demand to represent pre-1948 Arab neighborhoods such as Talbiyyeh and Baqqa in West Jerusalem. The Jerusalem Municipality was suggested as the body that would handle the shipping of materials, but the Palestinian side objected. After all, Palestinians never recognized the Jerusalem municipality. Sources of funds was another issue: do we accept funds from the Israeli Aerospace Company? This is just an indication of issues that had to be negotiated while research teams on both sides worked in their respective communities.

THE PALESTINIAN RESEARCH TEAM:

The Palestinian team consisted of seventeen researchers whose main driving force was their love of Jerusalem. One of the most delightful aspects of the project was working with Albert Aghazarian, the team's field advisor, whose passion for Jerusalem could be felt as he proudly led us through its winding streets, saluting every shop keeper and every other person he met. Some of the most fascinating, and perhaps the most amusing, moments

were "conversations," (more aptly described as competitions) between Albert, who is an Armenian Jerusalemite, Nazmi Jubeh, a Jerusalemite of Hebron origin, and All Qleibu a Jerusalemite from a Moslem family with far-reaching roots in the city. As the three talked about growing up in Jerusalem among its coffee shops, bakeries, and street eccentrics, each was demonstrating his knowledge of the city's history, rituals, and traditions in attempt to discreetly discredit the other as a "real Qudsi!"

For the Palestinian team, the experience of working on the festival was as rich and as problematic as the city itself can be. The more we dug into the city's cultural layers, the more we realized how politics and culture intertwined and what the impact of twenty-six years of occupation meant culturally, for example, to musicians who have not performed publicly for several years; to the weaver of palm fronds for Palm Sunday, who was forced to become a building contractor in order to make a living; to the Armenian master jeweler who had to hide away his beautiful handmade masterpieces when Israeli tax collectors invaded shops and confiscated items. Researchers had trouble locating people, arranging meetings, and even reaching Jerusalem because of Israeli military restriction on Palestinian access to the city. But finally, and with great persistence and determination, the research team identified some one hundred participants: musicians, dancers, stone carvers, candle makers, palm frond weavers, storytellers, Muslim sheikhs, Christian priests, Arabic calligraphers, etc. The list grew longer every day, reflecting the rich variety and plurality of cultures, religions, and subcultures in Arab Jerusalem.

WHOSE JERUSALEM?

As the car approached Jerusalem, the person sitting next to me asked: "And what do you remember from Jerusalem after being away for so long?" To answer his question I searched my memory for what remained with me since I was a young girl. To my

surprise, the most vivid, persistent image that stayed with me in my absence was of an old man concentrating as he rolled dough to make the cheese pastry at Zalatimo a sweet shop in Jerusalem's Old City. "Zalatimo," I answered. The man's face showed a mixture of disappointment, amusement, and surprise. He must have been waiting for me to answer, "The Dome of the Rock".

I often remembered this story as we worked on the project. One question kept recurring: which Jerusalem and whose Jerusalem do we represent on the Washington Mall? Arab Jerusalem? Moslem or Christian Jerusalem? Divided, occupied Jerusalem? Jerusalem is none of these and all of these.

JERUSALEM THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE:

Working on this project was certainly a very enriching experience for everyone. As researchers worked in the different fields, (rituals, music, archaeology, food, crafts, etc.), so many fascinating, different aspects of the city unfolded each day.

The requirements of the research took us through "Sacred Jerusalem, the City of Peace," sanctified and cherished by millions. We listened to Coptic hymns, and watched Ethiopian processions encircle the cupola on the roof of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. We attended Greek Orthodox rituals for the Holy Fire ceremony (*Sabt an-Nur*, celebrated on the day before Easter), and Moslem prayers at the Dome of the Rock during the holy month of Ramadan. We walked with Christian pilgrims following the footstep of Jesus Christ along the Via Dolorosa to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

We also saw Jerusalem through the eyes of thousands of tourists, who pass through its narrow, winding alleys and see kitsch souvenirs, embroidered dresses, and dangling trinkets and T-shirts. We also saw a living city-a city like any other-where ordinary people live and die. We saw distressed youth, drugs, and crime, for

this is also Jerusalem.

Subhiyyeh, who studied peddlers in Jerusalem, took us through a completely different city: Jerusalem as seen through the eyes of these peasant women who arrive there at sunrise every day from neighboring Palestinian villages. They sit near Damascus Gate, trying to sell their fresh vegetables before municipal police kick them around and throwaway their goods for violating municipal rules! We also experienced Jerusalem through the eyes of young Palestinian teenagers, who are often stopped by Israeli border police and bodily searched against stone walls covered with *Intifada* graffiti: "Jerusalem is the capital of the future Palestine."

The challenge of representing "everybody's" city was great. Jerusalem is never a neutral city-it evokes all kind of overloaded ideologies. On the other hand, Jerusalem is also a very ordinary city. Our team was being challenged to contextualize Jerusalem on the Washington Mall. On *8abt an-Nur*, a sacred flame originating in the chapel surrounding Christ's tomb in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher commemorates His resurrection. How could such an imposing event be presented on the Mall without trivializing it? How can the Friday prayers as performed in the Dome of the Rock be presented on the Mall?

"Jerusalem is a city where people are carrying mirrors," Albert says. "One holds a mirror in one direction. It is a city of many realities: every individual or community has a mirror of history, of cultural realities. As a true Jerusalemite, if I can call myself that, I carry my mirror, but I respect all the other mirrors. The problem is when one big mirror seeks to marginalize all the other mirrors except for itself! "