

Idylls of Jerusalem

The Bells of Memory: A Palestinian Boyhood in Jerusalem. Issa J. Boullata. Linda Leith Publishing, 2014, 87 pages.

Jerusalem: Arab Social Life, Traditions, and Everyday Pleasures in the 20th Century. Subhi S. Ghosheh. Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2013, 186 pages.

Reviewed by Penny Johnson

Remembering Jerusalem and remembering childhood are both, in many ways, missions impossible. On the latter, Vladimir Nabokov, in his wonderful autobiography *Speak Memory*, notes that childhood memory commences as “spaced flashes” until “bright blocks of perception are formed, affording memory a slippery hold.”¹ And few can write of their childhood without imposing an adult narrative framework (and sometimes an adult agenda). Nabokov himself, son of a type of aristocratic Russian family that is “now extinct,” deploys his “almost pathological keenness” of memory to recall a lost childhood and family, a lost time of pre-revolutionary Russia, and a lost country. He never succumbs to abstraction, extracting a world from the memory of a family summer gathering in the Russian countryside. However, when memories of childhood and adolescence serve as a lens for remembering a lost Jerusalem, the temptation to veer from one’s own memories to the Big Story is compelling. A child, in other words, is also a witness.

Issa Boullata, now “an octogenarian” living in Montreal and a translator, retired teacher, and critic of Arab literature, described his memories of Jerusalem in *The Bells of Memory* as “glowing in my memory as if I were currently living in it.” At its best, his clear and modest prose recalls Nabokov’s bright blocks of perception, although Boullata does not explore the slipperiness or complexities of memory in this brief collection of his writings presented to the reader, as he says, “with all the simplicity in which its parts were originally written.” And unlike Nabokov, his explanations of public events are not always anchored in his intimate world, so the reader receives rather standard treatments of such matters as the

Peel Commission or the course of the 1948 war.

As with many memoirs of childhood, school provides a structuring element and Boullata is particularly good on his first day at the co-educational Thawri government school in Jerusalem in the autumn of 1934. The five-year-old Boullata, from a Greek Orthodox family, sits mesmerized by the “beautiful Arabic words” of the Fatiha, the opening sura of the Qur’an, led by the headmistress, Sitt Alexandra, also a Christian (7). The young Issa learns to read from *al-Jadid*, the four reading books composed by Khalil al-Sakakini. A pleasant description of a visit to the school by Sakakini, then a government school inspector, is revealing of Sakakini’s pedagogical bent: he asks the students repeatedly what the word *fawran* means in a text, and gives different examples until all the students in the classroom hold up their hands in understanding. Boullata’s memories of his later schooling at the Collège des Frères from 1938 is somewhat less enthusiastic as, at least at first, the brother in charge of the library unlocked the book cabinet for a few minutes each week and gave the students only books he had selected (36). Boullata turned to his father’s crate of books and later to the library at the Jerusalem YMCA, which he describes in loving detail. He also discovered in the YMCA the Arts Club founded by the writer Jabra Ibrahim Jabra,² who had also taught him literature at the Frères, and conveys some of the intellectual and cultural excitement he experienced in late Mandate Jerusalem. He was to note that growing up in Jerusalem in the 1930s and 1940s gave him his love of Arabic literature – and his “distrust of politicians” (53).

This is a the memoir then of a self-described “bookworm.” In this respect, it is reminiscent of Edward Said’s *Out of Place*, with both boyhoods marked by immersions in books and schooling, although Boullata works with a much more restricted palette and without Said’s sardonic and decidedly anti-nostalgic take on a Jerusalem he considered dull and provincial. But what about the other aspects of the changing Mandate-era Jerusalem that surrounded the young Boullata?

Of particular interest is how Boullata experiences and briefly recounts the tumultuous times of the Great Revolt and later the signal years of 1947–1948. Although physically either witnessing or in the thick of events, Boullata was either too young or, more interestingly, too sheltered, too emotionally or intellectually remote, to actively participate. As a nine-year-old boy living in the al-Thawri neighborhood (near Upper Baq’a), he watches British reconnaissance planes sending signal flares down to ground troops in the Old City, where the rebels held out for five days. While out on walks, he and his father were caught by British soldiers and made to clear the streets of nails placed there by rebels. Nonetheless, his main memory track is the happy life his parents created, sheltering the family from the insecurities of the outside world. In February 1948, as a young man of nineteen, he is accepted at the Jerusalem Law School and works as an accountant in the Mandate Prison Service. When an Arab colleague, Khalil Janho, boasts of carrying out a major operation – the bombing of the *Palestine Post*, in which twenty Jewish staff were killed – Boullata describes him as “spunky” but then goes on to recall an episode several months earlier. Janho had asked Boullata to cooperate in a robbery of the armored car in which Boullata would be transporting salaries (the funds chained to his wrist) from Barclays Bank. Boullata says: “I refused to have anything to do with the scheme,

preferring to do my official duty and pay the policemen their deserved salaries” (77).

His two responses give us a glimmer of the contradictory environment in which Palestinians, perhaps particularly aspiring middle class professionals, lived, caught between old certainties, individual ambitions, and unsettling new realities. That a young man growing up in such tumultuous times did not ever seem to see himself as a possible activist (let alone a militant), even when sheltering with his family in their Old City house in 1948 as battles raged around them, is also telling of his social and cultural setting and his self-identification. Perhaps here is an affinity with the young people in Ramallah today, living the seemingly secure life of the city’s burgeoning professional and business middle class. But Boullata’s memoir also tells us of how everyday life may be punctuated by great events, but has its own momentum as well. Quitting the Mandate service, Boullata goes to work for Barclays Bank: on the day of the funeral of ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni, his colleague Miss Sonia Toubbeh collects funds from the Arab employees to send wreaths for Husayni’s burial in al-Aqsa. Boullata donates but also adds: “a good organizer, she also collected money from the employees every month for ten o’clock coffee” (78).

Boullata ends his account with the Nakba; although he lived in and out of the city for at least part of Jordanian times, his youth and his city fade into unrecorded time. His delicate and episodic memoir of boyhood is colored by the nostalgia of exile, but offers the reader a valuable series of “blocks of perceptions” from his and the city’s lost era.

Nostalgia is not merely a form of sentimental recollection. As Milan Kundera reminds us, nostalgia is derived from two Greek words, *nostos* meaning “return,” and *alagos* meaning suffering. Thus, he opines: “Nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return.”³³ When a yearning for one’s past (childhood) and a yearning for a place denied (Jerusalem) are combined, nostalgia is difficult to avoid, but its relation to memory is uneasy. Indeed, in Kundera’s ironic text, nostalgia is viewed as a form of amnesia.

In his memoir, Boullata views Jerusalem through the prism of individual memory – marked with nostalgia, perhaps, but told with precision. Subhi Ghosheh takes a different tack in *Jerusalem*, his compendium of “social life, traditions and everyday pleasures” in Jerusalem, although he shares with Boullata the implicit aim of restoring a lost and much loved city to memory. But Ghosheh is almost resolutely anti-biographical, perhaps in order to achieve a more objective and universal tone. But in my reading his book, his voice might best be characterized by the troublesome concept of collective memory.

Ghosheh’s book is thus not explicitly a personal memoir, and this poses an interesting problem. Little documentation or other sources are cited, although there is a small scattering of endnotes. This leaves the book’s main authority in its extensive description of traditions, customs, and practices in Jerusalem with a narrator who in many ways is concealed from the reader. Who is remembering these traditions?

Generally, the voice is impersonal, but occasionally a rather ghostly “I” appears: describing practices to protect new-born infants, Ghosheh remarks: “I personally had an amulet that I did not believe in, but out of respect for my mother’s wish, I continued to keep it around my neck until my last years of elementary school” (21). Discussing “superstitious explanations” for delayed pregnancy after marriage, we discover in an aside that Ghosheh himself is a doctor who saw underage brides of ten or eleven who obviously

could not get pregnant (xi). And on remedies for childhood illnesses, “my grandmother” suddenly appears, massaging the bellies of children and firmly applying a piece of dough (152). Indeed, the chapters in the book on marriage, birth, and child-rearing practices are among the most interesting and detailed: a newborn is given drops of water with a paste of dates “imported from Holy Mecca” on the grounds that “Jesus Christ’s food was mainly dates, which was why he was so fond of his mother” (20). One suspects that Ghosheh’s profession contributes to his knowledge of these popular practices, and this reader at least would have liked a link between biography and description. Ghosheh is also especially good throughout the book on proverbs and songs: for women contemplating marrying a man who already has children, there is this advice: “Go to Akka and Arwad, but don’t take a man with *awlad* (children)” (18).

Dissonances between documentation and memory – or perhaps between collective and individual memory – can also be disconcerting. Ghosheh notes the appearance of the phonograph in Jerusalem cafes for the first time in 1910, a time when he obviously could not have been present, but then remarks on its use in several cafés to attract customers: “I remember how funny it was when the song used to fade away, indicating that the phonograph needed to be wound up again, by turning its handle clockwise” (118).

This dissonance is less an authorial error than an example of the author’s project to bring to the reader collective memories of Jerusalem – and a Jerusalem that, this reader would argue, slides into a mythic time called “before” – certainly before the Israeli occupation and sometimes before 1948. This mythic time is not false, but it is idyllic and away from the changing terrain of history. Ghosheh’s “Jerusalem before” does not differentiate between late Ottoman, Mandate, and Jordanian Jerusalem; indeed, Ghosheh sometimes operates in a “before” that stretches back to the Canaanites.

Both Boullata and Ghosheh evoke the harmonious relations between Jerusalem religious communities in a lost past; their specific examples of neighborly cooperation and support are indeed salient. Ghosheh, however, extends his lens much earlier than his own lifetime, citing the city’s “remarkable coexistence between its Muslims, Christians, and Jews ... social cooperation, thanks to Islamic ethics, has always been the prominent character of the region” (3). Or again, “Neighbors of different religions – Muslims, Christians, and Jews – lived peacefully together and shared the same customs ... Muslims and Christians in Jerusalem and other Palestinian towns lived together in total harmony” (6).

This version of an idyllic collective memory is of course set against the discrimination and exclusion of today’s occupied Jerusalem and thus has an operative power. Ghosheh’s project of recovering “Arab social life, traditions and everyday pleasures” can be seen as a poignant exercise in collective memory, but it can also be read for its almost encyclopedic review of specific customs, practices, and, indeed, characters of Jerusalem. One often wishes for more: what, for example, is the story of the Islamic Orphan Institution Orchestra and why was it so prominent? Or, how about more on one of the most famous of the fortunetellers and sorcerers, Abul Fijl and his “clinic” in the Old City? Hopefully, Ghosheh’s book will lead to further explorations on neglected aspects of social life and lost traditions in the city.

Ghosheh himself reports in a melancholy tone that he failed to get his own children

interested in these traditions. It is perhaps even sadder to find him grasping at what must be seen as a twisted straw:

When I visited the Old City in 1998, I was pleased to see people had resumed the old custom of having the newly married couple reside with the groom's family so they could avoid losing their Jerusalem identity cards if they left the city. (32)

One could see Ghosheh's book as a call to other Jerusalemites of his generation to engage in recording their memories – a growing collective memory as it were. Indeed, a more extensive memoir by Raja-e Busaileh on his boyhood in Jerusalem is expected soon from the Institute of Palestine Studies. But then why end with 1948? For those whose boyhoods and girlhoods in Jerusalem encompasses the Jordanian years, it could be time to put pen to paper.

Penny Johnson is an Associate Editor of Jerusalem Quarterly.

Endnotes

- 1 Nabokov Vladimir, *Speak Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 21.
- 2 The relationship between Boullata and Jabra was a long and fruitful one: Boullata translated the two volumes of Jabra's memoirs, *The First Well: A Bethlehem Boyhood* (University of Arkansas Press, 1995) and *Princesses' Street: Baghdad Memories* (University of Arkansas Press, 2005), and wrote a critical analysis of Jabra's works, *Nafidha 'ala al-hadatha: dirasat fi adab Jabra Ibrahim Jabra* [A Window onto Modernity: Studies in the Literature of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra] (Mu'assasat al-'Arabiyya li-l-dirasat wa-l-nashr, 2002). A collection of their correspondence, *al-Tajriba al-jamila: rasa'il Jabra Ibrahim Jabra ila Issa Boullata min 1966 ila 1994* (A Beautiful Experience: Letters from Jabra Ibrahim Jabra to Issa Boullata, 1966 to 1994), was published in 2001.
- 3 Milan Kundera, *Ignorance*, trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber, 2002), 2.

