

## **The Day After**

**By Sherene Seikaly\***

In a pharmacy on Jaffa Street, an elderly man named Fakhri Jedai spoke passionately about the failure of Arab regimes, the ascendancy of American empire, and the dire situation in Iraq. Receiving his degree from Istanbul University, Jedai's father returned to Palestine and opened a series of pharmacies in the early twentieth century. The pharmacy in which we sat in 2005 was established in 1924. Jedai had followed his father's vocational footsteps, receiving his training at the American University of Beirut in the 1940s, and returning to Jaffa to continue the family business. Surrounded by the accouterments of a well-maintained, old-fashioned pharmacy complete with high ceilings and a laboratory, Jedai told me of Jaffa before 1948. He spoke of his family's home that was built one hundred and fifty years ago, his father's pharmacy which became a meeting ground for political discussions in the afternoons, the basketball and football tournaments, his school, the first refrigerator his father bought, and the Apollo Cinema where Umm Kulthum sang. The entire time, while Jedai traveled in time drawing a map of Jaffa (not just the bride of the sea, he insisted, but the very jewel of Palestine), Jaffa's present Arab residents – many of whom are impoverished and disenfranchised – walked in and out of the pharmacy.

A 101 year-old woman living in the Galilee when asked her age confidently responded, "and one ... I don't need to count the first hundred anymore ... and one." She relayed what she could remember of the Ottomans, the British, the Arab Revolt, the Nakba, and Israel. Yet her experience of military rule and various forms of Israeli repression made her mistrust questions about Palestine and the Nakba. She expressed in no uncertain terms her gratitude for the state's health insurance. For "and one," remembering Palestine meant risking her tenuous relationship to the state and its social benefits.

A handsome man, tall of stature and long of beard, appearing much younger than his eighty some years, relayed his experience as a worker in a metal casting factory in Jaffa in the 1940s. Joyful and lively, he remembered all the old haunts – cafés, restaurants, theaters, and cinemas. With a rigorous memory he recounted his daily wages and where a working man got the best daily special. After an hour and a half of intensive inquiry, the man's grandson said it was time to stop. The old man gets tired, he explained; actually he gets very sad.

The acclaimed daughter of one of Palestine's few highly successful industrialists sat in her family home built around the turn of the twentieth century. Her father and uncle had come to the thriving town of Haifa from inland Palestine, educated but penniless. Slowly they began an enterprise that included trade, agriculture, industry, and commerce. As she showed me photographs of her father hosting Haifa's mayor in the 1950s in their celebration of the opening of the Carmelit subway, the specificity of this industrialist's experience became more and more striking. The narrative of a Palestinian businessman losing everything in 1948 and beginning again in a neighboring country is a common story. Less common is the experience of a man who was a leading figure in the business world and at the forefront of a nationalist struggle waged in economic terms, and who was forced ultimately to contend with the reality of what came after 1948.

The tremendous rupture of the Nakba and its centrality in defining the Palestinian experience has lead to various renditions of what came before. As in other cases when the story of a people pivots on a moment of tragic loss, the quiet before the storm is a source of idealization

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and nostalgia. This is true for the majority of people who were expelled from historic Palestine and who are physically disconnected from all that remains.

For Palestinians living inside Israel, the “remnants” – a house, a mosque, or the entire city of Jaffa itself – are more than signposts to be remembered and memorialized. They are lived spaces. For some Palestinians, such as Fakhri Jedai (and his son, who is also a pharmacist), these sites continue to hold the past – “You know where the police office now is? What they call *mishtara*? That was the British government office, where my father worked as a medical inspector.” For others, undoubtedly, they mean what they are today – an old store, an abandoned building, a cinema house transformed into the Israel Discount Bank. The contradictory layers of meaning that such sites hold for anyone who lives in and around them make the relationship to both memory and the present much more complicated. Palestine - the day after the Nakba - is not suspended in imagination but something that is daily contended with.

