

The Olive Tree and the Rose

For most, history is a compendium of emotionless facts, a dry, often colorless, recounting of events and people written in retrospect. We focus on the “what,” overlooking the “why.” This manner of seeing the past ignores the passions and fears that presage events, the motives that kindle actions, the match that explodes into an inferno.

What drives a Napoleon or a Wellington, a Hitler or an FDR, a Henry Ford or the nameless man who lives and dies anonymously? Every person is the beneficiary or victim of his unique genetics and environment, a complex amalgamation of nature and nurture. Truly understanding another person requires knowledge of their experiences and challenges, as reflected in the idiom “Before you judge a man, walk a mile in his shoes.”

My Homeland

The area known as Palestine is the most-contested area of the world, a strip of land about the size of Maryland lying between the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River. The region contains few precious minerals other than those extracted from the mud of the Dead Sea. Its mountains would be considered hills in other lands, and its sandy soils receive little rain each year.

Identified as Caanan in the Bible, then Phoenicia in ancient history, the area and was initially settled by a mixture of multiple tribes from the surrounding area before 3500 BCE. Generic research indicates that the closest relatives of the early Canaanites today are the people of Lebanon.

Due to its strategic position as the nexus of major ancient trade routes, foreign rulers continually invaded the area, fighting bloody battles for control and subjecting the inhabitants to various degrees of subjugation. Over the centuries, the land has been ruled by a succession

of foreign rulers - Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, and Byzantines. Self-rule was sporadic and infrequent.

The Ottomans of Turkey ruled the land for more than four hundred years before being defeated by the Allied Forces in World War I. The region previously known as "Syria" under Ottoman rule included the territory lying between the Taurus Mountains and the Sinai Peninsula including the Vilayet of Aleppo, the Vilayet of Bairut, the Vilayet of Syria, the Sanjaq of Lebanon, and the Sanjaq of Jerusalem. Following the war, the former Ottoman Empire was partitioned between the five winning countries into "spheres of influence" with the agreement of the League of Nations. A section of this region was carved out to create the smaller, mandated territory of Palestine.

Despite a promise of independence for the Arabs in return for their support during the Great War, the British and French established protectorates over the Middle East to protect their strategic and financial interests, an arrangement that remained in place until the end of World War II. The subsequent denial of Arab sovereignty and the creation of a Jewish state in the region remains one of the greatest acts of perfidy in Arab memory.

Jerusalem, 1934

In 1934, Jerusalem, a settlement dating back to 3500 BCE, had an estimated population of about 125,000, living in two sections of the city. Approximately 30,000 - mostly Muslims - lived in Jerusalem's "Old City," the area inside ancient stone walls containing the holiest sites of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

This section appears much the same as it did hundreds of years ago, an amalgamation of tightly-packed masonry and stucco-covered mud buildings. Small open-air markets and closet-sized shops separated by narrow cobbled streets provided everyday necessities as well as real and fake religious relics, trinkets, and curios eagerly sought by pious pilgrims.

My family - father, mother, grandmothers - lived outside the walls in a community called Katamon, about a forty-minute walk to the Old City. Our neighborhood was built after WWI on land formerly owned by the Greek Orthodox Church of Jerusalem and sold for financial reasons.

Moving through Katamon was confusing since only two streets had names (Katamon and Jordan), and buildings were named for the upper- and middle-class families that occupied them. The neighborhood was a popular residence for Arab Christians and British officials at the time of my birth, with new masonry and stone homes on wide paved streets, many with beautiful gardens of purple sage, bellflowers, and crocus. Lemon, apple, and olive trees competed with towering Aleppo Pines and conical Mediterranean Cypress.

Despite the city's modern trappings, fruit and vegetable carts pulled by donkeys and caravans of Bedouin camels were not uncommon, the aroma of their pungent excrement wafting on the light breeze of spring and summer while the brays of the former punctuating the eerie groans of the latter. It was quite exciting for a young boy.