

A sensitive, lively young woman, Serene Husseini Shahid was gifted with a natural receptivity to people and places, and it is by articulating her sense of them in often painful, but always vivid detail that she records her coming to maturity, the displacements and tragedies through death, forced dislocation and exile that befell her as well as the pleasures of discovery, association and love that have shaped her life as a Palestinian woman, a wife and a mother, during a significant chunk of the twentieth century.

The sections of her story that antedate the fall of Palestine are already riven with the misfortunes of her family. Her father Jamal al-Husseini has a premonition of his own exile early in his story as he recalls a procession of Armenian refugees walking through Jericho. This fate will befall about 800,000 Palestinians during 1948 but being one of the national leaders of the 1936-9 uprising against the British he will be deported almost ten years before the fall of Palestine along with a number of other major figures. Serene's family stands at the apex of the Palestinian hierarchy: this includes Haj Amin al Husseini, the Mufti, and her maternal uncle Musa al-Alami, a brilliant, Cambridge-educated man whose modern ideas that ran the gamut from politics to agriculture were far ahead of their time. None of these men is spared the crisis faced by the majority of refugees, however, except that their incarceration and premature separation from their people contributed to the poorly-organised nation that was out-flanked and out-gunned by the Zionist forces that planned, then executed their eviction. Through Serene's eyes we see first how the British exhausted the Palestinians, then delivered them – stripped most of their defences and depleted – to the Haganah so to speak. Life thereafter is improvised through a series of staccato moves, from Palestine, to Lebanon, to Iraq and so on.

EDWARD SAID

Fragments of life in Palestine become precious treasures

many years later.

One day recently, about to throw away an old suitcase which had been around the world with me, I checked to see if I had forgotten anything in its folds. Sure enough, from the corner of one of the torn pockets, I pulled out an envelope, frayed with the passing of time. I opened it and found inside an old, faded photograph of a family group. In the small figure at the center I immediately recognised myself as a child of two. Surrounding me in the picture sat my grandmother Zuleikha, her mother Asma, and my mother Nimati.

I was delighted to find the photo, but a little shock ran through me when I thought how it had remained hidden and undiscovered over the decades, and how the suitcase itself has crossed so many borders, and how the whole thing had ended up here at last, in my hands, in my house so many years later.

I sat and I looked at the picture, and as I did so, I was engulfed by memories surging up from a forgotten well deep in my unconscious mind. As I stared at it, I allowed myself to enjoy the warmth and the sadness, as the memories washed over me.

I recognised the courtyard, a door, and an occasion on that afternoon so long ago when I was taken from my bed to look into a strange machine Uncle Musa had brought and that ticked across the room. That was the first camera in the family. Probably Uncle Musa

had just returned from England, where he was studying at Cambridge University.

My great-grandmother had an obsession with cleanliness. She spent her days moving between her daughter's house and her son's looking for enough water with which to wash her hands and fill her drinking bottles. She was not even satisfied with the cleanliness of the water itself and would leave it to run from the tap for a long, long time before she would so much as touch it. And all this in a Jerusalem which had little running water, where every house had to have a private well in which was then pumped up to the house!

Knowing this weakness of Great-grandmother Asma, my naughty cousins and I sometimes spent a whole morning teasing her. We found ways, for instance, of sitting so close to her that we touched her dress, knowing that her phobia would now be concentrated on the effort to clean it. In those days, children always kissed the hands of their elders, but in our mischief, we would deliberately kiss her hands again and again, knowing that she would be compelled to wash them as often as they were kissed.

In spite of all this teasing, we loved her a great deal. We enjoyed hearing family stories about the great beauty she had enjoyed in her youth, when she had been known for her long, blond hair.

I especially remember her wearing a long dress with a cashmere design and a brown silk jacket lined with blond, red fur which let out to the collar and the sleeves. I was a grandmother myself when, walking down a Paris street one summer day, I saw in a shop window a jacket which reminded me of my great-grandmother's. I could not help but buy it, and every time I wore it, I thought of her.

I wonder sometimes where and how the people of Jerusalem did their shopping and got their goods in my great-grandmother's days. The farthest she ever travelled was between her old house in the walled city, and the one just outside the city walls that she built later in her old age. Yet I suppose that though its people lived such a closed life, people from all over the world who came to visit the religious shrines in Jerusalem through the centuries brought by them goods as well as other aspects of their various cultures.

As I stared at the picture some more, my attention shifted from Great-grandmother Asma to Grandmother Zuleikha. I was her first grandchild and throughout my childhood was very close to her. In the photograph she looked sober and sad, unlike the memory I had kept of her. It took me a few minutes and some calculation to realize that she must have recently lost her husband, Faidi al Alami, when the



Serene Hussein Shahid as a young girl with her mother (standing behind), her grandmother (left) and her great-grandmother.

picture was taken. Her dress, an indication of this mournful event, was black, with black trimming embroidered on the collar and the sleeves of the matching jacket.

Long after she died and after Uncle Musa's death, we had drawn lots to determine who would take what of their possessions, and I was very happy when her wedding chest fell to my lot. I have it to this day. It always reminds me of the old times and my childhood, when, as a special favour to me, she would open it and show me its contents. The chest itself made of moth-resistant cedar wood, was painted green. It is studded with brass nails, and pieces of shining brass cut in the forms of arches, lanterns, and human figures are attached to the wood.

At the very bottom of the chest, Grandmother Im Musa kept a large photograph of herself in a wide-brimmed hat. The picture had been taken in Austria, when she accompanied my grandfather there when he had to go for ophthalmologic treatment. A well known Dr Teekho in Jerusalem had told him the only way he would be able to save his sight would be to undergo that particular treatment in Austria. She had bought the hat in the picture in order

to cover her head and most of her face : after all, she could not wear a veil in the streets of Vienna. When she returned to Jerusalem, she hid her photo in the chest so as not to reveal her change of habit abroad.

She used also to show me the first garment her son, Uncle Musa, wore as well as the first dress Mother wore. The dresses were of taffeta silk with thin stripes in pastel shades. One was blue, the other pink. They were cut in an old Arab design, and were probably made at a convent. The chest also contained the suit her husband wore in the Ottoman Parliament. It was a black suit, with gold embroidery on the neck, the sleeves and the waist. Of her trousseau, she had kept a long, white silk dress, embroidered with fine white thread which had turned yellow over the years.

In the photograph, Mother stands behind the others. She must have chosen this position because she was pregnant. She must have been carrying the baby boy who was born after me and who died suddenly one night. I do not remember him. Mother had inherited her family's beautiful green eyes, and would have remained beautiful had she not gained a great deal of weight during her seven pregnancies. Such a large number a children was unusual for her family: both her mother and grandmother had had only two children each. Two of her babies died in infancy, and the five of us who lived only added the weight of the hurdles she endured during her long life.

Of the four generations of women sitting for that photograph that afternoon, I think her generation suffered the most. She had had to live in exile in several Arab cities with five children to look after, usually on her own, because her husband was either exiled or attending a conference abroad. She often had to wait for money, which came only after long periods of anxiety; she lived in societies that, knowingly or not, deliberately or not, did not take her into account. Nor was she alone in that plight : every Palestinian was an extra number, a burden, on the society in which he or she lived in exile. It is true that her children went on with their lives and education, and yet she never had the peace of mind to enjoy her everyday life with them as previous generations had done. And her marriage was torn apart in her autumn years.

I remember a tear that seemed always to sparkle in her green eyes, and I believe that she never forgave the world for being so cruel.

Finally, I looked at myself in that old photograph. I was born in September 1920, almost a century after my great-grandmother, and in the picture I sit close to her. As I scrutinised my image as a small child, I could not help thinking about my life

and theirs. After allowing myself to float away on a sea of memories, I asked myself: What does it mean to be looking at four generations of Palestinian women?

For my great-grandmother, Jerusalem, with its small winding alleys, was the world. She rarely moved far from its walls. Yet she must have been the queen of her house, in her own city and in her own country. To her there was no shadow of doubt where she belonged and what spot of earth belonged to her. She lived and died part of a whole that represents the security every human being needs.

Her daughter, who had almost the same degree of security even while being more open to the world, suffered greatly only during the last two decades of her life, after events in Palestine sent her into exile. She passed away in the heat of the desert on her way from Baghdad to Jerusalem. Today, she lies in a lonely grave in a Baghdad cemetery.

But for some knowledge of the Koran, both my great-grandmother and grandmother were illiterate. Mother, on the other hand, spoke four languages. I earned a university degree and travelled around the world. Yet it seems to me that the time of Great-grandmother Asma was better than mine : she never had to be a refugee, looking for a country to accept her, begging for a passport, and longing for an unambiguous identity.

Where am I now in my twilight years? How can I ever know what their life was really like? Don't we all take our parents for granted, not realising that time flies and that the time to ask questions and probe the past goes, never to return? It seems to me that the changes which took place between the time when Great-grandmother Asma was born and the early nineteenth century and my time, a century later, were perhaps unprecedented in history.

I could not bear to look at the old family picture for very long that morning when I first found it. The past is heavy on the heart sometimes. But I often go back to it, and remember.

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SERENE HUSSEINI SHAHID (1920-2008) was born in Jerusalem. She was educated in Ramallah and at the American University of Beirut. For many years she worked in Beirut with Palestinian refugees. She graduated from the American University of Beirut in 1941. With her family she lived in exile in Lebanon, where she met and married Munib Shahid in 1944. She had three daughters.