



In 2021, Dorit and I were interviewed on Roberto Mazza's podcast, *Jerusalem Unplugged*, which always starts with the question, "What is your Jerusalem?" So I asked myself that question ahead of time. *What is my Jerusalem?*

Jerusalem is the place my mother, Anna Kassotou Parisinou, called home. It's the place where she was born and where she spent her entire childhood.

Jerusalem is the place where my great-great-grandfather, George Shtakleff, immigrated as a young man in his twenties, from the Balkans in the mid-1800s. According to family lore, he first arrived as a pilgrim and, having identified some business opportunities, fetched his older brother Zacharia from Tetovo, a town in present-day Republic of Northern Macedonia, to join him. The

Shtakleffs established flour mills and bakeries and, later on, ice-making businesses. Jerusalem is the place where at least four generations of Shtakleffs built and lived their lives: they married, had children, went to school, worked, and played.

Jerusalem is also the place where my other great-great-grandfather, Anestis Agathopoulos, an Ottoman Greek from Asia Minor or Constantinople, found himself at the turn of the previous century, along with his small itinerant theater troupe which consisted mainly of himself and his two daughters. His eldest, Eugenie, played the dramatic roles; the youngest, Marika, the lighter, comedic ones.

It was in one of those theatrical performances in Jerusalem (was it Shakespeare? Molière?) that George Shtakleff's eldest son, John (Hanna in Arabic, Yiannis in Greek), saw



By Marina Parisinou

I was born and raised in Cyprus but was weaned on stories of Palestine. My maternal family, the Kassotis, fled their home in Katamon, Jerusalem, on May 1, 1948, hoping to return when the "troubles" subsided. It didn't take long for them to realize that Cyprus was not going to be the temporary refuge they had envisioned and that they had instead become veritable refugees, like hundreds of thousands of other Palestinians of all stripes – Arabs, Armenians, Greeks, etc. – who dispersed all over the world.

They eventually landed on their feet: my mother and her sisters married in Cyprus, raised families, and rebuilt their lives. But they never ceased to tell stories about their life in Jerusalem. My appetite for those stories was insatiable, and as I grew older, I started collecting them along with various records (letters, diaries, documents of all kinds) and photographs. In 2013, I was recruited as a participant in the interactive documentary *Jerusalem, We Are Here* (JWRH),¹ conceived and created by Israeli-Canadian film theorist and documentarist Dorit Naaman. My involvement in JWRH and my work with Dorit and her other collaborators led me deeper into the world the Jerusalem stories had opened up for me. I started my blog, *My Palestinian Story*,² where I write about my research into my family history. I became an associate producer of the JWRH project; and, more recently, I started researching the bombing of the Semiramis Hotel, two doors down from my grandfather's house, with a view to turning that story into a book.

Anna Parisinou (née Kassotis) photographed by her daughter, Marina, outside her family home in Katamon, Jerusalem. August 1986. This was Anna's first and only visit to her home after the Nakba.





Manolis Kassotis with his wife Vitsa Schtakleff and their firstborn daughter, Vasso. Jerusalem, August 1926.

Eugenie on stage, fell for her, and asked Anestis for her hand. Anestis promptly delivered his leading lady to miller John. They married in 1902 and with that, Eugenie's career came to an end and the troupe disbanded.

My grandmother Paraskevi (Vitsa) Schtakleff was the couple's first child, born in 1905 in Ottoman Jerusalem. By the time the British arrived to occupy the city in 1917, as the First World War was drawing to a close, my grandmother had four siblings and was receiving a French education in the school established by the nuns of Notre Dame de Sion/Ecce Homo Convent in the Old City. She was also becoming quite a proficient piano player who was often asked by her father to entertain his business guests. Her piano teacher wanted to marry her. But fate intervened.

A man from the Greek island of Samos had been brought to Jerusalem as a boy by his uncle, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, Damianos I. Emmanuel (Manolis) Kassotis grew up in the Greek monastery in the Old City, and then his uncle sent him to university in Greece. Before finishing his studies, and probably due to the outbreak of World War I, he returned to Jerusalem, where he was assigned the lease of a vast estate, property of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, some 28 kilometers west of Jerusalem, in the village of Al-Bureij (Breij). So Manolis became a farmer and estate manager. And somehow, somewhere, when he was 29, he met Vitsa, fell in love with her, and married her in August 1922, in defiance of his mother – a very un-Greek move.

My grandmother, only 17, left her cosmopolitan life in Jerusalem and her piano behind to become a farmer's lonely wife in the Palestinian countryside. Her loneliness was alleviated by the arrival of their firstborn, their daughter Vasso, in 1924, and also when Manolis finally bought her a piano.

Manolis anticipated that as the family grew, they would need a base in the city. So in April 1926, he bought a single-story stone house in Katamon and rented it out. When Vasso became of school age, she became a boarder at the German Schmidt College for Girls in Jerusalem. The family gradually transitioned their life to Jerusalem, renting a house in the Greek Colony, where my mother was born in 1930. Three years later they moved in



The Greek community of Jerusalem, outside the Greek consulate in Talbiyeh, Jerusalem, on the occasion of Greek Independence Day, March 25, 1940.



The Zacharia Schtakleff family. Jerusalem, mid-1930s.

to their Katamon house where the third and final daughter was born in late 1935. Although Breij continued to be a big part of their lives, Jerusalem was home.

Jerusalem was where my mother went to school – first at the Greek gymnasium in the Old City, then at the Jerusalem Girls' College (JGC) for the benefit of an English education, and finally at the Arabic Al-Ummah when conditions in Jerusalem made accessing JGC perilous. In the Greek Club in the Greek Colony, or in the Greek community hall next to the Church of St. Simeon in Katamon, the Kassotis family joined their fellow Palestinian Greeks to celebrate national and religious holidays, to sing and dance. At the YMCA, various family members of both the George and Zacharia Schtakleff branches participated in sports and cultural activities. In the

German Colony, Uncle Nando Schtakleff, my grandmother's brother, ran his cinema, the Regent, in the 1940s.

So Jerusalem was a place of convergence, a dot on the map where people from different places around the world, from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, met and lived side by side or together, where they coexisted and intermingled. It's the place where the seedling planted by George and Zacharia grew into a huge family tree with two large branches, each with a multitude of twigs that reached out and embraced neighboring trees and encompassed many languages and cultures, spanning the gamut from Greek to Arabic to Russian, Bulgarian/Macedonian, English, French... I look at the surnames on the leaves and the diversity is mind-boggling: Schtakleff, Agathopoulos, Kircheff, Georgieff, Simich, Kassotis, Haddad, Tiil, Abdo, Illitch, Blajeva, Madjukoff, Gaitanopoulos, Kalandranis, Farraj, Barlas, Antippas, Thorogood, Samsonoff, Solodkoff, Katsinopoulos, Sfaelos, Galenoff, Lewis, Ladopoulos, Pittuck, Lachet, Siksek, Stellakis, Efthyvoulou, Hazboun, Sarouf, Cattan, Andary, Marcin, Fasheh... This is my tribe – that originated in Jerusalem!

But just before reaching its ninetieth birthday, the tree was violently uprooted as the city turned into the epicenter of dispersal. Jerusalem is the place that all these people lost in 1948, along with their homes, their properties, their means of making a living, their community, and their dreams for the future. All



George Shtakleff with his second wife and all his children. Jerusalem, early 1900s.



Wedding of John Shtakleff and Eugenie Agathopoulou. Jerusalem, 1902. Photo by Khalil Raad.



Tomb of George Shtakleff at the Greek Orthodox cemetery on Mount Zion. Jerusalem, October 2023. Photo by Marina Parisinou.

Al-Quds (Jerusalem)

old black-and-white part represents the abstract, the romantic, the faded memory and its emotional imprint; the new, the colored version, is closer to reality: grittier, harsher, grounding.

That's my Jerusalem: a collage of old and new, of memories and facts, of family stories and real history, along with the connections I've made and continue to make in the course of my explorations. Jerusalem is the place where my family left a big piece of their heart; I picked it up, incorporated it into mine, and I continue to nurture it and keep it alive – for myself and the younger generations of the tribe.

This article is an adaptation by the author of a post she previously published on her blog, MyPalestinianStory.com.

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these colorful leaves were scattered by the winds of the *Nakba* – the Palestinian catastrophe – to the four corners of the earth. My family tried hard to hang on for a while but could not withstand the force of the winds of war. Today, I have relatives, close and distant, in Canada, the US, Australia, the UK, France, Jordan, Lebanon, Greece, and of course in Cyprus – and likely in more places that I have yet to discover.

And from that point on, Jerusalem became the place about which my family reminisced and told stories. Constantly. Every time they met. Jerusalem became part of the fabric of our family. There was some sorrow in the stories but also much joy: their lives in Jerusalem had been rich and full, and that's what they chose to remember. Their faces lit up when they talked about their hometown. The stories, despite always being underscored by nostalgia, had humor and laughter and adventures and celebrations and pride and mysteries and gossip... They drew me in like a magnet.

At age 25 I orchestrated my mother's return to her hometown with me – my first visit to Jerusalem – in search of

the Kassotis house in Katamon. But I was still quite young and that visit was like a dream. I still could not quite put the pieces together. But I'd had a first glimpse of the place, a first inkling of what it meant to my family, a first awakening to how it was lost to them.

When years later I got involved in the JWRH project and started my blog, my efforts became more methodical and systematic. I started learning history – real history as opposed to family legends – and my curiosity grew. I realized that in many cases I had been too late to ask the right questions, as my grandparents and oldest uncles and aunts were already gone: brown leaves falling off the tree, returning to the earth where fragments of their stories are now buried forever.

The original Shtakleff never left Jerusalem. Great-great-grandfather George is still there, buried in the Greek Orthodox cemetery on Mount Zion, where I found him for the first time in 2014 and where I visit him every time I'm there, to say hello, to prune the trees that all but cover his tomb, and to assure him that I will continue to tell the story of what he started in Jerusalem. More of my ancestors are buried there, too, like

great-grandmother Eugenie, but time and the new occupiers haven't been so kind to them and their graves are lost...

My first visit as part of the JWRH project was in 2014. It was followed by several others. I started experiencing firsthand where the stories took place and getting a better sense of what they were about. I met people who remembered my family, I walked the streets my family had walked, saw the houses my family had lived in. I found records and began to connect the pieces. And the memories, my family's memories which I have inherited – they have essentially become my own – came face to face with reality and had to be reconciled against it. Memory is fickle and needs hooks in the real world to hang on to or it gets distorted beyond recognition.

From that point on, Jerusalem became like an old photograph that gets re-photographed: you shoot the same picture, the same frame, from the same angle, and then you partially superimpose the new on the old. The

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¹ For more information, please visit info.JerusalemWeAreHere.com.

² Available at MyPalestinianStory.com.