

Hard Truth About Palestine

[Amos Elon](#)

[April 26, 2007 Issue](#)

Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life

by Sari Nusseibeh, with Anthony David

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 542 pp., \$27.50

Sari Nusseibeh's chronicle of a life "lived in a broken and violated land" reads at times like an unfinished nineteenth-century novel. In it there are villains and victims, patriots and fools, war and peace, betrayal and corruption, and an inevitable romance. We don't know how the story will end. The book dramatizes recent history in Palestine as few others have done. It begins forty years ago in 1967, during a war rashly named after the Six Days of Creation. The Israeli army conquers East Jerusalem, the city where Sari Nusseibeh's family is said to have lived for more than thirteen centuries. Two years later at Oxford he falls in love with another student, Lucy Austin, the tall, strikingly good-looking, fair-haired daughter of the famous Oxford philosopher J.L. Austin. The young lover ponders how he could possibly ask her to follow him to a war-scarred city in one of the most volatile corners of the world, with two major wars in its recent history and Arab leaders worldwide calling for a third. It seems preposterous even to try. He composes a romantic fairy tale instead. It works.

Nusseibeh was a nineteen-year-old philosophy student at the time, the scion of a Palestinian family with vast land holdings, or what was left of them after the wars of 1948 and 1967. The first Nusseibeh was said to have arrived from Arabia with Omar the Great in 638 AD, though the author's father, a sensible, forward-looking

man and a former Jordanian minister of defense, would occasionally quip that they came “from a long line of thieves.” Patrician families in Jerusalem commonly outdid one another with tales about their ancestors. “It was extraordinary how many ‘direct’ descendants of the Prophet lived in Jerusalem in those days,” Nusseibeh observes wryly.¹ Sultan Omar made the Nusseibehs hereditary custodians of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Today one of Nusseibeh’s uncles still holds the foot-long key to it; at specific times, he is called upon to ceremoniously lock and unlock the the door.

Born in 1949, Nusseibeh grew up in the Jordanian-controlled part of Jerusalem, then a divided city much like Berlin at the time, in a large house with precious carpets and chandeliers, often filled with people seeking his father’s advice or soliciting his help. The no man’s land between Jordanian East and Israeli West Jerusalem, a grim expanse of mines, ruins, barbed wire, and anti-tank obstacles, ran directly behind the Nusseibehs’ garden wall. The UN-monitored cease-fire was often violated. The young boy could look out across the spires and crosses at the nearby Israeli sector and the massive buildings of Hebrew University on Mount Scopus, an armed Israeli enclave at the time. Hebrew voices drifted in with the wind from the other side. He would tune in to Israel radio to hear the Beatles. His parents’ taste in education was ecumenical. Sons were sent to the Anglican St. George’s School in Jerusalem, and later to Rugby in England; daughters went to French Catholic and...

This is exclusive content for subscribers only.

Full text:

<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2007/04/26/hard-truth-about-palestine/>