

Commentary

September 1999

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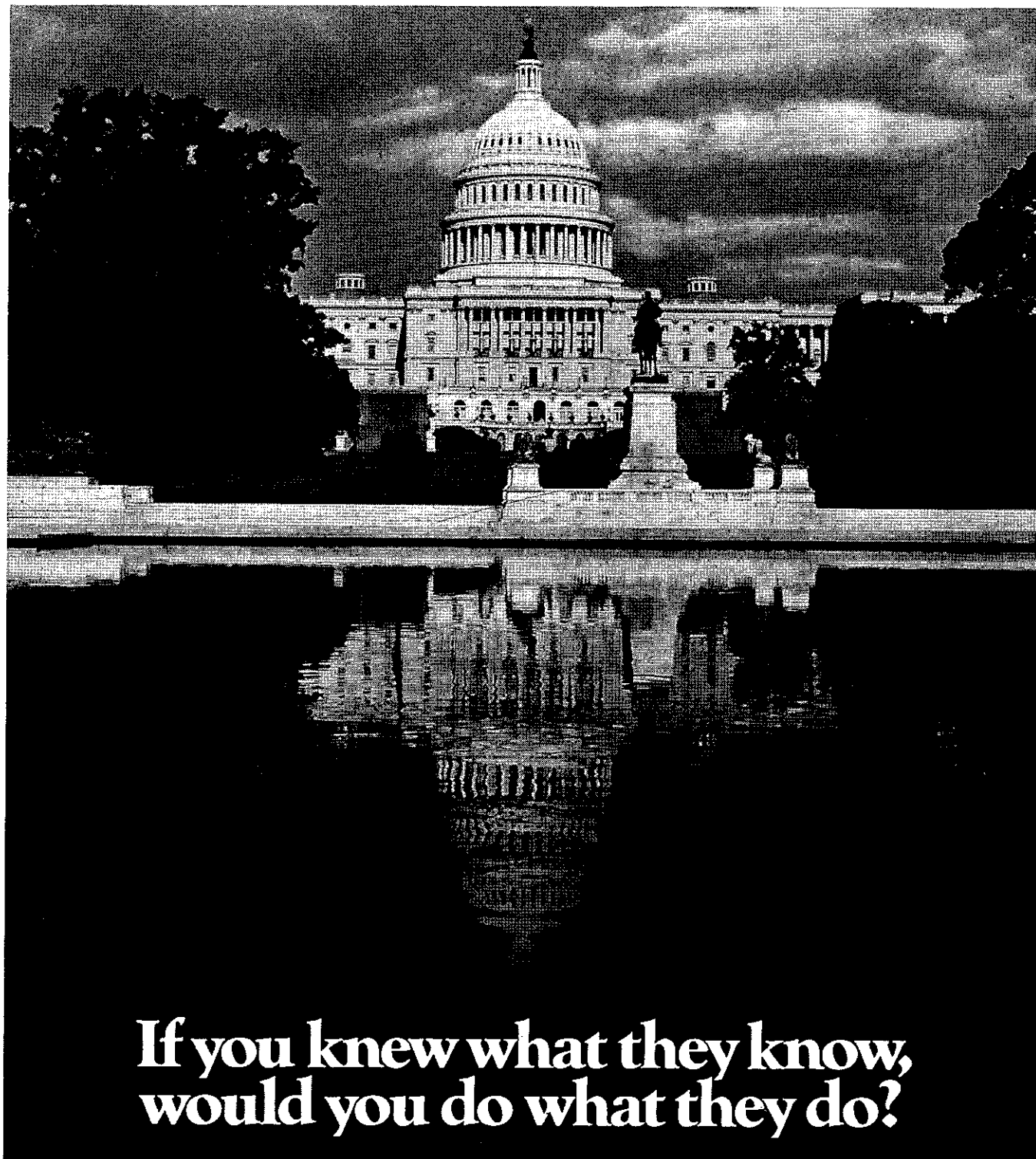
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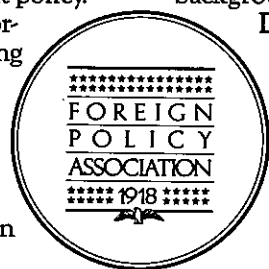
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"My Beautiful Old House" and Other Fabrications by Edward Said

Justus Reid Weiner

AMONG SPOKESMEN for the Palestinian cause in our day, surely none is so articulate, or so well-known, as Edward W. Said. The holder of an endowed chair in English and comparative literature at Columbia University, a prolific author of books and articles both scholarly and popular, a frequent lecturer and commentator on radio and television, a sometime diplomatic intermediary and congressional witness, the subject of countless profiles and interviews in the world media, Said—who was born in Jerusalem in 1935—has earned a reputation not only for polemical brilliance but, when it comes to championing Palestinian Arab rights (and assailing Israel for infringing them), a fierce moral zealotry that will not be assuaged.

The adulation in which Said is held by Palestinians themselves is suggested by a recent ceremony honoring him at the U.S.-based Palestinian Heritage Institute that was attended by 450 Arab diplomats and Arab-Americans, as by the overflow audience of 1,000 that gathered to hear him lecture last year in Bethlehem. But his prestige is no less high among American and European academics and intellectuals, who have extravagantly praised

his literary scholarship and admire his uncompromising politics. As for the scholarship, his most famous book, *Orientalism* (1978), with its bold thesis that the Western study of Islam (and by extension other cultures) is itself a form of "colonialism," has had as profound and radicalizing an influence on literary studies in colleges and universities as it has had on Islamic self-perceptions. And as for politics, so stringent is Said's vision of the Middle East that in recent years he has changed from being a supporter of Yasir Arafat to a vociferous opponent, accusing the PLO chairman of having betrayed 50 years of Palestinian aspirations by signing the Oslo agreements with Israel.

The very model of an engaged academic, Said has been politically active since at least the late 1960's, when he co-founded the fervently pro-Palestinian Association of Arab-American University Graduates. In 1974, he was the principal author and translator of Arafat's notorious address to the UN General Assembly in which the PLO leader brandished both a gun and an olive branch; during the Carter years he transmitted overtures between Arafat and the administration, and in the Reagan years participated in the breakthrough meeting of a member of the Palestine National Council (PNC), the PLO's "parliament in exile," with Secretary of State George Shultz; and he himself served for many years as a member of the PNC. Said's books bearing directly on the Palestinian issue include *After the Last Sky: Palestinian*

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Lives (1986); *Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestine Question* (1988); *The Pen and the Sword* (1994); *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination* (1995); and *Peace and Its Discontents: Essays on Palestine in the Middle East Peace Process* (1996).

There can be no doubt that a great deal of the moral authority accruing to Edward Said derives as much from his personal as from his intellectual credentials.* As a living embodiment of the Palestinian cause, he has made much in print and on film of his birth, childhood, and schooling in Palestine, telling a story of idyllic beginnings and violent disruption—of a paradise lost—that resonates with personal pain while also serving as a powerfully compelling metaphor for the larger Palestinian condition. As Salman Rushdie put it in lauding Said's *After the Last Sky*, in writing about his "internal struggle: the anguish of living with displacement, with exile," Said "enables us to feel the pain of his people."

Both his personal pain and the pain he feels for his people are on especially vivid display in a 1998 BBC documentary that Said both wrote and narrated, *In Search of Palestine*. The film, aired around the world to mark the 50th anniversary of the Palestinian *nakbah* ("disaster") of 1948, and recently shown in New York on the local PBS affiliate, features extensive footage of Said standing outside his birthplace at what is now 10 Brenner Street in Jewish western Jerusalem.

But just the mention of that birthplace confronts us with a problem. Although Said has defined his own intellectual vocation as one of "tell[ing] the truth against extremely difficult odds"—he has sweepingly declared that the duty of the intellectual is "to speak the truth, as plainly, directly, and as honestly as possible"—it turns out that, in retailing the facts of his own personal biography over the years, he has spoken anything *but* the plain, direct, or honest truth. Instead, he has served up, and consciously encouraged others to serve up, a wildly distorted version of the truth, made up in equal parts of outright deception and of artful obfuscations carefully tailored to strengthen his wider ideological agenda—and in particular to promote the claims of Palestinian refugees against Israel.

For the past three years I have been looking into the core autobiographical assertions made by Said about his childhood in Palestine—a childhood that he has repeatedly asserted is central to the formation of his political thought and indeed of his emblematic political identity as a Palestinian refugee.

My search, a fascinating adventure in itself, took me through sometimes obscure public records and archives in five countries on four continents and involved tracking down and interviewing numerous relatives, neighbors, school classmates, and professional colleagues. Virtually everything I learned, the principal conclusions of which are set out below, contradicts the story of Said's early life as Said has told it.†

To complicate matters still further, however, some time after completing the manuscript of this article, I learned of the forthcoming publication of another new book by Said, a memoir entitled *Out of Place* that is due to be released later this month.** Remarkably—but, as I shall have reason to speculate later, perhaps not surprisingly—this new book thoroughly revises the personal tale Said has been reciting all these years, bringing it into greater conformity with the truth while at the same time ignoring his 30 years of carefully crafted deception.

But I am getting ahead of myself. In order to untangle the strands of this enigma, we must begin by examining what has been the standard version of the life of Edward Said and see where and how it diverges from the facts.

II

FOR A characteristic rendition of the standard version, we need look no farther than a long and typically admiring feature article on Said that appeared almost exactly a year ago in the *New York Times* ("A Palestinian Confronts Time," by Janny Scott, September 19, 1998). Here is the relevant paragraph:

Mr. Said was born in Jerusalem and spent the first twelve years of his life there, the eldest child and only son of a successful Palestinian Christian businessman. The family moved [elsewhere in this same *Times* piece, the word is "fled"] to Cairo in late 1947, five months before war broke out between Palestinian Arabs and Jews over plans to partition Palestine.

And here, from *Current Biography Yearbook* (1989),

* Both his scholarship and his grasp of political and cultural history have, in fact, been subjected to severe criticism, though this has hardly sufficed to undermine his reputation or to prevent his recent accession to the presidency of the prestigious Modern Language Association.

† Readers interested in the documentation for this article can find it at COMMENTARY's website, www.commentarymagazine.com, where I also list the many individuals to whom I am indebted for assistance.

** Knopf, 352 pp., \$26.95.

in a five-page profile personally approved by its subject, is a more expansive take:

Edward W. Said was born in Jerusalem in what was then Palestine on November 1, 1935, the oldest child and only son of Wadie Said, a prosperous businessman. . . . The family lived in an exclusive section of West Jerusalem. . . . Baptized as an Episcopalian, Edward Said attended St. George's, an Anglican preparatory school, where his extracurricular activities included riding, boxing, gymnastics, and playing the piano.

. . . At the age of twelve, Edward Said was forced to use a pass when traveling between his home and his school. "The situation was dangerous and inconvenient," he recalled . . . during an interview for *New York* magazine (January 23, 1989). In December 1947, the Said family left Jerusalem and settled in Cairo, Egypt. . . . "Israel was established; Palestine was destroyed," Said wrote in his book *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*.

But why rely on the words of others? Both of these summaries merely recapitulate Said's own oft-recited outline of his early life:

I was born, in November 1935, in Talbiya, then a mostly new and prosperous Arab quarter of Jerusalem. By the end of 1947, just months before Talbiya fell to Jewish forces, I'd left with my family for Cairo. . . . ["Palestine, Then and Now," *Harper's*, December 1992]

I was born in Jerusalem and spent most of my formative years there and, after 1948, when my entire family became refugees, in Egypt. ["Between Worlds: Edward Said Makes Sense of His Life," *London Review of Books*, May 7, 1998]

. . . my recollections of my early days in Palestine, my youth, the first twelve or thirteen years of my life before I left Palestine. [*The Pen and the Sword*]

This same rendering of his early years recurs over and over again in writings both by and about Said. (Thus, for example, the website of the *Nation*, a magazine with which he is affiliated as a music critic: "In 1948, Said and his family were dispossessed from Palestine and settled in Cairo.") It is what undergirds his self-definition as an archetypal "exile"—i.e., one who, *like his people in general*, was separated from his homeland in a sudden act of historic violence. Except for the detail of his birth, it is a tissue of falsehoods.

III

HERE ARE the bare bones of the truth: Said's father Wadie (also known as William) grew up and went to school in Jerusalem but evidently emigrated in 1911 to the United States. During World War I, he reportedly served with American forces in Europe before returning to the Middle East with a U.S. passport to start what would become a very successful career in business. At least nine years prior to his son's birth in 1935, however, Wadie Said was already residing permanently in Cairo, Egypt. There, according to the 1926 French edition of the *Egyptian Directory*, he owned the Standard Stationery Company. The company prospered sufficiently to open a branch in Alexandria in 1929 and in due course a second store in Cairo itself.

It was to Cairo that Edward Said's mother Hilda (Musa), of Lebanese origin, moved upon marrying his father in 1932, and it was in Cairo that the nuclear family continued to reside over the ensuing decades in a series of ever more elegant and spacious apartments, the last three of which were located in Cairo's best neighborhood on the island of Zamalek in the Nile River. Documentation of their residences and other pertinent facts can be traced in decades' worth of consecutive annual editions of the *Egyptian Directory*, the Cairo telephone directory, *Who's Who in Egypt and the Middle East*, and other sources; a long-time family friend, Huda Gindy, a professor of English at Cairo University, has reminisced in an interview about her former neighbors, the Sais, who from 1940 lived upstairs from her at 1 El-Aziz Osman Street. By 1949, the capital of Standard Stationery was listed in the *Egyptian Trade Index* at the then very significant sum of 120,000 Egyptian pounds.

And Jerusalem? In that city lived Wadie Said's brother Boulos Yusef, his wife Nabiha, and their five children. To this branch of the family, as to other destinations, the affluent Cairo-based Sais made periodic visits. In November 1935, during one of those visits, Edward Said was born. On his birth certificate, prepared by the ministry of health of the British Mandate, his parents specified their permanent address as Cairo, and, indicating that they maintained no residence in Palestine, *left blank* the space for a local address. Similarly blank is the entry for a local address in the church record of Edward Said's baptism, an event that likewise took place in Jerusalem two years later. Of the 29 telephone and commercial directories for Jerusalem and Palestine from 1931 through 1948 that I was

able to locate, more than half carry business and/or residential listings for Boulos Said and his wife. There are no listings for Edward Said's parents in any of the directories, whether in English, Hebrew, or Arabic.

IV

AS FOR the house in Talbieh (Talbiya), that is a story unto itself. In his article in *Harper's*, as in the much longer version of the same piece that he published in the (London) *Observer*, and as in other iterations of this theme elsewhere, Said has wrenchingly recounted the nostalgic visit he paid in early 1992 to his childhood roots in Jerusalem and in particular to this house at 10 Brenner Street. The *Observer* article was accompanied by a large photograph of the author perched on a stone wall with the caption: "Edward Said in front of his family's old home in Jerusalem."

Footage of Said and his son Wadie outside this same structure also features prominently in the BBC documentary, *In Search of Palestine*. Its deep symbolic significance was further underlined at the ceremonies honoring him at the Palestine Heritage Institute, at the end of which a painting of the house was presented to him as a gift. In an interview last March with the *Jerusalem Times*, an English-language Palestinian newspaper, Said had this to say:

I feel even more depressed when I remember my beautiful old house surrounded by pine and orange trees in Al-Talbiyah in east [sic, western] Jerusalem, which has been turned into a "Christian embassy." I went there a few days ago and took several photographs.

But wait. During his visit in 1992, according to Said, he was able to locate his "family's house" only because a cousin then living in Canada "had drawn me a map from memory that he sent along with a copy of the title deed." If that is so—if, that is, Said really had in hand a copy of the title deed to what he has described as "my beautiful old house"—then he could not have helped noticing the absence on it of his parents' names, his siblings' names, or his own name. For it never was, and is not now, their or his house.

In the ledgers kept at the Land Registry Office in Jerusalem during the Mandatory period, the earliest entry for the house in question is dated February 14, 1941. It records a transfer of fractional interests in the property from its registered owner, Yusef Said (Edward Said's grandfather), to Mrs. Boulos Yusef Said (Edward Said's aunt) and her five children. And that is all. There is no record of Ed-

ward Said's parents owning either the house or any interest in it.

IF HIS nuclear family had no ownership interest in the house at 10 Brenner Street, neither did he or they ever permanently reside in it. (Nor, apparently, did his aunt and cousins until 1942.) After being built in the early 1930's, the structure was initially divided into two apartments, each with a separate entrance from the outside; in 1942, a third apartment was created in the basement. From 1938 to 1946 (that is, from the time Edward Said was roughly three to the time he was eleven), the upstairs level was rented out to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia as its consulate general, and then from 1946 to 1952 to the successor government of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It was used both for office space and for housing; during World War II, the exiled King Peter II lived in it for about six weeks.

Is it not curious in the extreme that Said, while on record as remembering the "rooms [in this house] where as a boy he read *Sherlock Holmes* and *Tarzan*, and where he and his mother read Shakespeare to each other," has nowhere brought to mind the presence upstairs of the Yugoslavian consulate, the comings and goings of visa-seekers, diplomats, and politicians, including for a time the king of Yugoslavia himself, or the arrival of limousines and their elegantly attired occupants for official functions like the annual Yugoslavian independence-day reception? On November 29, 1947, the very night the UN voted in favor of the partition plan for Palestine, and a couple of weeks before he has told us the Saids were forced to leave for Cairo, this reception was attended by no lesser figures than the British-appointed mayor of Jerusalem; Golda Meir, then director of the political department at the Jewish Agency; Hussein Haldi, the secretary of the Arab Higher Committee; and most of the city's social and political elite.

As for the downstairs, main-entrance level of the house, it was rented from about 1936 to 1938 by the Iranian consulate. Then, after 1938, this and the basement level were leased to the illustrious German-Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, his wife, and his two teenage granddaughters, all of them recent refugees from Nazi Germany. The Buber family was forced out of the house in early 1942 (when Edward Said would have been about seven) in a dispute with the owners—that is, Nabihah (Mrs. Boulos Yusef) Said—who broke the lease and reclaimed the premises for their personal use, winning a judge's ruling in favor of eviction.

Buber's granddaughters, from whom I heard this account, also accurately remember the names of Nabihah Said and two of her boys, Yusef and Robert. Another tenant of the house during the latter Mandate period remembers George, still another son of the family. None remembers Edward or any of his four sisters.

Is it not curious, again, that Martin Buber's residence in this house should have gone unnoticed by Edward Said? Actually, that is not so; at least, not quite. In 1992, Said wrote of having heard, years earlier, "that Martin Buber had lived in the house for a time after 1948" (emphasis added). Last year, in a speech at Birzeit University on the West Bank, he amplified this thought with characteristic vehemence:

The house from which my family departed in 1948—was displaced—was also the house in which the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber lived for a while, and Buber of course was a great apostle of coexistence between Arabs and Jews, but he didn't mind living in an Arab house whose inhabitants had been displaced.

But the truth is the other way around: it was Said's aunt who evicted the Bubers, an event—surely a memorable one—that took place during the very period when Edward Said was allegedly growing up in the selfsame house, and long before Israel's war of independence in 1948. But there can be little wonder why neither that event, nor the presence in and subsequent removal from the building of Martin Buber's surely no less memorable library of some 15,000 books, has ever figured in his meticulous recollections of "my beautiful old house . . . in Al-Talbiyah." The Bubers and their library were there. Said was not.

V

NONE OF this, to be sure, is to gainsay the possibility or even the likelihood that, after 1942, when the Bubers had departed and Nabihah Said and her five children moved in, Edward Said's nuclear family may have stayed for brief periods with their cousins on the main entrance floor at 10 Brenner Street. By now, however, both families would have been quite large, while the apartment in question had a grand total of only four bedrooms. Assuming two were set aside for parents, this would have meant accommodating ten children in the remaining two bedrooms, without even taking into account the needs of grandparents or

live-in servants, drivers, cooks, and the like. It is hard to imagine Wadie Said, accustomed as he was to spacious arrangements, enduring this for any great length of time.

And that brings us to another element in Said's reconstruction of his Jerusalem childhood: the question of his schooling.

According to the standard version, he attended St. George's Anglican preparatory school in eastern Jerusalem, "along with most of the male members of my family" (as he put it in his 1992 piece in *Harper's*). In the recent BBC documentary, Said is seen touring this school, which still exists. In the headmaster's office, where he turns the pages of an old, leather-bound student registry, he locates on camera the listing for a Jewish student named David Ezra, whom he says he remembers clearly. A vignette of David Ezra also turns up in Said's new memoir, *Out of Place*.

Interestingly, in this segment of *In Search of Palestine* we are not shown or told about any listing for Edward Said himself in the St. George's student registry. And for good reason: neither in the particular registry shown on camera nor in the school's other two old leather-bound registry books is there any record of his having attended this institution as he has claimed. Nor does David Ezra, who today goes by the name of David Eben-Ezra, have any recollection whatsoever of a classmate by the name of Edward Said—though in 1998 he was easily able to recall for me the names of nearly all his other classmates at St. George's. Not even the childhood movie footage of Edward Said that has been incorporated in the BBC documentary, not even old still photographs of his class, succeeded in jogging Eben-Ezra's otherwise quite remarkable powers of recall. He did comment, though, on Said's claim in the TV documentary that the two of them had sat together in the back of the classroom. Because of his poor eyesight, Eben-Ezra always sat in front.

None of this—again—is to gainsay the possibility of the young Said's having been now and then a temporary student at St. George's while on visits to his Jerusalem cousins. He might well have become aware of David Ezra and others in the school without having stayed long enough to enroll and have his own presence recorded in its official registry books. But so modest a possibility hardly fits what up to now has constituted the standard version of his life from birth until the age of twelve. To cite it one more time: "I was born in Jerusalem and spent most of my formative years there and, after 1948, when my entire family became refugees, in Egypt."

VI

LET US look now at the latter part of that sentence: that is, at the circumstances of the Said family's departure as "refugees" from Jerusalem to Cairo, an event Said himself has repeatedly placed in mid-December 1947.

First, the standard version. In evoking the ominous atmosphere of those days, Said has cited the fact (duly recorded in his profile in *Current Biography Yearbook*) that even he, an innocent twelve-year-old schoolboy, had to produce a pass to traverse three British security zones between his home in Talbieh and his school, St. George's, in eastern Jerusalem. But what really caused his family to flee "in panic," he has recalled, was something far more menacing: in December, "a Jewish-forces sound truck warned Arabs to leave the neighborhood" (interview with Robert Marquand, *Christian Science Monitor*, May 27, 1997). In other words, the family's departure was a forcible one, a product of the incipient usurpation of the entire country, and the banishment of its indigenous Palestinian-Arab inhabitants, by the Zionists.

Neither of these claims withstands scrutiny.

If Said and his parents had in fact been living regularly in Palestine during the years prior to 1947, they would have become accustomed, as was every citizen of Jerusalem, to routinely producing identification and zone passes at the demand of British soldiers manning roadblocks—an inconvenience that was hardly "dangerous," as Said has termed it, but was, rather, designed to facilitate the search for fugitives or contraband weapons, to prevent violence between Arabs and Jews, and to protect British personnel. More to the point, at age twelve young Edward Said would hardly have been required to carry individual identification to and from school or at any other time; as David Eben-Ezra (along with several of his contemporaries) has attested, a St. George's uniform and/or a schoolbag with books would have been quite sufficient.

The matter of the "sound-truck" warning is a bit more complicated. Contemporary accounts indicate that relations between Jews and Arabs were, as it happens, quite good in the affluent and cosmopolitan neighborhood of Talbieh. (According to the then British mayor of Jerusalem, the area was "shared fairly evenly" between the two groups, though Said with his typical disregard for facts has asserted that its population was almost exclusively Arab.) In the five-and-a-half month period between the end of November 1947 and the middle of May 1948—that is, between the UN partition

resolution and the establishment of the state of Israel—only two incidents of intercommunal violence marred Talbieh's calm.

In the first, on December 21, 1947, an Anglo-Jewish journalist for the *Palestine Post* was shot dead by Arabs. In the second, which occurred on February 11, 1948, a member of the Haganah, the indigenous Jewish defense force, was wounded by an Arab, and that same day, at the unauthorized behest of the Haganah sector commander, a sound van proceeded to drive through the area, warning Arabs to evacuate. According to the Hebrew newspaper *Ha'aretz* (February 12, 1948), the three Haganah men in the vehicle were promptly arrested by British police.

Some Arab residents of Talbieh apparently did pack up and go after this incident in February, but only temporarily, returning within a few days from nearby locales on the assurances of British police and clergy. The numbers could hardly have been large, since no mention of their flight appears in the leading Palestinian-Arab newspapers at the time. The permanent evacuation took place later, with the departure of British forces and the capture of Talbieh and the rest of southern Jerusalem by the Haganah. That occurred in mid-May, although the leading book on this subject by the Institute for Palestine Studies, a pro-PLO think tank, puts the date two weeks earlier, on April 30.

In any case, we are speaking of a period four and a half to five months *after* the time Said claims for a certainty the defining incident took place, and two and a half to three months after the mini-incident of mid-February. For what it is worth, the voluminous British documents from this period, including declassified security telegrams, make no mention of Palestinians leaving Talbieh, for any cause or reason, during the month of December 1947.

From these multiple internal inconsistencies and discrepancies from the historical record, one cannot avoid the reasonable conclusion that just as Edward Said and his nuclear family were not long-term or permanent residents in Talbieh in the 1930's and 1940's, so were they not resident there during the final months of the British Mandate. They thus cannot be considered "refugees" or "exiles" from Palestine in any meaningful sense of those two very weighty and politically charged terms.

VII

NOR, OF COURSE, did they arrive in Cairo for the first time in late 1947. For it was in Cairo that Edward Said in fact grew up and played with his childhood companions. It was in Cairo

that he attended the Gezira Preparatory School, and in Cairo that he was enrolled, at the age of almost fourteen, at Victoria College. And it was from Cairo, in 1951, that he was finally sent by his father to complete his secondary education at the Mount Hermon school in Massachusetts.

As I indicated earlier, the history of the Said family's presence in Cairo can be traced through public records and the clear recollections of friends and neighbors. It has now also been confirmed by Said himself in his forthcoming memoir, *Out of Place*.^{*} In this book, with its weirdly apposite title, the man who for decades has presented himself to the world as a professional refugee, who has powerfully described the traumatic effect on himself and his family of their sudden, panicked exile from the beloved city of his birth and childhood, who has harped repeatedly on the horrors of dispossession, of losing house and home, school, companions, and, in the case of his father, livelihood itself, sharply reverses course. Jerusalem, it turns out, was not the soul and center of Edward Said's youth, the place to which, as he averred in 1998, "nearly everything in my early life could be traced." Jerusalem was one of several family vacation spots. The center of its existence, from years prior to his birth until the early 1960's, was Cairo, Egypt.

If Said reverses course in this book, however, he does so silently, without acknowledging the bomb-shell disparity of his present account from his previous ones. Instead, he methodically camouflages and backfills, calmly giving us a "revised standard version" comprising hundreds of pages of family minutiae, all remembered 50 or 60 years later in picayune (and often boring) detail, not least when it comes to narrating the course of his budding if thwarted youthfulness and the humiliations he suffered at the hands of parents, classmates, and teachers. By this titillating means are we ourselves, no doubt, meant to be seduced into overlooking the egregious departures of his latest autobiography from the autobiography we have had delivered to us in segments over three decades of books, essays, lectures, interviews, and filmed reminiscences. Or perhaps the two are meant to chug along in our minds like a single locomotive on two parallel tracks, with neither version to be held to so old-fashioned a standard as the objective truth.

Why Said should have chosen this particular moment to release a revised standard version must remain a matter of speculation. For myself, I cannot rule out the possibility that the 85 interviews conducted over the course of my own three-year investigation, including many with persons known to him, may have alerted him to the urgency of re-

trieving from amnesia this amazingly full reconstruction of his Cairo childhood. If so, that very fullness, characterized by a near-photographic recall of everything from his parents' conversations to his adolescent wet dreams, might well be intended as a stay against skepticism; for how could anyone so candid ever have intended to conceal anything?

WHATEVER HIS motive, however, one thing this tireless paladin clearly does not intend to do is to permit a mere book, even one written by him, to interfere with his larger political agenda. That much, at least, was made perfectly clear in his BBC documentary, *In Search of Palestine*.

For in that film, standing with his son and a friend in front of 10 Brenner Street in Jerusalem, Said gesticulates at the house "my family owned" and, voice shaking with emotion, discusses the possibility of securing its rightful return from the Israeli authorities. Similarly, in an interview earlier this year, he reiterated his claim both to the house and to a business putatively owned by his father in Jerusalem, the Palestine Educational Company (a firm that "made office equipment and sold books").

Interviewer: I was wondering, would you accept financial compensation from the Israeli government for these losses?

Edward Said: You're damn straight.

And elsewhere: "I lost—and my family lost its property and rights in 1948." Compensation is owed for that property, he insists, as for all lost Palestinian property. "I've never believed in giving that up. If we lost it, then it has to be paid for by the Israelis."

Now, leave aside the plain fact that the war of 1948 was instigated not by Israel but by the Palestinian-Arab leadership, which launched hostilities against the Jewish inhabitants of Palestine after refusing to accept the UN partition resolution. Leave aside, too, the no less plain fact that over the course of the ensuing war, which saw every neighboring Arab nation rush in on the Palestinian side, not only did hundreds of thousands of (genuine) Palestinian refugees leave the Mandatory territory for various reasons, but many hundreds of thousands of Jews were simultaneously driven out of Arab

^{*} To be completely fair, hints of the truth have also appeared in fugitive places over the years, including in a 1987 article by Said in, of all venues, *House & Garden*. My attempts to verify the record with Said himself were unsuccessful; a request for an interview, made through his assistant at Columbia, Zaineb Istrabadi, met with no response.

countries, eastern Jerusalem, the Old City, and what later came to be known as the West Bank, and arrived in Israel traumatized and destitute. This alone suggests that if consideration is to be extended to the claims of some refugees, it must be extended to the claims of all.* But leave all that aside, and ask only this: why, if Edward Said has any legal basis for his assertion, has he not lifted a finger to secure the financial restitution due him?

It cannot be from ignorance of Israeli procedure. He has mentioned the actual filing process itself in one of his books (*After the Last Sky*), and, as he must know, that process is simplicity itself. All that is required is the completion of a two-page form that can be filled out in English, Hebrew, or Arabic. Claimants may file for themselves, or a lawyer may file on their behalf. There is no fee. In short, the risk is zero, while the gain could be substantial.

Perhaps little was to be hoped for, it is true, in connection with his father's alleged interest in the Palestine Educational Company. This store stood on Jaffa Street in an area looted and burned by Arab rioters in late 1947, heavily damaged by shell fire during the war of 1948-49, and remaining in no-man's-land between Jordanian and Israeli positions until Jerusalem was reunited by Israel in the Six-Day war of 1967; by that time, certainly, there could have been nothing left to salvage. But the house is another matter: according to the head of the most prominent real-estate agency in Israel, the building at 10 Brenner Street is worth, at the most conservative estimate, \$1.8 million today. And, financial gain apart, think of the example an action of this kind on Said's part would set for his fellow Palestinians, and of the inestimable political value that would accrue from what would inevitably become a highly publicized and, to Israel, potentially quite embarrassing proceeding.

But there will of course be no filing, either for store or house. Even had the Palestine Educational Company been classified by Israel as absentee (rather than abandoned) property, it is unlikely that Wadie Said could have personally suffered financial loss from its destruction. Although I did find his name or initials in some listings for the store in local telephone books and (more pertinently) business directories, that was only prior to 1931; from 1931 onward, the solitary name listed is that of Boulos Yusef Said. Perhaps, then, for a few years after he moved permanently to Cairo in about 1926, Wadie Said retained some interest in the firm; anything beyond that seems highly unlikely. And as for the house at 10 Brenner Street, well, that is a subject we have already covered.

Still, I cannot leave this matter of "reparations," to use Edward Said's inflammatory term, without two final comments. The first is that, even if pride were to have prevented him from submitting a claim of any kind to an Israeli government office, he had ample opportunity, either by mail or during his several visits in the last years, to register with one or both of the Palestinian organizations that have undertaken to document such claims of ownership; as of 1998, neither had been contacted by him.

The second comment is this: whatever pecuniary losses the family of Wadie Said did or—more likely—did not suffer in Jerusalem in the late 1940's, they pale beside the devastating losses that befell him and them a few years later in Egypt. As the current manager of the Standard Stationery Company confirmed in an interview last year, and as Said now acknowledges in *Out of Place*, a revolutionary mob burned down Wadie Said's flagship Cairo store as well as a local branch store in 1952. Several years later, the successfully rebuilt business was nationalized in a purge of Western influence instituted by Egypt's president, the revolutionary dictator Gamal Abdel Nasser. (Wadie Said, it will be remembered, was a foreigner with an American passport.)

Yet, in contrast to the vigor with which Edward Said has spoken about his putative claims against Israel, he has been strangely silent concerning his family's very real and weighty losses of property in Egypt. One can readily imagine why. Not only would dwelling on those losses highlight the fact of his family's long-term residence in Cairo rather than Jerusalem, it might retroactively compromise Edward Said's own self-acknowledged enthusiasms as a onetime "Nasserite." Or perhaps he just knows that, unlike in Israel, where the rule of law holds sway, the prospects of recovering anything at all in Egypt are negligible to nil.

VIII

IN HIS many narratives of his childhood in Palestine, Edward Said has painted the years before 1948 as a romantic idyll, in which life was simple, harmonious, and happy. This perfection was rudely destroyed by the outbreak of violence that preceded full-scale war in 1948-49, forcing him out of his "beautiful old house" into a 50-year exile that has been, for him, the "central metaphor" not only

* I have written in favor of an international tribunal to resolve the documented claims of Palestinian refugees ("The Palestinian Refugees' 'Right to Return' and the Peace Process," *Boston College International and Comparative Law Review*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1997).

of his personal biography but of his very identity, and that drives his campaign for redress. For Edward Said in this scenario, now substitute the Palestinian people—as his readers and listeners are meant to do—and one begins to gain some apprehension of the myth-driven passions that have animated the revanchist program of so many Palestinian nationalists, whose expanding political ambitions often seem, even to sympathetic observers, permanently insusceptible of being satisfied through the normal processes of politics.

Edward Said is also an eminent scholar and literary figure, the author of a book entitled *Representations of the Intellectual* and of such uncompromising definitions of an intellectual's responsibility as the one I cited early on: "to speak the truth, as plainly, directly, and as honestly as possible." What are we to make of the fact that, in his own case, the plain, direct, and honest truth is so radically at odds with the parable of Palestinian identity he has been at such pains to construct over the decades? For, to say it one last time, he himself grew up not in

Jerusalem but in Cairo, where his father, an American citizen, had moved as an economic expatriate approximately nine years before Edward's birth and had become the owner of a thriving business; and there, until his own departure for the United States as a teenager in 1951, the young Edward Said resided in luxurious apartments, attended private English schools, and played tennis at the exclusive Gezira Sporting Club as the child of one of its few Arab members.

Whatever we do finally make of all this, there can be no denying that the parable itself is a lie. An artful lie; a skillful lie; above all, a very useful and by now widely accepted lie—but a lie. As he continues the process of silently "spinning" this lie, a process now auspiciously launched in *Out of Place*, it will be especially interesting to see who among his legions of admirers, or among the friends of the Palestinian people, will notice or care. That is a question with reverberations far, far beyond the shifts and dodges and brazen misrepresentations of one prevaricating intellectual.