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Commentary
September 1999

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

Justus Reid Weiner

Among spokesmen for the Palestinian cause in our day, 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 Yitzhak Rabin to a vociferous opponent, accusing the PLO chairman of having betrayed 10 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 1960s, 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...
in a five-page profile personally approved by his subject. 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 Wallace 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 self-outlined outline of his early life.

I was born, in November 1935, in Tel Aviv, then a mostly new and prosperous Arab quarter of Jerusalem. By the end of 1947, just months before Tel Aviv 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 in Palestine, my family being refugees in Egypt. . . . ["Between Worlds: Edward Said Makes Sense of His Life," London Review of Books, May 7, 1989] . . . my recollections of my early days in Palestine, my family being refugees in Egypt, . . . 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 in writing 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 dispersed from Palestine and settled in Cairo. . . . It is what undergirds his self-definition as an archetypical "exile."—i.e., one who, like his people in general, was separated from his homelands by a sea of hostile violence. Except for the detail of his birth, it is a tissue of falsehoods.
able to locate, more than half carry business and/or residential listings for Boulos Said's and his wife. There are no listings for Edward Said's parents in any of the directories, whether in English, Hebrew, or Arabic.

IV

A

as for the house in Talbiyah (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 analogously recounted the nostalgic visit he paid in early 1992 to his childhood home 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 house in Jerusalem."

Footage of Said and his son Waelle 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 Post (an English-lan-

guage Palestinian newspaper, Said had this to say:

I feel even more depressed when I remember my beautiful old house surrounded by pine and cypress trees in Al-Talbiyan in east [sic, western] Jerusalem, which has been turned into a “Christian embassy.” I went there a few years 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 “as to what he has described as “my beautiful old house”—then he could not have judged the absence of any 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 Feb-

ruary 14, 1941. It records a transfer of fractional interest in the property from its registra-

ted owner, Youssef Said (Edward Said’s grandfather), to Mrs. Boulos Youssef 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.

T

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, ap-

parently, did his aunt and cousins until 1942.) After the construction of the building, there 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, in the time Said Edward was roughly three to the time he was eleven), the upper-

stairs level was rented out to the Kingdom of Ya-

gozia 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.

It is 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 Treasure Island, and where he and his mother read Shake-

sspeare to each other, has nowhere brought to mind the presence upstairs of the Yugoslav con-

sulate, the comings and goings of visa-seekers, diplomats, and politicians, including for a time the king of Yugoslavia himself, or the arrival of immi-

grants and their elegantly attired occupants for offi-

cial functions like the annual Yugoslav indepen-

dence-day reception? On November 29, 1947, the

very next day the UN voted in favor of the partition plan and a couple of weeks before he
told us the Said family had proceeded to leave for Cairo, this reception was attended by no lesser figures than the British-appointed mayor of Jerusalem; such political state visits, the diplomatic, ear-

liest departure of the Jewish Agency, Hanineu Ha’id, the sec-

retary of the Arab Higher Committee; and most of the city’s social and political elite.

As for the downstairs, main-entry level of the house, it was rented from about 1936 to 1938 by the Yevstin family. Then, after 1938, this and the basement level were leased to the Yevstins. Edward Said’s German-Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, his wife, and his two teenage granddaughters, all of whose relatives were 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, Naba-

ha (Mrs. Boulos Youssef) 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 Naba

ha Said and two of her boys, Yusuf and Robert. Another tenant of the house during the lat-

ter years, according to later accounts, 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 vehi-

lence.

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 dis-

placed.

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 could possibly rank as a memorable library of some 15,000 books, has ever been-

figured in his meticulous recollections of “my beautiful old house . . . in Al-Talbiyan.” The Bubers and their library were there. Said was not.

V

Now or this, to be sure, is to gain the possi-

bility or even the likelihood that, after 1948, when the Bubers had departed and Naba

ha Said and her sons and daughters-in-law, her 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 bed-

rooms. Assuredly we are wise to discard, this would have meant accommodating ten chil-

dren 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 his standard version, he attended St. George’s Anglican preparatory school in eastern Jerusalem, "along with most of the male members of the family" (see it in his 1972 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 memo,

Out of Place.

Interestingly, in this segment of In Search of Palestine we are not shown or told anything about Said’s education in the St. George’s student registry. And for good reason: neither in the par-

ticular 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 did David Ezra, who today goes by the name of Davidative, as far as I can recall, whatever the name of the book, of an unusual recollection whatsoever of a classmate by the name of Edward Said—though in 1988 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, nor even old photos of Said in Cedars Hospital in 1948, listed in the Family Albums. That is, the two of them had sat together in the back of the class-

room. Because of his poor eyesight, Eben Ezra al-

ways sat in front.

None of this—again—is to gain the possi-

bility of the young Said’s having been now and then a temporary student at St. George’s. We were on visits to his Jerusalem childhood, which could not have been aware of David Ezra and others in the school with-

out having stayed long enough to enroll and have his name recorded in the 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 scene 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 (only recorded in his profile in Current Biography (1960) that even he, an innocent twelve-year-old schoolboy, had to produce a pass to traverse three British security zones between his home in Talibeh and his school in 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 and truck of Arabs to leave the neighborhood" (interview with Robert Marquand, Christian Science Monitor, May 27, 1977). 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 Zionist.

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 been arrested, as was every citizen of Jerusalem, to routinely producing identification and some 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 and control of "infiltrators," to prevent violence between Arabs and Jews, and to protect British personnel. More to the point, at age twelve, Edward Said would hardly have been required to have demonstrated identification to and from school or at any other time; as David Eben Ezra (along with several of his contemporaries) has attested,患儿's mother was full-time, and his school 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 Talibeh. (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 argued the 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 Talibeh's calm.

In the first, on December 21, 1947, an Anglo-Jewish girl was killed by Arabs. In the second, which occurred on February 11, 1948, a member of the Haganah, the indigenous Jewish defense force, was killed by Arabs, 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 Haaretz (February 12, 1948), the three Haganah men in the vehicle were promptly arrested by British police.

Some Arab residents of Talibeh apparently did pack up and go off 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 Talibeh 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 certain the defining incident took place, and two and a half to three months after the mid-incident of mid-February. For what it is worth, the voluminous British documents from this period, including declassified secret telegrams, show when it came to narrating the course of his budding if thwarted youthful sensibility and the humiliations he suffered at the hands of the British military and teachers. By this means means are we ourselves, no doubt, meant to be seduced into overlooking the egregious departures of Said's latest attempt at autobiography. We have had delivered to us in segments over three decades of books, essays, lectures, interviews, and films reminiscences. Or perhaps the two are meant to be seen as a single biographical timeline 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 1985 interviews conducted over the course of my own three-year investigation, including many persons with known to him, may have stirred him to the urgency of retraction from annexe this amusingly 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 beside his son and a friend in front of 10 Bremner Street in Jerusalem, Said gesticulates at the house "my family owned" and surrounded by paintings depicting the liberation of 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 partnership owned by his father in Jerusalem, the Palestinian 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 the government owes for all lost Palestinian property. "We 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 Palestine-Arab leadership, which launched assaults against the Jewish inhabitants of Palestine after refusing to accept the UN partition resolution. Leave aside, too, the no less plain fact that the course of the ensuing war was determined not by the leaders of Arab nation rush in on the Palestinian side, not only did hundreds of thousands of (genuine) Palestinian refugees lose the Mandatory territory for various reasons, but many hundreds of thousands of Jews were simultaneously driven out of Arab
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 restoration due him? It cannot be from ignorance of Israeli procedure. He has mentioned the usual 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, a conservative estimate, $1.8 million today. And, financially 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 home. Even had the Palestine Educational Company been classified by farred as absence (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 1951; from 1951 onward, the solitary name listed is that of Boulous Yousef 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 prides 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 1940s, 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 punitive claims against Israel, he has been strangely silent concerning the 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 enthusiasm as a one-time “Nasserite.”* Or perhaps he just knows that, unlike in Israel, where the rule of law holds away, the prospects of recovering anything at all in Egypt are negligible to nil.

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 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—his readers and listeners are meant to do—and one begins to gain some appreciation 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 insatiable 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 uncompromi ning definitions of an intellectual's responsibility as the one I cited early on: “to speak the truth, as plainly, directly, and honestly as possible.” What are we to make of this dual nature in his writing? In his own case, this is 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 Gesra 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 backstep representations of one prevailing intellectual...