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# HAIFA BEFORE & AFTER 1948

## NARRATIVES OF A MIXED CITY

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### **Historical Mile Stones**

The following short historical introduction offers a brief chronology of the city's development since the mid-19th century and might be read by those who miss a clear historical background.

When, in 1840, the Ottomans resumed their hold over Palestine, Haifa's administrative position was upgraded and became a center of a *qada`* (district). In parallel, Haifa's importance as one of Palestine's main harbors and centers for foreign trade grew rapidly from that time on.<sup>1</sup>

When the German Templars began migrating to Palestine in 1868 they set up in Haifa their first settlement to be known as the "German Colony", in expectation of the city's future development. Migration of European Jews to northern Palestine began in the 1880s and the Jewish neighborhood gradually grew within the Islamic quarter (*al-Hara al-Sharqiyya*). Soon afterwards, the Baha'is established their first homes in Haifa following their expulsion from Iran. European merchants and officials who worked in European consulates and in missionary organizations began to spread around the city. With Haifa's increased administrative importance, and as the economic infrastructure expanded, so the number of immigrants increased from inside and outside Palestine, both urban and rural people, and from various religious communities. This human diversity became a characteristic of the city. Palestinians gave Haifa the name of *Umm al-Gharib* (Mother of the Stranger).

Construction of the Hijaz railway started in 1892 and, on 1 October 1905, celebrations marked the line's opening. It connected Haifa with Damascus in the north and with the Hijaz in the south. The Ottoman administration chose Haifa as the major rail terminus and brought with it railway maintenance works and the railway administration offices. Endless projects and programs to expand the port followed. Investors, both locally-based and from abroad, set up heavy industry in Haifa because of its excellent infrastructure.

By the beginning of the 20th century, Haifa had become the leading city in northern Palestine. As a result, Jewish immigrants settled there in

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed study of Haifa during the Ottoman Period, see Mahmoud Yazbak, *Haifa in the Late Ottoman Period: A Muslim City in Transition 1864-1914* (1998).

the new Herzliya neighborhood, at the foot of Mount Carmel, the first specifically Zionist planned area. An indication of the city's importance to the future Zionist project was the opening of the first academic Jewish institute in 1912, the Technion. In addition, the arrival of Jewish-owned heavy industry changed the city's economic base.

Merchants with businesses in Beirut or Damascus relocated to Haifa or set up branches and warehouses there. The expansion of industry and commerce in Haifa and the presence of the railway network encouraged many wealthy Palestinian families by the early 20th century to invest in Haifa and to live there. In addition, people from the countryside moved to the city in search of work. New neighborhoods appeared, a process speeded up with the end of World War I and the beginning of the British Mandate.

The rapid change in the social and economic infrastructure of Haifa from the late Ottoman Era onwards was reflected in cultural developments. When the Ottoman authority permitted in 1908 publication of newspapers, Haifa emerged as a center of journalism. By 1914 nine newspapers and magazines were published in Haifa, the most important of which was the *al-Karmil* newspaper owned and edited by Najib Nassar. It became well known for its anti-Zionist views.

Under the British Mandate (1918-1948) Haifa became the administrative capital of northern Palestine. The region's largest factories were built in Haifa during the first decade of British rule, *Le Grand Moulin*, Shemen for soup production, *Nesher* for cement, al-Hajj Tahir Qaraman's factory for cigarettes and tobacco, as well as many others.

Initiatives by the British Mandate included building a new and modern harbor to give Palestine a main maritime port, constructing a large airport, establishing a new railway workshop, building pipelines for transporting oil from Iraq and establishing a refinery in the bay of Haifa.

The expansion of the economic structure of the city during the British Mandate years made Haifa a very attractive city for immigrants, both Arabs and Jews. The population increase completely changed the city's character.

Haifa's social evolution during this period, demonstrates a fascinating process of urbanization, due to the heterogeneous nature of its component people: villagers from various areas, Christians of all churches, Muslims, Jews, Syrians, Lebanese, Jordanians, Egyptians, Sudanese and Europeans intermingled together in Haifa's daily life.

Haifa's population growth, from approximately 22,000 in 1918 to more than 50,000 in 1931 and to more than 140,000 by 1947, dramatically changed its demographic character. The most phenomenal change during

the Mandate period was in the Jewish community. While Jews made up approximately one-eighth of the population in 1918, their number grew to one-quarter in 1922, to one-third in 1931, and to over one-half of the total inhabitants of Haifa in 1947. This dramatic increase can only be explained by the number of Jewish immigrants that flooded Palestine in successive waves in the 1930s after the emergence of National Socialism in Germany and the persecution of Jews in Europe.

The Arab population had also grown tremendously during the 1930s as a result of natural increase and immigration. It is estimated that the Arab population of Haifa increased from 34,148 in 1931 to more than 50,000 in 1938. Both the British Mandatory administration and the Arab private sector initiated a number of projects that attracted Arab workers, skilled and unskilled. Hence, what had been a relatively small town at the beginning of the Mandate period had become one of the largest cities in Palestine over the course of 39 years. The population growth changed the balance of the town's communities, stripping the Arab community of the social and psychological power it had previously enjoyed in its majority status.

A serious slump in the building industry in the spring of 1936 deeply affected both Arab and Jewish unemployment. The Arab strike which started in Haifa in April 1936, resulted in a take-over by Jewish labor in segments of work that had previously been purely Arab. Following the strike and the coming three years of the rebellion, Arab building and its allied industries came to a total standstill, which further deepened unemployment among the Arabs. These were mostly day laborers who were unorganized and quickly lost their jobs to the *Histadrut* (the Jewish Labor Organization), which was fighting to capture such areas of work, leaving many unskilled seasonal Arab workers to return to the familiar cycle of poverty. Approximately 50 percent of the Arab population in Haifa was reported to be living in slums, characterized by overcrowded living conditions, poor sanitation, and low income residents.

Sheikh 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam, a religious and charismatic leader, who agitated among the urban poor, won the trust and adulation of the rural immigrants in Haifa. His armed activity, first evidenced in November 1935, set a precedent based on understanding the readiness and ability of the embittered poor immigrants to carry out a rebellion. For them it would be a release of the social pressure and perpetual economic hardship. The mass support of al-Qassam's activity was seen as the start of a process of shaking free from the prolonged distress. The long-simmering social and political agitation reached boiling point with al-Qassam's death (November 1935). His disciples and friends, who understood this well, let the spark that

caused a three-year rebellion (1936-1939). As the situation of the rebels in early 1939 grew more difficult, owing to government attacks and lack of funds and arms, their violence was increasingly directed against the most vulnerable elements – the Arab civilian population and those considered to be the cause of their plight. Their attacks reflected the bitterness of the peasants and poor immigrants in a state of lawlessness.

The end of the revolt in Haifa, as elsewhere, irrespective of its negative aspects, was a triumph for the Mandatory administration and the Jewish National Home policy. It was also a minor victory for the mercantile Arab class, which could now resume its business and its residence without concern for what the future might hold. However, it was a moral and political defeat of Arab society as a whole. In Haifa the balance had tipped in favor of the Jewish character of the city, and it was set on a course which was dramatically achieved with the tragic expulsion of the Arab population in 1948. If by the end of World War I the Arab population stood at roughly 17,000 and the Jews numbered approximately 3,000, in 1947 there would be approximately 74,000 Arabs and a similar number of Jews living in the town.

Hostilities broke down in Palestine when on 29 November 1947 the United Nations accepted Resolution 181, which envisaged the partition of Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state. When less than six months later, on 15 May 1948, the Jewish leaders proclaimed the State of Israel in those parts of Palestine that were allocated to it in the Partition Plan as well as in the parts of which the Israeli armed forces had taken control by then, there were barely 2,000-3,000 Palestinians left in Haifa.



apartment, the freezing of the property, the transfer of the title, the letting of the apartments and the sale of one of them finalized the Shiblak's loss of their property. Shiblak House thus met a fate similar to that of the vast majority of Palestinian houses within the territory of the State of Israel. The fate of the Swidan House, which is traced in the following section, was different.

#### HANNA SWIDAN HOUSE: 33 CRUSADER STREET

##### *A Monument*

Standing on Ben-Gurion Avenue, the main street of the Templar colony, with one's back to the sea and facing the mountain, one beholds a splendid sight. The Baha'i Gardens spread out from the base of the mountain almost to its summit. The shining golden dome of the Shrine of the Bab glitters at the center of the gardens. Should one's eye insist on wandering eastward of the gardens, beyond the marble walls and ornamental iron gates, it would come across an assortment of structures, a true hodgepodge comprising an international style of building dating from the 1920s and 1930s as well as projects that emerged from the various public housing workshops of subsequent decades. Here and there a developer's ambitious initiative defiantly protrudes, lacerating the general texture ostentatiously, disproportionately and with an inappropriate style. This jumbled agglomeration, incidentally, is rather characteristic of large tracts of Haifa's construction, which consistently ignores the city's singular topography. A similar picture reveals itself also to the west of the gardens, albeit less crowded and forlorn than that on the eastern margins. Yet above all, one's eye is caught by a large building adjacent to the Baha'i Gardens, prominent in size and style; this is Swidan House.

The singular nature of the structure, so it appears, is a function not of some subjective esthetic preference or inclination on our (the authors') part. It was recognized already in 1992 by an independent outside body. Swidan House was included on Haifa Municipality's list of conserved buildings as a "monument," "*any work on it, including renovation of its facades, must be undertaken according to the conservation guidelines,*" (emphasis in original) it was stipulated on 31 March 1992 on the Mini Sheet, the documentation of ongoing activity in the building file.<sup>43</sup> Haifa, incidentally, was among the first cities in Israel to compile a tentative list of buildings and sites worthy of conservation within its jurisdiction as early as

<sup>43</sup> The Municipality of Haifa, The Conservation Department, Building File 3822/33.

1984. This was a local initiative that predated country-wide initiatives, yet this does not necessarily indicate concern for the city's Arab architectural past. The inclusion of Swidan House in this original list, however, may certainly be regarded as an exceptional recognition of its singularity. Moreover, the unidentified inspector's decision to recognize the structure as a "monument" furnishes further evidence of its special status. One may learn more about this status and the building's conservation over many decades in a city devoid of awareness of historical conservation from a further incidental reference; namely, an application on the part of two students to Haifa's City Engineer late in 1966. This, too, is recorded in the building file kept in the main archive of the Engineering Administration; a sequential file, number 3822/33, which contains the annals of the structure from its construction in the mid-1930s up to the present day, its continuity articulating a blunt reproach to the fragments collected within it.

"Dear Sir," the two boys write to the City Engineer,

we, two pupils in the sixth class of high-school at the Reali School in Ahuza, have decided to undertake an independent project on a house in Haifa that is of particular interest to us. The house is situated on Crusader Street, and can be seen from United Nations Avenue. We understand that the house is called 'Swidan House' but are not sure about this. It resembles a castle with two turrets facing the sea, and is painted yellow-brown. We should be most grateful if you would send us material pertaining to the said house or suggest an alternative source from which we may obtain the necessary details.<sup>44</sup>

There is thus no doubt that, with its impressive facades facing Haifa Bay, its twin turrets and unusual ochre coloring, Swidan House caught the eye, and in this instance the eyes of two inquisitive youngsters. "A mansion, on the slopes of the Carmel, known as Swidan House," is how the building was described at a court hearing held that same year in the Rental Court affiliated to Haifa Magistrate's Court.<sup>45</sup> Beyond the sweeping agreement as to the grandeur of the house, the reference in the Mini Sheets in 1992 and the incidental application on the part of two youngsters in 1966 as well as many further references in earlier years testify that Haifa's residents referred to the building as "Swidan House," even though the Swidans, who

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, File 3822/33, from Carmel Storlezi and Raphael Yoeli to Haifa City Engineer, 7.11.1966.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, Building File 3822/33, Rental Court affiliated to Haifa Magistrate's Court. Rental File 133/65 Yishai First of 33 Crusader Road Haifa, applicant, against the heirs of Hanna Swidan, Malik Swidan, 33 Crusader Road, 20.3.1966.

built and owned the house, were for several decades prevented from living in it.

### *Mismatch*

When, in 1992, once the Knesset had passed “Amendment 31 to the Planning and Construction Law” (the Conservation Law), Swidan House was declared a listed building, the Swidan family’s descendants were already living in many of its apartments, having succeeded in regaining their rights through a Sisyphean process. The facades of the house, as they appeared to the two youngsters in 1966, concealed more than they revealed, since, according to the conventional meaning of ascription, Swidan House was not at that time the house in which the Swidans lived. For several decades the Swidans had employed market forces in order to regain the property. While their ownership was indeed not contested *de jure*, it was wrested from them *de facto* when, in 1948, they were deprived of the possibility of living in the property, of populating it in other words. During the decades before they regained the right to live in their home the Swidans were frequently compelled to deal with tenants who sought to adapt the property in which they resided to their needs by virtue of a rental contract or key money. This kind of tension between the owners and the tenants would endure over the entire period, as the bulging building file attests. Let us who browse over these shabby small claims in lower courts not be deceived by them, even though they appear to be ordinary disputes between property owners and tenants in the property market. These proceedings reveal the upheaval that Haifa underwent from being a “mixed city” with a strong Arab bourgeois stratum rich in property to a Jewish city of laborers that, amid the immediate pressing needs, housed a jumble of impoverished and destitute Jewish migrants.

Indeed, the disparity between the Arab bourgeois past and the Israeli-Jewish present became apparent, for instance, in the claim submitted by the tenant of the turret Yishai First against Hanna Swidan’s heir, his son Malik Swidan, to the Rental Court affiliated to Haifa Magistrate’s Court in the month of March of this same year, 1966.<sup>46</sup> The turret’s picturesque appearance, which imparted to the building a special aura within the urban milieu, alongside its numerous other decorative elements (which in turn generated horrific fables of a sinking house, an engineering error and a suicidal architect), provided a stark contrast to the quality of life of the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

tenant who had resided therein since 1952. The trials of tenant First are related over the course of a prolonged correspondence, beginning in the late 1950s and continuing into the latter half of the 1960s. First sought to adapt the two spaces in which he resided on the roof of Swidan House, namely the turret and a room further along the roof, to the needs of his family. He set out his troubles at length in his application to the City Construction Department of Haifa Municipality in 1958:

“My wife and I together with our three children live in two rooms of 11 and 12.5 square meters. Apart from their small size, the rooms are also not side by side, but are separated by a distance of 4 meters, which the two older children cross in winter: in driving rain and tempestuous winds whenever they leave their room.”<sup>47</sup> The tenant Y.First mobilized the assistance of well-wishers, such as the Welfare and Culture Officer in the Trade and Industry Ministry, who visited the family’s home and lost no time in reporting to Haifa’s Deputy Mayor that:

[...] I visited his apartment and was astounded at the conditions in which the said family is living on the roof. The area of the two-room apartment is 24 square meters, the distance between the rooms is 4 meters without a roof covering and wall, and 5 souls live in this small area, including 3 children aged 13 to 5. The congestion is such that the older children sleep on armchairs. In the absence of a passage way the family suffers from the sun in summer and in winter from winds and rain and sometimes from flooding.<sup>48</sup>

A glance at the original plans of the building prepared in 1933 shows that the structure on the roof was not originally designated for human domicile. It most probably served as a laundry room and contained toilet facilities. This structure, together with the turret, was turned into a living unit of sorts owing to the chronic shortage of accommodation in the city. The city engineer was prepared to agree in part to the tenant’s wishes providing that the connection of the living spaces would not detract from the appearance of the house. The negotiations addressed the disparity between the tenant’s accommodation needs and the esthetic qualities of the singular structure. In this context the original uses of the turret, or “tower” as it is called in some of the documents, came under discussion. Malik Swidan, son and heir to the original owner of the property Hanna Swidan, sought in his testimony to establish cultural and historical rights in order to protect the appearance of the structure, contending before the Rental Court

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., File 3822/33, Yishai First to the City Construction Department, July 1958.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., Building File 3822/33, letter from Y. Shumert, Welfare and Culture Officer with the Trade and Industry Ministry to Haifa Deputy Mayor Mr. Fleeman, on 22.10.1958.

affiliated to the Haifa Magistrate's Court that "the room in the tower served his late father as a prayer house."

The son added that

I am sure that were my father alive today he would not agree to any change in the tower, when we have 36-37 tenants in the house. If everyone should want to do whatever they desire they will turn the house into a market. If the requested change is made, this will transform the entire appearance of the tower. I oppose any change being made to the tower, even if the change is made up to the height of the door.<sup>49</sup>

The historical rights in the name of which Malik Swidan demanded that no changes be made to the tower fell on deaf ears. The claimants were unimpressed by the mention of the prayer room and asserted that the said tower had ceased to serve as a prayer room even in the lifetime of the deceased himself and that the deceased had let the tower to the applicant for the purpose of accommodation. The outcome of this juridical contest cannot be established from the documentation.

Yishai First was one of many tenants living in Swidan House who initiated various changes to the inner partitioning of the building so as to adapt it to their needs. The Swidan family was frequently required to contest the tenants' initiatives to introduce these changes, which were undertaken by circumventing the owners of the property and were facilitated in part by the fact that they did not at the time live in or nearby the building. Mrs. 'Afifa Swidan applied to the City Construction Committee to issue a demolition order against a tenant of hers on the ground floor who, without her agreement, without applying for a license and making use of her building stones had constructed an additional room.<sup>50</sup> Thus too, by means of repeated applications written in English on the official notepaper of his import-export company, did Jean M. Swidan seek to prevent the tenant Yosef Levy from constructing a kitchen and additional room in the basement apartment.<sup>51</sup> The class discrepancy between the erstwhile urban Arab bourgeoisie and the impecunious Jewish immigrants manifested in the use of English and the notepaper as symbols of class is

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., Building File 3822/33, Rental Court affiliated to Haifa Magistrate's Court. Rental File 133/65 Yishai First of 33 Crusader Road Haifa, applicant, against the heirs of Hanna Swidan, Malik Swidan, 33 Crusader Road, 20.3.1966.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., Building File 3822/33, Afifa Swidan, owner of the house at 151 Mountain Road to the City Construction Committee, 29.12.1960.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., Building File 3822/33, Jean M. Swidan to the Haifa Municipality, Engineering Department, 2.6.1950.

further emphasized by the details of the case, since Nissim Ben-Yosef Levy, a recent immigrant and “a clear welfare case,” was in desperate need of exceptions to the building regulations. As the documents note, he was living with his asthmatic father who also suffered from angina pectoris, with a brother suffering from tuberculosis, and with a further eight individuals, and sought to isolate the ill brother in order to protect the remaining family members from infection by fashioning an apartment by means of enclosing part of the column floor of Mr. Hanna Swidan’s house. Since this was not a designated building zone, his request was rejected.

The severity of the conflicts of interest and the conflicting needs of the property’s owners and the new tenants are demonstrated by the case of another tenant, Peter Bondi. An Auschwitz survivor, Bondi had passed through five different German concentration camps between 1941 and 1945. On the basement floor of Swidan House, which he shared at the time with the immigrant Nissim Ben-Yosef Levy, Bondi built an apartment for himself and his ailing wife with the money he had mobilized through the sale and pawning of the meager belongings that he had managed to bring with him, and with the help of loans made by friends. Bondi invested all his means in this construction project. The Czechoslovak Immigrants Association supported his application to permit him to complete this illegal construction, testifying that “the immigrants from Czechoslovakia who came in 1949 had no way of bringing with them money or other property apart from the few objects that could be brought in one crate. The aforementioned Mr. Peter Bondi also brought just one crate containing his personal belongings, and apart from these he has no means whatsoever here in the country.”<sup>52</sup> The City Engineer rejected the application since the area had been designated solely as a sports pavilion, and the construction of an apartment on this location would constitute an infringement of the building regulations.<sup>53</sup>

Swidan House and its many tenants – down and outs and destitute Jewish immigrants – serves as one of many examples from the period beginning in late 1948 of the transformations undergone by stately Palestinian homes in the city in the wake of their owners’ departure and the forced concentration of those who remained in the city in the *Wadi al-Nisnas* neighborhood as their homes were placed at the disposal of new

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, Building File 3822/33, to the Mayor of Haifa from the Czechoslovak Immigrants Association, 13.1.1950, signed by the Secretary, Engineer Y. Fraenkel.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, Building File 3822/33, Y. Proshenski, City Engineer to the Czechoslovak Immigrants Association, 6.6.1950.

tenants. With the end of the war of 1948 many families were housed in the apartments of Swidan House and in many other apartments and houses that had in the past been designed as a single family unit. As time passed the tenants were compelled to improvise additions, and to add toilets, bathrooms and kitchens in the passage ways and areas that had originally been designed as public spaces. In any event, they lacked the means for ongoing upkeep of the expensive structures. “Mismatch” is how the literature terms the disparity between these high quality buildings and the low economic status of the new tenants.<sup>54</sup>

### *The Basement and the Courtyard*

Many of the changes undergone by the property occurred on the basement floor of Swidan House, which emerges as the weak point of the grand building. In the original design, to which we shall return later, this floor was left empty, without a specified function. It would appear that Hanna Swidan chose to utilize the building area allotted to him in the well ventilated spaces facing the sea. The basement was naturally not part of these. Yet this way of thinking was the product of a time of plenty, and was irreconcilable with the acute hardship generated in the city in the wake of the 1948 war, and in fact, as witnessed in the case of Fadil Shiblak’s house, already prior to it. Given the lack of available housing, these open spaces constituted an ever-present provocation, if not a veritable breach. In the mid-1950s Mr. Swidan had hoped to legalize a number of structures constructed without a license toward the end of the 1940s and which now served as kitchens, toilets and storerooms to the tenants residing on the ground floor and in the basement, as well as to an exterior building erected in the courtyard and which served as living quarters at the time.<sup>55</sup> His request was rejected, despite the position taken by the City Engineer’s inspector, who had noted a year earlier that “this building has undergone many transformations on its way to becoming a slum,” and that since “we are in any case unable to prevent the building from becoming a slum,” it would be preferable to impose a number of steps to improve sanitary conditions by means of legalization.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Amiram Gonen, *Between City and Suburb: Urban Residential Patterns and Processes in Israel* (1995), p. 51.

<sup>55</sup> The Municipality of Haifa, The Conservation Department, Building File 3822/33, Office of the City Engineer to Mr. Hanna M. Swidan on 8.11.1956.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, Building File 3822/33, 21.9.1955.

Conditions in the mid-1950s were most probably far better than those pertaining in the basement and courtyard in 1950. In that year a number of employees of Steel Brothers & Co., whose offices occupied part of the building, complained of the unbearable stench caused by the housing of 18 individuals on the ground floor verandah without any sanitary infrastructure whatsoever, as well as the breeding of chickens, dogs, rabbits and pigeons in the courtyard.<sup>57</sup> These apparently fantastical assertions are borne out in the Building Department's order to the tenants and landlord to clean the courtyard, install a platform for garbage containers and to remove the chicken coops.<sup>58</sup>

It would be a mistake to attribute all these changes to the war and its aftermath, although it had, no doubt, played a decisive part in the conversion undergone by the mansion in later decades. Over-population, it appears, was prevalent already in the mid-1940s, owing to the general shortage of housing in the city among both Jews and Palestinians. This over-population was likewise evident in the Shiblak House. Already in 1945 Mr. Hanna Swidan submitted an application through the architects Rais and Canaan to convert the column floor into an area of domicile. The City Engineer was reluctant to approve the application. He too referred to the danger that the building may turn into a slum owing to over-population.<sup>59</sup> Around a decade after its construction, so it would seem, a cloud began to hover above Swidan House, which may be distilled into the keyword "slum."

The origin of the dwelling in the courtyard, incidentally – the same structure that Mr. Swidan sought in vain to legalize in the mid-1950s – predated the dramatic events of April 1948 by several months. In June 1947 Mr. Swidan requested permission to build a tennis court and a pavilion,

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., Building File 3822/33, Steel Brothers & Co. to the Chairman, Haifa Municipal Council, 31.8.1950.

"Part of the ground floor verandah is now undergoing structural alterations to convert the open verandahs into extra rooms. There are now about eighteen people living on this verandah or in the storeroom adjacent thereto without any adequate sanitary facilities. The stench on a hot day is overpowering. [...] Chickens, dogs, rabbits and pigeons are also being bred there. Their droppings add to the general filth and squalor."

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., Building File 3822/33, 19.9.1950.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., Building File 3822/33, Government of Palestine, District Commissioner's Offices, Haifa District, Haifa, A.D. Lebhar to the City Engineer, Haifa 23.5.1945.

"My own view is that as the Sweidan (*sic!*) House is already several floors in excess of regulations no concession should be granted to increase the density of the population of a building that already bids fair to become a slum."



which would include two shower rooms, a verandah and two toilets.<sup>60</sup> The timing appears somewhat strange when one reads the narrative from its conclusion. From its beginning it reads merely as a real estate initiative on the part of a versatile man. Mr. Swidan's application was approved in July 1947, with the stipulation that the court be built first.<sup>61</sup> In early September 1947 Mr. Swidan received final approval together with a demand that he implement the plan during the following six months, before this authorization would become invalid.<sup>62</sup> It appears that the work was not completed, since in August 1949 a sports club, a Jewish one of course, called "The 105 Sportsclub", did indeed operate on the site. It is unclear what infrastructure was available to the club in the courtyard of Swidan House, but tennis courts were not built.<sup>63</sup> The application submitted by the new users, "for a crafts and industries license for the club – Hanna Swidan" as officially noted in the documents, for the sale of alcoholic beverages, was rejected. Hanna Swidan and his family were no longer living in the building at that time. Like all the Arab residents of the city, some 3,000-3,500 in number, they were compelled through an act of forced settlement to reside on the Western side of the city, in the area of Wadi al-Nisnas and the adjacent streets.<sup>64</sup>

### *Rupture*

Swidan House's building file in the archive of Haifa Municipality's Conservation Department may be likened to a facade that conceals the history of its occupants. The upheaval in the lives of Hanna Swidan and his family shortly after they received authorization for the tennis court project

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, Building File 3822/33, extract from minutes of the 114th meeting of the Haifa Local Building and Town Commission held on 10.6.1947:

"Mr. Hanna Swidan, requesting permission to erect a tennis-court with a pavilion comprising two rest rooms and a verandah, two showers and two latrines, in the courtyard behind his building at Crusader Street (Parcel 202, Block 10813). Resolution: The application was recommended for approval."

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, Building File 3822/33, Government of Palestine, District Commissioner's Offices, Haifa District, Haifa to Mr. Hanna Swidan, 21.7.1947.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, Building File 3822/33, Municipal Corporation of Haifa, City Engineer's Department to Mr. Hanna M. Swidan, 1.9.1947.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, Building File 3822/33, the City Secretary to the City Engineer, 15.8.1949.

<sup>64</sup> The local Palestinian population, incidentally, experienced the forced settlement completed in July 1948 as an insensitive and unjust step, with some even referring to it as ghettoization. Born of immediate military-security logic, this action in retrospect ironically contributed to the evolution of a Palestinian milieu as the area expanded and developed over the years and became the preferred Palestinian neighborhood in Haifa.

is not recorded therein, and to the extent that this left any remnants they are to be found in a different archive, in the Israel State Archive. The painful correspondence between Hanna Swidan and his new rulers begins with a letter penned by the paterfamilias “to the head of the State of Israel, the esteemed Mr. Ben-Gurion,” on 3 July 1948, in which he seeks to protect his life and property:

I am Hanna Mubadda Swidan, born in Haifa to an ancient family, and a trader in food and beverages, who despite the Arab boycott persisted in buying from Jews. I have always maintained correct relations with the Jews of Haifa. As a citizen of the State of Israel I request my rights. I have been told that the defense forces are preparing to invade my house on the slopes of the Carmel. May your honor please issue the appropriate orders in order to protect us from all aggression on the part of the military, and cultivate me as one of his people and assist his servant.<sup>65</sup>

No wonder that Hanna Swidan expected the Jewish state to protect his rights. His position opposing the Arab boycott was consistent, and he had adhered to it over some two decades despite persistent internal pressure and direct threats to his life. Perusal of the Jewish press reveals that Swidan’s position was well known in both Jewish and Arab society. The journal *Filastin* published in Jaffa reported in late 1929 that Hanna Swidan had been threatened by the Black Hand – a secretive and extreme organization founded in Jaffa in 1919, which established a branch in Haifa a year later – warning that were he to continue to enjoy the services of the Electric Company his life would be placed in danger.<sup>66</sup> *Filastin*, incidentally, was among the leaders of the campaign against Ruthenberg and the Palestine Electric Company already in the early 1920s in Jaffa. It failed there just as it failed in Haifa in the mid-1920s, because the bourgeois elite desired electricity and hooked up to the grid despite the pressures. Swidan chose to ignore the threat and to inform the governor and the police, in the clear knowledge that the British regime supported Ruthenberg’s Zionist initiative and was taking action against its opponents. In 1930 Swidan persisted in his refusal, when he declined to participate in a trade stoppage initiated by the Muslim Association, and in a riposte in the form of a pamphlet that he issued of his own accord he announced that he would make do with a stoppage of only two hours.<sup>67</sup> It would appear that, as

<sup>65</sup> Israel State Archives, Hanna Swidan to David Ben-Gurion on 3.7.1948 – 310/11.

<sup>66</sup> “The Black Hand”, *Davar*, 17 December 1929.

<sup>67</sup> “The Arab Stoppage”, *Davar*, 24 August 1930.

in the cases of many other Christians,<sup>68</sup> he persisted in his refusal to join the boycott also during the “Great Arab Rebellion,” since in 1938 a customer of his, Dr. [N]ajib Khury, son of Haifa’s former Municipal Physician, was mistakenly shot in his store. The local press surmised that the shots had been targeted at the owner of the store and were fired in the wake of a threatening letter he had received a few days previously.<sup>69</sup> Hanna Swidan himself, incidentally, drew a pistol and pursued the attacker in vain, as he succeeded in escaping by forcing an Arab taxi driver at gun point to drive him in the direction of Balad-al-Sheikh.

That which was known to the readers of *Davar* two decades prior to the *Nakba* no longer worked in his favor in 1948. His direct application to Ben-Gurion was transferred from the Haifa branch of the Ministry of Minorities to the main office in Tel Aviv. A few days later a response was received instructing “to receive him and to handle his affairs as you see fit and to the extent that this matter does not compromise the interests of the military.”<sup>70</sup> Hanna Swidan did not give up his attempt to endear himself to the new rulers, and in early January 1949 he approached the State President, Chaim Weizmann. In the conventional style of correspondence between a subject and the ruler, particularly in cases that seek the direct protection of the rulers in the face of harassment by local officialdom,<sup>71</sup> in a letter studded with panegyric and in the spirit of religious kinship on which he dwelled expansively, he declared that “I am proud of you and love you and hope that you will receive us amongst you and we shall be faithful and obedient.” “I shall be delighted,” he wrote, “together with my family and servants, to live under the protection of your state.”<sup>72</sup> Asked by the Minorities Ministry to express an opinion on this application, the Foreign Ministry remained cool. “This man is not considered to be a particularly respected or important person,” they assessed there, “in our opinion a polite

<sup>68</sup> Benny Morris, *1948: The Annals of the First Arab-Israeli War* (2010), p. 28.

<sup>69</sup> “A Daring Assassination in Haifa. Christian Arab Seriously Injured”, *Davar*, 17 June 1938.

<sup>70</sup> Israel State Archives, The Ministry of Minorities at the Kirya to Mr. Moshe Yitah, Ministry of Minorities Haifa Branch, 13.7.1948, C – 310/11.

<sup>71</sup> Yuval Ben-Bassat, “On Telegraph and Justice: The Petitions of Residents of Jaffa and Gaza to the Great Wazir of Istanbul in the Late Nineteenth Century”, *The New East* 49 (2010), pp. 30-52.

<sup>72</sup> Israel State Archives, Hanna Mubadda Swidan to President of the State of Israel, Dr. Chaim Weizmann, 12.1.1949, C – 310/11.

response is sufficient, with a formal acknowledgement of his letter (in Arabic, of course).”<sup>73</sup>

A polite response, however, could not meet Hanna Swidan’s true requests, nor could it alleviate his pressing tribulations. The Swidan family was dispersed in all directions in 1948. The father and brother remained in Haifa, the mother and five children – three sons and two daughters – fled to Egypt, while the events surrounding an additional son – Malik – Malik defender of the turret, took a dramatic turn. On the same day that he approached the State President, Hanna Swidan wrote a further letter to the Minorities Ministry in Haifa in which he submitted two requests: to enable his son Malik to move from Fassuta to permanent residency in Haifa, and to allow his family to return to the country from abroad, namely Egypt.<sup>74</sup> The 21 year old Malik had traveled to Fassuta on 13 April 1948 to recuperate from two operations and following a bout of typhoid.<sup>75</sup> Mr. Hanna Swidan agreed to deposit any warranty required of him for the transfer of Malik and also to guarantee his livelihood. Regarding the matter of the return of his family, Hanna Swidan was ordered to submit a return request to the Immigration Committee, which would in turn require the authorization of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Security, Police and Minorities. The matter of the son initially appeared to be simpler: on the basis of a warranty of 250 Israeli Liras and the medical certificate he was permitted to dwell in Haifa.<sup>76</sup> His father meanwhile submitted an application to the Transfer Committee for permanent residency. But at this point things spun out of control. At midnight on 17 March 1949 military police and other security personnel appeared and asked Malik to accompany them on suspicion of being an infiltrator.<sup>77</sup> In his distress, Hanna Swidan approached the director of the Minorities Ministry in Haifa. The security personnel, he related, had slapped his son and had threatened another son, Farid, with a pistol when he tried to unravel the reason for the arrest. He now felt helpless after having turned in vain to the *Wadi al-*

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., Y. Shimoni, Foreign Ministry, Middle East Desk to the Secretary of the President of the State Council, 23.1.1949, C – 310/11.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., Minorities Ministry Haifa Branch to Minorities Ministry, Ha-Kiryia, 12.1.1949, C – 1318/73.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., Minorities Ministry, Ha-Kiryia to Minorities Ministry Haifa Branch, 27.1.1949, C – 1318/73.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., Intelligence Service Haifa Base to Minorities Ministry Haifa Branch, 28.12.1948, C – 1318/73.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., Minorities Ministry Haifa Branch to Intelligence Service 3, Haifa Base 18.3.1949, C – 1318/73.

*Nisnas* police in search of his son.<sup>78</sup> Some three days later Hanna Swidan returned pleading to the Minorities Ministry in the city – in all probability one of the very few addresses to which he could turn with any degree of confidence in these dramatic circumstances. His son Malik, it transpires from the letter, had been led to the village of Mansura after being divested of his belongings, 36 Liras, a gold watch, a Parker fountain pen, spectacles and identity card.<sup>79</sup> “He was then ordered to run and since he suffered from a fracture and was ill he was unable to run so they shot at him and hit him in one spot only a centimeter from the heart and in a second spot on the knee.” His injured son, so the father wrote to the authorities, was carried on a donkey to the village of Rumaysh, where he was treated by a doctor who subsequently accompanied him in a taxi to the hospital in Tyre for further treatment. “Mr. Yitah,” wrote Hanna Swidan, “I turn to you in the name of humanity and ask you what is the reason for all this attack. You are our representatives here and what should I do.”

### *House of Dreams*

Mr. Hanna Swidan chose to position his house 181 meters above sea level. The carefully designed plan prepared by the local architect and contractor Eng. I. Haggar was submitted to the City Engineer on 30 August 1933. The structure was to be erected in the Bab al-Manatir quarter, or Guards Gate, which was not actually a quarter in the conventional sense. The schema presents a first house, standing alone, on an unpopulated and as yet unprepared tract of land. The house was erected prior to the paving of the road, which would later be known as Crusader Road. It would appear that the man was a true entrepreneur. Hanna Swidan was a man of vision. In the original plan the road is called Tanzim Road, a Turkish name of uncertain origin. The road, in any event, never bore this name. Hanna Swidan, incidentally, was not pleased with the name “Crusader” given to the road. Apparently well aware of his singular contribution to the development of the road, on 5 June 1945 he applied to the Mayor of Haifa, requesting him to consider the issue of the name chosen by the municipality for the road. “I request,” he wrote, “that you name the road Hanna Swidan and ask you to correct it.”<sup>80</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., Hanna Swidan to the Minorities Ministry Haifa Branch, 18.3.1949, C – 1318/73.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., Hanna Swidan to the Minorities Ministry Haifa Branch, 23.3.1949, C – 1318/73.

<sup>80</sup> Haifa City Archives, Hanna Swidan to the Mayor of Haifa, 5.6.1945, document 1541 – 9/2. I thank Johnny Mansour for drawing my attention to this document.

The sketches and sections of Swidan House indicate a measure of technological innovation. Apart from a pit for the collection of water that appears in the original plan, which may not eventually have been implemented, the house contains no traditional elements whatsoever. This is not a stone house, the conventional style at the time among both Jews and Arabs, but is made of concrete, which requires modern construction technology that was then only evolving. The appearance is exceptionally beautiful and has obviously been carefully thought out. The many decorative elements as well as fine details, such as the sliding doors and their tracks, indicate great attention to detail, a clear awareness of quality, an expensive and assured esthetic taste, imagination and daring. The carefully crafted building diagram enables the observer to share the dreams of the entrepreneur and owner, Hanna Swidan, at a remove of over seventy years.



*Fig. 2: The Swidan House*

*Source: Municipality of Haifa, the Conservation Department, Building File 3822/33*

It appears that the owner and architect spared no effort, neither in planning nor in financing, in seeking to take in the splendid landscape to be

seen from all possible angles of the building. Constructed on exceptionally steep and dramatic topography, on a slope of approximately 45 degrees, the building called for complex solutions. That chosen was to erect retaining walls, which facilitated maximum congruence between the contour of the mountain and that of the structure. To this solution was added the construction of a floor of columns beneath the building, adorned with pointed arches as a decorative element. Devoid of all use, according to the original plan of course, the column floor was designed for one objective alone: raising the building, making it taller, that is, and enhancing the built area's exposure to the scenery. In later years, with the passing of the golden age, numerous eyes were set on this floor, born in plenty and culminating in paucity, its existence provoking those seeking a roof over their heads, a motley collection of needy and impatient immigrants and refugees.

Once the building had been raised, all of it faced the landscape. Unlike many of the buildings constructed at that time in the Jewish section of the city, Swidan House utilizes the majority of the building area allocated to it to face the sea, in a grand and open façade facing Haifa Bay. All its floors and sides sport numerous porches suspended on concrete ledges: the open verandahs face the sea, while the enclosed balconies face east and west, toward the Baha'i Gardens, the western Carmel, and on the side of the entrance bridge on Crusader Road, toward the upper slopes of Mount Carmel. The verandahs and balconies were decorated with attractive and precise iron work in art deco style, complemented by a multitude of windows, both single and triptychonic, likewise adorned with applied art nouveau elements, such as the glass panels installed with a wooden frame in the upper third of the window, alongside elements that were not eventually applied, such as the decoration by means of a rough plaster finish that sets the windows off against the smooth plaster ubiquitous on the finish of all the outer walls. The many different styles allow us to characterize the house as an eclectic building, a trait typical of many of the buildings constructed at that time in Palestine.

The house was handsome, and most handsome too were the rooms that spread out in a central structure and two perfectly symmetrical wings. From a surprisingly simple stairwell that was almost incompatible with the general magnificence one could enter spacious living quarters. The inner entrance hall and the corridor at one end led to five mostly square and in some cases rectangular living rooms, whose proportions were attractive to the beholder. They were spacious, had many windows and most led directly on to a verandah or balcony. The 3.91 meters high ceilings, in line with the conventional ancient Arab style of building, far exceeded the usual height of contemporary structures, which tended to be some 3.2 meters in height.

The construction of the wings naturally enhanced the exposure to the landscape and likewise to the breezes blowing from different directions. Swidan House was a spacious and well ventilated house, looking out on to splendid scenery, which at the same time delighted those who looked upon it.

Engineer Hagggar submitted the initial plans on 30 August 1933. On 21 November 1933 the plan was approved, and on 20 February 1935 an application was submitted for a license to occupy the building, which was received in April of that year. The pace of progress was thus very rapid. Surrounded by a fence that would be badly damaged by the rains of February 1946 and subsequently rebuilt, Swidan House came into being.