correspondents at large
RAMALLAH

Letter from Ramallah

RAJA SHEHADEH

ONLY SOMEONE LIVING IN THE HISTORICALLY BURDENED HOLY LAND CAN UNDERSTAND WHAT GOOD FORTUNE IT IS TO LIVE IN A CITY FREE from holy weight. I have long thought how auspicious it was for Ramallah, a city founded only in the fifteenth century, to have escaped mention in the Holy Scriptures.

European pilgrims who visited the Holy City in droves in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rarely bothered to make the short trip to this pastoral hamlet a mere ten miles north of Jerusalem. Thus, it was saved the fate that plagued Jerusalem, of falling hostage to the European imagination.

Ramallah is a relatively new city as history goes in the Holy Land. By legend, it was established in 1500 by the Haddadeen tribe, who had been living across the Jordan River in the village of Shobak. There are many explanations of why they crossed over. I, for one, am fond of the tale that they fled after refusing to betroth one of their daughters to the son of a Muslim sheikh. It must not have been an easy life for them in the dry, hilly region where they established their village. Water was not plentiful, since rainfall and springs were not always dependable. Many years of drought had to be endured. The valleys were narrow and steep. There were no plains, so farmers grew olives, grapes, and such vegetables as grow on hillside terraces.

In 1901, when the first road linked Ramallah to Jerusalem, the American Quakers established the first girls' school in Palestine. This was soon followed by a boys' school. These two schools, which remain to this day among the best Palestinian private schools, graduated tens of thousands of young men and women over the years, who had such good command of the English language that they could be considered bilingual. There is nothing wrong in learning a foreign language, except for the tremendous consequences this had on the village. Good knowledge of English became the ticket for work or further education in the United States. The emigration that began in the early twentieth century continues unabated, slowly emptying the town of most of its original Christian inhabitants, so that Ramallah immigrants in the

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United States far outnumber the population of the town itself. The Bible might not have brought tourists or a wealth of representation by European pilgrims that distorted the town's image of itself, but it brought missionaries who wanted to educate the inhabitants of this Christian village in the central hills of Palestine and ended by devastating it.

The city has always been blessed by superb weather, cool in the summer and bitterly cold for only a few months in winter. This has been another of the city's good fortunes. Instead of getting self-righteous tourists seeking salvation for their souls, Ramallah got pleasure seekers pursuing the cool summer breeze.

Ramallah acquired fame as a summer resort with garden restaurants, good hotels, boardinghouses, and friendly people. In the 1960s, its popularity with the oil-rich Arabs of Kuwait and the Gulf States rose. There was the possibility of developing a vibrant tourist industry similar to that of nearby Lebanon, but the Israeli occupation of June 1967 brought an end to these aspirations.

During the first few years of occupation, its inhabitants watched as the city next to them, East Jerusalem, was annexed to Israel and Jewish settlements began to form a ring around it. This respite did not last long. It soon became clear that the people of Ramallah were not going to be spared Israel's policy of settling Israeli Jews in the newly occupied territories. The bulldozers began to roll over Ramallah's beautiful hills, devastating their quiet beauty.

Some hundred years ago, a roundabout was built marking the new modern center of a growing Ramallah. It was called the Manarah, a lighthouse away from the sea. Five roads forked from the Manarah circle. One went to Jerusalem, passing through the runway of Kalandia Airport, where cars had to stop and wait if planes were taxiing. Another went north to the ancient city Nablus, then the commercial center of the West Bank. It also connected Ramallah to the eighty villages around it that depended on it for services and trade. Jaffa Road connected Ramallah to Jaffa, a port city on the Mediterranean used by emigrants for boarding steamers traveling the high seas to the United States. The same road was used in the reverse direction by the tens of thousands of refugees from Jaffa and other coastal towns who were forced out of their homes during the 1948 Palestinian Nakbeh ("Catastrophe").

After the 1967 Israeli occupation, Ramallah's fortune in lacking a biblical legacy cherished by tourists and coveted by religious Zionists foundered. It soon became clear that the policy of settling Israeli Jews in the occupied territories was not only religiously inspired. It was government policy. Within a few decades, Israeli settlements began to sprout on the hills around the city. Now they ring my city in the same way they do the nearby holy city. Along with the Separation Wall, Israeli settlements are strangling Ramallah, depriving it of its lands and defining its borders. New roads have been built to serve these settlements. The old road that once led to Jaffa is now blocked by a checkpoint behind which Israeli traffic whizzes by on a new bypass road connecting the settlement of Givat Zeev, southeast of Ramallah, to the coastal city of Tel Aviv. A wall surrounds Kalandia Airport, which is now annexed to Israel and separates Ramallah from Jerusalem, with the aid of a terminal that was once a humble checkpoint and is now a self-styled border crossing with Palestinian neighborhoods on either side. Even Nablus Road has been blocked. All five roads branching from the Manarah roundabout now lead nowhere. At night one can hear the speeding cars of young men, loud music blaring from their radios, braking with a screech as they come to the end of the blocked road.

The five-hundred-year-old city that long sought to define itself has finally been defined. As a city under siege.

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