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Peace, habibi (my love), no peace big balagan (chaos). With a mixture of Arabic, English, and Hebrew, Khadra spoke as she sat on a dilapidated couch. I had just come in from one of my adventures traversing the walls of the Old City in Jerusalem, watching the sky drench itself in orange and pinks, set against the gold shimmer of the Dome of the Rock. Khadra was talking to me about her life in Jerusalem- the life of a Dom, or Gypsy of the Middle East.

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Jerusalem, Isreal

Taylor Jo Isenberg

THE IN BETWEEN: THE DOM OF EAST JERUSALEM

The Holy City, Jerusalem, al-Quds, Yerushalayim, enraptures the hearts, minds and spirituality of millions worldwide. Disputed, claimed, idealized, and revitalized, it is at the center of one of the most convoluted conflicts in recent history. While many claim rights and continue to fight for this coveted piece of land, a quiet, almost invisible community tucked away in the corner of the Old City has lived in Jerusalem for over 400 years. Neither Arab-Palestinian nor Jewish-Israeli, they have struggled to outlast wars, changing governance, and cultural discrimination. It was for this community, the Dom, that I traveled to this city steeped in rich history.

In Jerusalem there are about 1,000 Dom who have faced economic, social, and cultural marginalization. Deemed the derogatory term 'nawar' by Arab-Palestinians and undifferentiated from Arabs by Jewish-Israelis, they are a culture 'in between,' accepted by neither. I was drawn to their distinctive narrative- a community stubbornly disengaged from the political situation, yet continually disturbed and formed by the unique status of Jerusalem. How did they manage to remain separate? Or did they not? Who are they as a people?

Amoun Sleem, a woman of formidable beauty and personable magnetism, is the key for the outside world to this removed community. She established the Domari Society of the Gypsies in Jerusalem in 1999 to



preserve their quickly disappearing cultural identity. Arabic-speaking and Muslim, they have largely assimilated in appearance to the surrounding culture, although they remain distinctive in familial and community background. Beset with low levels of education and employment, the Dom are struggling to overcome deep-rooted poverty that reinforces the stereotypes of beggars and thieves. Less than 50% make it past middle school, and

an astounding 80% of males are unemployed. I was regaled with tales of being spit on in the street, taunting by teachers in schools, and blatant work-place discrimination. In many ways, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict exacerbates the socio-



economic problems that are typical for Gypsies all over the world. Much of the aid to the area is directed to either side, and the restrictions on movement between the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip has made it difficult to maintain family times, an integral part of Dom culture. Further, their choice to remain neutral and disengaged from the conflict has earned them the animosity of many, leading to greater social isolation. East Jerusalem, where they mostly live, was annexed by force to Israel in 1967. Residents live in a system characterized as 'separate and unequal,' with limited funding for infrastructure, schools, and other basic services.

I spent two months volunteering in the Domari center, working alongside Amoun teaching English, researching, and assisting. I had gone in with a grand research plan, involving oral histories and extensive research. Yet what I found was a woman transcending all cultural and societal norms to advance her community. She is facing both internal and external resistance- the community is internally divided and defiant to change-but she forges ahead to ensure that the next generation of Dom children can be proud of being Gypsy. It is a dream that she embraces daily as she faces continual setbacks and imposed limitations. While many Dom choose to hide their identity, she thrived on embracing and bolstering it. It is impossible to describe all that I learned from my time in Jerusalem- I intimately experienced a unique perspective on a well-known story, and also found a family among the Sleems. I learned of the power of historical narrative and personal

testimony. Yet I realized that my goal of helping to arm a population with a voice through oral histories was not appropriate, because this is a population, outside of Amoun, who purposefully resists having that voice captured. Yet through her, this community has hope. I witnessed her forceful personality confront the political and social forces withstanding her, often



triumphantly. She refused to resign to being 'the Arabs' Arab,' the lowest of the low in Israeli and Palestinian society.

For every Dom I talked to, Jerusalem was simply their home. It is where their grandparents lived, their parents raised them, and where they hope to bring up their children. As they continue to struggle to find their place, preserve their cultural heritage, and overcome the internal problems, their identity is now intricately tied to the fate of this city- whatever it may be.

My time in Jerusalem was trying: there was emotional upheaval, frustration, and failure. But there was also clarity, understanding, and daily triumphs that demonstrated the infinite potential of determination. Amoun taught me what it meant to be a fighter, leader, and empowered woman when you are told you are supposed to be anything but these. As I move forward into a career encouraged by my time with the Dom, her story and that of her people will be a constant reminder of what should never be forgotten, and what should always turn our heads.

