

Her Books

Moving My Mother's Library to Al-Quds

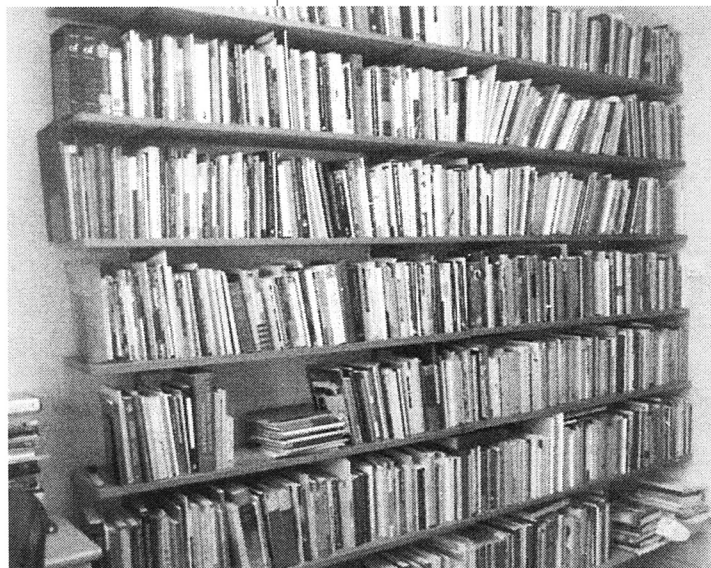
BY DEBORAH KAUFMAN

WHAT DO YOU DO with your parents' possessions? With the collections of a lifetime? What do you do with the books?

I sat with my husband, Alan Snitow, in my mom's living room in Jerusalem feeling the anxiety ebb and flow as we pondered these questions. My stepdad, Bill Daleski, had suddenly died, and I had just moved my mom, Shirley Kaufman, to the Bay Area to live near my two sisters and me so we could take care of her now that her dementia was rapidly progressing.

Now, I had flown back to this strangely quiet apartment in Rehavia, the old tree-lined neighborhood of the Ashkenazi elite: professors and intellectuals, mostly secular liberals, the generation that is now passing. We had had our share of passionate moments in this home—mostly arguments about Israel's occupation of Palestine, but also scotch-soaked parties with visiting writers, artists, and far-flung friends. In Rehavia, where the streets are mostly named after scholars and poets from the golden age of Jewish culture in Spain, today you see growing numbers of black-clad Orthodox Jewish families who have taken up residence, and you hear feral cats scurrying amid the overflowing garbage bins.

My stepdad was a well-known English professor at the Hebrew University, a literary critic, and Israel Prize winner. He had a significant collection of English literature, which his family arranged to donate to the Hebrew University right after he died. Beautiful editions from Dickens and Lawrence to Sillitoe and Le Carré. My mom is a poet, author of nine books, and recipient of many literary awards. She had a large and sumptuous library of English-language poetry books, collected over sixty years, many signed by the authors. The shelves lined the walls of her study down to the floor and up to the ceiling. For her, this was the world that mattered most—George Oppen, Adrienne Rich, William Carlos Williams; the shelves burst with whole landscapes of pleasure and pain and mystery. A window looked out over a flowering Jacaranda tree in the garden below and to weathered pines across the street, where



Deborah Kaufman shares a tender moment with her mother, Shirley Kaufman, whose "sumptuous library of English-language poetry books" (top) is now part of the Al-Quds University library in East Jerusalem.

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A Palestinian moving crew from Al-Quds helps Deborah Kaufman load her mother's poetry collection into their truck.

the mourning doves sang at dawn. This library was a cool oasis in a stressed-out city, and it was my mom's private Garden of Eden, tended to over the decades.

I began to investigate our options for the books and quickly learned that it is extremely difficult to donate books to libraries in Jerusalem. There are too many dying Jews with too many books! Israeli schools and libraries want only valuable or specialized collections. Writer friends told us sad stories about their efforts to give away a colleague's private library, and how the only taker was a used bookstore.

But my sisters and I had already decided we did not want to move the books back to California. We had other thoughts, too, thoughts that put us at odds with some of our friends and family in Israel. We had spoken with my mom many years ago about the possibility of donating to a Palestinian university, and she had been open to it—though not without some doubts. Now that the time had come to actually do something about the books, I was immobilized by all the endings that were piling up one upon the other—Bill's death, my mom's decline, the transformation of Rehavia, and the general demise

of the Israel in which they had believed. So many changes, and I was unclear about what to do next with this collection that had meant so much to my mother.

Reaching Out to Al-Quds University

My only connection to a Palestinian university was from years earlier, before the second intifada, when I had met Sari Nusseibeh, a Palestinian professor of philosophy and the president of East Jerusalem's Al-Quds University, at the International Human Rights Film Festival in Tel Aviv, Nazareth, and Ramallah. We were together with politician and peace activist Shulamit Aloni on a panel that was considering the model of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Panels for Israel. Later, I read Nusseibeh's autobiography and political essays, which transcend the limits of conventional politics, and they touched me deeply.

So I sent him an email asking if Al-Quds University might like to have my mom's books. Nusseibeh's immediate email response blew me away: "This is truly amazing, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for this very personalized and generous donation."

The next day, my husband and I met with Nusseibeh at the YMCA's café—known to many as neutral territory in West Jerusalem. It probably looked like a breezy coffee date among aging hippies with unruly hair, but the conversation sped rapidly from the daily news to more personal and urgent matters. He told us he rarely travels to the western, Jewish side of the city anymore—in fact, he said, he thought he hadn't crossed over in perhaps two years. But my appeal was something he related to—his mom was also in her eighties and, like mine, suffered from dementia. With a gentle smile he said he interpreted our offer to donate the poetry collection as a gesture of friendship, and since this was very meaningful to him, of course he would ensure that arrangements would be made to move the books the following day.

The books would journey from their shelves in my mom's Rehavia apartment across town to the Al-Quds University library in Abu Dis, a Palestinian neighborhood now cut off from west Jerusalem by the twenty-six-foot-tall concrete Israeli separation barrier. The books would move into an entirely new and separate reality—on the other side of a great divide. I sat there a bit stunned—pleasantly surprised that the books had so easily found a guardian and an appreciative home, but at the same time on edge—what would my mom and stepdad have thought? What would our friends and family make of this? Would we ever see the books again?

Moving Day

At the apartment the next day, I got the first of several phone calls from the Palestinian moving crew from Al-Quds—they had never traveled to this side of town and were utterly lost on the Israeli side. There was something comic and tragic about our directing the four movers and Randa Kamal, the Director of the Al-Quds Library, through the streets of Rehavia. In a moment such as this, one remembers yet again how the separation between the two sides of the city can be profound. Although one increasingly sees younger Palestinians on the west side of town—speaking Arabic, in hijab, shopping, eating, and socializing—I realized that, in the thirty-eight years I'd been coming to visit my mother here, I'd never seen a single Palestinian on their street. There's a kind of Jim Crow atmosphere in many Jerusalem neighborhoods, and I was worried the movers would be stopped, harassed, or worse.

After finding their way through the narrow streets, the emissaries from the east finally arrived, safe and sound. It was a hot July morning, and librarian Kamal and I sat at the dining room table chatting as the movers boxed the books and loaded the cartons one by one, neatly in tight rows, onto the giant flatbed truck. The shelves were now empty. The truck was full. Nothing more was said. In the blazing light, my husband and I waved good-bye to Kamal and the movers as their rickety flatbed began its journey, now loaded with precious cargo, back across the divided city. The whole process of disassembling my mom's collection of a lifetime had taken only an hour.

Not long after, I got a letter from the president's office at Al-Quds, thanking my family for the poetry collection. Nusseibeh wrote that the collection "will be used by students and faculty for many years to come," and he invited the family to come visit the library in the future. Then he closed his letter: "This is the first significant contribution of books the university received from an Israeli family. We are very appreciative of this gesture, which we look upon as a sign of goodwill and hope."

How could it be—with so many books and so many personal libraries—that this was the first significant contribution of books from an Israeli family? It appears to be a sad fact that Palestinian intellectual life and culture—with its universities, libraries, scholars, and students—remains invisible to most Israelis, and many Americans, whose vision of Palestinians are badly clouded by prejudices and stereotypes.

A Small Gesture in the Wake of Violence

A year has passed. My mom is happy—if forgetful—in Berkeley, but her disease has progressed and she barely remembers her life in Israel. Sometimes we sit together with a cup of tea and I'll read aloud poems sent from old friends. When I read one sent to her recently from Alicia Ostriker, I asked her what she thought of it, and she answered that she could no longer understand the words, but she liked it a lot anyway, and then she beamed, "That's the beauty of poetry!"

During the year, Professor Nusseibeh wrote an essay titled "Why Israel Can't Be a Jewish State" and published a provocative book that questions his own earlier commitment to a two-state solution. We exchanged emails about the book and about the recent documentary film my husband and I made about the American Jewish culture wars, *Between Two Worlds*. Al-Quds librarian Kamal sent an email inviting the family to visit Al-Quds, where students have been reading mom's books.

In an act of synchronicity, Benny Brunner, an Israeli filmmaker and friend who lives in Amsterdam, sent me a preview copy of his latest documentary, *The Great Book Robbery*. It is a searing exposé of the systematic "collection" of tens of thousands of Palestinian books, rare collections, and valuable libraries during and after the 1948 war by the newly born state of Israel, a story of theft and the erasure of a culture. It is a damning indictment of the "People of the Book" and a plea for some kind of justice. It was an ironic

counterpoint to my own tiny effort to bridge a divide. I watched the film at home with a lump in my throat.

The news from Jerusalem is worse than ever. I still contemplate what it means to have given my mom's poetry collection to a Palestinian university—for them, and for us. What is the meaning of such a small gesture? I wonder what memories will remain of the scattered books—theirs and ours? And what, if anything, will the students in the libraries of tomorrow absorb from my mother's books of poetry? ■