

## DIARIES & BIOGRAPHIES

### Who Was Spyro Houris?

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Excerpts from “Where the Great City Stands” from *TILL WE HAVE BUILT JERUSALEM: ARCHITECTS OF A NEW CITY* by Adina Hoffman. Copyright © 2016 by Adina Hoffman. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux. <http://us.macmillan.com/fsfg>

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*In the summer of 2014, in the middle of Israel’s latest war on Gaza, I set out through the streets of Jerusalem in search of a ghost. My account of that search forms the last section of a book, *Till We Have Built Jerusalem: Architects of a New City*, which focuses on three very different figures who helped construct the modern town. Both the German-Jewish refugee and modernist maverick Erich Mendelsohn and the English expatriate, civil servant, and lifelong student of eastern architecture Austen St. Barbe Harrison left sizable archives, so that it was possible to reconstruct the history of their fraught time in the city. The biographical traces of the third architect, meanwhile, an elusive figure named Spyro Houris, have all but been erased.*

*The Israeli architectural historian David Kroyanker has called Houris, in passing, “among the most outstanding Arab architects” of British Mandate Jerusalem. Kroyanker also reproduces a photograph of Houris in several of his books (though the photo’s source is obscure) and credits him with a range of impressive buildings, many of them inset with decorative panels made by the master Armenian ceramicist David Ohannessian and some apparently planned with a partner, “Petassis.” Whatever else we do or don’t know about Houris, it’s clear he was a kind of equal opportunity employee, building for well-to-do people from all of Jerusalem’s communities – from the aristocratic Palestinian Muslim poet, intellectual, and educator Is‘af al-Nashashibi, to the Constantinople-born Sephardic Jewish judge and lawyer Yom-Tov Hamon, to the Catholic Arab businessman and diplomat Elias Thomas Gelat. He also worked in a variety of styles, which ranged from the elaborately*



*ornamented, ceramic-fronted mansions planned in Shaykh Jarrah for Nashashibi and in Talbiya for Gelat, to the peculiar, red-copper-roofed villa he built for Hamon in Romema. Among other notable designs usually ascribed to him are the group of handsome, balcony-fronted commercial and residential structures that form the very heart of the new city, on Jaffa Road near Zion Square. These are said to have been commissioned, respectively, by a wealthy Christian from the village of Bayt Jala, a Persian Jewish merchant from Mashhad, an investor named Houry, and an Iraqi Jew from an old Hebron family; it seems Houris's own office was also located in one of these buildings. At the other end of Jaffa Road, one of the city's most ornate Mandate-era constructions stands,*

*dilapidated and dwarfed these days by the monstrous West Jerusalem central bus station. Built for Gelat's business partner, a quarry owner from Liffa known as Hajj Mahmud, this apartment house features reddish and pink striped ablaq masonry, toothy crenellation, and further floral Armenian tiles, as well as calligraphed Qur'anic inscriptions that declare, for instance, "Peace be to you: you have led good lives. Enter Paradise and dwell in it forever."*

*Beyond the fact of these buildings, though, very little is known about Spyro Houris, and as I rummaged (in the midst of the war and in the blistering heat) for signs of him, my quest expanded and I found myself not just looking for Houris – whose identity began slowly to emerge as a good deal more layered than any single ethnic or national label might indicate – but also for clues. Clues to what it is the city has lost or is rapidly losing: some sense of itself as a place more multitudinous, more heterogeneous, more generous than the "eternal united capital" of a single battered and now battering people.*

*What follows is an abridged excerpt from the book.*

*– AH*

His buildings themselves offer the most solid proof of his former presence in town, and it is those buildings that have sent me scrambling to find his traces.

This is an admittedly peculiar quest. There were better-known architects who worked in Jerusalem at the same time that he did, and it would be wrong to argue that he was a world-class figure like the defiantly visionary Mendelsohn or the quietly inspired Harrison. He designed on a more modest scale and appears to have been willing to bend



his style to suit the needs and tastes of a wide range of clients. That said, it seems to me that the far less celebrated, far more protean Houris managed to infuse each of his very different buildings with qualities of wonder, complexity, and – for lack of a better word – humanity that are at once unique and wholly suited to their setting, scrambling as they do elements of East and West, grand and intimate, old and new. There’s something about the freedom, warmth, and sheer variety of Houris’s designs that strikes me as oddly poignant, as his work encapsulates the category blending and border blurring that are, or have historically been, part and parcel of Jerusalem itself. As I set out to find whatever I can about him, I am trying to put the puzzle pieces together and to discover: Who was the man who made this hodgepodge make sense?

Three highly distinct Jerusalem mansions offer up matching calling cards on their cornerstones, the most solid evidence we have that the architect existed and that he built here.



These inscriptions are more than signs of his authorship. They also bear, or so it seems to me, coded messages from beyond the grave.

The whole thing is, for starters, carved in Latin, not Arabic, characters. *Spyro*: the first name is Greek. *G.*: an odd flourish in local terms, where middle initials don’t tend to matter. *Houris*: the family name is common in Arabic and is usually written in English as “Khoury” or “Khouri,” meaning “priest,” but for whatever reason this Houris didn’t want to be a Khoury and so ordered the craftsmen to chip it *this* somehow alien way into the stone. In the Greek pronunciation the final *s* drops away. And if that weren’t foreign enough, there’s that last touch – *Architecte*. Was the choice of French a mere affectation (his clientele were wealthy, worldly people) or does it tell us something more essential about Spyro Houris and the language he dreamed in?

Just as important as the verbal substance of this stone signature is the very fact of such an inscription at all. To my knowledge, no other Jerusalem buildings of the period bear the names of their designers this way. (A handful of houses do include the Hebrew name of an engineer or builder, but the gesture is rare in these parts.) Aside from the fact that the practice seems to be, again, imported, it’s striking that Spyro G. Houris, Architecte, wanted others to notice what he had created. Of course, the very *presence* of his name on those three buildings begs the question of its *absence* on the others usually ascribed to him. If he signed some buildings, why didn’t he sign them all?

For now, I set this riddle aside and make my way to the National Library of Israel. This is a dignified if slightly worn-at-the-edges building from the late 1950s that may or may not be modeled on Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye and that sits on the spacious green Givat Ram (post-1948, pre-1967) campus of the Hebrew University. Soon the library will be replaced by a brand new, state-of-the-art Swiss-designed structure located not far from the brand new pseudo-tabernacle of the Israel Antiquities Authority campus, as well as the recently built Supreme Court, the Prime Minister's Office, the Bank of Israel, the Foreign Ministry, and the aptly named National Parking Lot. In his day, Houris would have known the area now occupied by the literal corridors of Israeli power as the Arab village of Shaykh Badr.

*Spyro G. Houris, Architecte*: Seated at one of the long green Formica tables in the airy general reading room, I pore over all the Mandate-era business directories that have survived the years, in search of those spectral words. *The Directory of Arab Trade, Industries, Crafts and Professions in Palestine and Trans-Jordan, 1937–1938*, for example, was published in English, Arabic, and French by the Arab Chamber of Commerce in Jerusalem and it contains, at least in verbal form, the mercantile artifacts of an entire lost world, listing as it does every sort of Arab enterprise in town – from Asphalt and Bitumen to Dentists to Newspaper Correspondents to Silk Yarn. It features ads for Lind & Halaby's Goodyear Tyres and Tubes, the Ottoman Bank, and Edward Said's father Wadie Said's Palestine Educational Co., founded 1910 ("Books & Periodicals of every description, Stationery of all Kinds, Office and School Supplies, Account Books, National Loose Leaf Books . . ."), as well as full-page exhortations to "BUY ARAB NATIONAL PRODUCTS: ENCOURAGE ARAB ENTERPRISES. If you are in doubt where to shop REFER TO THIS DIRECTORY."

The names of the officers of the Association of Arab Architects and Engineers in Jerusalem also appear here – and one Adib Khoury is described as the group's secretary. This Khoury advertises himself as a "Licensed Land Surveyor, Supervisor of Building Construction." Could it be that Spyro Houris sometimes went by this other, more explicitly "Arab" name? While it's true that in Arabic the word for "architect" and "engineer" is the same – *muhandis* – and the categories often bleed into one another in this context, I wonder if a licensed land surveyor and supervisor of building construction would dare dub himself an *architecte* and inscribe it on the side of a mansion. The discrepancies are too great here: Adib Khoury must be someone else. The entire lost world this directory contains does not seem to include Spyro Houris.

When I scour the Jerusalem section of "Engineers and Architects" in the *Palestine Directory and Handbook* of 1932, meanwhile – issued in English and Hebrew by the Tel Aviv organizers of that year's so-called Levant Fair, designed to promote Zionist industry and commerce – I recognize various familiar names, most of them Jewish and spelled a little strangely (Kaufman, Kracover). Here and there several of the city's other leading Arab architects appear (Sheiber, Baramki) as does one "Pefasis" on HaSolel Street and an engineer called "Fatasis," also on HaSolel Street. (Are they both the same enigmatic Petassis?) But Houris seems, again, to be absent, or perhaps in hiding. Why? Running my finger down the page one last time before I close the book for good and with a mounting

sense of bewilderment, another entry jumps out at me: “Koris-Sapiro, G.,” which must be Houris, Spyro G. It seems the directory’s Jewish editors were so flummoxed by this particular array of alien syllables (Greek? Arabic?), they simply assigned him a new – almost Eastern European and barely recognizable – handle.

And the name game goes on as, in the next directory I check, the alphabetical listings include one “Spyro, G., Arch.” In Hebrew it’s rendered “Shapiro.” I am, at once, finding him and *not* finding him. A digitized search of old newspapers offers yet another version, which in some ways both alleviates my sense that I’m chasing a shadow and only adds to the mystery as, on 17 November 1919, the Jerusalem newspaper *Doar Hayom* features an unobtrusive ad for SPIROS HOURIS, ARCHITECTE, then, “architectural office, preparation of plans, surveying, price estimates, work tenders of all kinds” – in, of all languages, Hebrew.



Now I know this much: His telephone number was 427. His mailing address was P.O.B. 257, Jerusalem. In 1932, his office was located on “Jaffa St.”

But who was Spyro Houris?

## A Picture’s Worth

The photograph that Kroyanker reproduces in several of his books is a classic period piece, a formal studio portrait of a young man with cat-like eyes and a brushy mustache, a wide, unwrinkled brow, and a dark suit whose breast pocket is punctuated by the corner of a soft white handkerchief. There’s a certain softness about him in general. His skin is slightly pale and his cheeks are smooth; he has broad shoulders and looks like he might be tall – an athlete? – though it’s hard to say for sure, since he is sitting, his hands folded in his lap, legs crossed. Leaning a bit uncomfortably at an angle against the wooden back of an elaborately carved throne of a chair, whose one visible arm curls into the head of a lion or dragon, he looks, for lack of a better term, *European* – though perhaps this is simply the way Palestinian Arab men of his class and background dressed and posed for studio photos in this era. Or maybe it says something else, something more specific about where he came from and who he considered himself to be.



A much-enlarged version of the same photograph keeps staring, still silent, when one July afternoon I enter a simple three-room house at the edge of the Jerusalem neighborhood known as the Greek Colony and find it hanging on the wall. With its irregular geometrical panels, the wooden front door to the house has been unlocked for me by Anastas Damianos, the official head of the once substantial, now severely shrunken, Greek community of West Jerusalem. At its height in the midst of the Mandate, this consisted of some seven thousand members. Now, as the (Orthodox Christian) Damianos jokes halfheartedly, “We have enough for a minyan.” A modest and unassuming man in his seventies, he can’t help but wield the large, old-fashioned skeleton key with a certain inadvertent ceremony.

Though I’m speaking Hebrew with Damianos, I am, for once in this city – it

happens very rarely – pleasantly confused about his ethnicity and his mother tongue. He’s slight and dark skinned with wire-framed glasses, a light gait and gentle manner, and his fluent Hebrew is accented in an unfamiliar way. As he’ll eventually explain when I ask, his was the only Greek family in their Galilee village – his ancestors arrived in Palestine from Monastir in Macedonia before 1850 – so as a child he spoke Greek at home and Arabic outside it. He has lived in Jerusalem for more than fifty years and, now retired, worked for decades as an official in the Arabic-language section at the largely Hebrew-speaking Israeli Ministry of Education. He collects icons; his children live in Greece and Spain. He has agreed to show me the building, which has recently been renovated by the energetic Greek-Israeli-Jewish, American-trained architect Elias Messinas and now serves as a humble museum of the history of Jerusalem’s Greek community, though it is mostly locked and shuttered – unless one arranges to have coffee and a long, lively talk with Messinas, who in turn passes on the cell phone number of Damianos . . . I am, I told Damianos when I called him, eager to see the interior of a house built by Spyro Houris.

Or *seems* – yet again – to have been built by Spyro Houris. The usual air of uncertainty hovers over this attribution, as it does over the cluster of buildings that make up the heart of the orderly neighborhood, which Houris himself is thought to have planned before the First World War. A “Greek architect” was responsible. Kroyanker speculates that he was the one, as do several other Israeli historians and geographers. Damianos himself is not so sure; the dates don’t make complete sense (I agree), and the style of most of these structures seems distinct from that of Houris’s other buildings, the materials and

construction cruder. But it does appear that Houris was responsible for planning at least some of the buildings in the neighborhood, including this house, where his picture now hangs on the wall.

As the story is usually told, at the end of the nineteenth century a forward-looking Greek archimandrite named Efthimios took it upon himself to buy up some 1,000 dunams (or 250 acres) of farmland in the south of Jerusalem. Having formed a building association, he proceeded to arrange a lottery for these coveted plots, on which the winners would be responsible for constructing their own homes. First, a community center and four adjoining houses were erected. Then, at some point between 1902 – the date inscribed on the community center’s lintel – and the moment sixteen years later when in the midst of the Great War German air force planes swooped over the city and snapped a series of remarkably sharp aerial photographs, Houris (or someone) built another sixteen houses along the same tidy grid.

While the enterprising archimandrite may genuinely have been interested in alleviating congestion within the Old City walls, where most of the community then lived in severely cramped conditions, his goals were also – as is almost always the case in Jerusalem – political. It appears he was eager to create a strong Greek presence beyond those walls, and the establishment of this upscale residential neighborhood was just part of his plan. With the bursting coffers of the patriarchate available to him – pilgrims had been bringing gifts and making donations for centuries – he began to buy land elsewhere as well. He established a row of shops in the booming Ottoman town square that filled the plaza outside the Jaffa Gate, built a grand new hotel (called, as it happens, the Grand New Hotel) right inside it, and purchased a large Crusader-era market known as the Mauristan in the Christian Quarter. Part of that suq now bears his name.

When the war began, the pilgrims stopped coming, the money ran dry, and the church was forced to sell off or lease certain properties, including large tracts in that area known as Nikephoria, where the King David Hotel and the YMCA would eventually be built. But it was in large part due to Efthimios and other entrepreneurial ecclesiastics like him that the Greek Church became what it is today: one of the most powerful landholders in the entire country, owner of more real estate in Israel than any single entity besides the state itself. The fact that the church still lays claim to such vast and sensitive tracts of land makes its history much more than the object of dusty antiquarian curiosity. The most pressing present-tense power struggles revolve around these holdings, as in 2005, for instance, when the patriarch was ousted by the local Arab community. Demoted to the rank of monk, he was, he claimed, forcibly locked inside the church compound for several years, his groceries hoisted up to him on a rope. Allegedly he’d conspired to sell Efthimios’s Jaffa Gate hotel and the land around it to a group of Jewish settlers, and so to shore up his standing with the Israeli authorities by helping to “Judaize” Jerusalem.

I am, though, getting ahead of myself, and far ahead of Spyro Houris, who may not have lived to witness such sordid struggles but whose plan for the Greek Colony – if it was indeed his plan – does indicate his close ties to priests and to power. Whether or not he built the whole neighborhood, his links to the church are more than a matter of mere speculation: In the course of my digital wanderings, I’ve happened upon a small item

from the *Palestine Bulletin* of 16 July 1930, announcing that “the honour of Commander of the Order of the Saint of the Sepulchre has been conferred on Mr. Spiro G. Khuri by his Beatitude, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, for presenting the plans of restoring a convent near Jericho, which was destroyed during the earthquake of 1927.” Whatever his religious beliefs, he clearly didn’t share his contemporary Khalil Sakakini’s contempt for the church’s Greek-speaking hierarchy. (Sakakini for his part fiercely objected to foreign control of the church and vowed “to bring to an end Greek tyranny” as he renounced his own Orthodoxy.) If anything, Houris seems to have made his living in part from his connections to it. “They say,” writes Kroyanker, “that the representatives of the Greek Orthodox Church . . . would oblige those who bought land from them to hire the professional services of the Greek Orthodox architects Houris and Petassis.”

Is it so? Looking around the plain main room of the house in the Greek Colony – with its whitewashed walls, high ceilings, and simple wooden window frames, now painted a pale lemon shade – it is not ecclesiastical plotting and prodding that I am thinking about. Rather, I’m trying to imagine Spyro Houris first imagining this house. I am trying to imagine Spyro Houris imagining a house for his beloved.

## **The Greek Doctor’s Daughter**

I’m also trying my hardest to find hard facts – to follow paper trails and architectural patterns, to unearth old photos and yellowing maps – but the saga of Houris’s connection to the Efklides family, for whom this house was built and to whom it belonged until the last of its elderly occupants died there in the 1990s, is far less solid than that. It has about it the air of a legend or fable and can’t be proved, exactly, though the details that emerge from various historical sources and from the memories of those like Damianos, who knew at least some of the cast of characters personally, may be pieced together like a kind of half-remembered dream, somehow spookier for its faintness. Where a ghost is concerned, there will be ghost stories. So:

Once upon a time (in 1891, to be exact) the twenty-seven-year-old Dr. Photios Efklides – a Turkish Greek, born in Brousa, now Bursa, recent graduate of the medical faculty at the university in Constantinople – arrived in Jerusalem. Recruited by the Ottoman authorities to direct the new municipal hospital there, he soon settled into several rooms near the Greek patriarchate in the Old City and started work in one of the grandest buildings on Jaffa Road, which was commonly believed to be haunted.

One account said that the wealthy man who’d built it as his home had died soon after he moved in, and that the next year his son died, and then another relative died . . . and by this point no one wanted to draw near the house, since a curse clearly hung over the imposing structure with its substantial stone gate and its two deep cisterns. According to another often-repeated and more hyperbolically Gothic version of events, the building had been planned as a home for a well-to-do young Arab Catholic couple who were engaged to be married. When the groom died before the wedding, the guests propped his corpse in a chair and led in his lovely young bride, outfitted in her brocade dress, jewels, and veil.

Necrophiliac nuptials of a sort ensued, as ululation accompanied the traditional dance performed with lighted candles by the mother of the groom, who then, it was reported by one contemporary memoirist, “tore her clothes, gave a terrible death cry, and snatched the veil from the bride’s face.” This “violent demonstration of grief evidently killed the mother.” After her death, the building sat derelict for a decade.

Whether such ghoulish rites had really occurred, by the time Efklides arrived in Jerusalem, the authorities had decided to put an end to all the talk of corpses and curses and had assumed control of the abandoned mansion, added the sultan’s intricate seal to the façade, and turned the place into a free hospital for the poor of all races. And within a few years the good doctor had established both himself and the institution as friendly fixtures in town. He became known all around as Dr. Photios, or the Greek Doctor, and the building, too, took on various nicknames – al-Mustashfa (“the hospital”), al-Baladiyya (“municipal [hospital]”), or al-Sihiyya, from the Arabic word for “health,” the very salubrious sound of which implied that Efklides had finally managed to dispel the belief that evil spirits wafted through its hallways. He soon married Maria Samptopolo, a tall, beautiful pilgrim from a village in the Dardanelles, and she gave birth to three small, beautiful children: Alexander, Heleni, and Clio.

Besides running the hospital and a day clinic for peasants from the surrounding countryside, Efklides was now appointed the chief physician of Jerusalem, a role that seems to have entailed a constant shifting of registers. On the one hand, he performed the unglamorous and often exhausting work of a glorified village doctor. While theoretically the hospital was open to all, its patients were primarily poor and Muslim and the hospital’s resources were meager, with two thermometers and one syringe shared on a twelve-bed ward. On the other hand, as a high-ranking Ottoman official, he took part in much of the peacocky pageantry that marked the last years of the old regime, before the Young Turks came to power in 1908. On state occasions, Dr. Photios would don an intricately embroidered uniform, complete with filigreed silver buckles that anchored his elaborate sleeves, and adorn himself with the multiple medals he’d been awarded by both the Greeks and the Turks. In 1901, the sultan himself bestowed on Dr. Photios a firman, a special recognition of his service to the empire. As befitted a man of such standing – a man with such a beautiful wife and beautiful children, such elaborate sleeves, and such imperial honors pinned to his chest and floridly calligraphed on a scroll in his own name – the doctor needed an appropriately impressive house in which to show it all off. So it was that sometime before the Great War broke out, he contracted an architect to build



him a house in the new neighborhood that had sprung up outside the Jaffa Gate, near an ancient pool and the most important Muslim graveyard in Palestine, all of it known as Mamilla or Ma'man Allah, the Shelter of God.

In his 1985 book on “Arab architecture in Jerusalem,” David Kroyanker writes that in 1912 or 1913, Spyro Houris designed a house at 25 Mamilla Road for “the Efkitedes family” – which another historian, who interviewed Heleni Efkliides on her ninetieth birthday, May 25, 1986, corrects as he confirms that it was the *Efkliides* house. By now, one can no longer visit the building (to say nothing of Heleni), since the Mamilla Dr. Photios and his children knew – once a thriving and decidedly messy and mixed Arab, Jewish, Greek, Turkish, German, British, French, Armenian commercial, industrial, and residential district – has been bulldozed. Between 1948 and 1967, No Man’s Land and a mostly Kurdish Jewish slum sprang up there, along the Jordanian border. After Israel annexed East Jerusalem in the wake of the 1967 war, the concrete wall came down and the residents were “cleared” from their homes.

Now – after more than forty years of planning, razing, digging, more planning, delays, construction, and further delays, brought about in part by the discovery of extensive First Temple period and/or Byzantine graves and the violent protests by ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups that followed – the same area is occupied by a flashy \$400 million commercial development. This compound includes a lavish yet antiseptic apartment complex whose units are mostly used as holiday homes by wealthy foreign Jews, an outsized luxury hotel with a predictably bombastic biblical name, and a glitzy Miami-meets-the-Middle-East shopping mall, all of it designed with the trademark aggressively symbolic touch of Israeli-Canadian architect Moshe Safdie.

The construction of this swank compound was apparently meant to erase both the memory of the difficult period of Jerusalem’s history just after 1948 and the seam between Arab East and Jewish West Jerusalem, so attempting to “unify” the still fundamentally divided city. While a certain welcome melding of populations does in fact take place there – as young women in hijabs stroll past young women in head scarves – the presence in this setting of such opulence and such high-end consumerism only underscores other divisions: “In Israel’s poorest city,” writes the clear-eyed, sharp-tongued architecture critic Esther Zandberg, “this colossal project is a stone-clad memorial to the sin of hubris.”

And for all the talk of “unifying” the parts and people of Jerusalem, the very Israeli Mamilla complex is hardly neutral or common ground in political terms. While the developers took great pains to dismantle and then reconstruct, stone by numbered stone, the house in which Theodor Herzl once spent the night (this is now occupied by a café called Herzl, catty-corner from the Rolex store), the reconfigured façade of the Efkliides residence – unmarked – is all that remains of what may be Spyro Houris’s first building in Jerusalem. The inside has been razed and replaced by a darkly cavernous pop-music-blasting atrium occupied by a blur of chain stores, among them the Gap, Bug Computers, American Eagle, and a lingerie store called Whispers.

Other erasures have also taken place, as Kroyanker has since published a thick, glossy Hebrew album of a book about the history of the neighborhood and its “renewal” – commissioned by the project’s Tel Aviv-based developer – in which he leaves out all

mention of the Efklides building and of Houris. Meanwhile, down the street and near what once was the mufti's Palace Hotel (now an elaborately refurbished and rather garishly decorated Waldorf Astoria that caters to well-heeled religious Jews from abroad), the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center is currently constructing what may be the ultimate stone-clad memorial to the sin of hubris, a \$250 million Museum of so-called Tolerance, built directly over a large part of the cemetery of Ma'man Allah, which tradition holds dates to the seventh century and contains both the remains of several companions of the Prophet Muhammad and the twelfth-century graves of thousands of Saladin's soldiers. The area continued to serve as a burial place for some of Jerusalem's most distinguished Muslim families right until 1948.

No less renowned an architect than Frank Gehry (né Goldberg) was first hired to plan the museum and – thinking in the monumentally swooping, metallic terms of Los Angeles's Walt Disney Concert Hall or the Bilbao Guggenheim but not, it seems, in terms of all those dusty old skeletons buried in the Jerusalem earth – he designed one of his characteristically chaotic and commanding structures. Complete with sixteen undulating titanium “Pillars of Tolerance,” which would have held the 118-foot-tall building aloft and, according to the museum's sponsors, “be seen from miles away,” the building would also have featured a bulbous Grand Hall, which Gehry described as symbolizing the “living room” of Jerusalem, “because of its openness on all sides” (a peculiar conceit for a museum built in a city that the Israeli powers that be have blocked off from the West Bank and its Palestinian population by means of a snaking twenty-five-foot-high concrete wall and multiple corral-like checkpoints). For reasons that may have had more to do with budgets than politics and the international uproar that arose with the announcement of the plans to build an institution dedicated to tolerance right on top of this major Muslim graveyard, Gehry eventually dropped out – insisting all the while that he continued to consider the project “vitaly important.” In an official statement, he proclaimed his admiration for the idea of the museum, which “will serve as the embodiment of human respect and compassion.” He was replaced with a far less famous husband-and-wife team of Tel Aviv architects, who rendered plans for a very different (more restrained) sort of building – though whatever one may or may not say about the relative merits of their design, the museum's charged location and goals didn't shift in the slightest with Gehry's departure. According to news reports, the prominent American rabbi in charge of the whole perverse production has explained that one section of this self-proclaimed “Center for Human Dignity” will “deal with the question of ‘How did the Jews survive for 3,500 years?’” while the other will “confront Israel's issues as they are today, domestic and international issues, but not the Middle East peace process . . . It's not,” he has explained, “about the experience of the Palestinian people . . . When they have a state, they'll have their own museum.”

Shopping malls and cultural centers may, in other words, be just as haunted as houses. Built over graves of all ages and sorts, the whole neighborhood seems to me teeming with phantoms.

But while the Efklides house in Mamilla is gone, another exists – the simple structure in the Greek Colony, where, along with the picture of Spyro Houris and that elaborately

carved wooden chair, Anastas Damianos now shows me Dr. Photios's framed Greek-language Ottoman medical license and his ornate swirl of a gold-lettered firman.

The circumstances that led to the construction of this building are also vague, though at some point it seems Efklides's fortunes turned. Maybe the curse of the hospital building had attached itself to the Greek doctor, maybe he was just unlucky, but first his marriage to the beautiful Maria Samptopolo curdled and they separated. Then, in May 1916, in the midst of the war, as a typhus epidemic swept the city and sent him scrambling to try to save as many lives as he could, Dr. Photios himself succumbed to the illness. He was fifty-two years old, and his funeral was, according to one eyewitness, "truly a demonstration of sorrow," an embodiment of all the grief then washing over the town, together with the dread disease. The hospital lost not just its director during this infectious interlude, but its pharmacist, secretary, and three nurses. Dr. Photios's demise was a major event. One Hebrew newspaper reported that "The Doctor Is Dead" and described how his "geniality and fine character" had drawn a "large and impressive" crowd to his burial. Dignitaries and doctors, consuls and clerks, army officers and eminent people "of all the communities of our city" assembled to lead him to his grave in the Greek Orthodox cemetery on Mount Zion.

In a last will and testament drawn up just a month before his death – and, it would seem, in sober awareness of the very real dangers he faced as he labored on the typhus ward – Dr. Photios left his fortune to his three children, together with a small provision for his estranged wife, various shops and buildings to the Greek community of which he'd been such an upstanding member, and all his books to the Greek hospital inside the Old City. As he requested in plain terms that his children not live with their mother, it seems he may also have left an unwritten directive for Spyro Houris to plan for them that small house in the Greek Colony. While the house is often described as having been built at the start of the century, when the doctor was still alive, the photographs snapped by those German air force planes in 1918 show an empty lot where the house stands today. Subsequent maps – from 1925, 1926, and 1927 – reveal the same blank spot, though by 1929 government cartographers had taken care to ink in a little box of a house on that corner.

Whenever it was that the walls of the building were constructed, the Efklides siblings eventually found themselves living in close quarters there. Though their home was modest and the money their father left them dwindling, they somehow still carried themselves as the privileged children of the great doctor, whose nameplate they affixed like a charm to the building's entrance. Dandyish Alexander taught English at the Berlitz School but wore white gloves after hours and drove a fancy Fiat; the sisters were both widely known for their good looks and their glamour.

Their mother, meanwhile, had fallen on harder times, and where she called home in those years is not clear. After 1948, Maria Samptopolo somehow ended up a refugee in the Old City, then Jordan, while her grown children remained on the Israeli side. One longtime resident of the Christian Quarter remembers this formerly wealthy and elegant woman ("very lofty in her ways") impoverished, borrowing money from whoever would loan it – until Clio somehow arranged to cross the border and bring her mother back to the Greek Colony house, where she eventually died.



Long before that, though, and in circumstances that also remain frustratingly hazy, the often unlucky Efklides family had reason once more to celebrate, as pretty Heleni announced that she was engaged to be married – to the architect Spyro Houris.

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#### **Photographs**

1. The Gelat Villa, Talbiya, photographed by the author.
2. Hajj Mahmud's apartment house, Romema, photographed by the author.
3. Jaffa Road buildings planned, it seems, by Spyro Houris, near Zion Square: American Colony Photographers, from the G. Eric and Edith Matson Collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.
4. Spyro G. Houris stone signature, photographed by the author.
5. Ad from *Doar haYom*, 17 November 1919.
6. Spyro G. Houris, from David Kroyanker, *Shekhunot Yerushalayim: Talbiya, Katamon vemaMoshavah haYevanit* [Neighborhoods of Jerusalem: Talbiya, Katamon, and the Greek Colony] (Jerusalem: Keter, 2002).
7. Dr. Photios with Heleni and Clio, courtesy of Zalman Greenberg.
8. Heleni Efklides, Talbiya, 1930s, courtesy of Alex Corfiatis, Anastos Damianos, and the Greek community of West Jerusalem.