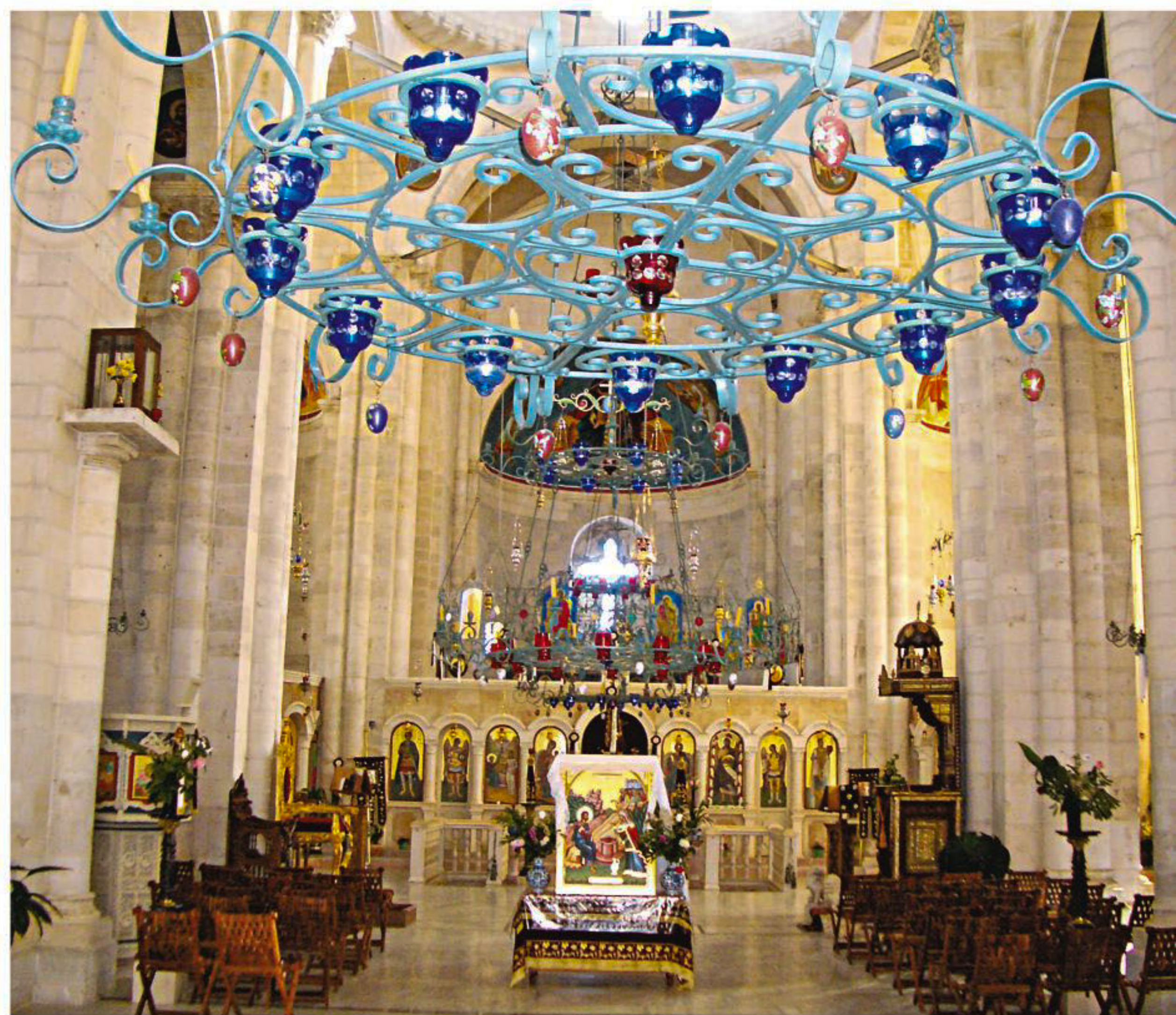


After page 12

Roaming around, expelled from their place of birth, the people of Yafa joined those from Haifa and other adjacent villages in the Balata refugee camp. In 1950, UNRWA, the United Nations organisation working for Palestinian refugees, built this provisional camp, with tents, to accommodate 5,000 people. However, it has been a long time since that number increased and the fabric used as partitions have fallen. Nowadays, the walls (though still weak) are of cement. For the people living here, these houses continue to be temporary, as they hope to return to their homes. This is where they live, but not where they are from, they confess with pride. Several generations have already been here in the camps; however, in the lands that were usurped, they maintain their signs of identity.

One of the identity symbols of anyone from Balata is the enormous key that opens the bolt of the abandoned house in 1948. Besides, passion for football causes the team of the camp, Markaz Balata, to serve as a common identifier. On the other hand, the incursions of the Israeli army, the continuous arrests and the shootings



Jacob's well



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help to define the enclave, a square made up of three streets and several passages, so narrow that it is almost impossible to walk through them. In fact, to move furniture from one place to another, or even to take out a dead body from some of the buildings, it is necessary to use the terraces and move whatever is necessary through the ceilings of the houses in the camp.

The camp does not have orchards between its cement, but rather an oasis of calm, the Yafa Cultural Center. Since its founding in 1996, it offers diverse activities in its headquarters, next to one of the UNRWA schools, and between graffitied alleys. There was a time when about a thousand boys and girls enjoyed activities such as summer camps, dance, photography or film classes. An interest in the last led them to direct their own short films and to exhibit, during several years, some of the movies from the film festival called AMAL, hope.

The hope of keeping the center as an enclave of cultural resistance makes the institution stand, in spite of the difficulties, due to different crises that caused aid to the Palestinian population

to diminish. This is how one of the coordinators of the center, Ibrahim, who was only 11 years old when it was created, remembers its founders—who are either deceased or jailed in Israeli prisons—such as Nasser Awis, convicted for belonging to one of the militias in the camp of Balata after being imprisoned in 2002.

It was 2002 the year that Ibrahim began to rank. It was because of a projectile that killed two children at his side and left other people injured. That day, one of the Palestinian combatant flanks carried out a suicide bombing at a hotel in Netanya where 30 people died and 140 were injured. Retaliation spread throughout Palestine and Balata returned to being filled with tanks, to which the smallest ones responded by throwing stones. Ibrahim could not attend the funeral of his friends because he spent two weeks at the ICU.

Ibrahim's father was born in Haifa and his mother in Tantura, a seafaring village



connected to the previous one and that the partition plan placed within the Jewish state. Like more than 400 other villages, Tantura was destroyed and occupied, and most of its 1,500 inhabitants massacred, reports Ibrahim: "The Zionist brigades slaughtered and executed all but two men, saved by a miracle."

Another miracle happened in Tantura. At present in the lands of the maternal village of Ibrahim are the Kibbutz Nehsolim and the Moshav Dor. When the first settlers arrived, they occupied the abandoned houses and

then built new ones. Legend has it that when the excavators tried to destroy the mausoleum of the famous local sheikh al-Majrami, the blades of the bulldozers fell apart. That is why, today, this *maqam*, mausoleum, still stands.

Ibrahim still stands, despite his personal and social difficulties. He continues at the Yafa Cultural Center with the same excitement he began with as a child, aware of the progress. Now, the center's objectives are the promotion of a cultural, artistic, humanitarian, egalitarian education, with the support of voluntary work and with psychological help for those who need it, always keeping in mind the history of their people and the right to return. However, the economic difficulties and the external pressure against the aid to Palestinian are making the center suffer and the number of courses and programmes have declined due to the lack of necessary minimum money to sustain these.



Necessary for Balata, as for any other refugee camp, the Yafa Cultural Center is a bulwark against isolation, a place of protection and relief that leaves hope and that is projected in the illusion of those keys that await open again, someday, the bolt that was once separated from them.

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