

KARIMEH ABBUD
LADY-PHOTOGRAPHER
کریمه عبود * مصورة نساء



Karimeh Abbud

*Early Woman
Photographer
(1896-1955)*

Ahmad Mrowat

The recent discovery of the studio portraits of Karimeh Abbud ('Lady Photographer' as she used to identify herself) will undoubtedly compel us to re-evaluate the history of Palestinian photography. The Abbud family is well known in Nazareth as a family of great learning. Her grandfather, Salim Abbud, studied pharmacy at the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut, and then later went on to become the senior pharmacist of the Nazareth English Hospital, founded in 1861 by the Armenian physician, Kaloost Vartan, and supported by the Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society (EMMS).¹ Her father was Rev. As'ad Abbud, a well known Protestant minister who served in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Haifa, and Nazareth.² According to Rafiq Farah, an authority on the Protestant churches in Palestine, the family's origin is from southern Lebanon. His name was Sai'ed and not As'ad, and he served as a lay preacher in Shefa Amr (1891-1899) and later joined the Lutheran Church and became a pastor and

Karimah Abbud and her camera, Haifa, 1920s. Photo by C. Swaid.

served in Bayt Jala from 1899 until 1905 when he was transferred to Bethlehem. He was ordained as a Lutheran pastor on 26 September, 1909; he died in his native village Khiam in Lebanon in June 1949.³

As'ad Abbud's constant travel in Palestinian cities and villages exposed Karimeh from her youth to the varied landscape of the country. Eventually they settled in Bethlehem, where Rev. Abbud became the parish priest and Karimeh was given her first camera in 1913 as a gift for her 17th birthday. Karimeh became obsessed with her magical machine and she took and developed on her own numerous pictures of her family members, friends and the Bethlehem landscape.

Karimeh, together with her close cousins, Mateel and Shafiqah, attended the Schmidt Girls School in Jerusalem. All three went on to the American University of Beirut for their university education. Karimeh attained a degree in Arabic literature. Her cousin, Shafiqah (born 1894), studied medicine and became a gynecologist at the Akka Government hospital during the 1920s. Shafiqah's elder sister Mateel (Matilda) studied English literature and, in 1926, became one of the first Palestinian women teachers at the Government School in Nazareth.

Working from home in the early 1920s, Karimeh began to earn money by taking pictures of women and children, and then by taking wedding and ceremonial pictures. Her first signed picture (at least that I was able to find) is dated October 1919. During the same period, she



Little Olga, daughter of Kalthum Odeh, the famous Nazareth scholar from Leningrad, Nazareth 1920s. Photo by Karimah Abbud.



Suhaila, Aida and Siham Haddad, undated, Nazareth. Photo by Karimah Abbud.



Abbud family photo, Nazareth 1903. Karimah is the child seated second from right. Grandfather Salim is in the front row. Photographer unknown.

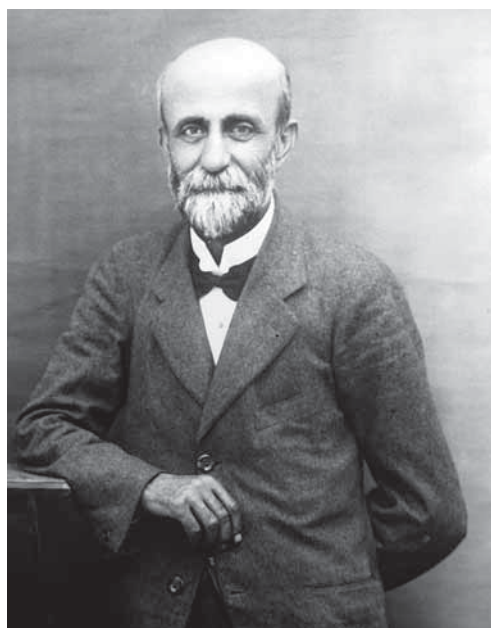


Nahda Theatrical Group and Literary Club, Nazareth, 1946. Photo by Karimah Abbud.

took numerous photos of public spaces in Haifa, Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Tiberias. As a student in Beirut, she made a special trip to Baalbek to shoot the archeological sites.

By the early 1930s, Karimeh became a professional photographer. We do not know exactly when she opened her own studio, but it seems that she rose to prominence in her native Nazareth when the local photographer Fadil Saba moved to Haifa, and she became highly in demand in taking wedding and portraits. We have two of her stamps from this period. They announced her in Arabic and English: “Karimeh Abbud – Lady Photographer – مصرية عبود: مصورة شمس”. By the mid-‘30s, she began to offer hand-painted copies of her studio portraits, of which few samples have survived (here see the picture of her cousin, Lydia Abbud).

The death of Karimeh’s parents in the 1940s led to dramatic changes in her life. She moved to Jerusalem, and then to Bethlehem, and continued to practice her profession there. In three letters dated 1941 from Bethlehem to her cousins Shafiqah and Mateel, she discusses her photographic work and the need to prepare a printed album of her work, apparently as a means of publicity. In those letters, she expressed her wishes to go back to Nazareth.⁴ The war of 1948 left us with an unknown trajectory for the life and work of Karimeh Abbud. We do not know if she was caught by the war outside the area that came under Israeli control, or if she actually moved back to Nazareth. What is known is that for the



Salim Abbud, Karimah’s grandfather in Nazareth, circa 1920. Photo by Karimah Abbud.



Nurse in Acre Government Hospital, undated. Photo by Karimah Abbud.



Lydia Abbud, Karimah's cousin, Nazareth, 1924(?). Photo by Karimah Abbud.



Picnic, undated. Photo by Karimah Abbud.



Lydia Abbud, Bethlehem, 1931, in one of the early hand-painted photographs by Karimah Abbud.



Dr. Shafiqah Abbud, 1923. Photo by Karimah Abbud.

last 50 years most of her collection has been lost, even though she spent her final days in Nazareth, where she died in 1955.

An event took place in 2006, however, that throws new light on Abbud's fate. An Israeli antiquarian collector by the name of Boki Boazz placed an ad in the local Arabic papers enquiring about the Karimeh Abbud collection. It transpired that he had attained a number of her photographs from a house in the Qatamon neighborhood in Jerusalem, which was abandoned by its owners during the war. Presumably, she had lived there from 1930 to 1948. He had in his possession some 400 photographs, many of them signed by the photographer. They included studio portraits of



Andoline Hawwa, Akka, 1949. Photo by Karimah Abbud.

women, children, and families, as well as landscape pictures from Palestinian and Jordanian localities. I was able finally to add, through purchase, his collection to mine, and we finally have a substantial treasury from the work of this hitherto unknown photographer.

Ahmad Mrowat is researcher and director of the Nazareth Archive Project.

Endnotes

¹ Salim Effendi Abbud left behind a diary of one hundred pages, which includes his student years in Beirut, where he graduated in 1871. The college later became known as the American University of Beirut. Dr. Kaloost Vartan (1839-1908) was a leading pioneer of preventive medicine in Palestine.

² Information about Karimeh Abbud and her family in this essay is derived from the Abbud family in Nazareth. I want to express special gratitude to Mr. D'aibes Abbud, and Ms. Maha Odeh for making available to me family papers and photographs. Karimeh's studio albums and other pictures are in my possession. They were acquired in the manner described later on in this short essay.

³ Communication from Rev. Rafiq Farah, 17 October, 2007 .

⁴ Interview with Maha Odeh Abbud, September 2007, Nazareth.