

The Proverbial *Shatha* in Early Twentieth-Century Jerusalem

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The invention of the daguerreotype in France in 1839 revolutionized the way in which people recorded their experiences.¹ Not only could people write or paint to remember, but now they could also freeze an image on glass and record it. This discovery immediately led to a flurry of portrait studios. And inevitably the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought a burst of photography in Palestine with such well-known names as Yessai Garabedian, Garabed Krikorian, Khalil Raad, and Daoud Abdo in Jerusalem, and ‘Isa Sawabini and Daoud Sabounji in Jaffa.²

Most accounts about Palestinian history have heavily relied on written or oral sources – British government documents, records of the Palestinian national movement, oral histories, and autobiographies. However, in this essay I will examine Palestinian social history during the late Ottoman and British Mandate periods through a visual art form – amateur photography. These photographs provide us with a rare glimpse into the quotidian cultural and social life of Palestinians.

The urban middle class population who could afford cameras were inspired by early portrait photographers and quickly became budding amateur photographers who recorded their lives and the lives of their loved ones. With cameras in hand, they began to snap family gatherings, picnics, and outings in different parts of Palestine, such as Jericho, the Dead Sea, Lake Tiberias, Jaffa, and beyond.

This photo essay will focus on the Jerusalemite *shatha* (“outing” in colloquial Arabic, pl. *shathat*). Captured on photographic paper and frozen in time, these outings provide us with a window into pre-1948 Palestinian social history. Not



Image 1: A picnic on the outskirts of Jerusalem, c. 1905, photographer unknown. From the author's collection.

only will we delve into the ethnography of these early days of Palestinian history, but we will also be encouraged to experience “nostalgia and the inspiration for continued struggle.”³

Why choose outings? The Palestinian *shatha* has always interested me. Being the daughter of a Nakba refugee family living in the diaspora, I have spent many hours dreaming about our lost homeland pre-1948. I grew up on stories my mother would tell me about her youthful days exploring different parts of her cherished *Falasteen*. She would open her maroon leather-covered photo album and start to recite every name and every place, almost as though her memories had been blocked inside her all this time, only to surge forward with force the moment she saw the photographs.

As an avid collector of old black and white photos of Palestinians dating from the Ottoman and Mandate periods, I always sought out opportunities to scan Palestinian collections. My best source was every Palestinian home I happened to enter. I'd ask if my hosts had been lucky enough to rescue their photos during and after the Nakba. If they had, I'd ask permission to scan them. They always obliged with generosity and enthusiasm, as it gave them an occasion to recount their stories and revisit their memories. As soon as I began scanning, I was sure to discover various photos taken on outings, picnics and social gatherings. I asked myself, why did the urban Jerusalemite middle class go on so many outings? Is the *shatha* phenomenon particular to urban Palestinians because they felt divorced from the land? Or were they enjoying nature as a source of leisure, rather than tilling the soil?

Jerusalemites have had a long tradition of leaving the confines of the Old City to enjoy nature and the great outdoors. I am not sure the phenomenon can be observed throughout Palestine, but I would surmise that for most Jerusalemites, who were living cramped between the walls of the Old City, getting out to open spaces was a true delight. Don't

forget that the residents of the Old City must have felt additionally claustrophobic when in the evenings the gates of the city were locked at sunset by the authorities, presumably for protection. Therefore, living in such crowded and tight quarters, I can imagine that Jerusalemites itched to get out of the rampart walls *la y'shimou el-hawa* (literally “to smell the air”). So where did they go? How did they travel?

Wasif Jawhariyyeh, a celebrated Jerusalemite, musician, poet, and chronicler, enlightens us in his memoirs with descriptions of the many religious festivals in Jerusalem, celebrated outdoors and outside the walls of the Old City. One of them was the Festival of Our Lady Mary, when in early August, entire families would exit the Old City and climb up to the Mount of Olives and spend a fortnight around the Church of Mary's Tomb. They would set up tents or hang sheets from the branches of olive trees and enjoy a diet of fruit and vegetables, as is traditionally done during the religious fasting period preceding the feast. For entertainment there would be street vendors selling their wares and musicians who gladly played their oud or *darbuka* to entertain the campers.⁴

Some summer outings were not connected to religious feasts, but instead were opportunities in the summer to leave the hot Old City and enjoy the coolness and greenery of the neighboring hills. Some people would remain there until sunset, feasting under trees or awnings, eating roasted chickpeas, buying sweets and nuts from vendors who circulated between the trees, while others smoked their water pipes or drank coffee and played backgammon.⁵

Palestinians have always had a close connection to their land and to nature's beauty. Numerous authors have described with relish their early enjoyment of the great outdoors. Serene Hussein Shahid, in her memoir entitled *Jerusalem Memories*, describes her love of nature instilled by her father's love of long hikes: “I have discovered that my happiest recollections are of places rather than of people. After all, people die and take away part of us with them, while places live forever. So I close my eyes and go to Jericho in winter, Sharafat in summer, and Jerusalem in spring.”⁶ Later, she writes: “We always spent our winter vacations in Jericho. Father was a great lover of long walks, and with him I covered its exotic roads and alleys on foot, passing through the green orange orchards and banana gardens out to the dusty roads beyond the town. No matter which direction we took, our walk always seemed to lead us to a historical or a beautiful sight.”⁷

The earliest photograph I own that depicts a Palestinian *shatha* was taken around 1905 (Image 1). My four great-uncles, the Sidawi men, ranging in age from thirty-year-old Daoud to fourteen-year-old 'Afif, are seen posing in this photograph. In the back, a little boy in a sailor suit sits on the back of a donkey. A big picnic basket is prominently shown in the foreground. We also see a few straw hats, a couple of walking sticks, a young girl carrying a cloth-covered cooking pot or basket on her lap, and a checkered tablecloth laid down between seated people. There is something very genteel, very nineteenth-century French or Russian about this photograph – the white clothing of most of the women, with their high collars and lace; the adolescent men in white shirts with rounded collars; and the men with their thick, upturned mustaches, their suits, vests, and bow ties. And in back, juxtaposed with the elegant white clothes, two women wear traditional Palestinian clothing with headscarves covering their heads.



Image 2: A mother and her daughters picnic near a windmill, 1910, photographer unknown. From the private photo collection of Tania and Hanna Nasir.



Image 3: Picking wild flowers, Jerusalem, c. 1947, photographer unknown. From the author's collection.



Image 4: Hiking to the Mount of Temptation, Jericho, c. 1946, photographer unknown. From the author's collection.

Another photograph, taken in 1910, reveals a mother and her two daughters having a picnic with a windmill in the background (Image 2). It could possibly be the Montefiore windmill – the first Jewish-owned mill, shipped over from Ramsgate, England, by Sir Moses Montefiore. It was built in 1857 in order to grind wheat for flour. Located in the center of Yemin Moshe, in Jerusalem, it continued to function as a mill until 1876, when it was superseded by the new steam-powered windmill brought into the German Colony by the Templers. Over the ensuing years it fell into disrepair.⁸

However, I am more inclined to think that the windmill in this photograph is the one in the neighborhood of Rehavia, Jerusalem, built, owned and administered by the Greek Orthodox (Rum) Church as a

social project to provide the poor with flour and bread. This mill used a combination of engine power and wind, but went out of use in 1873 when the steam-powered one began to operate in the German Colony.⁹

Returning to the photograph, the mother, seen in profile on the right, is Sa'ada Shatara Nasir with her two daughters, Nabiha in the center and Ni'meh on the left. In 1924, Nabiha established Birzeit Higher School, in the town of Birzeit, north of Jerusalem, and in 1942 it adopted the name Birzeit College.¹⁰ Her sister Ni'meh taught English at the school.¹¹ They are sitting amid large boulders, enjoying a repast. Ni'meh is carrying a bottle of some beverage, while Nabiha is holding in both hands a large white cup. Their summer hats lie strewn among the rocks.

Picking wildflowers in the springtime was almost a national pastime.¹² Linda Farraj, a retired Palestinian schoolteacher, remembers with pleasure how much she enjoyed picking wildflowers with her friends:

From Jerusalem we would drive all the way to the ice factory on the way to Bethlehem. I just loved standing on the running board of the car, hanging on to the window while the car was moving along. The moment I saw the flowers I wanted to pick, I'd yell to the driver to stop. There was lots of open land around and we'd hop off the car, and rush down to pick *dam al-masih* [the Lord's blood, *Adonis annua*, better known as pheasant's eye], and *she'eeh* [poppies], and *'arn al-ghazal* [cyclamen]. We also picked wild gladiolas. Sometimes between the flowers we'd find little wild beans, or peas, we used to call *jalathun* [*pisum fulvum*].¹³



Image 5: Siting atop the Mount of Temptation, Jericho, a man holds a phonograph record up for the camera, c. 1946, photographer unknown. From the author's collection.



Image 6: Dancing on the Mount of Temptation, Jericho, c. 1946, photographer unknown. From the author's collection.

Hala Sakakini, in her memoir *Jerusalem and I*, describes her love of nature and her fond memories of the outings she, her sister Dumia, and her mother used to take together:

Dumia and I owe our love of nature in the first place to our parents. Both of them found joy in the out-of-doors. Mother preferred taking us out into the country to paying social calls. During the holidays and especially on warm sunny days in winter and spring, she would prepare sandwiches and take along fruit and we would set out on foot to the open fields on the outskirts of Jerusalem where we would choose a comfortable rock to sit on, or an olive tree for shade. ... Dumia and I would roam the area picking wild flowers and basking in the warm sunshine and the fresh air.¹⁴

I have also interviewed a few Palestinian octogenarians about their memories of *shathat*. Again and again it is clear how much they loved the beauty of their country and how much they enjoyed these social outings.

Alfred Farradj, a retired small business owner, had a thick brown leather album packed with photos from his youth. He showed them to me with pride as though they were his trophies.

My friends and cousins loved our outings to Wadi al-Mujib, to the hot springs on the other side of the Dead Sea. We would bring our bathing suits with us and swim in the warm water. We would also go to Wadi al-Qilt on the way to Jericho, a short way from Jerusalem. There were no paved roads, and we had to hike or ride donkeys to reach those places, but the sceneries were beautiful and it was truly worth our efforts to reach them.

Another outing with our friends was going to the very top of the Mount of Temptation, Quruntul as we called it, near Jericho.¹⁵ There was a spring at the bottom of the hill, ‘Ayn al-Sultan, where we used to eat; then we would hike up above the convent to the very top of the mountain. The view from up there was magnificent. We used to carry our gramophone and records with us all the way up the hill, and we would turn that vista point into a ballroom floor and dance our hearts away.¹⁶

Mimi Mouchabek, a retired UN worker who also had a voluminous collection of photographs, shared her favorite *shatha* stories with me:

One time I will never forget. A group of us decided to make a tabbouleh and take it with us to a lovely picnic area to enjoy. We also took a bottle of ‘arak and we started to hike beyond Upper Baq’a down to the open fields of Bayt Safafa. George Farraj had brought some reinforced paper, which he meticulously fashioned into little cups that resembled wine glasses and we poured our ‘arak into them and scooped up our tabbouleh with lettuce leaves. Who needed cups and plates and forks?



Image 7: On the truck to Jericho, c. 1946, photographer unknown. From author's collection.



Image 8: A large group poses by 'Ayn al-Sultan creek in Jericho, c. 1943, photographer unknown. From the author's collection.

When we could see in the sky that the moon was almost full, we would plan for a *batikh* [watermelon] party. Our house had a nice *sateh* [rooftop], overlooking the Baq‘a valley. On the night of the full moon, we would invite all our friends for a moonlit *batikh* party of sliced watermelon and white cheese. And of course, we danced on the rooftop in the moonlight.

One day as we were planning a day trip to Jericho, we realized that we were too many and couldn't all fit in our cars, so we rented a truck, and all thirty of us were driven to Jericho for the day. We had such a jolly time riding in that truck and singing all the latest radio songs.¹⁷

The young Palestinians pictured in another photograph (Image 7) may have similarly rented a truck to go to Jericho rather than staying home on a Sunday. From 1947 to 1948 there were increasing curfews on private cars and more restrictions on traveling the roads due to skirmishes between Arabs and Jews that inhibited movement for the local population. I can't help but wonder, considering the innocence of youth, whether these happy young people had any inkling of the upcoming turn of events that would lead to their impending catastrophe.

It is interesting to note that the outings included both genders, and often people of all ages, from babies to elders. The types of clothing they wore were much more formal than the clothes people wear today when hiking. During the British Mandate, middle class urban young men dressed in three-piece suits, ties, sports jackets, cardigans, button-down shirts, and leather shoes, resembling the dress of the British colonialists who ruled their country. The young women wore dresses and pleated plaid skirts, sweaters, and pantyhose. Sunglasses for women seemed to have been quite popular.

As for the accoutrements, in a photo taken in Wadi al-Qilt circa 1940 (Image 9), some of the men have cigarettes hanging from their lips, while others are holding walking sticks. The men are all wearing bathing suits. The older man on the right is wearing a single piece suit, rather than the more modern short type.

In a photo of Wadi al-Mujib gorge, taken in 1940, not only can you see a large basket and a type of leather bag or suitcase, which most probably contained the picnic meal, but also several men carrying blankets or rugs over their shoulders to use for sitting on the rocks while they ate (Image 10). Some of the men are wearing shorts and some are adorned with *keffiyehs*, in order to protect themselves from the desert sun. One man has a pair of binoculars hanging around his neck. Perhaps for bird watching? One is carrying a broom – possibly to clear the sand or pebbles from their picnic site. One man seems to be carrying a backpack on his back underneath his carpet.

Swimming in Lake Tiberias was also a favorite activity among young Palestinians. There is something very current and modern about a photograph taken in the mid-1940s (Image 11). These young people could be anywhere in the world. They are timeless, having a wonderful time, pulling on each other's hair, being young and silly.

John Rose, in his memoir about life in Jerusalem, *Armenians of Jerusalem*, recounts his outings to al-Mujib and the Dead Sea:

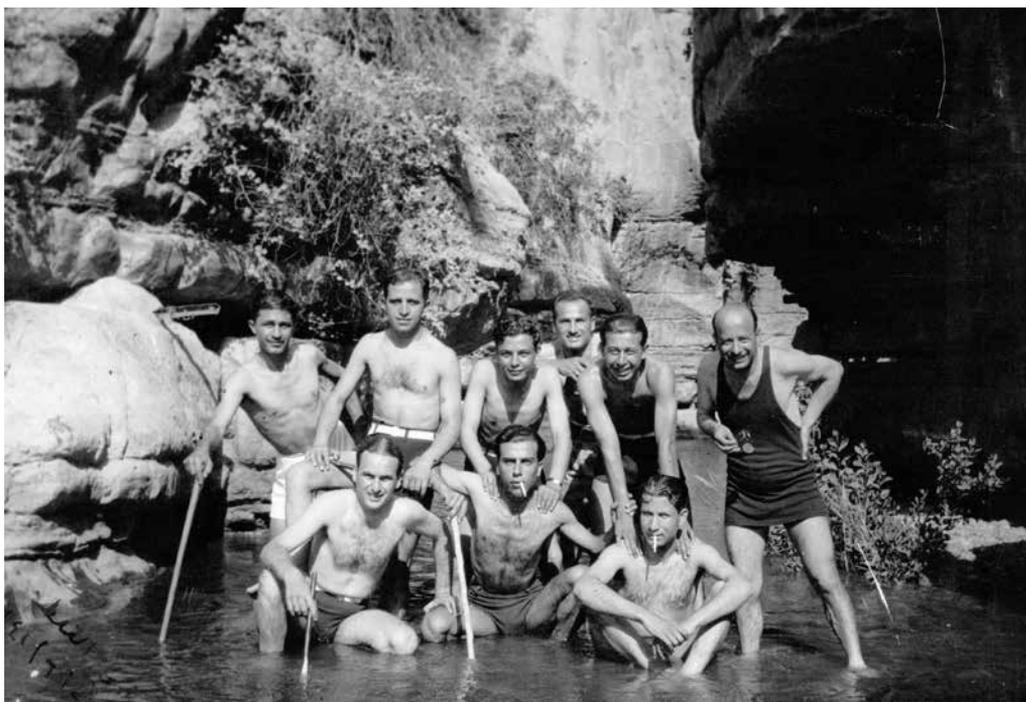


Image 9: A group at Wadi al-Qilt, c. 1940–1945, photographer unknown. From the author’s collection.



Image 10: A large group in Wadi al-Mujib, 1940, photographer unknown. From the author’s collection.



Image 11: Swimming in Lake Tiberias, c. 1946, photographer unknown. From author's collection.

Day trips to the coast were very popular, as were moonlight trips to the Dead Sea. A visit to the Mujib in east Jordan, a spectacular gorge through which the river Arnon flows, was often organized by office employees. After spending a night on the shores of the Dead Sea, where one was normally buzzed by gnats and mosquitoes, a motor launch arrived at dawn to pick up the group. It then lazily made for the eastern shore, stopping briefly at hot sulphur springs. The scenery seemed to change by the minute: in the distance to the east the mountains of Moab and to the west the Judean hills shimmered in various shades of brown, purple, and blue, enhanced by the hot crystal-clear air. On arrival at the gorge a short walk brought us to a waterfall cascading into a series of pools below. Swimming and a picnic lunch flowed, then it was time to make the return boat trip and the journey back to Jerusalem.¹⁸

In a photo taken in the early 1940s, a man is holding his camera, which looks like a Brownie, and has the case strapped on his shoulder, while another a man is pulling a bunch of grapes from the basket and showing it to the photographer (Image 12).

Another photograph shows a hunting trip, another type of *shatha* (Image 13). It comprises men only this time, and a dog. The photo, taken in the early 1940s, looks very European with its German Ford car and its French pointing dog. Two men are reloading their rifles. One is wearing a *jalabiya* – a traditional long gown – and bullets on a belt



Image 12: A group, including a man holding a camera, on a picnic, c. 1945, photographer unknown. From the author's collection.



Image 13: A hunting trip in the Jordan Valley with car and dog, c. 1945, photographer unknown. From the author's collection.



Image 14: A picnic after a hunt, featuring Daoud Abdo, late 1930s, photographer unknown. From the author's collection.

around his waist. A string of dead birds, possibly quails or small pheasants, is hanging from the car emblem. The landscape looks like a large valley, possibly in Transjordan.

A photograph taken in the early 1930s seems to have been shot after a hunting trip, as exhibited by the rifles hanging on the tree in the foreground (Image 14). The well-known photographer Daoud Abdo is reclining in the front, facing the camera. The picnickers are relishing their *shatha*, totally uninhibited, after having taken off their shoes and placing them neatly under the tree or off the blanket to the side. They are savoring their meal and drinks. From the way two of the women are holding their food, they might be eating stuffed grape leaves. Another woman is serving herself from the cooking pot. A saddled horse, their transportation, is resting in the background.

A photograph taken in the mid-1920s shows a large group of people that has just finished their meal (Image 15). They are lounging on the rugs that they brought with them for the picnic. Empty glasses and platters and bottles of beer or wine are seen in the foreground, as is an *argileh* (water pipe). Several of the people are holding musical instruments, which makes me think that they might have had some musical entertainment after their meal. A young boy, Sari Sakakini, the son of Khalil Sakakini, renown teacher, scholar and Arab nationalist, is holding a flute or a harmonica to his mouth, and an older man seated on the right, Saba Abdo, the father of the famous photographer Daoud Abdo, is holding an oud on his lap. Straw hats and tarbushes abound; young children, teenagers, adults, and seniors are together; even an Orthodox priest stands among them, raising his glass of wine.



Image 15: A large group picnicking on the outskirts of Jerusalem, with a basket and bottles in the foreground, c. 1928, photographer unknown. From the collection of Nadia and Teddy Theodorie.



Image 16: People eating on a hill overlooking a valley, late 1930s, photographer unknown. From the author's collection.

Finally, a photograph taken in the late 1930s shows a scene at the top of a hill, with people who are eating joyfully and playfully feeding each other (Image 16). It looks as though they might be eating chicken and rice or *hashweh* (spiced stuffing of meat and rice). The food is laid out on a tablecloth among rocks and they are gathered around it. They brought their pots, ceramic plates, and flatware – plastic containers, paper plates, and disposable forks were not invented yet. The *shatha* seems to be at a high point overlooking a valley. The people are dressed warmly with jackets and coats, as though it might have been a winter day. One woman is wearing a kerchief on her head and an apron, and seems to be serving the food. There is a sense of ease and familiarity among them. They seem so comfortable amid the rocks that surround them.

The photos examined in this essay provided us with many clues about life in pre-1948 Palestine. It is remarkable to see the diversity of *shathat* and the prevalence of photography as a hobby for many urban middle class Palestinians. They seem to have brought their personal cameras everywhere they went in order to record their lives and activities. The *shatha* was certainly a favorite pastime for the urban Palestinians. They enjoyed leaving their city life and exploring the great outdoors; they loved cooking and eating together; they were athletic and playful. They hiked, picked flowers, hunted, and even danced at the top of the Mount of Temptation. They traveled throughout Palestine, reveling in the different landscapes – from the gorges of al-Mujib to the mountains around Jericho and Lake Tiberias. Everywhere they went, they found an opportunity to have fun and to record their memories with their cameras.

Mona Hajjar Halaby is an educator, writer, and collector of photographs, living in Berkeley, California. She has published numerous articles on education and the social history of Jerusalem. Her current project is a book on her mother's life using photographs of Jerusalem during the Mandate period. To view her photo collection and learn more, visit the British Mandate Jerusalemites page on Facebook.

Endnotes

- 1 George Eastman House, and Todd Gustavson, *Camera: A History of Photography from Daguerreotype to Digital* (New York: Sterling Signature, 2012), 6.
- 2 For more on the early photographic pioneers in Palestine see Issam Nassar, "Familial Snapshot: Representing Palestine in the Work of the First Local Photographer," *History & Memory* 18, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 139–155.
- 3 Rochelle Davis, "Commemorating Education: Recollections of the Arab College in Jerusalem, 1918–1948," in *Pilgrims, Lepers, and Stuffed Cabbage: Essays on Jerusalem's Cultural History*, ed. Issam Nassar and Salim Tamari (Washington: Institute of Jerusalem Studies, 2005), 65.
- 4 Wasif Jawhariyyeh, *The Storyteller of Jerusalem: The Life and Times of Wasif Jawhariyyeh, 1904–1948* (Ithaca, NY: Olive Branch Press, 2013), 44–45.
- 5 Jawhariyyeh, *Storyteller of Jerusalem*, 44–45.
- 6 Serene Husseini Shahid, *Jerusalem Memories* (Beirut: Naufal Group, 2000), 21.
- 7 Shahid, *Jerusalem Memories*, 57.
- 8 Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 374.
- 9 Interviews with Nadia and Teddy Theodorie, Bethlehem, July 2009.
- 10 Gabriel Baramki, *Peaceful Resistance: Building a Palestinian University under Occupation* (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 167.
- 11 Baramki, *Peaceful Resistance*, 12.
- 12 Marie Jabaji and Tania Tamari Nasir, *Spring Is Here: Embroidered Flowers of the Palestinian Spring* (Ramallah: Institute For Palestine Studies, 2002).
- 13 Interview with Linda Farraj, El Cerrito, California, 4 January 2003.
- 14 Hala Sakakini, *Jerusalem and I* (Amman: Economic Press Company, 1990), 34.
- 15 The Mount of Temptation was a favorite winter destination for Jerusalemites who enjoyed the warmer weather, and hiking trails. Near Jericho, the Mount of Temptation is said to be the hill in the Judean Desert where Jesus was tempted by the Devil.
- 16 Interviews with Alfred Farradj, El Cerrito, California, 15 April 2004.
- 17 Interviews with Alfred Farradj, El Cerrito, California, 15 April 2004.
- 18 John H. Melkon Rose, *Armenians of Jerusalem: Memories of Life in Palestine* (New York: Radcliff Press, 1993), 162.