

# A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

## The British Mandate Jerusalemites Photo Library



By Mona Hajjar Halaby

In addition to those personal albums, I've obtained photos from the private collections of friends and acquaintances. Every time I enter the home of a Palestinian family, I ask permission to scan their pre-1948 family photos. Sadly, some people have none to offer, as they lost them when driven out of their homes during the *Nakba* of 1948, but others were able to salvage their albums.

I wanted to make my collection accessible to photo aficionados and researchers interested in the social history of Palestine. My first thought was to publish a book of photographs; however, it became clear that it would be costly and wouldn't reach many people. A friend suggested I create a social media page to share my photos. I'm glad I followed her advice.

And that's how *British Mandate Jerusalemites Photo Library* was born. From the start, I knew I wanted to post photos without inviting political debates. There are other venues and forums where



Naim Adranly in the doorway of the Damiani optician shop, Jerusalem, early 1940s. Source: Adranly Family Photo Collection.

people can express their political views. I believe that photos are powerful tools that speak for themselves. My collection illustrates Palestine's rich history, culture, and

Young men and women picking wildflowers in springtime on the outskirts of Jerusalem toward Bethlehem, c. 1940. Source: Halaby Family Photo Collection.



A few years ago, during one of my visits to Jerusalem, I sat down for lunch at the Bistro at Notre Dame Guest House with Vera, a Jerusalem friend. As we savored our meal, a Palestinian friend of hers, unknown to me, came up to our table to greet her. I listened quietly to their conversation when I heard the woman tell Vera excitedly, "Did you see today's photos on British Mandate Jerusalemites?" Vera laughed heartily and introduced me as the creator of that page. The woman stood in shock and exclaimed how honored she was to meet a celebrity!

I am no celebrity, only the humble curator of *British Mandate Jerusalemites Photo Library* (BMJ), a Facebook page that posts old black-and-white photos of Jerusalem and its residents during the British Mandate period.

It all began in 2014 when I considered what to do with my extensive collection of black-and-white digitized photos of Palestine dating from the late Ottoman days up to 1948. I had acquired over 20,000 photos in all, some of which I'd inherited from relatives who had photos of their special occasions, like family weddings, picnics, school graduations, athletic events, and more.

society. Although I definitely feel strongly about the situation in Palestine, I make sure to keep the conversation on BMJ focused on everyday life in Jerusalem in the first half of the twentieth century. My page depicts the sophisticated social and intellectual life of urbanite Palestinians in Jerusalem pre-1948.

One of my goals as the curator of this online archive is to allow the stories of Palestinians to be told through old black-and-white photos lest they be forgotten, and to preserve Palestinian history for generations to come. For most Palestinians who lost their homes in 1948, family photos are the only relics of the lives they led in Palestine, the only tangible proof that chronicles their stories and the way of life that shaped them before the *Nakba*.

For Palestinians scattered in the diaspora, *British Mandate Jerusalemites Photo Library* has become a place to congregate and reconnect with friends all over the

world. It has served as a bridge. Children and grandchildren of survivors of the *Nakba* all over the globe – in Sydney, Dubai, Paris, Beirut, New York – are meeting up and exchanging information. It doesn't matter where you live. When you're on BMJ, you're bound to find a long-lost relative, friend, acquaintance, fellow student or teacher, colleague. This connection in the diaspora has been a pleasant and unexpected surprise for me as the curator of this collection. I never anticipated that my page could take on a life of its own.

For non-Palestinians, BMJ has been an educational tool that has showcased our people and our society. An American friend browsing through BMJ recently looked at a Palestinian wedding photograph from the 1920s, and exclaimed, "This looks just like my grandmother's wedding photo!" Those photos form a bridge. They break down the notion of "otherness."

Young men and women dancing at the top of the Mount of Temptation, Jericho, c. 1944.  
Source: Halaby Family Photo Collection.

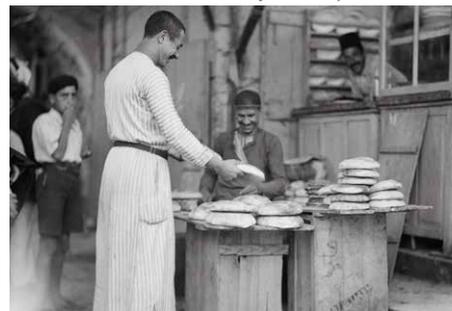


History books list political events that have shaped the world, but photographs fill the spaces between them. They're the untold stories that would have fallen between the cracks had it not been for the photographers who captured them. Family photos embody candid oral histories that form an integral part of understanding Palestinian social history.

Grocer standing in front of his store in the Old City of Jerusalem, c. 1910.  
Source: Photographium.com.



Old City bread seller, mid-1930s.  
Source: American Colony Photo Dept.



Young men and women under the waterfalls in Wadi Qilt, early 1940s.  
Source: Halaby Family Photo Collection

*Mona Hajjar Halaby is a writer and educator. She is the creator of British Mandate Jerusalemites Photo Library, a Facebook community page that posts daily a photo of Jerusalem or Jerusalemites from the late-Ottoman period to the end of the British Mandate. Mona is also one of the researchers who works on Jerusalem, We Are Here, an interactive documentary that takes viewers on tours of the streets of Qatamon neighborhood and through the remapping of Jerusalem neighborhoods. She has written a memoir entitled, In My Mother's Footsteps: A Palestinian Refugee Returns Home (Thread Books, UK: 2021).*

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