

Souvenir from Gethsemane: Portrait of the Albina Brothers

Iris Albina

When in 2004 my daughter, in search of family background, asked, “Which language did your dad speak best?” I swiftly responded, “Silence.” The answer seemed flippant, and we both laughed. But in truth, in spite of the number of languages he could speak, my father, Jamil, spoke little. Oh, there were the philosophical answers to my inane questions as to which one of us six offspring he loved best or when his birthday was. There was also the seemingly volatile but funny in the aftermath frustrated enacting of scolding us, which one day led him to fall off the three-step-high stoop at the house in Amman, much to our combined amusement and alarm. But my answer that afternoon had sprung from a September day in Jerusalem, in 1963, as he and I walked from the taxi station outside the Old City walls toward Damascus Gate and Notre Dame de Sion, within the walls. I am not sure what prompted me to turn toward him, captivated as I was by the decorative merlons at the top of the towers ahead of us. This 64-year-old man who always stood upright, head high, shoulders well back, as if in defiance of anything that would dare make him stoop or bend, was crying in the midst of the crowds, tears visibly pouring down. He said nothing of course, and in my young girl’s self-absorption, I attributed his tears to his being upset over our impending separation. Without stopping, he wiped his face and blew his nose, held my hand behind his back as he always did, and we walked on. He dropped me off at boarding school that day, and three months later he died of a massive heart attack.

I was often to come back to that event in later years; in those few moments of crying, Father had revealed more than he had said in the short twelve years I’d known him.

He had drawn me into a world beyond his silence, but could not stay to show me around. And life had an uncanny way of making me move on, making the past seem irrelevant for the time being, making me leave questions and wonderings pending. Between school and war, new countries and different cultures, work and family, the day came when finding answers to questions seemed too late; time also had passed. So I satisfied myself by snuggling to the memory of that day as a special moment between father and daughter, and again I moved on.

But Father's silence was to impress itself upon me again in 2006. Surfing the net in search for information on the Safieh side of the family, a photo emerged of "Jamil Albina, Najib Albina, and Lewis Larson, developing motion picture film for the American Colony."¹ On its own, the idea of my father, who would have then been 107 years old, on the Internet was strange enough. But why in connection with the American Colony? Bits of conversation filtered back. Mother in her renditions of the past had often mentioned the American Colony, but always in reference to it as a landmark, never in connection with Father's work. As far as we in the family knew, Jamil and Najib, his younger brother by two years, had shared a photography studio in Jerusalem. So here was a photo that, like Father's tears decades earlier, gave me another entry point into his inner world. A quick search for the source of this photo led to the Library of Congress, the American Colony, and the Eric Matson collection.²

A year later, when a good friend of mine discovered among his father's photos in Northumberland, England, pictures of holy sites in Jerusalem that seemed to duplicate in content and style ones that my father had taken and that my friend had seen, my years-long complacency turned into the urge to know more – and immediately. On the back, the photos bore a "Matson Photo Service" stamp. Scans to family members confirmed that some of those photos could well have been taken by Father. The discovery begged the question: How exactly was Father connected to the American Colony? To Matson? And what about Najib? But more to the point, other than Father, this man who went out to work in the morning, came back at night fingers yellowed with developing chemical, and sometimes cried in public, who was Jamil Albina, and what else did his silence keep from us?

Answers to such questions come with difficulty, however, information sparse. Jamil Albina was born in 1899. Most of those who knew him have now passed; others remember little of him, memories fading. Places in which he lived and worked have either been demolished or otherwise reconstructed. Of all his documents and archives, we had a passport, a baptismal certificate, a few photographs he had taken – no place, no date – and a list of materials and furnishings he had put in storage before leaving Jerusalem, and his silence. More imposing than his distant birth year, Jamil's silence seems to have prevailed over all his children; there was no narrative to be had, only snippets of memory. But I was soon to discover he was not alone in wanting for words. Answers from cousins regarding my uncle Najib, their father, yielded more fragments or responses echoing those of my siblings: "I don't really know"; "I don't recall him mentioning it"; "He never said much." Both brothers were evidently reticent to speak of their past. But their reticence, I realized, had left us with no personal history, no narrative of our own. I had grown up

ungrounded, rootless, subject to the self-serving renditions of any pen that would scribe a tale for me in the name of truth, often leaving me feeling awkward about my identity. As such, in the interest not only of discovering more of Father's world but also of scribing my own self, I feel doubly impelled to piece together Jamil and Najib's untold story from the family snippets I gathered, filling in the empty spaces with outsider accounts and documentation where possible and sheer intuition in places – if only as a first step in an ongoing research.³ What follows is a work in progress. It is necessarily medicinal in nature,⁴ particularly in its attempt to reinstate to existence two ordinary men seemingly unable to transmit their narrative to their own children.

A Late Ottoman Childhood

Jamil and Najib were born to a Catholic middle-class family whose origins date back to Italian merchants who migrated to the Levant in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. The brothers grew up in Musrara – northwest of Jerusalem's Old City, just outside its walls – in the midst of religious, denominational, and ethnic diversity. Such a mixture was common to Jerusalem at the beginning of the twentieth century and would help the brothers befriend and work with people from other cultures. For their early education, the brothers attended the Ratisbonne, a Catholic missionary school for boys in West Jerusalem, where they learned French, English, Arabic, and Hebrew and trained to work in various professions, among them book binding and sculpting. It is no doubt here that Father learned to make the sculpted papier-mâché crèche that took its place under the Christmas pine every year and to so artfully cover our schoolbooks so they could be passed down over the years among us. Sadly, the brothers' education would not continue past their early teens, for those years, already marked by political unrest, would also usher in the First World War; schools closed, and the Ratisbonne itself was appropriated for use as a military hospital.⁵

Beyond this, I gathered little of the brothers' childhood, and I have to defer to the history of the times to glean how difficult their young lives must have been between political tension, disease, war, recurring natural disasters, and famine.⁶ At the turn of the century, political tension was already on the rise in Palestine with waves of Zionist mass migration creating anxiety over land acquisition. Skirmishes between Zionist settlers and Palestinian farmers were taking place during the first few years of the brothers' lives. Less than a decade later, when Jamil and Najib were but nine and seven, news came that traumatized many Palestinians and brought apprehension that the boys would no doubt live with for the next six years: Christian and Jewish men, until then exempt from military service, would henceforth have to serve in the Ottoman army.⁷ This meant that Anton Albina, Jamil and Najib's father, could be conscripted. And conscription would not tarry. First, however, disease would ravage Jerusalem, especially its children.

The year 1912 in Palestine saw episodic cholera grow into a region-wide epidemic. The disease spreading from areas in Europe through to Istanbul reached Palestine, hitting populated towns such as Jerusalem the hardest. The Ottoman authorities commandeered

medical help, and efforts to contain the disease by isolating towns and villages proved ineffective. Thousands fell victim as a result – many of them children rendered more susceptible to the disease by their age and by hunger.⁸ Though the brothers were evidently spared, I can only speculate about the psychological effect of having had to live with illness and death surrounding them.

In 1914, Anton Albina was conscripted into the Ottoman army. Once their father gone, Jamil and Najib would have no communication with him, but news of the war filtered into Jerusalem through the wounded, the defectors, and the deserters – those falling into the latter two categories were, if caught, often hanged outside Jaffa Gate and Damascus Gate as a warning for all.⁹ The brothers no doubt knew that their father would most likely have had to join the Labor Battalions who often fared far worse than the battalions at the front – suffering famine, exhaustion, and disease and furthermore whipped and starved.¹⁰ Imagine the two young brothers going to Jaffa Gate in 1914 to see their father marched in a parade for drafted soldiers – perhaps with the thought this might be the last time they'd see him – then returning to the same place time and again in the ensuing years to see if their father were not, in the worst case, one of the defectors or deserters hanged or, at best, one of the wounded they could salvage. Their mother and two younger siblings were now in their care; employment was not easily had in Jerusalem, and famine prevailed.

At the onset of the war, most banks closed and trade came to a stop, as did the administration of infrastructure services, leaving many unemployed. Foreign postal services and newspapers had also been shut down, isolating Jerusalem from Europe; a sea blockade prevented the export and import of food commodities. Meanwhile, the government imposed tithes on grain and demanded that grain be sold at a fixed price lower than that of the market. Farmers felt the weight of these pressures, and by 1915, grain supplies had fallen sharply. The Ottoman army appropriated most food products while Armenian refugees, mostly women and children stricken by poverty and illness and escaping the violence of war, arrived in the city in the thousands, needing aid.¹¹ The situation must have been ripe with anguish that spared no one, let alone two young men looking to maintain a home and build a future. And the gods would be unrelenting.

The locusts arrived in great numbers in the spring of 1915 – insects like dark clouds descending on the land, eating through grass, leaves, and vines until trees and plants were left bare and crops destroyed.¹² Fruit and olive trees were depleted as were other main staples. Trees would bear no fruit for another two years. Most likely Jamil and Najib would have been two of the many citizens required to collect twenty kilograms of locust eggs each, which would be buried in an effort to eliminate those insects. But the locusts would come back a year later to complete the damage begun and further intensify the famine.¹³ Perhaps it is at this time that Father developed his great faith in God and church. There would have been little else to turn to.

Between war and locusts, Jerusalem alone saw three hundred people a month die of hunger.¹⁴ In his diary, Ihsan Turjman notes time and again the shortages of sugar, kerosene, rice, and tobacco.¹⁵ Food queues were long. Bertha Vester of the American Colony recounts how “thousands must have died from slow starvation and distress.”¹⁶ Sewing and lace making workshops she had set up to help women feed their families

through the war had to close as women were too hungry to work.¹⁷ By many accounts, young women chose promiscuity in order to survive. But harsh though the war may have been on soldiers and older civilians, the main victims seemed to have been the young. They not only suffered famine and disease most acutely, but many also suffered the loss of parents at war – Jamil and Najib included.

For most, news of the war's end must have come as a deliverance from its inflictions, but for the two young brothers, the news brought with it only more hardship. Anton Albina had died at war. Conflicting accounts exist among family members as to how exactly he had died. Some say he had gone missing in action in modern day Turkey, others that he was struck down by one of the many diseases rampant among the Ottoman soldiers. I remember Mother saying the family was told he had died from cold and hunger as the soldiers were marched through the snow, with only orange peels to eat. However he died, Anton Albina left no corpse to be buried and no closure, only a legacy of orphanhood for his children and the undeniable truth that henceforth they would need to fend for themselves.

American Colony Days

We are not certain of the exact date Jamil and Najib arrived at the American Colony nor how, but soon after the end of the war, they were working at the American Colony photo business. My cousin Lima believes the young brothers came to the Colony as orphans, having lost the bread-earning member of the family. This stands to reason, for the American Colony, which had been active during the war organizing soup kitchens, was given responsibility by the Ottomans for the welfare of the citizens of Jerusalem. Delegated women went door to door through the sections of the city, enquiring after the needs of the families within.¹⁸ Perhaps it was at this time that they discovered the Albina family in need. The Colony also employed young local boys to work in the tourist trade business, of which the American Colony's photo department and its stores, catering to tourists, pilgrims, and those interested in antiquities, were an integral part.¹⁹ With tourists and pilgrims coming to the Holy Land en masse in the aftermath of the war, businesses in the city expanded with the American Colony's at the forefront. The two young brothers were likely taken into the photo department as apprentices, positions in which they would have been aided by their earlier training at the Ratisbonne and their knowledge of languages.

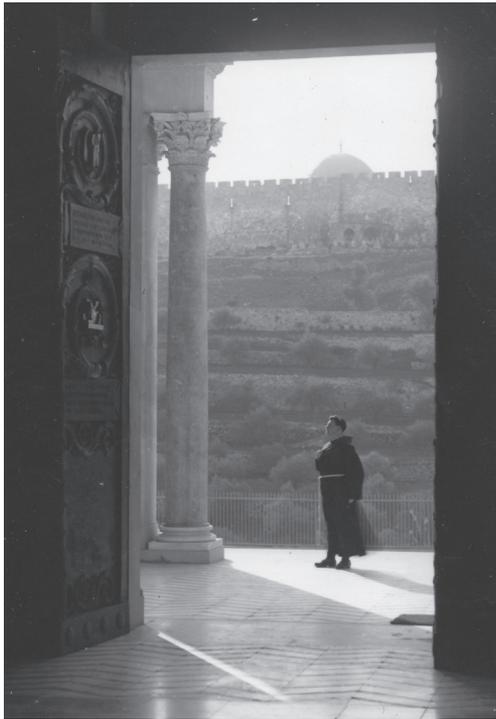
By the time Jamil and Najib arrived, the American Colony photo department –in operation since 1898 – was run by Lewis Larsson, a Swede in his mid-thirties and a member of the Colony. Over the years, the department had gained a reputation of having excellent laboratories “where all photographic work imaginable is carried out.”²⁰ Larsson himself was one reason for this reputation. He was described as someone who knew every corner of Jerusalem and the way the light played with the corners of its every street. He went to Syria, Jordan, and beyond on trips that lasted months, undeterred by the load of photographic equipment needed for him to document lands and people. Under his



View of the Garden of Gethsemane, 1930s–1940s. (Photograph Albina Brothers. Reproduced by permission of Auckland War Memorial Museum.)

expertise, the work of the American Colony photographers had been published in the *National Geographic*.²¹ Jamil and Najib would work alongside Larsson and other photo department assistants for over a decade.

Whether the two brothers were actually behind the camera as photographers in their own right is yet unclear. The American Colony photo department at that time included photographers, assistants, technicians, and hand-coloring artists whose names – with the exception of a few – remain to this day unknown. Given the collective mindset with which the American Colony operated, all photos were said to be the work of the American Colony Photographers.²² Lead photographers were always chosen among the members of the American Colony; that is, among members of the society of which Anna Spafford was considered “Mother.” Even Eric Matson, who would eventually head the photo department and in whose name the whole American Colony collection would later be filed in the Library of Congress archives, had not become photo assistant until 1910, though he had been at the department since a teenager.²³ Many young would-be photographers from the Colony were waiting to take on a lead role in the department. Therefore it seems unlikely that Jamil and Najib would have been behind the camera, but it does seem likely that they would have acted as field assistants, going on trips to help carry the heavy glass negatives and set up the camera. Here, they would have witnessed the art of taking photos, deciding on exposure, judging depth of field, choosing angles, considering contrast, shade, focus, and so on. They would also have been allowed to take photos as part of their training.



A priest at the Church of All Nations, Gethsemane. Undated postcard, 13.5 cm x 8.5 cm. (Photograph Albina Brothers. Author's private collection.)



Shepherd carrying sheep, hand tinted, mid- to late 1950s. (Photograph Jamil Albina. Author's private collection.)

The documented contribution of the Albina brothers took place in the photo lab, where the two brothers developed glass negatives for such formats as lantern slides and paper prints – both plain and hand tinted – stereographs, panoramic views, postcards, and same-size contact prints,²⁴ formats they would later market in their own studio as indicated in a recently acquired ad for their business.

The photographic process used to develop negatives in those days was for the most part one of dry-plate gelatin emulsion, which involved coating glass plates with a silver-based emulsion and leaving them to dry before taking them out on the field. Glass-plate printing was an involved process that required the brothers to compose and crop the image, manipulate the exposure, and use toning processes that would allow them to obtain the desired range of visible shades or colors in the final print without forfeiting the contrast, or fine, sharp detail. As such, the process of developing an image went well beyond technical production to artistic production.²⁵ The brothers must have also at least helped with the silvered print paper and the developing chemicals which were prepared at the Colony photo lab and would certainly have been involved in the hand-tinting at which the Colony members excelled and which Jamil would apply in his work for years to come.²⁶

The work was anything but dull or routine. From archaeological to holy sites to political events, photos with new subject matters necessitating different consideration in their development and printing arrived regularly for development.

In 1921, Jamil and Najib began developing motion picture film alongside Larsson. The Library of Congress Matson



Family picnic, circa first half of the 1920s. The author's father, Jamil Albina, stands in the middle of the back row, wearing a bow tie. The middle of three women standing in the back row is Jamil's sister, the author's Aunt Virginie. In the row seated just below, the woman in the dark dress (third from the right) is the author's Grandmother Safieh. The man seated with the oud (second from the right in the front) seems to be Jamil's and Najib's brother Farid. (Author's private collection.)

photo collection for that year contains three photographs showing one or both of the Albina brothers helping Larsson process film. These photos are our first visible proof of Jamil and Najib working at the Colony and their involvement in the photo lab. The brothers must have shown promise as well. My cousin Joe pointed out that my father and uncle had been approached by Larsson with the suggestion that they go study photography in the United States. They declined, not wishing to leave their mother behind.

Outside the parameters of the Colony, under the British Mandate, life seemed rather rosy in comparison to the days of horror during the First World War. Jerusalem enjoyed an air of seeming stability; Jerusalemites had access to such amenities as clean water, sanitation systems, and electricity. Food supplies were restored, and hospitals, clinics, and pharmacies had come into operation as did registry offices, banks, and postal and telegraph offices. Even telephones were now available. Bus and taxi lines serviced areas within and outside of Jerusalem, and roads accommodated both horse-drawn carriages and motor vehicles. Jerusalemites were now acquiring land outside the city walls, and building in neighborhoods such as Baq'a and Qatamon²⁷ – this latter being the neighborhood in which Jamil would eventually choose to raise his family. On the socio-cultural scene, Jerusalem was developing in a way that must have been to the liking of the two brothers, each of whom enjoyed socializing in his own way. Outside the city walls, a main commercial center replete with cafés and cinemas had been established, occupying the triangle formed by Ben Yehuda Street, King George Street, and Jaffa Road. Other centers were planned



Najib Albina at a picnic, circa mid-1920s. (Author's private collection.)

along Princess Mary Street, Julian's Way, and Mamilla Street.²⁸ At a corner close to the intersection of these last two streets, the Albina Brothers would eventually open their own studio.

But what the work and social arenas provided, political upheaval took away. The hope of peace at the end of the war had given way to only more turmoil. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 angered many Palestinians. Rising tension over increased Jewish migration saw anger turn

into riots in 1920, 1921, and 1929 when demonstrations turned into violence that left over a hundred deaths on each of the Jewish and Palestinian Arab sides.²⁹ The Colony photographers visually documented much of the ongoing political events at the time, and Jamil and Najib would have been quite aware of the political mood in Palestine and particularly in Jerusalem. Yet the 1920s would have constituted relatively calm years for them. Whatever forewarning could be read in events, it would have been difficult for the brothers to conceive of what the next decades would bring. For the time being, their life promised stability and upward mobility.

The Albina brothers were still at the Colony in 1926: a letter signed by many of the Colony members in Jerusalem includes the Arabic signatures of Jamil and Najib.³⁰ A February 1933 article in the *Palestine Post* also confirms that at least one of the Albina brothers was still working with Matson at that time. The article describes a lecture delivered by a Reverend Eugene Hoade at the Terra Santa College in the first week of February 1933, at which hand-colored slides were shown by "Mr. Albina" of the American Colony Studio.³¹ Unfortunately, which one of the Albina brothers had shown the slides is not indicated. Though there is no documentation that points to Jamil and Najib having stayed on at the American Colony to work with Matson, various sources indicate that both brothers did continue to work at the photo department until Matson's final separation from the Colony in 1934, with Najib staying on with Matson until 1935 or 1936.³² This may well be so, for Najib at some point learned the art of infrared photography – an area of photography Matson was exploring in the mid-1930s – which he would later apply in his documentation of the Dead Sea Scrolls.³³

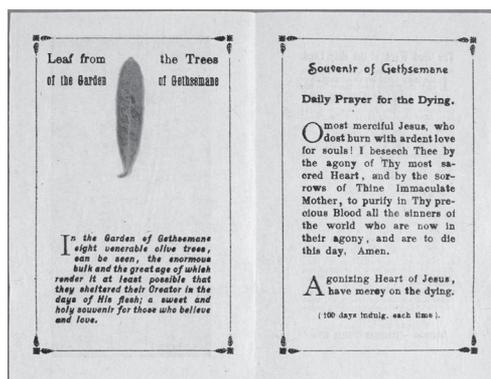
Albina Brothers Studio

In September 1935, Jamil Albina, according to his passport, travelled to Beirut, crossing at al-Naqura. It is very probable that he had gone to purchase equipment for the Albina Brothers studio that he and Najib were establishing at the corner of Julian's Way and Mamilla Street. Evidence from photo and postcard collectors indicates that work under the name of *Albina Brothers* was published and sold as of 1936.³⁴

Meanwhile, the second half of the 1930s would see an increase in political upheaval in Palestine. In 1936, Palestinian national committees came together and launched a general strike to protest against British rule and Zionist colonization. The six-month general strike became a three-year long uprising that would come to an end in 1939, under the weight of brutal British suppression, with the promise to Palestinians of independence and limits on Jewish immigration, delivered by the British in form of a White Paper, and in concert with the outbreak of war. The Second World War would prove to have an impact quite opposite to that the region experienced during the First World War. Palestine in the late 1930s early 1940s witnessed an economic boom, with the rise in allies' demand for agricultural products and the drop in international trade necessitating the substitution of imported goods from within. The standard of living rose, as did wages. And though many suffered from the British Mandate rationing policy and the inflated prices on the black market,³⁵ many others benefited financially.

The Albina brothers' economic situation seems to have survived both the uprising and the war. Prior to the revolt and the war, the tourist business had seen a spectacular rise. In 1935, some hundred thousand visitors came to Jerusalem, for now it wasn't just pilgrims traveling to Palestine but also tourists.³⁶ By the end of the uprising, Jamil and Najib had become established businessmen with a profitable trade. Hence, during the war years, they profited from the boom rather than suffered the exorbitant prices. Evidence of the brothers' economic situation during this period and their work can be found on the Internet, where the visual memorabilia of tourists or pilgrims who visited Jerusalem in the first half of the 1940s has been uploaded.³⁷ A 1942 advertisement for the Albina Brothers indicates their studio address to be on Julian's Way at Mamilla Road – an address that concurs largely with descriptions by my cousin Joe; Olga Abou Haidar, daughter of longtime friends of the family; and Ruth Morcos, a cousin by marriage, who as a teenager in 1941–1942 helped develop photos for Father and Najib.

One part of the Albina Brothers' work catered to tourists. The same advertisement lists panoramic views and outdoor group photos as their specialities, as well as lantern slides both plain and hand colored. It is interesting that the brothers should have specialized in outdoor group photos when family portraiture had long been the specialty of photo studios in Jerusalem. A popular item the brothers sold consisted of an envelope titled *Souvenir from the Garden of Gethsemane* followed by *Photo Albina Brothers, Jerusalem*. In the envelope a daily prayer with a mounted leaf from the trees of the Garden of Gethsemane and a description of the good work of the Friars Minor on the back accompanied 9cm x 6.8cm photos.³⁸ At the time of this writing, most of the brothers' photos we have acquired



Prayer accompanying souvenir photos. (Work of Albina Brothers. Reproduced by permission of Durham University Library.)



The Dome of the Rock, labeled as “Mosque of Omar,” Jerusalem. Undated postcard, 13.5 cm x 8.5 cm. (Photograph Albina Brothers. Author’s private collection.)



Reverse of Mosque of Omar postcard. (Author’s private collection.)

are of Christian and Muslim holy sites.

The other part of the work of the Albina Brothers consisted of taking photos of political events on the streets, as the American Colony photographers had done before them. At the sound of skirmishes, shootings, or explosions, the brothers would rush out with their cameras.³⁹ Given Father’s character and his intense Catholicism, we siblings are in consensus that he would have concentrated on photographing the Holy Sites while Najib concentrated on photographing political events. In time, Najib would collect several albums of political outbursts in the streets of Jerusalem between 1936 and 1948. (My cousin Joe believes that his father was contracted by the League of Nations to photograph these events.) There are also indications that Najib may have concurrently been working with Matson and Hanna Safieh, who was contracted by the British Mandate Government to photograph historical events.

Research also yields the probability of the brothers having had, in the 1940s, a business relationship with Matson who by now had his own studio apart from the American Colony. Matson would purchase from them their postcards which he would sell under his own Matson Photo Service rubber stamp, as he did with the work of other photographers and with the collection of the American Colony photo department now fully in his possession. For example, the photo collection from Northumberland, England, which my friend’s father, a Royal Navy sailor at the time, who had visited Jerusalem in November 1942 while on duty in the region, contains photos of Gethsemane bearing on the back a Matson Photo Service stamp.⁴⁰ One of the photos, titled Garden of Gethsemane (see below),

is an exact replica of a photograph that Durham University has in its special collections and which is ascertained to be one of a set of eight photos taken by the Albina Brothers.⁴¹

Jamil and Najib must have had a successful business, for by many accounts, they acquired a second studio. According to my cousin Lima, they used one studio for developing, printing, and coloring and the other for selling. To date, we have no written or visual proof of the exact location of this second studio, only various reports that it was inside Jaffa Gate, at Harat al-Nasara near David's Tower.⁴² Jamil and Najib had learned from the masters and were located in the heart of tourist land in the midst of hotels and souvenir shops that had sprung up in the northwest area of the city and inside Jaffa Gate.

The year 1946 locates Jamil in Qatamon. Both brothers had married by 1930, with Najib staying in Musrara and Jamil moving to Qatamon shortly after the birth of my sister Nelly in 1935. In 1946, he was now supporting a family of five children between the ages of three and eleven. A 7 May 1946 *Palestine Post* article refers to Jamil as an elected member to the board of the Catholic St. Teresa Association.⁴³ Interestingly, the article also announces a social evening with dancing, to take place the following Saturday at the Pension Bellevue in Qatamon. When I first began this research, my sister Marlene's first memories was of her being on a terrace somewhere, with parents dancing, women wearing long dresses, and everybody speaking French. She thought she may have been five or so. This may well be the evening she was referring to. But by 1948, the life that father enjoyed and had grown accustomed to would forever disappear.

In Search of Safety

In November 1947, the UN General Assembly resolution recommending Palestine's partition into two states gave rise to a progression of events that would see Palestinians in the western suburbs of the New City of Jerusalem rapidly losing their homes. Qatamon in particular was singled out, seen as a possible Arab stronghold in its strategic location. Henceforth, life would become most precarious for the residents of this suburb. On



Good Samaritan Inn, Jericho. Postcard, circa 1940s, 13.5 cm x 8.5 cm. (Photograph Albina Brothers. Author's private collection.)



Church of All Nations, Gethsemane, date unknown. (Photograph Albina Brothers. Reproduced by permission of Durham University Library.)

5 January 1948, the Semiramis Hotel in Qatamon was blown up. The explosion was felt hundreds of meters away and left eighteen dead and many more wounded, mostly civilians. The incident created panic among the inhabitants of this unarmed middle-class neighborhood and, in the aftermath, many left their homes for the seeming safety of other areas in the city or even abroad. We are not certain whether Father had relocated the family back to Musrara before or after the Semiramis bombing, for already by 1947, residents of Qatamon required a transit permit to rejoin Arab areas within the security zone drawn by the British. Whatever the case, after the Semiramis bombing, life in Qatamon became not only untenable but also dangerous. Roads were closed, transport to and from work and shopping became difficult, and basic commodities such as food were no longer available. Bombing and sniper fire endangered the lives of all; children were not allowed outdoors.⁴⁴ I remember Mother several times telling how Marlene would freeze whenever she heard the sound of a bomb or gunfire. Even those who had wanted to hold onto their lands and homes eventually had to capitulate, especially in the wake of the Dayr Yasin massacre, which came to serve as an example of what might happen. Apparently, remaining in place was not an option.

At the beginning of 1948, Father and family were living in Musrara on St. Paul's Road, across from St. Paul's Cathedral. At some point, the studio as well had been moved to the basement of that same building. Marlene recounts how she and our siblings Irene and Gabriel would sit patiently and quietly on the studio floor waiting for Father to develop the celluloid film so they could play swords with the rolls. I wonder whether that was not Father's way of keeping the young ones safely close to him in the event of an explosion. Fighting between Zionist forces and Palestinian irregulars had become the norm of the day.

Growing up, I more than once heard Mother tell of how one evening before they left Jerusalem, as she and Father were returning from checking on her family a few streets away in Musrara, sniping began and a curfew was imposed, making it dangerous for them to return home. They made their way stealthily through the dark streets, taking refuge at the house of a neighbor who every now and then would crack the door slightly open to check if the shooting had calmed down. At one point, two British soldiers patrolling the streets perceived the light from within. They came enquiring, and Mother explained that they lived in a building up the street and needed to rejoin their five children who were on their own. To verify the authenticity of the story, the soldiers accompanied my parents home and into the apartment where my brothers and sisters sat huddled together. Marlene laughs as she recounts how Mother prompted them to greet the *nice* soldiers and how all five responded in unison, "Good evening." Satisfied, the soldiers left. They went down the stairs of the building and into the street where a bomb blew up under them. The next day, the leg of one soldier, still in its boot, dangled from the roof of the church.

Leaving to safety must have already been on Father's mind. On 20 April 1948, Mother and the five children were added to his passport. On 22 April 1948, a stamp in his passport indicates that he had crossed the Allenby Bridge into Transjordan. The last page of the list for the studio equipment and furnishings Father had put in storage reads, "Clothing and underwear for 2 persons and 5 children." Father was never again to return to Musrara or Qatamon or the studio on the corner of Julian's Way and Mamilla Road.

After 1948

The year 1948 brought to an end the 47-year old partnership of the two brothers – a partnership that had seen them through disease, natural disasters, famine, orphanhood, two World Wars, conflict and rebellion, an education side by side, and successful careers. At some point, they had even purchased a piece of land, again in joint partnership. Henceforth, they would lead separate lives, seeing little of each other.

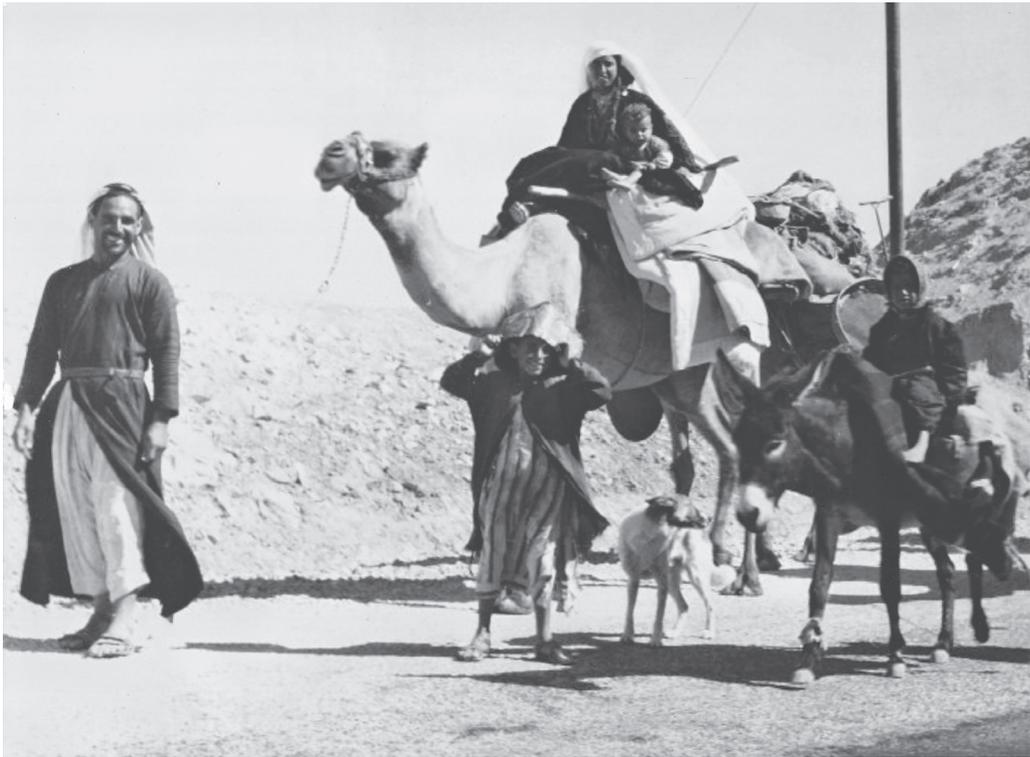


Infrared photographic plates of the Dead Sea Scrolls, circa 1950s. (Photograph Najib Albina. Fair use.)

Najib, having stayed in Musrara throughout, was forced to leave with his family in 1948. He went to Bethlehem, rejoining his wife’s family. In 1952, he went back to Jerusalem to work at the Museum of Archeology, known as the Rockefeller Museum. There, he would put his skills in infrared photography toward the preservation of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The scrolls, brittle, dusty, and stained in places, were gently brushed, treated with castor oil, and placed in a glass humidifier to help with their unrolling. Taped together, the fragments were then passed on to Najib for preservation through infrared photography. Najib used infrared plates and films imported from the United States in combination with a red/violet filter which he mounted on a Linhoff camera. Taking no recourse to a light meter – so certain was he of the light in Jerusalem, morning and afternoon – but keeping the distance from the 12 inch by 9.5 inch plates relatively constant, he would simply adjust the length of exposure depending on the darkness of the plate of fragments, from four to eight minutes for most plates and over an hour for more difficult pieces.⁴⁵ This he did with the intent of penetrating past dust and pollution on the fragments to that which the naked eye could not see, thus successfully rendering a visible image of the script below. Najib’s work allowed for the study of the manuscripts to be carried out overseas while also providing visual documentation of the fragments as they were found.⁴⁶ More importantly, his photographs would become, years later, the only means of accessing the content of the scrolls, for the fragments had been kept in unsuitably controlled climate conditions and had suffered mildew while in storage. Hershel Shanks, editor of the *Biblical Archaeology Review*, would later refer to Najib as an “unsung hero” whose photography rendered the fragments with such clarity as to make the photographs the best archival source available for the study of the scrolls.⁴⁷

Najib would stay with the museum until 1967 when, once again, what he had built would be dismantled. Cousin Joe tells me that toward the end of his years, Najib would often repeat, *kulloh rayeh* (“it all passes away”; “there is no hope”). Najib died in Virginia in 1983.

Father would never quite adapt to leaving Jerusalem. Fifteen years later, he had still not settled to making a life in Jordan. Offered to buy a substantial property on Jabal Amman (the main mountain in Amman at the time) for 250 Jordanian dinars,⁴⁸ he replied, “I am going back to Jerusalem.” In 1952, he moved from Madaba, where he had taken



[Figure 13:] Bedouin family, mid- to late 1950s, 25.5 cm x 20 cm. (Photograph Jamil Albina. Author's private collection.)

the family to safety, to Amman, hoping to make a living until the Palestinian issue was resolved. He worked sporadically for two years until in 1954 he found a position with the Point Four program – a USAID program to Jordan, run by the American embassy in Amman. There, he could once again do what he loved best. In addition to developing photos, he traveled with the American embassy staff to places such as Qumran and the East Ghor Canal. The week after his return from one such travel, he developed a set of photos of Bedouins and shepherds. Our family and the embassy staff suddenly became aware of Father's artistic eye in capturing a scene on negative or hand tinting a print. All requested a copy. Looking back, I wonder if the admiration of his work then was not more painful than pleasurable for Father, reminding him of what he had achieved in his other life – and lost. Indeed, as I recall, he seemed to shrug off any compliments received. For the next ten years, Father remained at the embassy, mentoring up-and-coming young photographers in the art of developing negatives. During those years, the only comment my siblings or I ever heard him make about the past – one that would stay with me – was, “We always lived together well, why this now?” In retrospect, these few words and his tears that September day in Jerusalem expressed as best he could his understanding of what had happened.

Indeed, Father never gained a disengaged enough perspective to either view or be able to discuss the events during the last years in Palestine. Mourning and objectivity do not marry well. Add to this that in his sixties, when he should have been retiring, he was

still embroiled in the struggle of raising himself from the poverty he had once more been plunged into. At the end, he lived rather in a mode of constant cogitation from which he proved unable to extricate himself except to mutter his evening rosary, his refuge perhaps from his own thoughts. He died a rather broken man in 1963, and was buried, rosary in hand, in the Garden of Gethsemane – perhaps the only clear wish he ever expressed in those later years.

Even after piecing together snippets and accounts, the lives of Jamil and Najib Albina still lack much documentation and abound with unanswered questions. True, they may both have been prone to silence and Father too uncomprehending to broach the past, but the question begs itself: Why did we inherit so little from two photographers who lived during such a compelling time in the history of Jerusalem? Surely, we should have been left with stories aplenty and photos galore. It becomes apparent that it is precisely in the very existence of so many unanswered questions that the narrative of Jamil and Najib lies: questions unanswered and documents missing become the narrative of a narrative denied. It is not that my father and uncle were unable or unwilling to transmit their story to their children but more so that they could not. They had lived in a place at a time when the history of that place was set to be rewritten. The magnitude of such rewriting necessarily continues to rest on the transcribing into un-existence of ordinary men such as Jamil and Najib and others like them, especially those who documented people and places: What stories can human beings denuded of their canonical proof of personal possessions, artifacts, and archives tell? Lacking verification, their words would resonate as the ramblings of a delusional mind. Father's and Najib's documentary failure becomes their existential failure – to their detriment and ours but to the satisfaction of imperial and colonial histories.

One of the few documents that Father left behind was the list of his effects that he had put in storage at one of the convents before leaving Jerusalem.⁴⁹ It comprises four pages, three of which itemize the “Photographic Workshop Instruments and Appliances,” including several enlarging and glazing machines; printers; cameras and camera accessories; tripods; several magnifying glasses and projectors; frames; many kilograms of chemicals; paints, inks, brushes, knives for hand tinting; hundreds of albums and accessories; several guidebooks; and “7000 Negatives of Views from Bible Lands, 10,000 Snaps, 4,000 Postcards, 5,000 Christmas Cards” amongst much more, totaling 8897.390 Palestinian pounds.⁵⁰

Our family had no samples of Father's and Najib's work from those days. Father's effects disappeared soon after they went into storage, and Najib's work would be smuggled out to Jordan in 1967 in the hands of a person unnamed. What we have are a few photos donated by family and friends from their own archives – bits and pieces that have managed to escape old age or destruction. Ironically, we now surf the Internet, searching for what we can find at collector sites, where photos and postcards are sold for 2 dollars and 5 dollars a piece, and where sometimes they are offered on bid. There is little to be had, but it is heartwarming to have been told by one trader that postcards and photos from the 1930s and 1940s in Palestine are a selling item right now, and we are fortunate, I suppose to have recently acquired an Albina Brothers original set of seven photos, clad in their little envelope.

Iris Albina (albinai@ymail.com) is a teacher of English as a Second Language and freelance editor. She has lived and worked in Canada, Turkey, and the Caribbean. This essay is part of a larger research on the history of her family.

Endnotes

- 1 The American Colony, headed by Horatio and Anna Spafford from Chicago, began with a small American congregation in Jerusalem in 1896 and grew to include members from other American and Swedish congregations. In time the Colony became known for its charity work, earning itself the trust of both Ottomans and British. The photography department, run mostly by the Swedish members, documented places and peoples of the Biblical Lands, gaining the Colony fame and the department a reputation of excellence.
- 2 See www.loc.gov/pictures/search/?q=albina.
- 3 I would like to thank Ruth Morcos, Olga Abou Haidar, Mattia Saad, and Elia Arshakian and his mother Widad for their various contributions of pertinent information. A very special thanks to Tom Powers, without whose maps, photos, generosity in terms of research and time, and acuity where history is concerned this narrative would not be. And another special thank you to my brother Gabriel, my sisters Marlene and Irene, and my cousins Joe, Ada, and Lima for being forthcoming with materials, documents, information, and many hours of emailing, chatting about the past, and wracking brains to remember. And a most special thank you to my daughter Laurel who has looked at this paper through the most serious eyes of a writer.
- 4 I use the word “medicinal” here to draw a contrast with the imperial histories that impose a different reality on a whole nation and deprive this nation of its integrity and past, to emphasize the healing aspect of being able to tell our own story and introduce agency to our own history. For more on this topic, see Aurora Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories: History, Culture, and the Politics of Integrity* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1999).
- 5 Abigail Jacobson, *From Empire to Empire: Between Ottoman and British Rule* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011).
- 6 References to historical events throughout this paper are used only to place Father and Najib against the backdrop of the times. The history of political events in Palestine during the first half of the twentieth century is well documented elsewhere and ample in controversy. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to delve into it.
- 7 Charlotte van der Leest, “Conversion and Conflict in Palestine: The Missions of the Church Missionary Society and the Protestant Bishop Samuel Gobat” (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2008); Salim Tamari, *Year of the Locust: A Soldier’s Diary and the Erasure of Palestine’s Ottoman Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Erik Jan Zürcher, “Between Death and Desertion: The Experience of the Ottoman Soldier in World War I,” *Turcica* 28 (1996): 235–258.
- 8 Ilan Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Odd Karsten Tveit, *Anna’s House: The American Colony in Jerusalem* (Nicosia, Cyprus: Rimal Publications, 2011).
- 9 Tveit, *Anna’s House*; Jacobson, *Empire to Empire*.
- 10 The Labour Battalions in the Ottoman Army were formed mostly of Christian recruits as Christians, given their European affiliations, were not trusted to remain loyal to the Ottoman authorities. As such, the Labour Battalions’ work consisted largely of road repair and transportation. For more on this, see Erik Jan Zürcher, “Ottoman Labour Battalions in World War I,” accessed 11 September 2014, www.arts.yorku.ca/hist/tgallant/documents/zurcherottomanlaborbattalions.pdf.
- 11 Jacobson, *Empire to Empire*.
- 12 Birgitte Rahbek and Mogens Bähncke, “Faith and Fate in Jerusalem,” accessed 11 September 2014, www.birgitterahbek.dk/faith_fate.pdf.
- 13 Rahbek and Bähncke, “Faith and Fate”; Tamari, *Year of the Locust*; Tveit, *Anna’s House*; Bertha Spafford Vester, *Our Jerusalem: An American Family in the Holy City, 1881–1949* (Beirut: Middle East Export Press, 1950).
- 14 Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine*.
- 15 Tamari, *Year of the Locust*.
- 16 Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, 264.
- 17 Vester, *Our Jerusalem*.
- 18 Tveit, *Anna’s House*.
- 19 Barbara Bair, email message, 4 June 2014. I would like to thank Ms. Bair for her contribution of information regarding American Colony welfare activities.
- 20 Tveit, *Anna’s House*, 204.
- 21 Mia Gröndahl, *The Dream of Jerusalem: Lewis Larsson and the American Colony Photographers*, trans. Peter Hogan (Stockholm, Sweden: Journal, 2005).
- 22 Barbara Bair, “The American Colony Photography Department: Western Consumption and ‘Insider’ Commercial Photography,”

- Jerusalem Quarterly* 44 (Winter 2010): 28–38; Gröndahl, *The Dream of Jerusalem*; Tom Powers, “Jerusalem’s American Colony and Its Photographic Legacy” (2009), accessed 11 September 2014, israelpalestineguide.files.wordpress.com/2009/12/jeruselems_american_colony-_its_photographic_legacy.pdf.
- 23 Gröndahl, *The Dream of Jerusalem*.
- 24 Gröndahl, *The Dream of Jerusalem*; Powers, “Jerusalem’s American Colony.”
- 25 Powers, “Jerusalem’s American Colony.”
- 26 Powers, “Jerusalem’s American Colony.”
- 27 Ruth Kark and Michal Oren-Nordheim, *Jerusalem and Its Environs: Quarters, Neighborhoods, Villages, 1800–1948* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2001).
- 28 Kark and Oren-Nordheim, *Jerusalem and Its Environs*.
- 29 Kimberly Katz, trans., *A Young Palestinian’s Diary, 1941–1945: The Life of Sami ‘Amr* (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 2009); Gudrun Krämer, *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*, trans. Graham Harman and Gudrun Krämer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
- 30 This document is archived at the Library of Congress. Barbara Bair, email message, 4 June 2014. I would like to thank Ms. Bair for sharing this document.
- 31 “Terra Santa Club: An Illustrated Lecture,” *Palestine Post*, 16 February 1933, 5, accessed online through www.jpress.nli.org.il. I would like to thank Tom Powers for bringing this article to my attention.
- 32 Conversations with family and friends.
- 33 See for example Matson’s 1936 photos in infrared at the Library of Congress www.loc.gov/pictures/search/?q=infra%20red&co=matpc&sg=true and *Palestine Post*, 7 April 1935 and 22 March 1936.
- 34 See for example www.postcardsofpalestine.com/catalogue.html.
- 35 See for example Sami ‘Amr’s diary in Katz, trans., *A Young Palestinian’s Diary*.
- 36 Kobi Cohen-Hattab, “Historical Research and Tourism Analysis: The Case of the Tourist-Historic City of Jerusalem,” *Tourism Geographies* 6, no. 3 (August 2004): 279–302.
- 37 See for example, www.rymaszewski.iinet.net.au/6jerusal.html. Four of the photos on this site are part of the aforementioned set of photographs held in the Durham University Library Special Collections. For the catalogue of the photographs held at Durham, see reed.dur.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=ead/sad/haunchto.xml.
- 38 See, for example, the souvenir held in the collection of the Auckland War Memorial Museum, call number DS109.8.G4 SOU, online at muse.aucklandmuseum.com/collections/general/Muscat/87448.detail?Ordinal=1&c_subject_search=%22garden+of+gethsemane+%28jerusalem%29%22&c_subject_logic=or.
- 39 Conversations with family and friends.
- 40 I would like to extend a profuse thank you to Alan Crass for his swift reaction in asking to keep his father’s travel photos, when they were but minutes away from being cleared out, with the thought that they could have been taken by my father.
- 41 The Durham University photo archives are not readily available to the public. See note 37.
- 42 Conversations with family and friends.
- 43 “Social and Personal,” *Palestine Post*, 8 May 1946, 2, accessed online through www.jpress.nli.org.il.
- 44 Itamar Radai, “Qatamon, 1948: The Fall of a Neighborhood,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 46 (Summer 2011): 6–14.
- 45 J. M. Allegro, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: The Story of the Recent Manuscript Discoveries and Their Momentous Significance for Students of the Bible* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1959).
- 46 Israel Antiquities Authority, “Conservation of the Dead Sea Scrolls,” accessed 11 September 2014, www.antiquities.org.il/article_Item_eng.asp?sec_id=44&subj_id=196.
- 47 Hershel Shanks, ed., *Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls: A Reader from the Biblical Archaeology Review* (New York: Vintage, 1993).
- 48 Roughly equivalent to 1,500 U.S. dollars.
- 49 The convent was either the Soeurs de la Charité or the Salesian Convent in Musrara, but there is no family consensus as to which of the two it was.
- 50 Roughly equivalent to 55,000 U.S. dollars. The Palestinian Pound consisted of 1000 mils, hence the three digits to the right of the decimal point.