



Khalil Raad - Jerusalem Photographer

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Photography arrived in Palestine in 1839, the same year in which Daguerre presented the photographic process to the world. In the following decades, the cameras of many European and American photographers regularly captured images of Palestine. Photography was taken up as a new craft by Palestine's local population as early as the 1860s when the Armenian Patriarch Issay Garabedian established a photographic workshop in Jerusalem to train young Armenians. It took some time for the first local to open a studio in Palestine. In 1885, Garabed Krikorian, one of Garabedian's students, established the first photographic

studio in Jerusalem. Khalil Raad followed suit in 1890, opening another photographic studio in Jerusalem, and two years later Dauod Sabonji opened one in Jaffa. The following article by Badr al-Hajj outlines the life and work of Khalil Raad, Palestine's first Arab photographer. It appeared more than ten years ago in the Institute for Palestine Studies' French publication, Revue d'etudes Palestiniennes, no. 37 Autumn 1990. Photographer John Tordai translated this piece for JQF. (IN)

On December 11, 1839, nearly four years after the invention of photography by Francois Arago, another Frenchman, Federic Gobel Fiske, recorded Jerusalem for the first time on daguerreotype. Thereafter, scores of photographers, both Arab and Western, criss-crossed the entire region, photographing widely in places such as Jaffa, Tiberias, Beirut and Damascus. This work was rapidly commercialized and often sold in the form of photo-albums in hotels and retail outlets in most towns and cities.

For the first twenty years of this new medium's invention, European photographers were especially keen on recording holy places and other sites of antiquity and emphasized their relationship with the Bible. There was a conscious attempt to link the sites mentioned in the Bible to specific geographic locations. Such was the success of this approach that hundreds of publications were sold both in the Levant and in Europe throughout the late 19th century. In Europe, the sales of views of the Holy Land were second only to those of Europe itself.

Anyone seeking to understand the work of these European photographers, who either

visited or were based in the Holy Land, must acknowledge the extent to which the countries of the Levant played an essential role in the development of the photographic medium. Moreover, it should also be noted that the appetite for photographing holy sites derived as much from their religious importance as it did from the strategic value of the region to those European powers engaged in the carve-up of the Ottoman Empire's territories.

The purpose of this article is not to offer a critique of 19th century photography but rather to suggest that the development of this art is inseparable from the colonialist enterprise with which it coincided. It began with Napoleon Bonaparte's Egyptian campaign, which was to pave the way for the influx of numerous artists, archaeologists, academics, photographers and soldiers, many of them incorporated into "scientific" or "religious" missions. This European invasion, structured yet evolving, gave rise to the creation of institutions and research centers, which were the preserve first of European universities and later of American ones. Gradually, these centers provided for their home countries important insights about the politics, economy and geography of the region. Such knowledge furthered European domination following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918.

Broadly speaking then, any analysis of the work undertaken by Western photographers should be set within the political context of the period. Many offered a rather scornful and chauvinistic view of their subjects. In this respect, if one considers the British photographer Francias Frith, who made three visits to Egypt and Syria between 1856-9, it

would be hard to ignore the captions accompanying his photographs.¹ The same could be said of the celebrated engraver David Roberts who preceded Frith in the region. Their opinions clearly echo the political views of empire as expressed by the likes of Milner and Curzon.

It should be kept in mind when discussing Khalil Raad that the majority of publications treating photography in the Near East were written by foreign authors; some publications were clearly produced in bad faith.² Most of the available information on photography during this period derives from European sources, specifically from the illustrated albums and travel diaries published in the 19th century. One can readily understand why the European photographers held such a pre-eminent position to the detriment of the local photographers, despite the latter's advantage in having avoided an 'orientalist' prism in their work. This wide lack of understanding about the work of Arab photographers exists despite their prodigious output, even if the intervening cycles of violence in the Near East did destroy many of these archives. Who can tell us about the work and the role of the photographer Daoud Sabonji in Jaffa? Or, for

that matter, about Issa Sawabini's photographs, also from Jaffa? Or about the scores of other unknown photographers whose signatures occasionally appear, now and again, on photographs?

Armenian Patriarch, Issay Garabedian, played a pivotal role in the development and expansion of photography in Palestine in the 19th century. Towards the end of the 1850s, he started courses in photography within the Church of St. James' compound in the Old City of Jerusalem. Many of the students went on to practice professionally, and soon cornered the local market. They retained their market lead until the start of the 20th century.

However, photography met with hostility from the conservative religious bodies of the Ottoman Empire, and the accusations of heresy leveled at photographers had an obvious constraining effect.³ The practice of photography was confined to certain communities, notably the Armenians and the Syriacs, who threw themselves in droves into the new profession. So it was with the Syriac doctor, Louis Sabounji, who was particularly active in photography in 1850s Beirut. He trained his brother, George, in the art of composition and who in turn became another important photographer. Meanwhile in Jerusalem, Issay Garabedian, who started in photography in 1857, spent 28 years of his life teaching photography to youngsters. We know that he came to Jerusalem around 1844 from Diyarbakir (Turkey) to study theology, which he continued until 1859. He visited Istanbul during this time where he spent four months learning new photographic processes.

¹ Frith published several illustrated works of his travels, including *Egypt and Palestine Photographed and Described* (London: J.S. Virtue, 1858-60), and *Egypt, Sinai and Jerusalem: A Series of Twenty Photographic Views* (London: W. Mackenzie, 1860).

² The majority of publications devoted to the history of photography in the Holy Land are written by Western or Israeli authors. For example, in Yeshayahn Nir's book, *The Holy Land and the Bible* (Washington, 1985), only Jewish photographers in Palestine are mentioned whilst Arab ones are ignored. Similarly, in Eyal Onne's book, *Photographic Heritage of the Holy Land 1839-1914* (Manchester Polytechnic, 1980), only one line is devoted to Khalil Raad: "C. Raad, Nationality? Photographer established in Jerusalem." In fact, the name Raad itself could have informed Onne that the photographer was an Arab.

³ See Engin Voir Gizgen, *Photography in the Ottoman Empire 1839-1919* (Istanbul, 1987), p. 14.

The Armenian Church in Istanbul houses examples of his work taken in the late 1850s.⁴

In 1863, Garabedian left for Europe. He visited Manchester (UK), London, and Paris where he kept abreast of the latest developments in photography. Upon his return to Jerusalem in 1865, he was elected patriarch of the Armenians in Jerusalem, but this did nothing to dampen his enthusiasm for photography. The Baedeker travel guide to Palestine and Syria (1876) notes the presence of a photographic studio "unique to Jerusalem within the Armenian community."⁵ In much the same vein, the French traveller, Jules Hoche, observed in 1884: "In the studio of the Armenian Patriarchate, Issay Garabedian teaches the science of photography to groups of young Armenians who come from all corners of the empire."⁶ Amongst Garabedian's students, two stand out: the Krikorian brothers, Kevork and Garabed. The latter was to become Khalil Raad's principal rival.

In the 1870s, Garabed Krikorian established a photographic studio on Jerusalem's Jaffa Road. Much of his commercial work involved photographing local personalities, tourists, and pilgrims. He gained notoriety after the visit of Kaiser Wilhem II to the Holy Land in 1878, for whom Krikorian acted as official photographer. Thereafter he signed his work with "photographer to the Prussian Court." Krikorian leads us directly to Khalil Raad who began photography as a student of

Krikorian. Raad would eventually compete with his former teacher and later became a partner with Krikorian's son, John.

The information presented here about Khalil Raad mainly stems from two letters. The first was written by Robert Mouchabek to Fouad Debbas, and the second by Ruth Raad Mouchabek (Raad's daughter) to the author of this paper.⁷ From both sources it can be established that Raad was born circa 1854 in the Lebanese village of Bhamboum. Raad's father, Anis, had fled there from the family village of Sibnay because he had converted to the Protestant from the Maronite faith. Raad's father was killed in 1860 during sectarian strife in the mountains. Robert Mouchabek confirms that following the death of Raad's father, his mother took him and his sister, Sarah, to Jerusalem where they settled with relatives. One of these, a paternal uncle, taught in the Bishop Gobat School.

Ruth Raad notes that as a schoolboy, her father was artistically inclined, and received his photographic training in Garabed Krikorian's studio around 1890. Once he completed his studies, Raad opened a studio opposite Krikorian's on Jaffa Road. This was the start of what proved to be ferocious competition between the two studios, and between pupil and master. It was to last until 1913, the year when Krikorian's son, John, returned from Germany where he had studied photography. John Krikorian soon took over his father's studio and married Najla who was Raad's niece. This was to usher in a period of association between the two studios.

Whilst Krikorian devoted himself almost

⁴ Information about Garabedian comes from Dickinson de Miller, *The Craftsman's Art. Armenians and the Growth of Photography. 1856-1981*. Non-published thesis. American University Beirut, 1981.

⁵ Karl Baedeker, *Palestina und Syrien* (Leipzig, 1876), p. 36.

⁶ Jules Hoche, *Le Pays des Croisades* (Paris, 1884), p. 221.

⁷ Letter from Robert Mouchabek to Fouad Debbas, October 15, 1981. Letter from Ruth Raad to the author, May 30, 1985.

exclusively to portraiture, Raad devoted himself to the coverage of political events, daily life, and to some of the major archaeological excavations then being conducted in Palestine.

On the eve of the First World War, Raad left for Switzerland. He went to learn the latest techniques then being developed by the photographer Keller. Whilst there he became engaged to Keller's assistant, Annie Muller. However, the war imposed a long separation between them and they were unable to marry until 1919. Once married, they settled in Talibiyya, a village near Jerusalem where Raad was later elected mayor. Raad continued working as a photographer until 1948 when Palestine ceased to exist. Forced to move, the Raad family first moved south to Hebron and then north, for a few months, to his ancestral village of Bhamboum in Lebanon. Later, they were invited by Bishop Ilya Karam to live within the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. He lived there from the end of 1948 until his death in 1957.

Khalil Raad documented political events and daily life for almost fifty years. Much of this work survives despite the capture of Jaffa Road in 1948 by the Zionists, thanks to the daring intervention of a young Italian friend of Raad's, who crossed no-man's land at night several times to rescue the entire archive in Raad's studio. Robert Mouchabek mentions that this Italian, who had to scale the ramparts of the Old City on his rescue missions, worked in Boulos Said's bookshop, which was next to Raad's studio on Jaffa Road.

Raad's archive was ultimately donated to the Institute of Palestine Studies, and some of his photographs were later published in a substantial work, *Before the Diaspora*, published under the aegis of the Journal of

Palestine Studies.

In general terms, Raad's photography reveals a fertile and exhaustive coverage of the political events then unfurling in Palestine, Syria and Lebanon. Aside from the 1230 glass plates that he produced, his archives contain numerous negative films, many of which have yet to be printed. The Middle East Centre at Oxford University holds a collection of postcards, which bear his signature, as well as 40 prints depicting the daily life of Ottoman troops in Palestine during the First World War.

In this regard, Ruth Raad recalls that her father was a friend of Jamal Pacha, the military governor of Syria at the time, who allowed Raad to access the Egyptian-Palestinian front. He was able to photograph soldiers and their Turkish and German staff officers, as well as artillery positions. Estelle Blight, who was responsible for securing Raad's pictures as well as personal papers for Oxford University, notes that these frontline pictures had captions written in English. They had clearly been intended for use as propaganda by the Ottoman forces. Raad's papers included documents authorizing him to take photographs of the army at the front. After the fall of Jerusalem in 1948, Raad sent these pictures to Estelle Blight (daughter of Bishop Blight) via a schoolteacher at St. George's, called Davids.

Mention must be made of Raad's numerous photographs of archaeological excavations at Ramat, near Hebron, led by Dr. Madre. His pictures of digging the earthworks of Jerusalem's third rampart, as well as his pictures of the sites at Tall Adonis and Tall Megiddo, are also noteworthy. Raad also left behind many photographs of towns in Palestine, Transjordan, Lebanon and Syria.

Many of these photographs were published as illustrations in European travel guides and books of the Holy Land.⁸

The photography of Khalil Raad, which this author has viewed, combines an aesthetic value with an historical importance. In his work, there is nothing "folkloric" as was sometimes the fashion in the work of some photographers who were successful in Europe. On the contrary, his was a vision that showed a considerable sensitivity in its portrayal of daily life. One sees farmers, villages, and town scenes all mixed in with portraits of Palestinian fighters, involved since the turn of the century in the struggle against Zionist colonialism and the British Mandate. It is Raad who conserved for posterity, the features of the patriotic leader, 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam and of Said al-'As and all the men who fought for their native soil. It is Raad who caught the mood of the times with his photographs of villagers and farmers laboring in their fields and orchards, dispelling the myth perpetrated by colonialists in Palestine that it was an empty land peopled only by a few "savages."

In this respect, it should not be overlooked that most European photography evoked this myth, suggesting that towns were empty, villages deserted and antiquities found half buried in the sand. It served as a type of visual overture to the invasion that was to follow. Particularly involved in propagating this mythology were the French; the Second Republic devoted large sums to pseudo-scientific photographic missions, which saw themselves as "peaceful occupiers," pending

the arrival of their troops. In Britain, the Palestine Exploration Fund, founded in 1865, dispatched military intelligence personnel throughout Syria with a mission to take thousands of photographs of sites and to draw up maps. The putative aim of these missions was archaeological, but thanks to their exhaustive research, General Allenby was able to direct his campaigns successfully and enter Jerusalem in 1918.

This vision, unlike that of Khalil Raad's, gave no importance whatsoever to the local population. On the contrary, the eventual appearance of locals around the holy sites was perceived as desecration, an affront to past glories. The words of Francis Frith seemed almost a rallying call: "[The] barbarous present and past [places] a burden of responsibility upon the West to deliver the Holy Land from its savages."

A flow of imagery, a truncated vision is something to which the work of Khalil Raad stands diametrically opposed. He was an archivist of something much closer to the truth and reality of his subjects. From the slightest detail of daily life through to key political events, Raad's work defies the obfuscating view of his Western counterparts, whose work, consciously or not, served the cause of colonialism and led to the fall of Palestine in 1948. Raad's testimony deserves a wider audience, deserves to be researched exhaustively, as should the work of his Arab colleagues who today, for the most part, languish in profound obscurity. Now, perhaps more than ever, is the time to oppose this dominant vision of history, bent beneath the weight of its own prejudice.

⁸ Such works include Leonard Pearson, *Through the Holy Land* (London, 1937), and Grant, *Touring the Ancient World with a Camera* (London, undated).