

“My Pulse Beats with the City”: Remembering Albert Aghazarian (1950–2020)



PENNY JOHNSON

A memorial tribute to Albert Aghazarian (1950–2020) recalling, often in his own words, how he grew up in the Old City of Jerusalem, his life-long passion for the city as a historian and activist, and his unique contribution to the defense of academic freedom at Birzeit University, including the rights of students and staff during his tenure as director of the Public Relations Office.

“MY PULSE BEATS WITH THE CITY,” Albert told a C-SPAN reporter in February 1991 as they both stood on a rooftop overlooking the Old City of Jerusalem, the spire of the Lutheran Church nearby and the Dome of the Rock gleaming in the background.¹ “War in the Middle East,” read the all too familiar media byline undergirding the broadcast, the war on this occasion being the first Gulf War. Albert, however, with his signature twist of hair shooting sideways and his animated hand gestures, dismissed the reaction to the scattering of missiles over the skies of Jerusalem as “hysteria.” He then elaborated on his favorite topic: preserving the diversity and pluralism of the city he loved, a diversity increasingly under threat, he said. For Albert, Jerusalem was both “timeless and living.” The rather wooden-faced reporter asked about his own safety as an American if he walked the alleys of the Old City and Albert replied, “Safety is a state of mind.” He followed this with his own mantra: “You do what you have to and whatever comes, comes.” (Another favorite life motto of Albert’s was “Do your best and leave the rest.”)

To the question “Are you Palestinian?” he forcefully replied: “YES. Palestinian.” Indeed, no one more so, in life and indeed in death. Albert’s coffin, draped with the Palestinian flag, was taken in a funeral procession through the streets of the Old City—displaying the banned flag in an illegal act he would have relished. He was also a proud Armenian and, above all perhaps, a soul-and-body Jerusalemite who learned his considerable skills at maneuvering, negotiation, argument, and plain old hustle in the streets of the Old City. Few will forget his hilarious encounter later that autumn of 1991 when, with Hanan Ashrawi as spokesperson, he headed the Palestinian press team at the Middle East peace conference in Madrid (where he knew the first names of at least a hundred journalists there in my estimation). Speaking on CNN, he trumped a bewildered right-wing Israeli legislator who invited him “to eat hummus in your place and you eat hummus in my place.” Albert countered that maybe he would eat gefilte fish, all the while managing to convey that who went to whose house and ate whose food was not really the point, and getting back to the topic

Journal of Palestine Studies Vol. XLIX, No. 3 (Spring 2020), p. 76, ISSN: 0377-919X; electronic ISSN: 1533-8614. © 2020 by the Institute for Palestine Studies. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2020.49.3.76>.

that concerned him: the military-ordered closure of Birzeit University and Israel’s series of human rights violations.

Albert, like myself and a number of other Birzeit University faculty and staff, was swept up in the Palestinian delegation to Madrid, which he described as his “finest hour.” *But Albert*, I want to tell him even now, *you had many finest hours*—including all those I witnessed at Birzeit University where he headed the Public Relations Office from 1980–2002. In the tumultuous 1980s, in particular, public relations was a constant battle where the odds were overwhelming: it was the vast power of the Israeli military versus an occupied Palestinian university, its staff, and students. Indeed, as I began my tenure in that office in 1982, the last Birzeit University newsletter was on my desk. Its headline read “Birzeit University ~~Opened~~ Closed.” And perhaps the most active part of a very dynamic office was the prisoners’ committee, with students and staff streaming in to report arrests or to give accounts of their mistreatment and torture under interrogation. At the center of this whirlwind, Albert plunged into the fight to develop the university—and to keep it open given the string of military-ordered closures—with his own particular set of skills and his shared level of commitment to the Birzeit community.

Where did Albert develop those signature skills? Born in 1950, he spent his youth both under Jordanian rule and Israeli occupation. His family history stretches back to Anatolia in Ottoman Turkey, from where his father’s family was forced to flee during the second wave of genocide in 1920. His father, Arsan, arrived in Jerusalem when he was eleven years old and went on to work as a cook with his brothers in their restaurant, the Picadilly in Mamilla, until 1948, when Mamilla fell to Israel. His father married another Palestinian Armenian, Elise, who was a highly skilled seamstress and dressmaker, opening the first tailor shop for women in Arab Jerusalem. A strong and determined woman, she fostered her children’s abilities and education.

Arriving in Jerusalem as Armenian refugees, the families belonged to a minority community—although, in a 1993 conversation with me, Albert answered with several decided “nos” that he’d never felt like a minority in his city.² It was difficult to distinguish between his personal ability to adapt and his elated vision of the city as embodying the “pluralism of the Levant,” where communities do not dissolve but are affirmed. “We are all part of the Arab-Islamic framework,” he maintained. “Islam accepts all the prophets, including Alexander the Great!”

For Albert, a personal key to this heritage was his love affair with the Arabic language. Teachers’ praise and school prizes were showered on the “Armenian kid.” Albert relished the attention and kept on talking. (He would go on to learn Hebrew and French, as well as his grandmother’s Turkish).

But school was not his only teacher. In our conversation, Albert described growing up in the Christian Quarter and the welcome advent of Christian pilgrims in the spring. Even though the Jordanian authorities had banned “unauthorized” persons from talking to foreigners (the fine was one dinar and ten piasters), Albert and his pals would talk to people at the Casanova Hotel and take them back to the Atallah shops on his street to purchase souvenirs. Albert himself started working in one of the shops when he was “just a kid,” not realizing that his father was paying the shopkeeper half of Albert’s ten Jordanian dinar salary per month to keep his son on.

He went on to work at the Intercontinental Hotel gift shop on the Mount of Olives when he was thirteen “under one of the great Jerusalem merchants, Raja Tannous,” wearing a tie and a starched collar to work. “What an ambience,” he told me. “It’s like it was four hundred years ago.” Albert was

working at the hotel when the first Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) conference took place there in 1964.

The bustling political activity of the Old City was part of Albert's education, particularly in 1957 when the Nabulsi government was in power in Amman. He noted that the Coptic Khan was a Communist Party center with lectures by Yacoub Zayadin, a "distinguished person." His Boy Scout troop at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was recruited by the Baathists—"church, politics, revolution, all in one package," Albert said with relish. On Monday morning, 5 June 1967, Albert was planning to go and volunteer for the Jordanian army with his friends. "We were ready to sweep into Tel Aviv," he said ruefully. But then the brief war came to Jerusalem. He answered a knock on the door the next day and found his cousin from Amman wearing a Jordanian army uniform. With little training, he had been placed in Musrara, where his commander died two hours after the fighting started. He wanted to fight on, but the family persuaded him to have a bath and rest. When his cousin woke up, Albert told him that Jerusalem was occupied. "Our first reaction was total shock," Albert recalled, adding, "Let's face it, we grew up with the mentality, 'If every Arab spits, Israel will be drowned in the sea.'" Albert went back to work—selling Tempo soft drinks to the wave of Israelis flooding the Old City. He wandered through West Jerusalem, impressed by the cafés, books, and films there until, one evening in 1969, leaving a cinema at 11:30 P.M., laughing and chatting with his friends, "an Israeli guy started hitting and kicking my friend." Albert and company were taken to the Moscobiyya prison compound by the police "and the madman went home in a police car." As for so many, the "sour taste" of occupation canceled the initial sense of discovery. He recalled Madame Gaspard (the mother of the late theatre director François Gaspard) leading a rally in 1968 at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for the seventeen hundred Palestinian detainees. And by 1970, when he was enrolled at Birzeit University, he went on hunger strike himself, ending up in the hospital.

Albert went on to the American University of Beirut, where he obtained a BA in political science, and then to Georgetown University, where he was the first graduate of the university's MA in the Arab Studies program. During his sojourn in Washington, he also worked at rival Arab embassies. "Maybe Jerusalemites are too adaptable," he commented.

When he came back home to work at Birzeit University, however, Albert's adaptability was anchored in his unstinting opposition to human oppression and his total embrace of the cause of Birzeit University and Palestinian higher education under military occupation. And that adaptability became a strategic asset in the university's struggle to survive. Indeed, one of his favorite words describing his approach to supporting our title fight—Birzeit University versus the Israeli military—was "ad hocery," or, in other words, thinking fast on your feet (and making sideways dodges) rather than acting according to a set plan. (The post-Oslo period with all its donor requirements for "logframes" and timetables did not really suit Albert, who was best as an improvising impresario.) His partner in crime, if you will, was an unlikely one at first glance: the dignified acting head of Birzeit University, Dr. Gabi Baramki. But Gabi was also a master of lateral thinking—he once famously, according to the then Dean of Students Munir Fasheh, closed his eyes and fell asleep while an Israeli army officer was lecturing him about the sins of Birzeit students. (Another time, he delayed responding to a summons for yet another military interrogation because he had choir practice.)

One of the most enjoyable moments of ad hocery came in the struggle against Military Order 854 (issued in July 1980), which demanded foreign faculty sign an anti-PLO pledge on the application form for a work permit as well as placing other restrictions on the university. Faculty, staff, and students waged a protracted public struggle against these violations of academic freedom. The ad hoc thought, however, was: why not just excise Article 18, the anti-PLO loyalty oath, from the application form and announce that foreign faculty members are ready to sign? And so it was on 20 November 1983, when Birzeit University dispatched signed work permit applications to the offices of district officer Captain Roni at the Civil Administration in Ramallah. In his memoir, Gabi noted with relish that “the captain declared himself delighted. Birzeit had finally submitted to his authority.”³ Although there were repercussions later, it was a moment to savor: the document of the occupation had been replaced with a document of the occupied. It is very much to the point that one of the chapters of Gabi’s memoir is called “Not Obeying Orders.” Both Albert and Gabi often headed the (illegal) marches when faculty, staff, and students attempted to return to their closed campus.

There were of course moments of shared sorrow. Entering our office on the new campus on 21 November 1984, I found Samira Sumara, usually a patient and cheerful presence to students seeking information on detained colleagues, weeping. The first death of a student by Israeli gunfire during a campus demonstration had occurred: Sharaf al-Tibi, a fourth-year student in engineering from Gaza, had been shot and died on his way to the hospital after the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) delayed the entrance of ambulances to the old campus. Rather than simply issuing a press release, or even a chronology of events, we decided on a detailed report using all the tools of evidence developed by human rights organizations, collecting affidavits in partnership with the Ramallah affiliate of the International Commission of Jurists, Law in the Service of Man, later to be renamed Al-Haq.⁴

Albert deeply respected our more patient human rights investigations—and greatly facilitated our work—but his *métier* was to be able to turn sorrow into immediate action. When, in 1986, the IDF killed another two students on campus, Albert organized a crowded press conference at the American Colony Hotel in Jerusalem within hours of their deaths. In our many press conferences in Jerusalem, Albert’s quick wit was often in evidence. On this occasion, he projected a steely anger.

Albert was never a heads-down person. In the 1980s, he would sweep through the (often dreaded) Ben Gurion Airport announcing, “We are from Birzeit University. Put us first in line because we will take time!” He also once (or probably more than once) told one of the ubiquitous security personnel that he would hate it if one of his kids ended up in such a “lousy job” and hoped the young man could find something better to do.

His interest in people was entirely genuine—and his ability to remember names put him for me at a genius level. Catherine Grosso, who took over the coordination of the Human Rights Action Project/prisoners’ committee in the Public Relations Office from 1993 to 1997 put it very well when she wrote me after Albert’s death:

I spent such happy years working with him. I will never forget the way he welcomed people into the office by name and context. . . . To honor them in that small way. . . . He loved the students. He was never too busy to greet and talk with a student returning from prison, from Gaza, or from studies abroad. Albert taught me patience and flexibility—for visitors arriving three hours late or [those that] stayed an extra four hours.

It's hard to select one or two of Albert's initiatives in shepherding delegations and guests to the university, even when it was closed by military order. But perhaps one from each intifada might do. In 1991, violinist Yehuda Menuhin received the prestigious Wolf Prize and addressed the Israeli Knesset, criticizing Israel's repression of the Palestinian people as "unworthy of my great people." A few days later, Albert brought Menuhin to Ramallah (the university campus had been closed since 9 January 1988). We met at the apartment of Sameh and Nadia Abboushi—appropriately because Nadia was and is a pianist and teacher of music. We talked about the lives of our community in the First Intifada—and also of our hopes for the future. And then Albert took Menuhin and his precious Stradivarius down the long road to Jericho and 'Aqabat Jabir refugee camp. Menuhin, Albert told us, was worried about his violin in the humidity and dust but Albert urged him not to disappoint the young people from the Jericho-area camps who had assembled to hear him. (I imagine now that he told the distinguished musician "Do your best and leave the rest!")

And in the tumult of the terrible year of 2002, during the violence-wracked Second Intifada, Albert welcomed the International Parliament of Writers to Birzeit University. Invited to Palestine by Mahmoud Darwish (who was a founding member of the organization), the delegation was headed by Russell Banks and included Nobel laureates José Saramago of Portugal and Wole Soyinka of Nigeria, among others. The group arrived in Ramallah only days before the 27 March invasion of our town. I asked Tania Nasser, who helped organize the visit and accompanied the group from Ramallah to the university through the Surda checkpoint (graced not only with soldiers but with a trench in the road), for her memories of this event:

They were warmly welcomed by Albert Aghazarian. I ha[d] never seen Albert more enthusiastic and happy[. A]s always when he meets writers and artists, philosophers and intellectuals Albert seems to bloom, becoming "larger than life," as many have said. His belief in the power of art and literature was absolute. Therein lies truth and humanity and to Albert this is what life is all about. He hosted a meeting with students and faculty and then gave the writers large sheets of paper to write their personal expressions of solidarity. One memorable memento was by Jos[é] Saramago who drew a flower for Palestine. These papers are now framed and part of the Birzeit University Museum collection.

Albert's many Jerusalem tours—whether with celebrities, scholars, or students—were justly famous. A historian, Albert could uncover the many layers of the modern city: Kaiser Wilhelm, the Mameluks, Saladin, Josephus and the Romans, pigeons' roosts, Syriac Christians, and sesame seed presses mixed together in a heady brew that was his personal Jerusalem. For him, Jerusalem was indeed, as he often said, a "city of mirrors," and he offered visitors dazzling reflections.

Albert would frequently invite his touring companions—who came from all over the world—into his home, first at his apartment in the Christian Quarter and later in the Armenian Convent. There they would meet Madeline, his wife, who, without exaggeration, offered not only unstinting hospitality and generosity to the unending waves of guests but was the crucial domestic support that underpinned Albert's relentless public energy. For all those years, she was the hard-working center of family life, as well as the devoted carer to their three children: Arsan, Elise, and Arda. Madeline also maintained Armenian traditions in her life and cooking—I recall her pounding *pasturma* on the roof in the 1980s.

After his departure from Birzeit University in 2002, Albert perhaps needed Madeline and his family even more. He launched a translation service—he was a brilliant simultaneous interpreter—and gradually his three children grew into partners in this enterprise. During his Birzeit years, I often marveled at Albert’s famously strong constitution—he often urged less robust university guests at a lavish Jericho lunch to partake of “lion’s milk,” in other words milky glasses of arak. But episodes of ill health began to plague him as the new century continued. In later years, he spent more time at home than in his beloved Old City streets. Nonetheless, he was still called upon to speak at international conferences. The last I know of was in Rabat, Morocco, in July 2010, a convening of the United Nations African Meeting on the Question of Palestine. The topic was entirely in tune with Albert’s lifetime passion: Jerusalem.

Some years later, in 2017, at a conference in Arab Jerusalem marking one hundred years since the Balfour Declaration, Albert told me of his own upcoming centenary: “My family will then have been in Jerusalem for one hundred years. I will be a citizen of Jerusalem, it takes a century!” This was one of the few times I disputed his usually convincing assertions. He had been a citizen of Jerusalem all his life—and remains so in his untimely passing. Those who knew him, I think, still hear his voice. George Hintlian, his close friend for over half a century, told me that when he saw Albert’s coffin, he thought, “How can a volcano be silent?”

One of the last times I saw Albert was at the launch of Birzeit University historian Nazmi Jubeh’s book on the Moroccan Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem. The meeting brought together older generations of Jerusalemites and young activists at the Yabous Cultural Center, one of the initiatives attempting to bridge the fragmented social and political world of Palestinian Jerusalem today. Albert sat down beside me, breathing heavily. He was clearly not well. But the first thing he said to me was reminiscent of all our years of working together at Birzeit University: “Penny, I need your help.” When I inquired, he said, “I want to write my memoir.” Eight months later, he was gone. I wonder how he would have begun his memoir. Perhaps with the phrase “My pulse beats with the city.”

About the Author

Penny Johnson is on the Editorial Committee of the Jerusalem Quarterly. Her book, *Companions in Conflict: Animals in Occupied Palestine* (Brooklyn: Melville House), was published in 2019.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Albert Aghazarian, “West Bank: Interview,” C-SPAN, 30 January 1991, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?16357-1/west-bank-interview>. Thanks to Janeen Albina for alerting me to this interview.
- 2 See Penny Johnson, “Growing Up in Jerusalem: A Conversation with Albert Aghazarian,” *Middle East Report* 182 (May–June 1993). Albert’s remarks in this conversation are quoted throughout this tribute.
- 3 Gabi Baramki, *Peaceful Resistance: Building a Palestinian University under Occupation* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), p. 85.
- 4 Birzeit University Public Relations Office, *No Mercy: A Report on Army Actions at Birzeit University on November 21, 1984* (Birzeit: Birzeit University, 1985).