



## School Days in Mandate Jerusalem at Dames de Sion

Mona Hajjar Halaby

*If the lives of women were rarely mentioned in formal histories, mention of the lives of children, and especially young girls was even rarer.*

—Jean Said Makdisi<sup>1</sup>

P.E. class on the terrace, 1937. From left to right: Lorraine Alonzo, Paulette Abu Khalil (facing camera), Nelly Ayoub (on right). Photo from the author's collection

Walking through St. Stephen's Gate, down Via Dolorosa into the Old City of Jerusalem, one comes across a large establishment at the arch of the Catholic Convent of Ecce Homo. Neo-Classical symmetry, characteristic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Old City, is visible in uniformly-spaced windows in the façades.<sup>2</sup> Climbing the four polished stone steps and facing the towering wooden door, a brass knocker shaped as a hand grasping a sphere awaits. This is the former Pensionnat de Notre Dame de Sion (referred to simply as 'Sion' in this essay), which today bears the name of Ecce Homo Convent and Guest House.

The Pensionnat de Notre Dame de Sion School and Orphanage for Girls, which operated from 1862 to 1948 in the Old City of Jerusalem, was one of the oldest, and most respectable educational institutions for girls. Because it was well known for its academic excellence, it drew students from all over Palestine and from neighbouring Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and Syria, and from the ranks of Mandate British officials.<sup>3</sup>

In the summer of 2004, I stayed as a guest at the Ecce Homo Guest House. Every morning, as I made my way down the staircase to the dining room, my hand would glide down the smooth wooden banister, and I would picture the schoolgirls who had come before me holding on to that same railing every morning on their way to the 'réfectoire'. As a teacher, I became intrigued by Sion's history and this building whose four walls held many schoolgirl stories.

The following summer, I inherited a photo album that brought those stories to life. It belonged to a former Sion student, and contained a collection of black and white photos of her school days from the early 1920s to the late '30s. Compelled by the photo album, I began to locate alumnae to interview about their lives at Sion.

With many of the schoolgirls now octogenarians and nonagenarians, scattered all around the globe, it was critical to conduct my interviews promptly, as their stories and memories would soon be lost if not recorded. Like Saleh Abdel Jawad, a lecturer at Birzeit University who coined the phrase "race against time" to describe a project aimed at recording the memories of survivors of the expulsion of 1948,<sup>4</sup> I, too, while locating and contacting Sion alumnae, felt I was in a "race against time" to rescue the past from oblivion.



Entrance of Ecce Homo Convent and Guest House on Via Dolorosa, 2000. Photo by the author.

My goal in this essay is to shed some light on the life and culture of a French Catholic girls' school in the Old City of Jerusalem from the late Ottoman period to the British Mandate. I will begin by retracing the history of Sion in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the context in which the school was created. Then, using the school alumnae's recollections, I will attempt to paint a picture of school life in the '20s and '30s, focusing on the school's social composition, teachers, curriculum, dormitory life, rewards and punishments, and the general atmosphere and culture that permeated the school.

## The Origins of Notre Dame de Sion

In the mid-nineteenth century, Théodore and Alphonse Ratisbonne, two brothers born in Strasbourg, France, to a wealthy and prominent German-Jewish family, converted to Catholicism and joined the priesthood. In 1848, Father Théodore founded the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion in Strasbourg. His brother, who took the name of Father Marie-Alphonse, wished to start a sister congregation in Jerusalem. The main thrust of the French orders, aside from education, was to work with Jews and pray for their conversion.<sup>5</sup>

In 1855, Father Marie-Alphonse set out on his voyage to Palestine. He wrote letters home describing the perilous journey by ship, which made two stops, one in Malta and another in Alexandria, before arriving in Jaffa.<sup>6</sup> Due to Jaffa's rocky and treacherous shores, no docks were provided for landing. Instead, when ships arrived in sight of the city, the passengers and their luggage were lowered into small wooden skiffs that sailors paddled to shore. The sea was often rough, and it was common to lose one's luggage in the roaring waves.<sup>7</sup> When Father Marie-Alphonse finally landed on the shores of Jaffa, he had only the clothes on his back. But the voyage was not over. He hired a guide and two horses and set off on horseback for a two-day journey along twisting and turning trails until finally reaching the holy city of Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup>

On 16 September, 1855, Father Marie-Alphonse wrote to his brother and the congregation:

*It is no longer a dream ... It is no longer an imaginary voyage;  
I am in Jerusalem. I left Paris August 27, and have arrived here September 12.<sup>9</sup>  
—Father Marie-Alphonse's first letter from Jerusalem dated 16 September, 1855*

Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, Father Marie-Alphonse began to look for a piece of land to purchase for his congregation. On 20 January, 1856, he discovered that the ruins on Via Dolorosa at the Ecce Homo arch were available for sale.<sup>10</sup> According to Christian tradition, it was here that Pontius Pilate introduced Jesus to the people,

saying “Ecce Homo” (“Behold the man,” see John 19:5).<sup>11</sup> Without delay, Father Marie-Alphonse travelled back to Europe to secure the funds necessary to obtain the land. Thanks to the generosity of many wealthy benefactors, Father Marie-Alphonse was able to purchase the property, and between 1856 and 1862, the convent, orphanage and Basilica were built.<sup>12</sup>

## Jerusalem in the Second Half of the 19th Century

For four hundred years, from 1517 to 1917, Palestine was ruled by the Ottoman Empire. When Sultan Abdul Hamid II ascended the throne in 1876, Palestine was a poor and neglected region of the empire. It lacked many of the modern amenities, such as harbours, railroads, and a network

of carriage roads. But the second half of the nineteenth century saw many changes in Palestine. In 1869, the first road suitable for carriages was completed between Jaffa and Jerusalem. And in 1892, when the railroad from Jaffa to Jerusalem was built, the trip by train, though scheduled only once daily in each direction, took four hours, as compared to 12 by carriage and a whole day by mule.<sup>13</sup>

Even though relations with Abdul Hamid II, who lived in Constantinople, were tense and contentious due to his heavy taxation of the Palestine province and the regime’s increasingly demanding military conscription, aspects of modern times enhanced life in Palestine.<sup>14</sup> One important improvement was kerosene, which was imported from Russia and Romania and slowly replaced candles and lamps in urban areas.<sup>15</sup>

Jerusalem at the start of the nineteenth century was small in area, confined to the Old City, which was encircled by high walls and gates and had been rebuilt between 1535 and 1541 by the Ottoman Sultan, Suleiman the ‘Magnificent’.<sup>16</sup> The Old City gates, except Jaffa Gate which remained open, were locked at night for protection.<sup>17</sup>

Conditions were difficult in the Old City for its population of 28,000.<sup>18</sup> Water was insufficient and it was difficult to heat the houses, which were boxlike and made of



Ruins of Arch of Ecce Homo, circa 1850. *Source: Sisters of Zion, A House in Jerusalem.*

stone with rounded rooftops and small courtyards.<sup>19</sup> Members of different religious communities lived together in the Old City. Christians, Jews, Muslims and Armenians were not insulated from each other. The inhabitants were poor and regularly decimated by epidemics of cholera, smallpox and typhus; eye diseases were prevalent.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the population grew and in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was so cramped for space that middle class Muslims, Jews and Christians began buying land beyond the Old City walls, constructing houses, schools, hospitals and public buildings, and thereby expanding the city of Jerusalem.

Regardless of its primitive conditions, Jerusalem, considered holy by Christians, Jews and Muslims, played a special role in the traditions of each faith. Pilgrims, businessmen interested in commerce and tourists drawn to the Middle East, were all attracted to Jerusalem.<sup>21</sup> The sheer number of pilgrims generated business through a demand for hostels and services, as well as small souvenirs, such as icons, candles, objects made of olive wood and mother-of-pearl.<sup>22</sup>

Tourists, businessmen and pilgrims did not merely pass through Palestine in the second half of the nineteenth century; many diverse groups of internationals settled there with religious or business motives – the Russian community, the German Templers, the French convents, and the American Colony, to mention only a few.<sup>23</sup>

It was only in the beginning of the nineteenth century that missionaries and religious orders began to see the possibilities for spreading their doctrines in the Ottoman Empire. Education was increasingly viewed as a means to social and economic mobility for the destitute and as a way of retaining power for the financially well off.<sup>24</sup>

The Franciscan order was present in Palestine as early as the sixteenth century and had created the first schools for boys.<sup>25</sup> It was only in the mid-nineteenth century that other Catholic orders started to show an interest in educating girls in Palestine. The Sisters of St. Joseph were the first to establish themselves in Palestine in 1847.<sup>26</sup> The founding of St. Joseph heralded the establishment of many other girls' schools in Jerusalem. After Sion opened its doors in 1862, a school for girls was established by the Quakers in Ramallah in 1889.<sup>27</sup> In 1895, a Muslim girls' school created by the Ottomans opened in the Old City of Jerusalem.<sup>28</sup> The teachers and administrators were Christian, Druze and Muslim.<sup>29</sup>

Even though many of the important private schools were operated by missionaries or other religious orders, Christian and Muslim, these schools' students were not divided along sectarian lines. Many daughters of distinguished Jerusalem Muslim families attended Sion. Among them was Khadija Hadutha al-'Alami, who entered Sion in 1880, and Zahhiya Nashashibi, who attended Sion around WWI.<sup>30</sup>

## The Beginnings of Sion

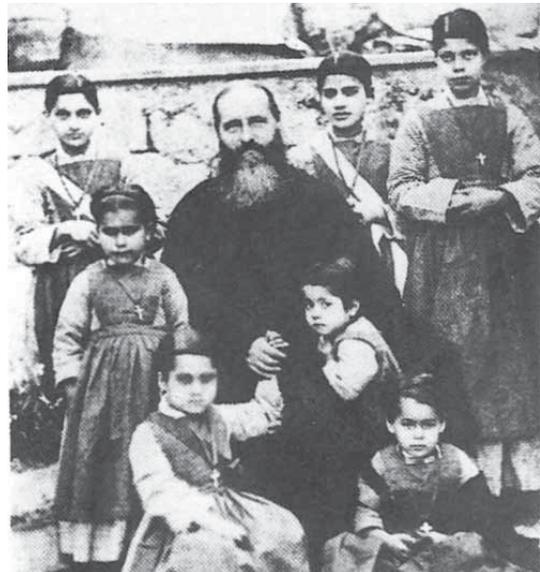
On 6 May, 1856, when Sisters Noemi, Electa, Victorine and Marthe arrived in Jerusalem from France in order to start the congregation and school of our Lady of Sion, they were forced to temporarily reside in a lodging in Khan al-Zayt neighbourhood while the convent was being constructed.<sup>31</sup>

In 1862, after the convent and school building were completed, the four founding sisters opened the doors of Sion to the first 12 students. By 1881, the number of sisters had increased to 24, and the children to 186.<sup>32</sup> At first, Sion offered to the Old City's most needy children a day program comprising practical lessons in French and Arabic, plus housework and needlework.<sup>33</sup> The school also had a dispensary that provided medical service to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.<sup>34</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, the school added a boarding school for 25 girls, including the daughters of the Pasha.<sup>35</sup> Instead of teaching housework and needlework, the boarding school taught languages (French, Turkish, Italian, English and German), history, geography, math, music, drawing, and embroidery.<sup>36</sup> It is important to note that in the early days of Sion, Arabic was not part of the curriculum.



Sisters Noemi, Electa, Victorine and Marthe, circa 1860. Source: *Sisters of Zion Archives Exhibit Posters, Jerusalem.*



“The big girl on my right is a Lebanese Maronite. In front of her is a charming child from Gaza. On the other side, a young Greek Orthodox with black eyes. I’m giving my hand to my little Zeli, a very nice Jewess. At my feet, a child from Jerusalem and a Samaritan.” - Pere Marie-Alphonse, photographed with students in 1880s. Source: *Sisters of Zion Archives Exhibit Posters, Jerusalem.*

## Conducting Oral Histories: The Sion Alumnae

*The present tense of the verb ‘to be’ refers only to the present: but nevertheless with the first person singular in front of it, it absorbs the past which is inseparable from it. ‘I am’ includes all that has made me so. It is more than a statement of immediate fact: it is already biographical.*

–John Berger, *About Looking*<sup>37</sup>

Among the different forms of personal testimony – autobiographies, correspondences, memoirs, just to name a few – oral histories offer the social historian invaluable face-to-face, first-hand information about a foregone time and place. In fact, oral histories benefit both the historian and the narrator/informant. As historians, oral histories allow us to enter inside the experience of another individual who lived at a particular time in history and in a distinct geographic location. For the narrators/informants, oral histories provide them with a unique opportunity to reconstruct the past, mingling past and present perceptions.<sup>38</sup>

But how are historical narratives formed? How did the alumnae, as Palestinian youth, internalize their French Catholic education? How did the details of their environment and the guidance of their teachers influence their sense of self and place? Edward Said, in his essay, “Invention, Memory and Place,” affirms that memory affects issues of identity, nationalism and authority, and that the study of history is the underpinning of history.<sup>39</sup>

Interviewing Sion alumnae gave me the rare opportunity to listen to women share their personal interpretations and reconstructions of their past. As Ellen Fleishmann wrote in “Crossing the Boundaries of History,” “Oral history plays a significant role as a methodology and pedagogical tool that empowers women by providing them with direct expression as authors of, or participants in their own history.”<sup>40</sup> Every time I walked into the house of an alumna, it was like stepping into a time capsule, where bits of her school days were preserved in the form of stories, notebooks, or photographs. The Sion alumnae were indeed participating in their own history through their stories and artefacts.

All five women I interviewed were happy to talk to me and were at ease with the interview process.<sup>41</sup> Conducting interviews with women in their eighties and nineties could have been challenging had I been confronted with memory impairment. But these women’s recollections were sparkingly vivid. They remembered details of their school experiences, poems they had learned by heart as young girls, and small descriptive images that helped bring their school days to life.

The Sion alumnae interviews, recorded between 2005 and 2006, form the basis of this essay. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, French and English, as all five women are trilingual. All the women I interviewed had attended Sion between 1919 and 1938. Their ages ranged from 78 to 93.<sup>42</sup>

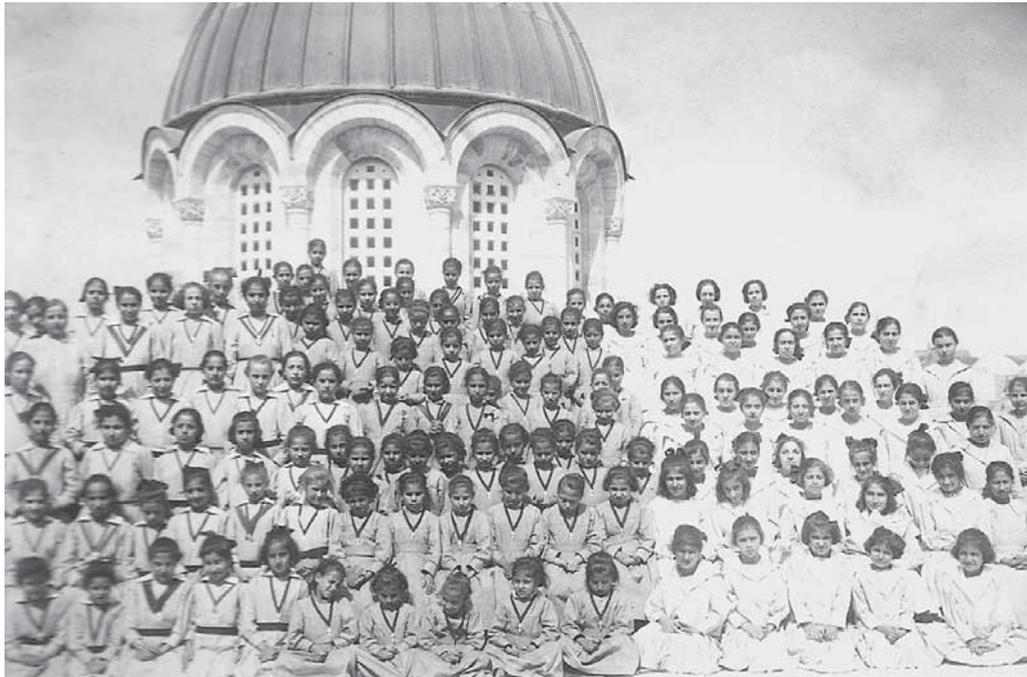
## Social Composition at Sion

Even though all five women I interviewed had attended Sion in the '20s and '30s, it became apparent through the interviews that not all the girls received the same education. Like many other Catholic schools in Jerusalem at that period, Sion provided separate sections for tuition-paying students and financially-challenged ones. All Catholic schools recognized that in order to survive financially, they would have to cater to different sectors of the population.<sup>43</sup> Early on, the school took in orphans and the destitute, but quickly realized that it could attract both the upper and lower socio-economic classes by creating separate programs within the same school.

And since political turmoil in the region created many refugees, orphans and destitute families, there was a huge need for subsidized or free education. Right from the start, Sion took in many Maronite orphans who had fled the 1860 Druze massacres in Lebanon and were seeking refuge in Jerusalem.<sup>44</sup> And later, between 1915 and 1923, a large influx of Armenian orphans and refugees escaping the Armenian genocide were drawn to offers of free lodging, free education, and weekly donations of bread from the Armenian and Catholic churches.<sup>45</sup>

Every category of student was grouped and bore a distinct name. At first the orphans, named "Les Bleuettes," and the boarders, named "Les Orphelines," formed two groups, to which a third one was added. The latter changed names three times. At first it was called "Les Neophytes," then the "Second Boarders" and finally the "St. Alphonse Class."<sup>46</sup> This third group was created in honour of Father Marie-Alphonse and served the Jewish girls who attended the school and received a free education. However, since few Jewish girls actually did attend the school, this group eventually comprised those students who paid half-tuition.<sup>47</sup>

Among the women I interviewed, two were 'pensionnaires' (full paying boarders), whose families did not reside in Jerusalem. Lorraine Alonzo's family lived in Alexandria, Egypt, while Fifi Khouri Abdel Nour's family lived in Jaffa. Mimi Mouchabek and Archalouys Krikorian Zakarian's families lived in Jerusalem; thus, they were full paying day students – 'demi-pensionnaires' or 'externes' as they were called. Elise Tachjian Aghazarain was enrolled as an orphan under full financial aid.<sup>48</sup> Her father had died fleeing the Armenian Genocide and her mother lived alone in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, I didn't have the chance to interview a St. Alphonse



School photo of the entire Sion student body, 1921. Note the three different shades of uniforms. Photo from the author's collection

girl (only about four Jewish girls attended Sion in the '20s and '30s). Archalouys remembered that one was named Fanny.<sup>49</sup> Mimi recalls that another was named Nekhama and died of typhoid.<sup>50</sup> In the late 1930s, when there was a shortage of teachers, the St. Alphonse girls attended the pensionnaires' classes, but they sat in the back of the classroom and left the room immediately after class was dismissed.<sup>51</sup>

Most Muslim and Christian girls who attended missionary schools found them to be welcoming and accommodating to Islam.<sup>52</sup> Given that at that time French was considered the language of commerce and good breeding, French Catholic schools were perceived as providing an important service for the local population. Some of the well-to-do Christian families whom Archalouys remembers at Sion were the families of Batatu, Qattan, Habib, Zaphiriadis, Hazbun, Homs, Alonzo, Rahill, and Lorenzo.<sup>53</sup> Lorraine remembers the families of Albina, Abu Khalil, Abu Suan, Ayoub, Khouri, Safieh and Salameh.<sup>54</sup>

However, a growing number of Muslim girls also attended Sion. As the number of Muslim girls increased, the school opened up a separate division for them, fearing that the Ottoman authorities and the Muslim population would accuse the nuns of surreptitiously converting Muslim girls to Catholicism.<sup>55</sup> Archalouys remembers the daughters from notable Muslim families that attended Sion during her days – girls from the Khalidi, Husseini, Nashashibi, 'Abdel Hadi, and Jarallah families.<sup>56</sup>

The fact that Sion was stratified according to socio-economic class troubled many of the alumnae I interviewed. Fifi was filled with fond memories of her days at Sion, except for her discomfort with the segregated programs:

*School was snobbish because the nuns underlined the economic status of the children. Everyone knew about each other's status, as we wore different coloured uniforms.<sup>57</sup>*

When I interviewed Archalouys, she first exclaimed with joy, "Sion was my second home!" However, midway through the interview, she, too, expressed uneasiness at how the school separated the girls:

*The three categories of girls were not free to talk to each other. The nuns felt that the parents of high society girls would not want their daughters to socialize with the lower classes. We studied in separate classrooms, ate in separate cafeterias, and slept in different dorms. Even at recess, we couldn't mix.<sup>58</sup>*

When asked what the school tuition was in the 1920s and '30s, Archalouys and her sister, Haiguhie Krikorian Zakarian remembered that as *demi-pensionnaires*, who were day students, they paid 60 Qroush per month, which did not include lunch. To receive lunch, they paid an extra two Palestinian pounds. As for the *pensionnaires* who were boarding at Sion, they paid 20 Palestinian pounds a month, which in mandate days was equivalent to the monthly salary of a high school teacher.<sup>59</sup>

Lorraine was most distressed by the fact that the orphelines were served for breakfast a sort of mashed gruel made from the *pensionnaires*' evening leftovers.<sup>60</sup>

As an orphan, Elise was only given two hours a day of academic instruction. The rest of the time was spent cleaning the convent and doing cross-stitching embroidery, which the nuns exhibited in their store and sold to tourists. Elise perceived this difference in education as devastating, and was comforted that at least one nun appreciated her difficult position:<sup>61</sup>

*I could tell the pensionnaires were very lucky as they were treated better. But one nun was especially nice to me. One day she said to me, 'C'est dommage que vous êtes orpheline. Vous êtes si intelligente.' [It's too bad that you are an orphan. You are so intelligent.] She had acknowledged my feelings, and I always wanted to be near her as it made me feel good.<sup>62</sup>*

Being close to this particularly perceptive nun who provided her with a valuable image of herself gave Elise deep solace. The nun had humanized Elise's experience with

her kind words. Because there were 75 Muslim and Christian orphelins in the early 1930s, Elise felt that most of the nuns didn't have the time to pay attention to them or to give them what they most needed. Elise stated with bitterness, "The nuns were very strict. They didn't see us as humans. It's as though we didn't exist."<sup>63</sup>

Mimi Mouchabek recounts that the tuition-paying pensionnaires had the privilege of wearing the lightest-coloured uniforms. The St. Alphonse, on partial financial aid, wore darker uniforms. And finally the orphelins, who were on full financial aid, wore the darkest uniforms.<sup>64</sup>

## **Notre Mère: Mother Superior**

In the 1920s and '30s, the Sion nuns' habit was simple: a long black robe with large cuffs, a starched white collar that laid flat on their shoulders and climbed to the top of their necks, and a white turban that wrapped tightly around their heads, covering the roots of their hair and their ears. On top of the turban sat a white-starched veil and on top of that, a black veil. Around their necks, they wore a large silver cross that hung down low on the chest and a wooden beaded rosary that swung from the waist.<sup>65</sup>

All the women I spoke with had rich and vivid memories of the director of their school, Notre Mère Marie-Godeleine, who, with her intellect and erudition, had made a strong impression on the young girls. They respected her, but also feared her:

*The first Mother Superior I remember when I first attended Sion was Mère Marie Lucia. However, the one I remember the best was Notre Mère Marie-Godeleine, the principal in front of whom we all trembled. If we saw her in the halls, we had to curtsy. We were taught how to do it by taking one step forward and counting in our heads, un, deux, trois, and then one step back, un, deux, trois. She was very intelligent and scholarly. She was efficient and taught us several subjects in the upper grades, like philosophy, ethics, the gospel and theodicy.<sup>66</sup>*

Lorraine remembers other aspects of Mère Marie-Godeleine that, together with Archalouys's memories, help paint a fuller picture of this extraordinary nun:

*Mère Marie-Godeleine was an artist. She painted holy pictures of Baby Jesus, the Virgin Mary and wildflowers. We watched her draw when she attended our piano exams. She was also our choir conductor, and a famous archaeologist. She was short and fat, and had heart trouble. When she sang a solo in our choir, she would open the top two buttons under her chin to sing better. Her bedroom was just below one of our dorm windows. At night*

*I could see her sitting at her desk drawing. Sometimes Mère Léandre, the school nurse, would stop in with Notre Mère's heart medicine.*<sup>67</sup>

Mère Marie-Godeleine began the excavations undertaken in 1931 in the convent of Sion, which were supervised by Dominican Father Vincent from l'Ecole Biblique. In 1955, her successor Soeur Marie-Aline de Sion, published the results and interpretations of their joint research on the Fortress Antonia in a book entitled, *La Forteresse Antonia à Jerusalem et la Question du Prétoire*. The book is dedicated to Mère Marie-Godeleine.<sup>68</sup>

Fifi recalls that one day Notre Mère received a letter in Arabic from the Jerusalem municipality and, as she couldn't read Arabic, asked Fifi to translate it for her. "I felt so proud and honoured. I guess I had good grades in Arabic."<sup>69</sup>

Mère Marie-Godeleine's thirst for knowledge and sheer ambition must have been an inspiration to her students. In the first quarter of the twentieth century with many girls' mothers at home tending to their families, Mère Marie-Godeleine must have modelled to her students that women can lead intellectual or professional lives outside of the home, and that learning is exciting and rewarding. It is interesting to note that all five alumnae interviewed for this essay had, at one point in their lives, held an occupation outside of their duties at home. How much Mère Marie-Godeleine's aspirations motivated them to pursue professional goals is difficult to say, as the Nakba of 1948 and the ensuing financial ruin experienced by many Palestinian families could have also contributed to their seeking out employment. Nevertheless, Notre Mère Marie-Godeleine and her teaching staff had an immeasurable influence in shaping these girls' minds at an impressionable age.

## **Teachers and Curriculum**

The remaining teaching nuns were addressed as 'Mère', followed by their acquired religious name. Archalouys and Lorraine recall the admiration bordering on infatuation that the girls had for Mère Raphaëla, a common reaction for girls in convent schools.

*Mère Raphaëla taught us geography. The students loved her, as she was young and pretty. Everyone wondered why she was a nun.*<sup>70</sup>

*One day I had not studied the names of the French regions on the map of France. Mère Raphaëla didn't punish me; instead she asked me to take a few minutes to memorize them in class. I covered my eyes with my hands and pretended to study them, while in fact I had made small holes with my*

*woven fingers and was admiring Mère Raphaëla. She was our favourite teacher, because she was young and she understood us. We knew she cared about us. Because we loved her so much, she was immediately transferred to another school. We were devastated.*<sup>71</sup>

Most of the students at Sion were Palestinian Arabs, while most of the nuns were French or European with only one or two Palestinian nuns among them. One of the French nuns was so smug in her racism that she felt perfectly justified in distrusting her Arab students. Mimi remembers hearing Mère Agnes say to crying students, “Larmes de crocodiles. Les larmes des arabes ne me touchent pas.” (“Crocodile tears. The tears of Arabs don’t move me.”)<sup>72</sup>

According to all the women I interviewed, the teaching of Arabic in their school days at Sion was not considered a priority. The nuns chastised the girls if they spoke Arabic at school and even gave them bad grades for speaking Arabic outside of Arabic class.<sup>73</sup>

*One hour of Arabic a week taught by Père Ephrem Jarjour was all we got. In fact, this was the reason my parents eventually pulled me out of Sion and enrolled me at the Jerusalem Girls College. They wanted me to get more Arabic instruction.*<sup>74</sup>

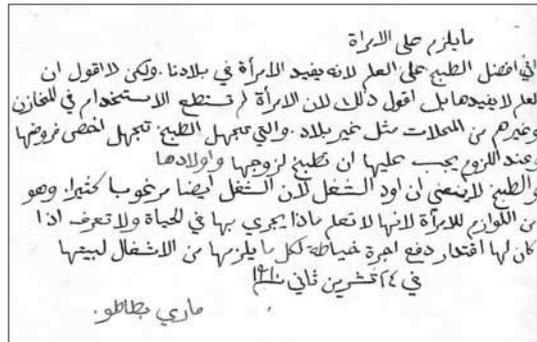
The emphasis at Sion was on everything French – from the uniforms, to the language, to the history. ‘L’Histoire de France’ was taught in the early years, starting with the lives of Clovis, Clothilde, the druids, and the Crusades.<sup>75</sup>

*We learned nothing about our own history, only about the French kings and queens and the French revolution. But I am glad they did teach us the map of Palestine, which was fortunate, because at our matriculation exam we were asked to draw the map of Palestine with the major cities.*

*Every Saturdays this old, old priest would come to teach us Catechism in Arabic, which we had to learn by heart. My friend, Elisabeth Habib, didn’t study much so she would argue with the priest about her grade. “Give me at least a five or a six,” [10 being the top grade] she’d beg him in Arabic so that the nun who was there to supervise the old man didn’t understand. At Arabic class, a French nun always sat in the corner doing embroidery to chaperone us, as it was not proper for a male teacher to be alone with us, adolescent girls.*<sup>76</sup>

*In the upper grades a Syrian priest, Père Hanna, taught us Arabic once a week, but in the lower grades it was Augustine Tleel Jouzy. To teach us how to write our Arabic alphabet in calligraphy, she would bring bamboo*

sticks from Jericho, slice them in half in length and sharpen their points. We then dipped them into our inkwells and learned how to form the Arabic letters. Later Izilda Mouchabek taught us Arabic.<sup>77</sup>



Sample composition in Arabic by Mary Batato, 1911. From the author's collection.

The nature of students is universal and timeless. They love their teachers; they hate their teachers. They admire and respect them, while at the same time taking advantage of them, playing pranks and cheating. In 100 years, little has changed.

*After lunch we had English class. Our English teacher, Mère Emèrentia was a British nun, who was old and almost blind. She wore big, dark glasses. Because her eyes were troubled, we had to close the shutters and darken the room for her. To entertain ourselves in the dimly-lit room, my friend, Elisabeth would start a fictitious letter to my male cousin, who was studying in Louvain, France, and she'd pass the letter around and we each would write a bit in the letter. Poor Mère Emèrentia, she didn't notice anything! In that same class, Elisabeth [...] would whisper to me, "Souffle, souffle," ['Whisper, whisper' in French] asking me to give her the answers to our tests. I always did, until one day I decided I didn't want to help her cheat anymore, and I stopped.<sup>78</sup>*

One episode of cheating where several girls plotted out the unethical deed but shared the answers with the rest of their classmates indicates a strong sense of solidarity and team spirit. It is common that in the face of a common enemy or adversary, students bond together. In this case, the irony was that the test they cheated on was not only in religion, but also in theodicy – the argument in defence of God's goodness despite the existence of evil!

*One time our teacher showed us from her desk our upcoming theodicy final test, and then she put it back inside her desk, urging us to study for tomorrow's exam. After she left the classroom, a few friends and I set up a lookout in case one of the nuns showed up. We could hear them walking up the stairs because they had wooden rosaries hanging from their belts and the rosaries would rattle. So we got the test out of the desk and copied all the questions. Then we distributed them to everyone and we all did very well on the test. Notre Mère was very happy.<sup>79</sup>*

It is interesting to note that Archalouys's final statement was not how happy the girls were for their success in passing the test, but how happy Notre Mère was. Making Notre Mère happy superseded the joy of getting a good grade on the test.

After over 80 years, Archalouys still remembers with pride her first school notebook, called 'Mon Premier Beau Cahier': "I had done my best handwriting and drawings, and when I was finished, the nuns put it together with leather covers and bound it with leather ropes. I am sorry it was left behind when we lost our home in 1948."<sup>80</sup>

Mimi, on the other hand, had lasting memories of the school play, which is immortalized in several photos. "I remember our school play, 'Pierrette et Le Pot au Lait,'" she told me. "The older girls played the parts of les lavandières, the washwomen, while, we, the little girls, were the flowers."<sup>81</sup>

The non-teaching staff, 'les soeurs converses' (lay nuns) or 'soeurs', did the cooking and custodial work. The one who seems to have remained in the memory of most of the alumnae was Soeur Léandre, the school nurse. Perhaps her role as school nurse reminded the boarding school students of the loving and custodial mothering they missed away from home. If the girls experienced any aches or pains, they were allowed to seek out Soeur Léandre in the infirmary. One girl remembered that the remedy for constipation was English salts, or "les sels anglais," which was a foul tasting white liquid.<sup>82</sup> Everything administered by Soeur Léandre seemed to have had a nasty taste, in particular cod liver oil, both the mainstay and nightmare of children in the '20s and '30s:

"In winter when we came out of the chapel, after morning prayers, we had to stop by the infirmary to drink our glass of cod liver oil, with which Soeur Léandre supplied us a piece of bread." Lorraine then made a grimace as though she were swallowing the dreadful oil and added, "We immediately would chew on the piece of bread to rid our mouths of the terrible taste. Then we went off to the refectory for breakfast."<sup>83</sup>

At the beginning of every academic school year, a physician came and checked the general health of each pensionnaire. Lorraine remembers that she used to cough a lot in those days and that year after year when the doctor arrived for his rounds, he would ask, "Where is the one who coughs?"<sup>84</sup> It pleases her to remember this incident. I suppose when you are one of many girls cared for in a convent, it probably felt good to be remembered for a unique characteristic, even if it was only one's tenacious cough.

For all the pranks, the jokes and the mischief, the standard of education at Sion was one of the highest in the region. Sion was known to be a replica of France's best finishing schools for middle class girls. The curriculum included physics, chemistry, biology, math (algebra and geometry), history of France, general history, history of



Graduating class as Lavandières in the play, *Pierrette et le Pot au Feu*, 1938. In the back: Arsinee. Top row far left: Nadia Ayoub, Mary Fiani, girl unknown (behind Mary), Lorraine Alonzo (seated), Alice Homs, Eveline Medawar, and Jeanne Zaphiriadis (far right). Front row: Odette Gellad from Jaffa (far left on her knees), Salwa Mouchabek (middle), and Paulette Abu Khalil (right, on knees). Photo from the author's collection

Syria and Greater Lebanon, reading, writing, history of religion, literature, philosophy, morals and ethics, theodicy, Arabic, French, English, German, physical education, sewing, theory of music, catechism and drawing. Afifeh Sidawi's class notebooks during the academic year of 1904-1905, when she would have been 16 years old, are undoubtedly a testimony to the fine education the girls received at Sion. The presentation of the work was deemed as important as the content. It is remarkable how the pages of her notebooks are impeccably clean and void of ink stains, and how perfect her handwriting is – almost as though it were a computer-generated calligraphy font.<sup>85</sup>

Piano lessons were not compulsory. The students who took private lessons with Mère Ferdinand paid her 50 Qroush or piastres. Occasionally a 'concours de piano', or piano competition, would be held at school with Notre Mère present.<sup>86</sup>

*Our piano teacher, Mère Ferdinand, was nice. I remember how she used to lift one of her skirts to step on the paddles of the organ with her feet unencumbered. In winter, if we arrived at our piano lesson with swollen hands due to the cold weather, she would skip our lesson and say, "It's all right, girls, go back to your classroom."<sup>87</sup>*



Sewing class, 1930s. Photo from Sion archives

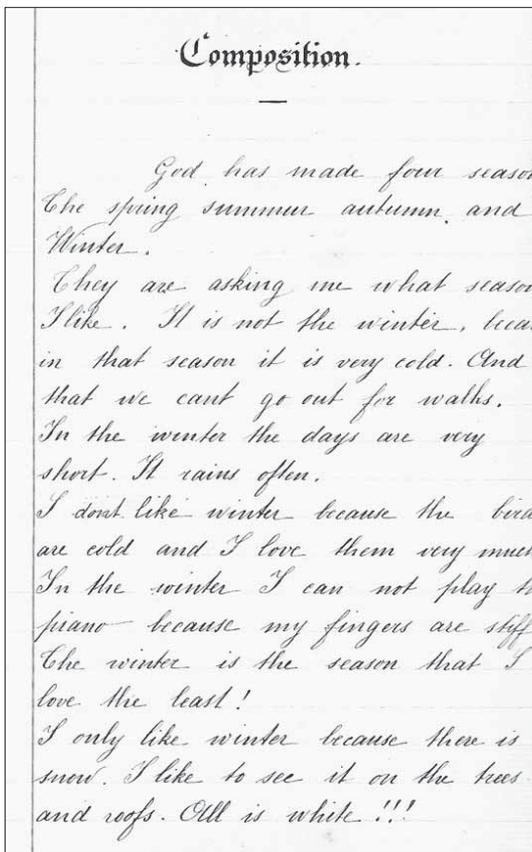


Photo of Afifeh's English composition, 1904-05. From the author's collection.

“For our sewing final exam,” recalls Archalouys, “we were given specific dimensions to cut a hole in a piece of fabric, then darn it back into the hole. Then we had to hem a piece of fabric. We also did embroidery and cross-stitching.”<sup>88</sup>

She also recalls that, in addition to the academic curriculum, the students were taught how to walk properly, how to hold their handkerchiefs, how to blow their noses and other rules of etiquette. “I still have habits from my days at Sion and remember poems by heart,” she laughs.<sup>89</sup>

## The Layout of the School

One of the aims of social history or ethnography is to contribute to an understanding of our human condition by observing and recording societies and communities.<sup>90</sup> Notre Dame de Sion School was a classical boxlike, multileveled building. After stepping over the threshold of the front door of the school, you found yourself in a cool dimly-lit hallway. On the left side was a small room called ‘la loge’, which was about the size of a theatre box, and in which a nun greeted guests and callers and sent them off to the desired location, while guarding the school entrance. In fact, her title, which sounds almost medieval, was ‘la tourrière’ – the tower guard.<sup>91</sup>

Facing ‘la loge’ on the right hand side of the hallway stood two parlours for Sunday visitors – ‘les parloirs’. Lorraine’s uncle, Albert, would come to visit her every Sunday. He’d invite her for lunch at his house for ‘la sortie du mois’, a monthly pass

to leave the convent, but she always refused, as she was shy around his young bride. “I felt more comfortable at Sion,” she says.<sup>92</sup>

The hallway opened into a courtyard with a large palm tree growing in its centre. The Basilica entrance was on the left. A staircase in the rear of the courtyard led up to the second floor. A bell hung on the wall of the staircase, serving as a rudimentary intercom system strictly forbidden to the students. La tourrière would ring once to get Notre Mère’s attention, or twice to get a hold of someone to attend the school gift shop, which was located on the ground floor as well.<sup>93</sup>

Lorraine chuckled as she related a story concerning the notorious bell:

*My best friend was Elizabeth Habib. She was very mischievous. One day (it must have been a Thursday or a Sunday, as these were the days our entire school went on our biweekly walks to the Mount of Olives) our entire school was lined up in the stairwell and the downstairs hallway in preparation for our walk, when Elizabeth played a prank on the nuns and rang the forbidden bell once. Suddenly all the nuns started to run around the building trying to locate Notre Mère. It was a hilarious scene, and fortunately, we were not caught.<sup>94</sup>*

The youngest students’ classrooms and dormitory were located on the second floor, which served grades one through four. First and second grades were called ‘Les Classes de L’Enfant Jésus’, while third and fourth grades were ‘Les Classes de Sainte Thérèse’.<sup>95</sup>

The third floor comprised the oldest girls’ classrooms, dormitory and a huge multileveled terrace overlooking Via Dolorosa and the Dome of the Rock. It was on this terrace that the girls stretch their muscles in their physical education class with Mademoiselle Antoinette, the P.E. teacher. They also played here at recess and were photographed for special occasions, as the nuns were in the habit of doing on a regular basis.<sup>96</sup>

Unexpectedly, the terrace could also turn into a safety zone in case of an emergency. Lorraine laughed heartily as she related the story of the earthquake of 11 July, 1927:

*Once we experienced an earthquake in Jerusalem. It was very strong. The minaret across the street lost a few stones. It happened while I was in class, and the nuns made us run out to the terrace where it was safer. One girl was in the bathroom and she came out with her panties wrapped around her ankles. We all laughed so much.<sup>97</sup>*

Fifth and sixth grades were called 'Les Classes de St. Théodore'. High school students were 'Les Classes de Sainte Marie', which culminated with the London Matriculation. The students entered school at age six and after 12 years of education, graduated at age 18.<sup>98</sup>

When Archalouys attended Sion, she completed her Brevet at the end of the eleventh year, and was then offered the opportunity to complete an additional year to obtain her London Matriculation. It was the first year the matriculation was instituted at Sion. Archalouys didn't choose this path, however. She had often heard people say, "La esh?" ["What for?" in Arabic] when a young girl chose to pursue her education past the Certificat d'Etude (end of primary school exam).<sup>99</sup>

*We were only two girls left in the Brevet year, Clémence Batato and myself. Clémence stayed on for her Matriculation year, but I refused. The nuns tried to encourage me to stay on as it was costly to have a Matriculation class for just one student. But I held my ground. Instead of continuing my studies, I helped my father with the bookkeeping at his wood shop in al-Maskobiyyah neighbourhood near the Evelyn Rothschild School. It also wasn't fashionable for young girls to work then, but I did it anyway.<sup>100</sup>*

Archalouys's commentary reveals her self-determination and independent spirit even in the face of public social displeasure. She must have had supportive and progressive parents who valued their daughter's opinion and well-being.

The refectories were in the basement of the building with their windows facing the main thoroughfare. Sometimes street children would stick their faces onto the glass panels of the windows and scream to scare the girls sitting silently and properly eating their meals at the tables. The startling scream made them explode into hysterical laughter that they then had to stifle, as a rule of complete silence at the tables was strictly enforced. In fact, one of the students would read aloud from a book to keep the other students quiet during meal time.<sup>101</sup>

## **Schedule of the Day**

The Sion school program was intellectually rigorous with long hours of study and small fragments of play. Lorraine remembers that she had between 15 and 20 classmates in the lower grades and only between four and eight in the upper grades.<sup>102</sup> The students attended classes six days a week, from Monday through Saturday.<sup>103</sup> Sundays for the pensionnaires was like any other day.

*There was nothing special on Sundays – same recess, same food. After church we went back to our classrooms and could read or write letters to our parents. Once in a while, we attended mass at Les Pères Blancs, our neighbours on Via Dolorosa at St. Anne’s, the Crusaders’ Church, where after mass the priests’ brass band would entertain us with a concert in the courtyard. The priests wore on their heads small red tarbushes, [red felt conical hats, called fez], slightly tilted to one side.<sup>104</sup>*

Each class lasted 40 minutes. Instruction started at 8:00 a.m. and ended between 3:00 and 4:00 p.m. Two girls sat at each wooden desk with their own inkwells and blotting paper. The teacher sat at her desk at the front of the class. The classroom walls were thick, and the ceilings high. Floral-painted or geometric square tiles covered the floors.<sup>105</sup>

*At first, no report cards were ever sent home to monitor our education and assess our learning, but later our parents did receive bi-annual report cards, and only then did some of the girls begin to take their studies more seriously.<sup>106</sup>*

Morning rituals for the pensionnaires started with a 7:00 am call to rise, followed by washing up in the primitive bathrooms. Since there was no running water at the convent, every evening a nun wove her way around each bed, pouring water from a pitcher into the girls’ individual tin washtubs kept on the shelf of their nightstands. On winter mornings, the water was so frigid that the girls barely dipped their fingers in the water to wipe their faces. Once every three months, or for special holidays, the girls took baths in big tin washtubs, all the while wearing long shirts in order to remain modest in the presence of the supervising nun.<sup>107</sup>

Pensionnat de N. D. de Sion			
JÉRUSALEM			
Année scolaire 1904-1905 1 <sup>er</sup> Trimestre			
Mlle Afifeh Sidawi			
1 <sup>re</sup> Classe		1 <sup>re</sup> Division	
—			
Conduite	Très Bonne		
Créer	Bon		
Travaux	Bon		
Progrès	Satisfaisant		
—			
Instruction Religieuse	3	1	3
Grammaire	1	3	1
Orthographe	1	2	6
Style	1	4	
Arithmétique	2	1	
Sciences	1	1	6
Histoire Générale	1	3	
Histoire Sainte	2	2	
Histoire de l'Église	-	-	
Géographie	1	1	
Lectures expliquées	3	1	
Littérature	1	2	6
Sur	3	3	

Afifeh Sidawi’s report card, 1904-05. From the author’s collection.

After their morning toilette, the girls put on their uniforms and went downstairs to chapel for daily mass. After services, it was time to stop



Playing croquet in the school garden, 1929. Photo from the author's collection.

by Soeur Léandre's infirmary for their daily drink of cod liver oil. "Then it was breakfast in silence in the refectory," Lorraine relates. "At breakfast, we ate jam and cheese and slices of bread. We drank tea with lots of milk. Breakfast tasted good because it was sent by our parents, the only meal our parents were allowed to provide us."<sup>108</sup>

After breakfast, the girls walked up to their respective homerooms where three different grades met for daily group meeting. Fifi remembers: "the meetings consisted of taking turns standing up and assessing ourselves in front of everyone with a grade for each subject. It was a method for helping us develop a sense of realistic evaluation of our work and an ownership for our studies."<sup>109</sup>



The orphelines' refectory, late 1930s. Photo from the Sion archives.

After daily homeroom meetings, the girls attended their various classes, and had a 30-minute morning recess during which the boarders ate a small sandwich provided by the school and day students had a snack from home. At recess, 'la récréation', the students ran around on the terrace, or played croquet in the small palm tree-shaded garden.<sup>110</sup>

Then came dinner:

*The tables in the refectory were long with benches on both sides. The tables were placed in a u-shape. One soeur supervised us while the other served us. We had to eat silently. There was a counter from which the cook*

*would hand us the pots and we carried the pots to the table from which the nuns would serve us. Our plates were made of china. We each had our tin tumblers, which we brought from home.*

*At lunch and dinner the food was terrible. Sometimes we had semolina soup, which I hated. It was disgusting. One day I found a big worm in my semolina soup. I was so happy to get rid of my food. But when I placed my plate on the counter to return it, a nun removed the worm and gave me back my plate. I can remember plates of rice with a boiled onion on top. On Sundays they fed us an artichoke. During Lent we ate lots of cooked cod. We had to eat everything that was on our plate and wipe it with a piece of bread.<sup>111</sup>*

Archalouys had happier memories of mealtime than Lorraine. She recalls with fondness that she used to bring snacks of chocolate and bread from home, and that for lunch they were served soup, meat, vegetables, fruit and pastries.<sup>112</sup>

*Since we had to be absolutely quiet during the meals, a system was established to communicate to the serving soeur if we didn't want to eat too much. We'd put our piece of bread on our plate to signal that we wanted less food. That meant we weren't very hungry.<sup>113</sup>*

Meals were bleaker for the orphelines: no chocolate and bread, no breakfast food sent from home. Elise has graphic memories of breakfast in the orphelines' refectory that almost bordered on cruelty:

*Everything was done separately. We slept in different dormitories, studied in separate classrooms and ate in different refectories. For breakfast we ate the leftovers of the pensionnaires' food mixed together to form a sort of porridge. One time a classmate couldn't eat it. She threw it up. The nuns kept her thrown up food overnight and forced her to eat it the next morning.<sup>114</sup>*

After lunch the girls had a short recess and then classes resumed. When instruction time ended between 3:00 and 4:00 pm, the externs left to go home, while the pensionnaires did their homework, had a light supper and went to bed.<sup>115</sup>

## **Uniforms**

*Everything was made in France: The yarn that held our crosses around our necks was made and imported from France. The straw hats we wore on our spring and summer Sunday outings were made in France, so were the veils, 'les mantilles,' we wore for Le Mois de Marie. Our uniforms were sewn at Sion, but with fabric imported from France.<sup>116</sup>*

The girls wore different uniforms for different occasions. The basic class uniform was made of a pinstriped grayish-blue fabric with a rounded white lace collar. In class, they covered their uniforms with a black apron or jumper in order to protect it from ink stains. When the girls had to leave the school building and walk out into the streets, they were to change into a navy blue uniform. And finally, once a month at school assemblies, they wore a formal uniform made of cream-colored raw silk imported from Damascus. Lorraine remembers that it was an itchy kind of silk that made her hot. With it, they wore white gloves and a straw hat in the summer. In winter, a beret was added to the uniform, as well as a short woollen cape and fingerless gloves that allowed them to write and do work while remaining warm.<sup>117</sup>

But what was most distinctive about the Sion uniform, was the different coloured belts the students wore to indicate which grade level they attended. The youngest girls, or first graders, wore a red fabric belt and were called ‘Les Rouges’. Second graders wore red belts with white edging and were called ‘Les Rouges Liserées’ (‘edged’ or ‘bordered’). Third graders wore orange belts, and fourth graders orange white-edged belts, and so on.<sup>118</sup>

The girls also wore a mother-of-pearl cross hung on ribbons that matched the colour of their belts. Muslim girls wore a silvery medal around their necks instead of a cross and it, too, hung from ribbons of various colours.<sup>119</sup>

## Rewards and Punishments

Every Saturday, every class had ‘une petite assemblée’, a small assembly, in their individual classrooms with the homeroom teacher and Notre Mère Marie-Godeleine. Notre Mère would stop in each class and sit up front next to the teacher and ask her loudly how the girls were doing. It was very intimidating. ‘La grande assemblée’, on the other hand, took place once at the end of each month in a hall where the entire school congregated. That’s when the most distinguished girls received an award in the form of a special sash, ‘le cordon’. The cordon was a wide fabric band in the girl’s class colour worn diagonally across the chest. Three different kinds of cordons were awarded for each grade. The Cordon d’Application was awarded for academic excellence, le Cordon de Sagesse for good behaviour, and finally at the end of each trimester testing period, le Cordon d’Honneur, was awarded for good conduct *and* academic excellence.<sup>120</sup> “We took a lot of pride in receiving our cordons,” recalls Lorraine. “It was a big honour. The nuns took photographs of us wearing our new cordons, and we wore them every day for a whole month or trimester. Everyone looked up to you when they saw this band across your chest.”<sup>121</sup>

Receiving a cordon from Notre Mère was the greatest reward and the crowning moment in every girl's life. Yet there were other rewards that motivated the students at Sion. Mimi remembers two such rewards connected to religious holidays:<sup>122</sup>

*During the month of May, which was dedicated to the Virgin Mary, every classroom posted a picture of the Virgin Mary on the wall. The poster had lines in a staircase pattern. Every girl's name was written on a paper rosebud, which was attached to a pin. Every time we earned good marks, our pin would move one step up the ladder until it reached the picture of Mary. We received a reward when we reached Mary's picture.<sup>123</sup>*

*Before Christmas, during Advent, we enjoyed preparing for Jesus' birth by setting up a Nativity scene. One of the activities the younger students took pleasure in was advancing their individual little wooden sheep that bore their names up the papier mâché hill to reach the manger. Every time we got a good grade, we were allowed to advance our little sheep up closer to the manger. The winner earned the privilege of putting Baby Jesus in the manger; the next girl got to put the Virgin Mary in place, the third girl, would put St. Joseph. It was such a small thing, come to think about it, but it made us so happy.<sup>124</sup>*

Another important honour bestowed upon the most responsible girls was being selected Guardian Angel ('Ange Gardien'). Guardian Angels were like prefects and were selected by the teachers in every class. Angels wore pins to identify themselves.<sup>125</sup> Their duties included helping the younger students by supervising them in the refectory and walking them from their classroom to the playground, but also walking at the front of the class lines and helping monitor classroom behaviour.<sup>126</sup>

Punishments at Sion, like rewards, were publicly recognized and meted out by the nuns.

*The most common punishment for a bad grade or bad behaviour was having to take off our cross and give it to our teacher. On Saturdays Notre Mère passed through every class to take our crosses or give them back to us."<sup>127</sup>*

*If we didn't get good marks, had bad behaviour, spoke in the dining room or the dorms after dark, or if we cheated on a test, we had to take off our cross and give it to Notre Mère. She would keep it from one Friday to the next. It was very embarrassing to go around the school without one's cross as everyone could see that we had failed somehow. One day, when I was walking back home from school, my friend and I ran into a crazy Armenian man who had been in the French Foreign Legion. We giggled when we saw him and whispered something to one another. Well, he told our principal,*

*and the next day we were summoned to her office, where she scolded us and took away our crosses for one week. We felt so ashamed. Sometimes I think the strict education we received made us grow up to be shy and embarrassed.*<sup>128</sup>

When Lorraine's grandmother, Maria Albina Alonzo, a resident of Jerusalem's Old City, passed away, the entire school went to her funeral at St. Sauveur Church. Upon returning to the school after the funeral, Lorraine was summoned to Notre Mère's office and punished for swinging her arms while walking to the funeral. Swaying one's arms was deemed inappropriate of young girls. Lorraine, feeling "humiliated", had to give Notre Mère her cross for a week.<sup>129</sup>

## **Dormitory Life**

Both dormitories at Sion had similar floor plans: two rows of 10 beds facing each other, with a nightstand between each bed. At the end of each dormitory, a small room doubled as the piano room in the daytime and the dormitory nun's bedroom at night.<sup>130</sup>

One of the most eloquent and vivid descriptions I was privileged to record during my interviews, and one that gave me a real sense of what the convent was like in the 1920s was Lorraine's description of her insomniac nights:

*When I was 13 or 14 and couldn't fall asleep, I'd crawl out of bed and slip out of the dorm after making sure everyone was asleep, including the supervising nun, and then I'd walk to my classroom, which was next door to the dorm. I'd grab one of my books, and sit on the deep stone window ledge and read by moonlight. Everything was pitch dark, except for the light the moon cast on the city. I could hear the muezzin's call to prayers. His voice was so clear and beautiful in the silence of the night. You know, there were no cars in the Old City. The only other sound I heard was the occasional utterance of "haaa, haaa, haaa" by the whirling dervishes in their chapel nearby. It was hard to break myself away from the magic of the moonlight.*<sup>131</sup>

In the winter, heating the rooms was difficult and the nuns didn't like to open the windows to air out the rooms. So to cleanse the air, Soeur Arbougast, an Eastern European nun whom the girls nicknamed 'Abu Gas', would walk the rooms with an incense burner. Lorraine remembers "it smelled very nice as the incense was mixed with orange peels."<sup>132</sup>

*Even though my sister, Haiguhie and I were not boarders, we knew from our friends what went on in the dormitory. Every morning the pensionnaires had to endure an inspection by one of the nuns. The girls' combs and hairbrushes were inspected for hairs. The beds were inspected as well. If something wasn't done right, the nuns would publicly embarrass the offending students.<sup>133</sup>*

Fifi Khouri's mother, who lived in Jaffa, worried about sending her daughter to study in Jerusalem far away from home. She made the nuns an unusual request:

*When our family friends and neighbours in Jaffa, the Ayoub, decided to send their daughters, Nelly and Nadia to Sion, my mother, who had heard about the good reputation of Sion, enrolled me as well – under one condition, that I sleep between Nelly and Nadia's beds in the dormitory. The nuns were kind enough to oblige. Other girls from Jaffa attended Sion as well: Aida Abboud, and Aida and Hilda Farwaji.<sup>134</sup>*

One of the most amusing stories to come out of the dormitory related to a typical fantasy of Catholic school girls – that of entering the nuns' private quarters. I was told that two girls, prone to sleepwalking, and whose beds happened to be side-by-side, would sometimes talk to each other in their sleep. One time they even had a fight and threw the water from their washtubs at each other. But the funniest tale was that of the night one of the girls walked down to the cloister:<sup>135</sup>

*Our greatest hope and dream was that a sleepwalker would one night lead us into the nuns' private quarter – the cloister – which was our forbidden territory! We had always wanted to enter the nuns' quarters and see them out of their habits. One night, shortly after the lights were out, one of the sleepwalkers sat up in bed. We all sat up as well, holding our breaths, ardently hoping that she'd walk down the stairs to the cloister. Lo and behold, she slipped out of bed and out of our dorm while all of us silently followed her, barefoot and in our nightgowns. She descended to the second floor and walked right up to the cloister door. She stood in front of the big wooden door with its copper doorknob. We paused behind her, silently cupping our hands over our mouths, trying to control our giggles and excitement. As soon as she touched the cold copper doorknob, she pulled away from it and walked back upstairs to our dorm in the same trance, without ever noticing that we were there. We were devastated. Never again did we ever get remotely close to entering the cloister.<sup>136</sup>*



Palm Sunday procession down Mount of Olives. Lorraine Alonzo followed by Alice Homsy in the forefront, circa 1936. Photo from the author's collection.

## Holidays at Sion

Life at Sion was punctuated by year-round religious feasts and holidays. The most important celebration was Holy Week followed by Easter. Every Friday during Lent the entire school went to pray at the Clarisse church on the road to Bethlehem. On Palm Sunday, the girls walked down from the Mount of Olives, carrying palm fronds and reciting the rosary or chanting prayers. On Good Friday, they took off for the Holy Sepulchre Church early in the morning when it was still dark.<sup>137</sup> Lorraine remembers that on Good Friday, the entire school walked the Way of the Cross on Via Dolorosa with the Franciscan priests: "There were so many people that by the time we reached one station of the cross, the priests were already at the next one."<sup>138</sup> School was let out

on Holy Saturday at noon, and that was when Lorraine remembers being allowed to eat 'kaak', delicate round semolina cookies with date stuffing traditionally baked at Easter.<sup>139</sup>

Every year for the feast of Père Marie-Alphonse, the students attended a mass in the Basilica and Père Marie-Alphonse's robe of conversion was on exhibit. Archalouys recounts that it still retained its original stains of coffee.

Because Lorraine had relatives residing in Jerusalem, she only travelled every other summer to Alexandria, Egypt by ship or train to see her parents. Sometimes a couple of nuns travelling to Egypt chaperoned her. The ship voyage only took two days and one night. She remembers sleeping in a coach compartment. At Christmas, however, she stayed at her grandmother's house in the Christian Quarter and went to pray at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem with her uncle Albert.<sup>140</sup>

Once a year, before the students were dismissed for the summer vacation, the entire school would take an excursion. They would walk up the hill to a house that belonged to the nuns on the Mount of Olives and picnic together on the hill.<sup>141</sup>

## Alumnae Memories of Sion

Before leaving my interviewees, I asked them what stood out in their minds about their education at Sion. Each one had an interesting final comment to share about her school days.

*We loved the nuns because they taught us discipline and imparted us with knowledge. They were strict, but at that time we didn't know better and all the adults were strict anyway. My happiest times were my years at Sion. No worries, no responsibilities. My friends, Marguerite Kattan, Clémence Batato and I were inseparable. We called ourselves 'les Trois Mousquetaires.'*<sup>142</sup>

Lorraine loved her days at Sion – so much so that even after her parents enrolled her for one year at Notre Dame de Sion in Alexandria, Egypt to be closer to them, she asked to return to Jerusalem. At one point of the interview, she divulged an interesting observation about herself. “I didn't live at the same ‘diapason’ [tuning fork, or beat], as my friends. Elisabeth and Clémence weren't like me. The nuns didn't understand me. I always ended up being disciplined for mischief I was dragged into by Elisabeth.”<sup>143</sup>

For Elise, whose experience as an orphan was tinged with envy and resentment, leaving Sion was perceived as deliverance. “The nuns made too big a deal about the differences between the rich and the poor. I was relieved to leave when I was 13.”<sup>144</sup>

Mimi remembers not only the reason she left Sion, but also the way her father stood up for his daughters. Mimi's father, Eftime Mouchabek, had an argument with Mère Agnes over the school bus stop. He wanted the bus to stop on the small street perpendicular to their unpaved path rather than on the main road but Mère Agnes refused. He was so angry that he withdrew his three daughters from Sion and enrolled them instead at St. Joseph's. “I can't believe how rigid the nuns were, but my father had a strong will and a lot of pride as well.”<sup>145</sup>

What stood out for Fifi about her years at Sion were the wonderful friendships she made and the good education she received. “Pendant les vacances on se quittait mal,” she remembers. (“During vacations we left each other with great pain.”) She added, “I used to be a shy girl in those days at Sion, so in retrospect I think the quiet and serious atmosphere suited me well.”<sup>146</sup>

## Conclusion

How did the Sion alumnae experience and memorize their school location both in the concrete building in the Old City of Jerusalem and in their emotional memory? Pierre Nora has coined the phrase, 'symbolic topology', to describe the role that memory plays in creating a community and distinguishing its 'lieux de memoire', the sites where it resides.<sup>147</sup> The Sion alumnae's historical narratives convey this same sense of an era that has disappeared from history, a community that has been eliminated, but is recovered from the past through the collective stories shared in this essay.

*The moment of 'lieux de mémoire' occurs at the same time that an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears, surviving only as reconstituted object beneath the gaze of critical history [...] if history did not besiege memory, deforming and transforming it, penetrating and petrifying it, there would be no 'lieux de mémoire.' Indeed it is this very push and pull that produces 'lieux de mémoire' – monuments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shores when the sea of living memory has receded.<sup>148</sup>*

It became clear through these interviews that only when sufficient time had elapsed from childhood could memory lead to reflection. In reconstructing their school days, the Sion alumnae reflected on their childhood, explored their character and personalities almost as though, in retrospect, they were able to construct a clearer image of themselves. Through the interviews, and in the context of remembering their school days, the women rediscovered who they were. Fifi saw herself as shy and quiet; Lorraine as different and misunderstood; Elise as intelligent and invisible; Mimi independent through her father's example; and Archalouys was able to articulate her choice to work after Sion despite societal disapproval.

It is interesting to note how powerful early childhood memories can be and how much they remain in the adult's life. In reconstructing their recollections of their school days at Sion, the women used a rich, evocative narrative style, at times reminiscent of poetry. Their memories sprang to life in vivid details and often with a hint of nostalgia. As they related their stories, they became animated and youthful. It was as though I were in the company of women much younger than their age, almost childlike on the one hand, yet mature and reflective at the same time.

In this essay, I have attempted to capture and preserve the myriad details of school life at Sion in Mandate Jerusalem. I have had the privilege of interviewing five remarkable women. Through their interviews, we gain a better understanding of the application of French Catholic education in the 1920s and '30s in Palestine. Finally, these interviews contribute to the voices of women in history.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Makdisi, Jean Said, Editor's Note, *Jerusalem Memories*, by Serene Husseini Shahid, (Beirut, Lebanon: Nafaul Group, 2000), v.
- <sup>2</sup> Kroyanker, David, *Jerusalem Architecture*, (NY: Vendome Press, 1994), 80.
- <sup>3</sup> Cuinet, Vital, *Syrie, Liban et Palestine: Géographie Administrative, Statistique, Descriptive et Raisonnée*, (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1896), 525.
- <sup>4</sup> Sayigh, Rosemary, "Survivors of the 1948 Expulsions: A Second Call for a 'Race Against Time,'" *Between the Archival Forest and the Anecdotal Trees: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Palestinian Social History*, Eds. Nakhala, Dua', Muna, El-Tamemy, and Helda, Kojstek, (Birzeit-Palestine: Birzeit University, 2004), 44.
- <sup>5</sup> Sisters of Zion. *A House in Jerusalem*. (Jerusalem: Carta, 1989), 2. I am very grateful to Sister Rita Kammermayer at the Convent of Ecce Homo. She made available to me the Archives of Zion and many pertinent materials.
- <sup>6</sup> Jorrand, Claire, *Le Père Marie à Jérusalem*, (Callian: Brumelot, 1999), 3.
- <sup>7</sup> Landau, Jacob M., *Abdul-Hamid's Palestine*. (Jerusalem: Carta, 1979), 24.
- <sup>8</sup> Sisters of Zion. *A House in Jerusalem*, 2.
- <sup>9</sup> Jorrand, Claire, *Le Père Marie à Jérusalem*, 3.
- <sup>10</sup> Sisters of Zion. *A House in Jerusalem*, 7.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 7.
- <sup>12</sup> Kroyanker, David, *Jerusalem Architecture*, 79.
- <sup>13</sup> Landau, Jacob M., *Abdul-Hamid's Palestine*, 11.
- <sup>14</sup> Sisters of Zion. *A House in Jerusalem*, 3.
- <sup>15</sup> Landau, Jacob M., *Abdul-Hamid's Palestine*, 3.
- <sup>16</sup> Yehoshua, Ben-Arieh, *Jerusalem in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: The Old City*, (NY: St Martin's Press, 1984), 14.
- <sup>17</sup> Landau, Jacob M., *Abdul-Hamid's Palestine*, 13.
- <sup>18</sup> Sisters of Zion. *A House in Jerusalem*, 3.
- <sup>19</sup> Graham-Brown, Sarah, *Palestinians and Their Society 1880-1946*, (London: Quartet Books, 1980), 99.
- <sup>20</sup> Sisters of Zion. *A House in Jerusalem*, 3.
- <sup>21</sup> Landau, Jacob M., *Abdul-Hamid's Palestine*, 10.
- <sup>22</sup> Graham-Brown, Sarah, *Palestinians and Their Society 1880-1946*, (London: Quartet Books, 1980), 104.
- <sup>23</sup> Landau, Jacob M., *Abdul-Hamid's Palestine*, 3.
- <sup>24</sup> Graham-Brown, Sarah, *Palestinians and Their Society 1880-1946*, (London: Quartet Books, 1980), 152.
- <sup>25</sup> Cuinet, Vital, *Syrie, Liban et Palestine: Géographie Administrative, Statistique, Descriptive et Raisonnée*, 527.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 526.
- <sup>27</sup> Tabawi, A.L., *Arab Education in Mandatory Palestine*, (London: Luzac & Co, 1956), 63.
- <sup>28</sup> Somel, Selcuk Aksin, *The Modernization of Public Education in the Ottoman Empire 1839-1908*, (Leiden-Boston-Koln: Brill, 2001), 120-121.
- <sup>29</sup> Spafford Vester, Bertha, *Our Jerusalem* (Lebanon: Middle East Export Press, Inc, 1950), 192.
- <sup>30</sup> Greenberg, Ela, "The Newly Educated Arab Woman and Her World: Girls' Education in Mandatory Palestine," 43.
- <sup>31</sup> Sisters of Zion. *A House in Jerusalem*, 6.
- <sup>32</sup> Sisters of Zion Archives Exhibit Posters, Jerusalem.
- <sup>33</sup> Greenberg, Ela, "The Newly Educated Arab Woman and Her World: Girls' Education in Mandatory Palestine," Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2004, 41.
- <sup>34</sup> Jorrand, Claire, *Le Père Marie à Jérusalem*, 16.
- <sup>35</sup> Greenberg, Ela, "The Newly Educated Arab Woman and Her World: Girls' Education in Mandatory Palestine," 41.
- <sup>36</sup> Cuinet, Vital, *Syrie, Liban et Palestine*, 569.
- <sup>37</sup> Berger, John, *About Looking*, (NY: Vintage, 1992), 300.
- <sup>38</sup> Conway, Jill Kerr, *When Memory Speaks*, (NY: Vintage, 1999), 6.
- <sup>39</sup> Said, Edward W., "Invention, Memory and Place," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 26, No. 2., Winter, 2000, 176.
- <sup>40</sup> Fleischmann, Ellen, "Crossing the Boundaries of History: Exploring Oral History in Researching Palestinian Women in the Mandate Period," *Women's History Review*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1996, 366.
- <sup>41</sup> I would like to acknowledge George Hintlian's help in introducing me to two of the alumnae I interviewed and for his suggestions as to the manner in which to conduct the interviews. George is a social historian specializing in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Jerusalem. He used to be the archivist at the Armenian Patriarchate in Jerusalem. Left to my own devices, I would have appeared at the interviews with my laptop and a long questionnaire. George recommended I not intimidate my interviewees with my high technology gear and specific narrow questions, which, if answered narrowly, would have limited the scope and depth of the interviews. Instead, I was encouraged to let them talk freely about their school days.
- <sup>42</sup> Three women were Jerusalem natives; one was from Jaffa and one from Armenia. I interviewed face-to-face two in Jerusalem; two in Montreal, Canada; and one via telephone in Beirut, Lebanon. As for their social backgrounds, with the exception of an Armenian refugee family who struggled financially in the early '20s, every one of these women came from urban bourgeois families. All the women I interviewed are Christian: two Palestinian-Armenian, two Greek Orthodox-Palestinian, and one Catholic-Palestinian. I wish there was the opportunity to interview a Muslim student to compare her experiences with those of her Christian classmates. Three interviews took place in private,

one-on-one, while two were conducted in the presence of a younger sibling, also a Sion alumna, who occasionally provided us with a forgotten detail or a bit of interesting information.

<sup>43</sup> Greenberg, Ela, "The Newly Educated Arab Woman and Her World: Girls' Education in Mandatory Palestine," 80.

<sup>44</sup> Sisters of Zion Archives Exhibit Posters, Jerusalem.

<sup>45</sup> Hintlian, George, "Armenians of Jerusalem," *Jerusalem Quarterly*, Fall 1998, Iss 2, 41.

<sup>46</sup> Sisters of Zion Archives Exhibit Posters, Jerusalem.

<sup>47</sup> Extensive interviews with Mimi Mouchabek, Montreal, Canada, June 2005.

<sup>48</sup> I wish to thank Archalouys, Elise, Fifi, Lorraine, and Mimi for their stories, their candor, patience and exceptional memories.

<sup>49</sup> Extensive interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, Old City, Armenian Quarter, Jerusalem, October 2006.

<sup>50</sup> Interviews with Mimi Mouchabek, June 2005.

<sup>51</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>52</sup> Greenberg, Ela, "The Newly Educated Arab Woman and Her World: Girls' Education in Mandatory Palestine," 126.

<sup>53</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>54</sup> Extensive interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, Montreal, Canada, June 2005

<sup>55</sup> Greenberg, Ela, "The Newly Educated Arab Woman and Her World: Girls' Education in Mandatory Palestine," 42.

<sup>56</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>57</sup> Extensive interviews with Fifi Khouri Abdel Nour, Beirut, Lebanon, October 2006.

<sup>58</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>59</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, and Haiguhie Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>60</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>61</sup> Extensive interviews with Elise Tachjian Aghazarian, Old City Christian Quarter, Jerusalem, October 2006.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Interviews with Mimi Mouchabek, June 2005.

<sup>65</sup> Sisters of Zion Archives Exhibit Posters and Photos, Jerusalem.

<sup>66</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>67</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>68</sup> Sister Marie Aline de Sion, *La Forteresse Antonia à Jérusalem et la Question du Prétoire*, Jerusalem: S. Éd, 1955.

American Journal of Archaeology: Vol. 62, No. 1, 130.

<sup>69</sup> Interviews with Fifi Khouri Abdel Nour, October 2006.

<sup>70</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>71</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>72</sup> Interviews with Mimi Mouchabek, June 2005.

<sup>73</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>74</sup> Interviews with Fifi Khouri Abdel Nour, October 2006.

<sup>75</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>76</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>77</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>78</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>79</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Interviews with Mimi Mouchabek, June 2005.

<sup>82</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> From Afifeh Sidaoui's report card and school notebooks from the 1904-1905 academic school year.

<sup>86</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>87</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>88</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> In an attempt to reconstruct the Sion community, I have grouped the following information I gathered into three broad headings inspired by Sharif Kanaana, and his researchers at Birzeit University:

1. The layout and physical structure of the school,
2. The relationships among the girls, and
3. a brief ethnography giving unique socio-cultural aspects of the school community, including schedule, uniforms, rewards and punishments dorm life and holidays.

<sup>91</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>96</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>103</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>104</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>105</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Interviews with Fifi Khouri Abdel Nour, October 2006.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>112</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Interviews with Elise Tachjian Aghazarian, October 2006.

<sup>115</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>116</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>117</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>118</sup> Fifth graders wore green, sixth green with white edges, seventh dark blue, eighth dark blue with white edges, ninth light blue or violet, tenth light blue with white edges, eleventh white, and twelfth white with white edges. Interviews with Mimi Mouchabek, June 2005.

<sup>119</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>122</sup> Interviews with Mimi Mouchabek, June 2005.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>126</sup> Interviews with Mimi Mouchabek, June 2005.

<sup>127</sup> Interviews with Fifi Khouri Abdel Nour, October 2006.

<sup>128</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>129</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>134</sup> Interviews with Fifi Khouri Abdel Nour, October 2006.

<sup>135</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Interviews with Archalouys Krikorian (Aghabekian) Zakarian, October 2006.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.

<sup>144</sup> Interviews with Elise Tachjian Aghazarian, October 2006.

<sup>145</sup> Archalouys, in relating the history of the Sion school bus, remembered an interesting little side story. "There was a time when Sion didn't own a school bus. So if you lived far away, as we did

in the Baq'a area, we used to take the city bus to Jaffa Gate and walk through the old city to reach Sion. Then later the school got a bus and Mr. Toumayan drove it. Mr. Toumayan owned a house in the Katamon area, which he rented to Sion during the Mandate period when we had an influx of foreigners at school, mostly British girls. The house is still there today opposite St. Thérèse. In the morning Mr. Toumayan would drive the foreigners to the Katamon house where they were taught there separately." Interviews with Mimi Mouchabek, June 2005.

<sup>146</sup> Interviews with Fifi Khouri Abdel Nour, October 2006.

<sup>147</sup> Nora, Pierre, "De la république à la nation," in *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 1, *La République* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), pp. 651-59.

<sup>148</sup> Nora, Pierre, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de mémoire*," trans. Marc Roudebush, *Representations* 26 (1989): 12.