



The American Colony Photography Department: Western Consumption and "Insider" Commercial Photography

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Jerusalem. The Old City. David Street (The American Colony Store). Eric & Edith Matson Collection, P&P, LOC. *Source: Library of Congress.*

In Jerusalem during the waning years of the Ottoman Empire—from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the occupation by British forces in 1917, and on into the Mandate period—the place to be for local professional photography was the bustling tourist-commercial area of the Old City near Jaffa Gate and on The Jaffa Road. This part of the city was home at the turn of the century to two of Jerusalem's most prominent portrait studios: one operated by Garabed Krikorian (opened in 1885, and operated later by his son, Hovahnnes), and the other by Krikorian's one-time apprentice, Khalil Ra'ad. The Levantine Ra'ad apprenticed with Krikorian in 1890 before setting up his own independent business. The house of Krikorian in turn owed its beginnings to the tutelage of the Armenian patriarch, Yessayi Garabedian, who pioneered local depictions by resident photographers—as opposed to visiting European daguerreotypists and Orientalist painters—in the mid-nineteenth century.

Ra'ad and Krikorian worked from studio-storefronts strategically positioned across the street from one another, competing for customers from among the local clientele. They also catered to visiting religious pilgrims and Near East tourists who shopped nearby, or took rooms at the Hotel Fast or the Grand New Hotel.¹

At various times in these decades, there were several other photographic enterprises established in the vicinity of Jaffa Gate. Among them was the short-lived studio of Zionist photographer Yeshayahu Raffalovich (opened in 1895), and as time progressed, a Jerusalem branch of Beirut-based Bonfils, which was located near a primary outlet for images of Palestine and the Middle East on David Street, the Vester & Co.–American Colony Store. The store was one of several commercial, charitable, educational and cooperative enterprises operated or managed in Jerusalem by members of the American Colony in Jerusalem. Beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century it was run by businessman Frederick Vester in partnership with his brother-in-law, John D. Whiting. Vester was the son of German-Swiss missionary-entrepreneurs who had come to Palestine in the mid-nineteenth century. Whiting had the distinction of being the first baby born among the original millennialist founders of the American Colony, not long after they had arrived in Jerusalem in 1881 and took up residence in a house in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City, near Damascus Gate. In the mid-1890s, the Colony's membership was greatly expanded by the arrival of new Swedish and Swedish-American members from Näs and Chicago, who brought with them important agricultural skills and experience in domestic crafts and trades. As time would prove, youthful members among the Scandinavian immigrants would grow up to provide the core photographic talent and leadership for the Colony's photographic agency in the first four decades of the twentieth century.²

By the time the American Colony Photo Department was created in 1898, the Colony had relocated to larger living quarters in the former home of pasha Rabbah al Husseini, in East Jerusalem. Mirroring Christian socialist enterprises in Britain and the settlement house movement in the United States, the American Colony became a largely self-sufficient community, with its own agricultural fields and animal husbandry, blacksmith shop and smithery, kitchen, weaving room, woodworking and art studios, group dining and meeting areas, and residential rooms. The Colony also became deeply involved on the community level in the welfare of its neighbours. Members operated their own co-educational school and kindergarten, attended by the children of leading Arab and Turkish administrators in the city, and the young Bertha Spafford (later Vester) was recruited by Ismail Bey al-Husseini to oversee the Islamic School for Girls, located in the Old City near the Mosque of Omar, in a building formerly used as a Koranic school for young men. Colony members coordinated sewing and lace making co-operatives among local women, and produced western-style baked goods for Jerusalem hotels and restaurants catering to tourists. The Colony itself offered generous hospitality to foreign evangelical travelers, functioning for many years as a hostel, and later, as a commercial hotel. Its Sunday musical services became a destination for visitors along with more sacred sites listed in western travel guidebooks. In the post-World War I years, Colony leaders administered the Christian



Krikorian Studio portrait, Feidi Effendi al al-Alami, Mayor of Jerusalem, Ni'mati (daughter), Musa (son). Album "Studio Portraits of Members (and Friends) of the American Colony," p. 12, no. 8, Visual Collection of John D. Whiting, P&P, LOC. Source: *Library of Congress*.

Herald Orphanage, primarily for the daughters of Islamic and Greek Orthodox families whose well being had been ravaged in the war. They also founded the Spafford baby home, pediatric clinic, and hospital which today offer an array of pediatric and social services to a primarily Palestinian clientele as the Spafford Children's Center. Colony commercial enterprises kept the Colony community financially afloat and helped make its benevolent activities possible.³

The American Colony store near Jaffa Gate was closely tied to the western tourist industry of Jerusalem and to the greater archeological and scholarly interest of westerners in the region. Through it, the American Colony marketed Palestine to those who wanted to take the region home with them in the form of artifactual memory. The store offered locally produced Palestinian embroidery, costumes, and religious artifacts, rugs and other fine crafts. It also sold images produced by the American Colony's multi-faceted photography service, which created, developed, printed, hand-colored, sold and distributed prints, thematic photograph albums, stereographs, panoramic photos, postcards, and custom sets of glass lantern slides under the communal commercial label of the American Colony Photo Department. Colony photographers also assisted visiting amateur photographers in photo-tourism, fulfilled contracts for book illustrations, and prepared custom sets of glass lantern slides and thematic or personal travel albums to order. They marketed their images directly through the American Colony store and through reprint purchases. The store also offered for sale images—especially postcards—created by their own service and by other photographers, notably a series of typology studies of Jerusalemites and related landscape scenes by S. Narinsky (the Russian-born artist-photographers Shlomo and Sonia Narinsky, whose work was marketed through Jamal Brothers). The store also advertised art photographs and a choice from four thousand negatives for glass lantern slide orders “of Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Mesopotamia” as well as “Costumes & Characters.”⁴

Local residents of the Old City and East Jerusalem—especially Christian Arabs and Armenians, members of Greek and Russian Orthodox faiths—came to the Ra'ad and Krikorian studios in business suits or best-dress attire to have themselves, their spouses, or their families captured in a historical moment in time. These formal, carefully composed, images served as emblems of the subjects' bourgeois social status and well being, and their prominence in their community. They also manifested evidence of the different generations within families, or the personal ties of marital engagement, academic or business attainment, or love.

Tourists and pilgrims also wished to document their personal presence in “place” in Jerusalem. They consumed photographic prints depicting iconic holy sites and the travel-guide destinations they had visited in their time in the Holy Land. These souvenir images were signs and signifiers of emotions felt during their time in Palestine. Saved into futurity, they functioned for their purchasers as reminders and reinforcement of their own personally projected experience and memories. As they were shared with church groups and family members at home, these images reified the tourist's own participation in what was already, since 1839 and particularly from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, an established tradition of photography of

the Near East by westerners and for westerners, based on and fed by foreign travel and foreign consumption.⁵

A minority of visitors indulged in a form of self-exhibitionism that had both playful and deceitful dimensions. They used the space created before the lens in the portrait studios to shed western attire and pose adventuresomely for the camera clad in exotic “Orientalist” costumes available for the choosing from the studio wardrobes. The resulting take-home images recorded a temporary transmogrification of the tourist self into an imagined adventuresome frame. These photographic records of cultural cross-dressing or make-believe were evocative of a romanticized experience of the Middle East that was constructed more from the realm of European travel literature, folk tales, fiction, and scripture readings than from the increasingly modern environment outside the studio doors. The example of the contrived portraits constitute an exaggerated gloss on a more widespread and generalized phenomenon. They were emblematic of the practice of many western visitors, who focused their attention on self-selected cultural elements of an idealized past in order to more greatly enhance their personal habitation of, and relation to, the present. They achieved a measure of self-assurance and indulged in a sense of heightened reality through the ritual reinforcement of particular meanings, or pre-definitions, assigned to specific national and transnational places.⁶

The kind of consumer alchemy occurring in the confines of the portrait studio also applied to personal interpretations of the cultural and geographical landscape at large. Proponents of Jewish restoration, for example, reinforced nationalist as well as spiritual hopes when gazing upon late nineteenth-century photographs of agricultural settlements. Christian tourists from Europe, Great Britain, and America meanwhile viewed the Holy Land from the vantage points of pre-proscribed sacred sites and locations predetermined from guidebooks. These sites and places were already familiar from landscape paintings and photographs viewed in urban galleries, or illustrations in family Bibles. Travelers in turn collected picture postcards, albums, and stereotypical images on their trips that reified Sunday school literature read at church or Christian literature enjoyed in armchairs at home. The experiential and artificial nature of costumed portraits, in short, serve as signifiers of a combination of fantasy, reality, documentation and desire that also characterized the creation and consumption of popular professional photographs of the Near East in other genres.

Several photographers, photographic assistants, lab technicians and hand-tinting artists were responsible for producing American Colony photographic wares in the lifetime of the enterprise. Not all of them have been identified, especially those behind the scenes or outside American Colony membership, nor is it always possible to discern who was behind the camera in any given instance. Each of the major periods of the photo department’s existence in Jerusalem, however, featured a different lead photographer, all of whom were at the time of their photographic activity members of the American Colony community.

In its earliest years, the photo service was founded and headed by Elijah Meyers, an East Indian Jewish immigrant and Christian convert, who may have learned the photographic trade in his native Bombay or during his time in London. Meyers was a friend of the Russian-Jewish photographer Yeshayahu Raffalovich, and the two had traveled together with their cameras in the winter of 1898, documenting Jewish settlements, including the agricultural school of *Mikve Israel*, for presentation in a book by Raffalovich produced the following year (*Views of Palestine and its Jewish Colonies*, 1899). Meyers was joined in the American Colony photo enterprise by Fareed Naseef, whose Christian Lebanese mother was also part of the American Colony community, as well as by the American brothers, Furman and Norman Baldwin, and the young Swedes Erik Lind and Hol Lars (Lewis) Larsson. Meyers instructed them all in the art of photography, and by the end of the nineteenth century, their pictures began to be featured in various travel books of the Middle East. Travel and field photography was an early forte, as the young men of the photo service set off between 1903 and 1910 on photo-expeditions within Syria (including what is now Lebanon and Jordan), Egypt, the Sudan, and India, as well as to Bedouin camps in Palestine, marketing stereo and other images to travel companies.⁷

The American Colony photographers also served an important non-commercial function at home, which proved to have an ancillary commercial dimension. They created extensive photo-documentation of the “family” of the American Colony community itself. While Ra’ad and Krikorian were hired to record graduation ceremonies at area schools and other events intrinsic to the broader Jerusalem community, American Colony photographers recorded the internal history of the Colony and its members—their work, their families, their vacations, picnics, and social events, holiday celebrations and weddings, receptions and parties. These images were in turn reproduced in periodical literature, Christian magazines, and American newspapers, in articles about the Colony written by various visitors.⁸

An important commercial niche that the American Colony photographers shared with other professional photography businesses in the Near East was the production of images of allegorical “biblical” scenes. Like other photographers needing to remain commercially viable, they took photographs of sacred sites, such as the Mosque of Omar and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. But they also went beyond the standard images well-known to tourists to create extensive documentation of mosques, churches, architectural sites, city-scapes and village homes and streets in greater Syria. An American Colony Store catalogue flyer of American Colony Photo Post Cards available in 1934 featured nearly 300 selections, catalogued geographically, with more than 50 of them Jerusalem scenes. American Colony “typology” studies of unnamed working Jerusalemites included photographs of a water carrier, a porter, and a rabbi (perhaps a model posing as a rabbi), each indicated in the catalogue as signifying specific verses from the Bible. The generic anonymity of these subjects implied a timeless arc from ancient times to the present, and made the humans featured into symbols of their respective cultures and ways of life, much as the architectural typology of holy buildings symbolized entire faiths. American Colony cameramen

joined other photographers in staging “tableau” photographs and took opportunity images that were emblematic of New Testament scenarios (shepherds with their flocks, women at the well, women grinding grain, fishermen with their nets, the arched streets of the Via Dolorosa, the river Jordan). They excelled in this particular niche market, producing albums of gorgeous hand-tinted sepia photographs, and pictorial prints of lush romantic Palestinian landscapes that followed both painterly and popular culture artistic traditions. Albums entitled the “23rd Psalm” and “Blue Galilee” were best sellers, and were also available for order as sets of lantern slides. The images sold well to a Protestant and commercial publishing market, and to tourists whose own desires were deeply wedded to a scriptural understanding or reading of place. Deep, bright, or unreal hand-colorations fed the sense of heightened reality that western Christians felt towards the “specialness,” in their own spiritual experience and understanding, of the geographic region described in the Bible, while images of beautifully lighted landscapes—such as iconic photographs of camel trains silhouetted on the horizon at sunset in the desert, or the moonlit seashore near Jaffa—took their place among other tropes of Orientalist exoticism.

Though the Colony photo department was known for these aesthetic hand-tinted Holy Land interpretations, it was actually in the arena of photo-journalism and documentary photography that many of the most significant Colony images were made. The Colony photographic oeuvre includes extensive black-and-white photo-documentation of daily life of Jerusalem and Jerusalemites, taken in and about the Old City and its markets, as well as among Arabs and Bedouins who lived beyond. Colony photographers also accepted contract work to provide photographs of industrial and agricultural sites, including documentation of the potash and Jaffa orange industries. The real debut of the Colony photo department as an international photo agency came at the very beginning, in 1898, when Elijah Meyers, with the diplomatic help of Frederick Vester, documented the visit of Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany to Ottoman Palestine, and the images were marketed in Europe under the American Colony Photo Department logo. This was the first of many “news” events the photography department would cover over time.

In its heyday, from 1904 to 1934, the American Colony Photo Department was operated under the management of the Colony’s master photographer, Lewis Larsson (ca. 1881-1958), one of the Swedish immigrants to the American Colony who had initially apprenticed under Meyers. In the first years of his leadership, Larsson, who was later Swedish Consul in Palestine, worked along with Olof, Lars, and Nils Lind, as well as the young G. Eric Matson. Jamil and Najib Albina worked along with Larsson in the American Colony photographic lab. Larsson’s iconic work includes detailed coverage of the locust plague of 1915—including “before” and “after” shots demonstrating the devastation of vegetation in such spots as the Garden of Gethesmene, images of locusts invading city walls and the windows of homes; methods of abatement used by locals; and pseudo-scientific studies of the locusts themselves.⁹ Perhaps his most famous single photograph is the often-reproduced picture of the white-flag surrender of Jerusalem to arriving British troops by the



Jamil and Najib Albina and Lewis Larsson, American Colony Photo Department. Eric and Edith Matson Collection, P&P, LOC. *Source: Library of Congress.*

mayor of Jerusalem, Hussein al-Husseini in December 1917. Larsson also produced key images of the military aspects of the war in Palestine and the Sinai. He was commissioned by the Red Crescent in 1914-1917 to provide behind-the-scenes documentation of troop movements, army camps and field hospitals, military staffs and campaigns of the Ottoman, German, and Austro-Hungarian forces. Larsson and Matson also recorded the transition of Jerusalem to British rule and the Mandate, from the public reading of the Proclamation of Marital Law to later Government House visit of Winston Churchill and Emir Abdullah following the Cairo conference.¹⁰ They recorded the impact of new modes of transportation—the automobile and the airplane—in this era, as well as epic geopolitical deal making, with their documentation of Arab, Bedouin, and British officials at Abdullah’s camp at Amman, Jordan, in April 1921. Among those depicted were Sheikh Majid Pasha el Adwan and Sheikh Sultan ibn Zayid al Nahyan.¹¹

The tradition of newsworthy and social history photographs taken from an “insider,” participant, or man-on-the-street point of view, was continued in the last era of American Colony photography in Jerusalem. In its final period of existence in Jerusalem, from 1934 into the 1940s, the American Colony photo archive and agency came under the management of G. Eric Matson (1888-1977).¹² Matson immigrated to the American Colony with his family in 1896 and began apprenticing with the photo department as a teenager. He served for years as an assistant photographer in conjunction with Larsson. Matson’s wife, the American Edith Yantiss (1889-1966),



The surrender of Jerusalem to the British, (photo by Lewis Larsson), December 9, 1917. Eric and Edith Matson Collection, P&P, LOC. *Source: Library of Congress.*



Amir Abdullah, Mr. John Whiting, and one of the Amir's staff. April, 1921. Album "Meetings of British, Arab, and Bedouin Officials at Amman, Jordan, April 1921," Visual Collection of John D. Whiting, P&P, LOC. *Source: Library of Congress.*

also a Colony member, was proficient in the production end of the business, while Matson excelled behind the camera. Among the technical innovations Matson brought to the American Colony photo service were aerial photography and ventures into motion picture recording. The American Colony Photo Department catalogue for 1937 listed over 5,000 specific photo-archival images available for purchase, including a few hundred of Jerusalem and its environs, as well as "cinema" services for film created to order, and air views.¹³ Matson worked in collaboration with other local photographers, including Hanna Safieh, Joseph H. Giries, and others. Under his operation the agency was renamed the Matson Photo Service in 1940.

Over the years, Matson collaborated in several projects with John D. Whiting (1882-1951). In a creative extension of his work in the business end of the American Colony, the Arabic-speaking Whiting was a writer and one of the photo department's contributing photographers. He was also a principal regional photographic-tour guide for scholars, archaeologists, and visiting amateur photographers. Whiting collaborated with Larsson in some key projects, including documentation of the locust plague of 1915 and of Passover ceremonies of the Samaritans in 1917.¹⁴ Between 1913 and 1940 he published a series of *National Geographic* articles on the Middle East that featured American Colony images by Matson and Larsson, and in the 1930s he traveled extensively in the region, sometimes with Matson, creating what he entitled "Diaries in Photos."¹⁵ These were photographic albums that chronicled



The raising of the siege of Jerusalem. Troops of the Old City intent on giving their names & addresses to a cameraman [Eric Matson] to have pictures sent to them. 1938. Eric and Edith Matson Collection, P&P, LOC. Source: *Library of Congress*.

photo-tourism and documentary photography created on various trips Whiting took guiding British officials, scholars, and tourists. They include images of the West Bank, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Turkey. Whiting also prepared custom reprints for those he and Matson had guided, after trip's end. Whiting's extensive familiarity with the geography and peoples of the region contributed to work he did as deputy American Consul in Jerusalem, circa 1908 to 1915, and to his pro-Arab British intelligence functions during World War I and the Mandate period, including close association with Emir Abdullah, T. E. Lawrence, and others involved in Arab revolt and the remapping of the region under western imperialism.

The operation of the American Colony photo agency within Jerusalem came to an end circa 1946 when, with rising street unrest and violence that would lead to the turmoil of 1947-48 and the Nakbah, the Matsons left Palestine for the United States. They continued until their deaths to market salvaged images from the combined American Colony Photo Department/Matson Photo Service archive from California.

Back in Jerusalem, in the bifurcation of the city the Matsons and other American Colony members had spent their lives photographing, the area on Jaffa Road where the Krikorian and Ra'ad studios once thrived was reduced to No Man's Land.¹⁶

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Endnotes

- 1 See "Portraits taken in Jerusalem by the Krikorian Studio," LOT 13872, John D. Whiting Visual Collection, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter P&P, LOC). On Ra'ad, see Badr El-Hage, "Khalil Raad—Jerusalem Photographer" *Jerusalem Quarterly*, 11-12 (Winter 2001). On photographic enterprise in Jerusalem and the Middle East in this period, see Issam Nassar, "Familial Snapshots: Representing Palestine in the Work of the First Local Photographers" *History and Memory*, 18, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 139-155; Paul E. Chevedden, *The Photographic Heritage of the Middle East: An Exhibition of Early Photographs of Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, Greece, & Iran, 1849-1893* (Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1981); and Yeshayahu Nir, *The Bible and the Image: The History of Photography in the Holy Land, 1839-1899* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).
- 2 The history of the American Colony and its photo department is documented in the manuscript papers and visual collections of John D. Whiting, G. Eric and Edith Matson, and the American Colony in Jerusalem in the Manuscript and P&P Divisions of LOC. See also Mia Gröndahl, *The Dream of Jerusalem: Lewis Larsson and the American Colony Photographers* (Stockholm: Journal, 2006); Valentine Vester, *The American Colony Family Album* (Jerusalem: American Colony of Jerusalem, Ltd., 2008), with afterword essay by Barbara Bair, "The Work of the American Colony Photo Department," 167-179.
- 3 See primary manuscript materials, photographs and photograph albums, as well as an overview time line and essays by Barbara Bair, in the "American Colony in Jerusalem" American Memory web site, online on the Library of Congress web site via <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>.
- 4 American Colony Stores Catalogue flyer, ca. 1934, collections of the American Colony Hotel, Jerusalem. A set of approximately 150 Narinsky postcards extant from the former stock of the American Colony Store are part of the visual materials of the American Colony in Jerusalem Collection, P&P, LOC.
- 5 On these issues, see Ruth Victor Hummel, "Reality, Imagination and Belief: Jerusalem in 19th- and Early 20th-Century Photographs (1839-1917)," chap. 17 in *Ottoman Jerusalem: The Living City, 1517-1917*, ed. Sylvia Auld and Robert Hillenbrand (Jerusalem, British School of Archaeology, 2000), Pt 1:235-278; Ami Ayalon, *Reading Palestine: Printing and Literacy, 1900-1948* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); Lester Vogel, *To See A Promised Land: Americans and the Holy Land in the Nineteenth Century* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); John Davis, *The Landscape of Belief: Encountering the Holy Land in 19th-Century American Art and Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Tim Jon Semmerling, *Israeli and Palestinian Postcards: Presentations of National Self* (Austin: University of Texas, 2004).
- 6 For full development of these issues, see Issam Nassar, *European Portrayals of Jerusalem: Religious Fascinations and Colonialist Imaginations* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2006); see also Nassar, "Familial Snapshots," 147.
- 7 Gröndahl, *Dream of Jerusalem*, 49, 78-79, 140-161; Nir, *Bible and Image*, 249-253.
- 8 See images in Vester, *American Colony Family Album*, and albums in the John D. Whiting Visual Collection, P&P, LOC; see also American Colony scrapbook in Part I, American Colony in Jerusalem manuscript collection, Manuscript Division, LOC.
- 9 See hand-tinted locust albums, 1915, Papers of John D. Whiting and American Colony in Jerusalem collection, Manuscript Division, LOC.
- 10 See albums, "World War I in Palestine and the Sinai, 1914-1917," and "World War I and the British Mandate in Palestine, 1917-1926," John D. Whiting Visual Collection, P&P, LOC. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2007675298/> and <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2007675259/>
- 11 See album, "Meetings of British, Arab, and Bedouin Officials in Amman, Jordan, April 1921," John D. Whiting Visual Collection, P&P, LOC. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2007675257/>
- 12 See the Prints and Photographs Online Catalog collection home page for the G. Eric and Edith Matson Collection, P&P, LOC at <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/matpc/>.
- 13 *American Colony Stores, Jerusalem, 1937 Catalogue Photographs & Lantern Slides: Bible Lands, Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Etc., Made by the American Colony Photo Dept.*, American Colony Hotel archive, Jerusalem.
- 14 See *Samaritanernas påskfest I ord och bild: bibliska blodsoffer I våra dagar (Samaritans Passover in Words and Pictures: Biblical Blood Sacrifice in Our Day)* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1917).
- 15 See the P&P collection description for the Visual Materials of John D. Whiting collection at LOC, at http://www.loc.gov/tr/print/coll/629_whiting.html. Whiting Diaries in Photos, vol. I-V, 1934-1939 and closely related albums are digitized and available via the LOC Prints and Photographs Online Catalog; see <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/> for search portal.
- 16 On the work of Hanna Safieh, see Issam Nassar, "A Jerusalem Photographer: The Life and Work of Hanna Safieh" *Jerusalem Quarterly* 2 (Winter 2000): 24. Nassar has noted that Hovahnnes (Johannes) Krikorian managed the Krikorian-Ra'ad business until "it was lost in 1948 after the division of the city between Jordan and Israel and the transformation of the location into the dangerous no-man's land" ("Familial Snapshots," 146).