

LETTER FROM JERUSALEM

# Farewell to the Habesch— Commercial Printing Press

Samia Nasir Khoury

## Abstract

This article was inspired by a video from the Palestinian Museum in Birzeit in which Tewfic Habesch, grandson of the founder of the Commercial Press “Habesch,” spoke about the achievements of the press over the past one hundred years. Near the end of the video, Tewfic announced the difficult decision that the family had taken to close the print shop due to the numerous measures Israel was imposing on East Jerusalem. The closure of the city after the 1993 Oslo agreement exacerbated the situation, by barring residents from the rest of the occupied territories from entering the city that had been the center of life for all Palestinians. Khoury relays her personal experiences of working with the Habesch printing press, a highlight of which was their designing and printing of the first university diploma in Palestine granted by Birzeit University in 1976.

## Keywords

Musa Nasir; Birzeit University; YWCA; YMCA; Oslo accords; annexation of Jerusalem; Orient House; Sophie Halaby; Chamber of Commerce; Rawdat al-Zuhur

Yesterday [30 September 2020], I watched a video from the Palestinian Museum in Birzeit in which Tewfic ‘Issa Habesch, the grandson of Tewfick Habesch who founded the Commercial Press in Jerusalem in 1920, explained that even the Commercial Press’s loss of their new building and new machines located in the west side of Jerusalem in the 1948

war had not deterred his grandfather. He had been determined to resume the work of the Commercial Press at new rented premises in the New Gate of East Jerusalem, until they were finally able to move to their own building on Isfahani Street in 1965.



Figure 1. *Tewfiq 'Issa Habesch with his wife, Jamileh Calis Habesch, and their children, Celeste, Colette, Beatrice, Laurice, 'Issa, and Yvette, in their Talbiyyeh garden, Jerusalem, c. 1937, online at [www.facebook.com/BMJerusalemitesPhotoLib/photos/tewfiq-issa-habesch-with-his-wife-jamileh-calis-habesch-and-their-children-celes/900727993331246/](https://www.facebook.com/BMJerusalemitesPhotoLib/photos/tewfiq-issa-habesch-with-his-wife-jamileh-calis-habesch-and-their-children-celes/900727993331246/) (accessed 10 January 2021).*

As Tewfic was relating the achievements of his family's printing press, I began reflecting on my personal connection with it after I returned from university in the U.S. in 1954 and began working at Birzeit College. My father, Musa Nasir, who was the president of the college at that time, had introduced me to the Habeschs so that we would resume our printing at the Commercial Press, whose work he knew to be very efficient and meticulous. 'Issa, the son of the founder had also just returned from abroad after finishing his studies to be qualified to work with his father.

As far as Birzeit is concerned, the most memorable job that the Commercial Printing Press accomplished was the printing of the first university diploma in Palestine, granted by Birzeit University in 1976. The logo appeared within the name of the university, which was designed by the renowned Jerusalemite calligrapher Mohammad Siam. The ubiquitous olive tree logo of the university was created especially for Birzeit College – later to become Birzeit University – by George Alif, the Russian art teacher at the college before 1948. The Commercial Press had also printed a book of my father's in 1966, *Toward a Solution to the Palestinian Problem: A Selection of Speeches and Writings between 1946–1966*.

Of course, I cannot but give credit to 'Issa's sister Beatrice, who was always

there at the Commercial Printing Press following up on details. She was an amazing proofreader who ensured that the printing, at that time dependent on letterpress, had no spelling mistakes. Later, after I married and lived in Jerusalem, I worked closely with Beatrice as the Commercial Printing Press for all of the printed material for the YWCA and the Rawdat al-Zuhur school, where I was volunteering. I remember my uncle Labib Nasir who was the general secretary of the YMCA, telling me that they did all their printing at the Commercial Press, and my husband Yousif Khoury had the stationery for his engineering office printed there, as well as our wedding invitations. I still remember Beatrice joyfully describing to a group of us how color was introduced into the printing process which enabled them to print the cards of wild flowers painted by the renowned Palestinian artist Sophie Halaby. Alas, these precious printed images of our vibrant landscape are out of print.

Tewfic was the third generation involved in running the Commercial Printing Press “Habesch” and had helped launch the modern printing methods with which his father was trying to cope. It is with great sadness that this success story had to end by Tewfic announcing that due to the closure of East Jerusalem and the various restrictions, it was becoming too difficult to maintain the work in the city, eventually leading to the decision to close down completely. I could not but shed a tear.

It has become very clear that the Israeli measures against Jerusalemites is to make their daily lives unbearable. It was shortly after the June 1967 war that Israel illegally annexed East Jerusalem and claimed “united” Jerusalem as the eternal capital of Israel. Ignoring the fact that according to the United Nations the annexation was illegal, Israel established a new reality by its actions on the ground, imposing very high taxes and confiscating property when people were not able to pay. Of course, the situation worsened for the population of East Jerusalem after the Oslo agreement when Israel closed Jerusalem; Palestinians from outside Jerusalem could no longer enter the city, which had been the center of life, culture, commerce, and medical services for all Palestinians. Checkpoints were established at the entrances



Figure 2. This photo is inside the new gate before 1948. The building was built in 1930 by my grandfather. Courtesy of Habesch family.

to the city and permits were only granted to the very few and for special purposes.

The institutions in East Jerusalem have determined to do everything possible to maintain operations and to help people remain in the city. Cultural events and musical programs have been especially important to keep the Palestinian voice heard in Jerusalem and to help in the *sumud* of the people. However, Israel continues to enforce new and innovative measures against the East Jerusalem institutions. We all remember how the Orient House was the first major institution to be shut down, followed by the Chamber of Commerce. The most recent victims of this selective policy were the Palestinian TV as well as the Palestinian Education Department, and the continuous harassment of the Palestinian governor and the minister of Jerusalem affairs.

Undoubtedly, all these measures and restrictions have posed many difficulties on East Jerusalem institutions and businesses. It is very clear that the decision to close down the Commercial Printing Press “Habesch” was not an easy one to make, and only after all options had been exhausted. It will be remembered as a Palestinian institution that fought valiantly to maintain its professional integrity and presence in Jerusalem over the last one hundred years. No small feat.

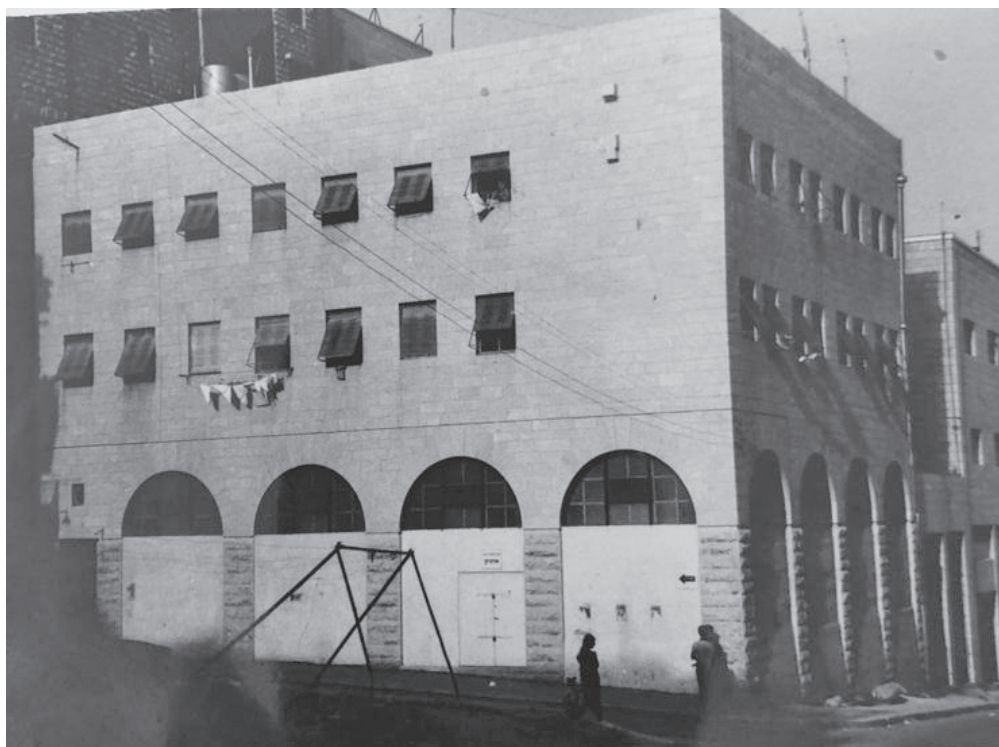


Figure 3. The press building in Shama'a, Mamilla, was built before 1948. The upper two floors were rented as offices. Samia Khoury: “I still have the original contracts. Unfortunately the machines were never used by us but were stolen by the occupiers. After 1967 my late father told me that he was thanked by an Israeli official for the brand new printing equipment that they used in their government print house.” Courtesy of Habesch family.

**Epilogue:** On 15 February 2021, shortly before this article went to the press, ‘Issa Tewfic Habesch, the only son of the founder of the Commercial Press, and director of operations for much of its post-occupation period, passed away in Jerusalem – sadly, and almost simultaneously, with the end of the one-hundred-year era of the Commercial Press “Habesch.”

*Samia Nasir Khoury is a retired community volunteer who served as national president of the YWCA and president of Rawdat al-Zuhur, and a founding member of the Birzeit University Board of Trustees and Sabeel–Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem. She is the author of Reflections from Palestine: A Journey of Hope (Cyprus: Rimal, 2014), and A Rhyme for Every Time (Ramallah: Turbo, 2009).*



Figure 4. Same location with the wall behind. Courtesy of Habesch family.