

OBITUARY

In Memory of Albert Aghazarian

The Alleys of Jerusalem Will Miss You

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Translated from Arabic by
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Abstract

On 30 January 2020, Jerusalem lost one of its beloved sons. Albert Aghazarian was a historian, a public relations expert, and a man among the people. He played a major role in representing Birzeit University – in Palestine and abroad – for over four decades, and was also a much respected source of information on Palestine and Jerusalem. Jerusalem, its history, diversity, and people, was his obsession. I was privileged to be one of his many friends who shared some of his life experience.

Keywords

Albert Aghazarian; Jerusalem; the Old City; Jerusalem; Armenian; Birzeit University; public relations.

I was a third-year student when Albert Aghazarian arrived at Birzeit University in the late 1970s, a tall, solid young man, with a trimmed beard and a pipe jutting from his mouth, beaming with life and energy. Although I was not required to take any of his classes in the Middle Eastern Studies department, I attended several that he taught on the History of Modern and Contemporary Arab Thought to learn the ideas of this new lecturer. I found him to have a brilliant mind and a passion for the seventies revolutionary spirit, challenging dominant and traditional concepts. Most interesting for me was his eloquent Arabic. Being from the Old City of Jerusalem, I was accustomed to hearing Armenians speak a version of Arabic that was not governed by the rules of



Albert Aghazarian and Nazmi Jubeh, Salzburg – Austria. Photo by Salim Tamari.

standard Arabic or dialects. Surprisingly, I found this Armenian Jerusalemite was speaking fluent intellectual Arabic.

Little by little, as our relationship grew, we soon discovered that we had much in common. At that time I was a student and political activist, while he had recently been appointed Director of Public Relations at Birzeit University. I began to spend considerable time in his office on the university campus, and learned a great deal from Albert. Albert was tailor-made for public relations; he did not just fit right into it, but he expanded it beyond its limitations. His mastery of several Eastern and Western languages at a native speaker's level, coupled with his bold and charismatic personality, turned him gradually into not just a PR person, but an indispensable source for international journalists seeking to understand the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian position. In fact, his relationships frequently grew into intimate and personal friendships, for Albert did not separate between his public and private life. After an interview with one journalist or another, he would frequently invite them to his home in the southern part of the Christian Quarter, and later in the Armenian Quarter, where Madeleine (Umm Arsine) would have prepared lunch or dinner, a task she did not cease to do until Albert's final days. Albert believed that for his PR job there was no separation between Birzeit, the Palestinian cause, Jerusalem, and his private life; he was convinced that he should utilize whatever means he possessed

to nurture influential relationships with the outside world, an effort that had been overlooked by many national institutions. Albert's name appeared as a source of information on the Middle East in general, and especially on Jerusalem, in hundreds of books and articles in various languages. In many cases the author would include their personal impressions and description of Albert, his wide knowledge, and his vibrant personality.

Albert found in Birzeit University the ideal representation of the Palestinian cause. At the time when the PLO was in exile, Albert believed that the university played a central role, side by side with other national institutions, in expressing the suffering of the Palestinian people and their aspirations. He saw in the university a leader of the struggle and an educated image of the Palestinian people. Albert, along with the university's administration, lecturers, and student movement, undoubtedly contributed to reinforcing the university's status and international presence, but he was notably effective for bringing together all of these different components for the common cause. The most admirable trait about Albert was not just his liberal vision, but his reverence for the idea of diversity. I do not recall that he excluded anybody in the university based on their position or background; to the contrary he was unusually and remarkably tolerant. He had excellent social relationships, even with the most religiously or socially conservative persons in the university. His office soon turned into a PR training workshop, and he managed to recruit many students to work with him; many went on to become prominent journalists, authors, and writers, especially during the First Intifada. Albert was determined to train even more students in the PR field, along with teaching dozens of specialized courses all over the country.

A recurring image from the seventies and eighties was his fearlessness when confronting the occupation's soldiers, who often attempted to barge into the old campus. Albert would go out threatening: "If you do not back off now, I will not be able to control the students, and you know Birzeit students." I heard him speak often, in the same tone, to the military governor by phone, as if he had an invincible army behind him. He never crossed a military checkpoint without protesting and speaking out. He often followed this by writing a press release and circulating it to the international and Arab press, and the various solidarity committees around the world.

At that time, the Israeli occupation had isolated the occupied territories from the outside world, and communication means were limited to phone calls, post, and later fax – all less than adequate and under the control of the occupation. Albert overcame this obstacle by skillfully supporting the establishment of committees for friendship and solidarity with Birzeit University. I cannot recall the names of all the committees he cofounded and worked with, but I witnessed first-hand how he interacted with them in Switzerland, France, Belgium, and the UK. I accompanied him on a visit to Switzerland and another to the UK, where he gave lectures and seminars on the Palestinian cause and Birzeit University. These committees organized press conferences and lobbied with their governments to pressure the Israeli occupation to re-open Birzeit University after each closure. They also collected books and raised funds to aid the university. I accompanied Albert on one of his trips with Sanabel

(the University's performing arts group), on a trip to the UK in 1982, where we toured England, Scotland, and Ireland and visited seventeen British universities. We gave lectures on Palestine and Birzeit, while Sanabel made several performances. During this trip I saw first-hand the extensive network of relationships that Albert weaved. I relived the experience again in Switzerland and France. I also had the honor of accompanying Albert on some of his tours to Sweden, Austria, Denmark, and the Netherlands, where he informed his audiences exactly what was happening in Palestine. This is what I personally witnessed, but it was only a part of his extensive work and relationships in Europe and the United States.

As for Albert and Jerusalem's Old City, it is such a multifaceted love story that if I were to tell all of its details I would never finish. Nothing preoccupied him as much as Jerusalem. Just as I search in its stones for its history and archaeology, Albert was in love with its people and its social history of the nineteenth and twentieth century. He was fascinated – almost to the point of obsession – with the city's ability to embrace contradictions, and to sit singularly on the “throne” of social and religious diversity. He considered Jerusalem to be a unique place, since no other city in the world included such a multitude of religious communities that managed, in one way or another, to coexist. I think he saw in old Jerusalem, prior to the Israeli occupation, a kind of utopia, and that is how he portrayed it. He genuinely believed in it; it was not simply good public relations. He used the principle of diversity to counter Israelization attempts over the city, to expand the circle of solidarity with Jerusalem.

Albert liked to relate the story of nineteenth century Jerusalem in various flavors, each time in a different tone. Sometimes it would be the history through the consulates, or through the patriarchs of the different churches, or through the Hebronites, or the city's prominent figures and their mistresses, its cafes and bars, or through the missionaries – and sometimes through the Armenians. It was always the same city but cloaked in different Albertian robes. Every time he told the Jerusalem's story, he would relate it as passionately as he did the first time, never tiring or becoming bored with the repetition. If he chanced upon new information, often generously provided by his lifelong friend, George (Gevork) Hintelian, a local historian, it would quickly become incorporated into his story.

Old Jerusalem was not only the physical place where Albert was born, grew up, and was buried. Jerusalem for Albert was the community, and not the city's intellectuals and scholars, but the people of the city: the shopkeepers, peddlers, and street vendors from all sects and colors. I had always marveled while walking with him in the streets of the Old City that he knew all of these people; he would drink coffee with one merchant, play chess or checkers with another, play cards in the evenings with his friends at his favorite coffee shop in Jaffa Gate, and later smoke narghile in one of the alleys of the Aftimos market. He would inquire about a merchant's son studying in France, or a daughter who recently married. In fact, he did not know the people as much as he knew their stories and concerns. He walked in the city's markets as if searching out their stories, and they enjoyed sharing their stories with him. They called him “Ustaz (Professor) Albert,” not because he was a teacher, but because for them

he was respected as more than a scholar – he was a homeboy, a local of the Christian Quarter who had happened to obtain a higher education and become a lecturer, but he was still one of them. He never left, and gave them all he could. Albert liked to take visiting “prominent figures” such as ministers, foreign secretaries, parliamentarians, and international journalists to these old markets to hear the stories of the common people. It was as if he wanted to impress on them that Jerusalem is not only a holy city, or sacred places, or an international address, but it is home to its people, who protect its uniqueness and safeguard the walls that were meant to safeguard them.

It is impossible to write about Albert without acknowledging his heroic wife, Umm Arsine. The truth is that Albert’s ability to give his time to public work in its various forms would not have been possible without his wife’s great support. For although Albert knew all the shopkeepers in the Old City, and despite their friendship – which I, the son of one of those shopkeepers, very much envied – he never shopped there. I don’t think he even knew how to shop. For a long time, even after he married, his mother, the famous seamstress at the eastern end of al-Zahra street, made his clothes, while Umm Arsine dependably bought and managed the house supplies. Moreover, she never complained about the numerous visitors he brought home with him, always assuming that she would have made more than enough food to share with unexpected visitors. And since Albert was always travelling, sometimes for long periods, Umm Arsine also took on the role of both mother and father to their three children.

I will never forget a sentence Albert often repeated: “A boat where God does not reside will sink, and the best thing about God is forgiveness.” I will miss Albert, I will miss seeing Jerusalem through his eyes, as will his family and his colleagues and his many friends, some whom I know and many whom I don’t, as well as a long line of students who owe him much.

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