

The family tree

How a Palestinian family from 1930s Jaffa ended up in the heart of a 2011 Israeli political storm.

By Dr. Rona Segal / published in Haaretz weekend edition (3-10.6.2011)

The photographer

The painting "The Citrus Grower," whose recent acquisition for display in the Knesset caused a storm, is based on a portrait of a Palestinian family from Jaffa in the 1930s. The original photograph was taken by Elia Kahvedjian, a survivor of the Armenian genocide. He was born in Turkey in 1910, and experienced the death march with his family. He was saved by a Kurd whom they encountered along the way. His mother, who understood where they were headed – and who had already lost three other children since the start of the march – gave Elia, then a young child, to the Kurdish man to save him.

After an arduous journey, and the loss of most of his family, Kahvedjian finally arrived in Nazareth with the help of the American Aid Association for the Near East. He got his love of photography from Borosian, a teacher at his boarding school in Nazareth. When he turned 16, this love took Kahvedjian to Jerusalem, where he studied photography with the Armenian photographers Joseph Toumaian and Garabed Krikorian, and later started to work at the shop of the Hannania brothers, Christian-Arab photographers.

The Armenians were among the local photography pioneers in Palestine in the second half of the 19th century, and Kahvedjian continued this glorious legacy. In 1940, he bought the shop from the Hannania brothers, and thereafter became a very active and successful photographer, opening two more shops at the end of Jaffa Road, near the Fast Hotel. There were numerous such shops in this area, including those owned by photographers Chalil Raad, Garabed Krikorian and Militad Savvides. After the war in 1948, the area became a no-man's land. Alerted in advance, before the war, by friends in the British army, Kahvedjian was able to save his negatives and the contents of the store in time, and he opened a photography studio in the Christian Quarter of the Old City. The store has been located in the same place ever since and the work there has been carried on by Kahvedjian's son Kevork and his grandson Elli.

Throughout his life Kahvedjian was involved in Arab society in Palestine and documented scenes of daily life in cities and villages – chess games, women at a well, the plowing season, a Friday market, the orange harvest and more – many of them near Jerusalem, but also elsewhere, such as the Jaffa port. Copies of these photographs, produced from the original negatives, may still be purchased at Kahvedjian's studio. He did not document the Old Jewish community of Jerusalem and avoided photographing the new Jewish-Zionist settlement. At the same time, Kahvedjian sometimes documented the consequences of the Arab struggle against the Jews, such as Jewish vehicles that were damaged and left by the side of the road in Bab el-Wad (known by Israelis as Sha'ar Hagay, on the road to Jerusalem).

The painter

The painting that was hung in the Knesset was done by Eliahou Eric Bokobza, a former pharmacist, who was born in Paris in 1963, the son of Tunisian immigrants. Like Kahvedjian, he came to live in the country as a child. Bokobza speaks of his mother Silvie's longing for the East; she had never been at home in Paris, and felt that she really belonged in the Orient. When she saw that returning to her beloved Tunisia was not an option, she instead fulfilled the dream of her father, who was an ardent Zionist and treasurer of the Jewish community in Tunis.

Tali Tamir, curator of the exhibition of his works at the Nahum Gutman Museum of Art in Tel Aviv, describes Bokobza as "the last of the Oriental painters of the Bezalel school." Because of the difference

in periods, he can be associated only in a fictitious way to this group of students of Mizrahi (Middle Eastern or north African) background, who studied at the old Bezalel Arts Academy in the first two decades of its existence at the beginning of the 20th century, and who were excluded from the canon of Israeli art; yet they shared the same identity.

Bokobza inherited his love of Nahum Gutman's work from his mother, who had reproductions of his work from Jaffa hanging in her home, for they reminded her of her life in Tunisia. For her son's 21st birthday, she gave him a book of Gutman reproductions, inscribed with the following dedication: "May you continue until 120 to look upon the world with the same innocent gaze of Gutman and to continue, like him, to paint the world."

And so he did – but with a gaze devoid of innocence. While Bokobza clearly has deep affection and admiration for Gutman's work, is inspired by its boldness and draws on its richness and intensity, he casts a more critical and sober eye on its contents, symbols and contexts. He follows the city of Jaffa, its orchards and orange groves, which for Gutman and his contemporaries were mostly affiliated with Zionist images – and returns these scenes to the history of the Palestinian entity. By means of historic photographs, like the Kahvedjian family portrait taken from the photographer's own archive – he also returns the Palestinian identity of Jaffa, including its orchards and people, to the Israeli public consciousness.

Bokobza deals with images that have been erased from the Israeli collective memory, while conducting a dialogue on many different levels with Gutman, one of the main figures in Israeli art. He raises questions about the complexity of life in a country where two peoples cling to the same land, about the encounter between them and especially about the history of the representation of the conflict.

The Knesset member

The storm stirred up by MK Aryeh Eldad (National Union) following the recent acquisition of the Bokobza painting for the Knesset reflects the way Israeli society has evolved. Until just a few years ago, the word "Nakba" (meaning "catastrophe") was not in regular use in Israel, and the Palestinian presence before 1948 hardly existed in the Israeli consciousness. Moreover, a photograph or painting of a Palestinian family from before 1948, against the backdrop of an orchard, would not have precipitated a discussion of the Nakba, as MK Eldad has done now.

Generations of Israelis were raised on the ethos of "a land without a people for a people without a land," and of Israelis making the wilderness bloom, while suppressing the existence of the Palestinian people in the country. The national institutions of the Yishuv (pre-state Jewish community) made extensive use of visual imagery to spread these ideas both before and after the state's founding. But today, everyday images by photographers and painters, both Israeli and Palestinian, depicting mundane scenes of Palestinian society, allude to the Nakba and immortalize the Palestinian life that has been largely erased. There is no need to show the disaster itself or its consequences: mass flight, expulsion, refugee-hood, Jewish settlement in Palestinian houses, and so on. One image is enough – a group portrait, or other everyday images, such as a crop harvest, olive picking, a chess game, a coffee break, laborers in action, etc. – to reflect in Israeli eyes, whether consciously or not, the crisis experienced by the Palestinian people.

This important change in consciousness has been taking place in Israeli society mostly in the last decade, though its roots date back much earlier. And from this position, in which each people recognizes the history of the other and the tragedies and disasters it has experienced – it is perhaps possible to start a sane discussion about the region's future.

Dr. Rona Sela is a curator and researcher whose focus is the visual aspect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.