



A “Significant Swedish Outpost”: The Swedish School and Arab Christians in Jerusalem, 1920–1930

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In the fall of 1925, the Director of Education in Palestine, Humphrey Bowman (1879–1965), was invited to the Swedish School in Jerusalem.¹ Also present were the school’s teachers—five Arab women: Warde Abudije, N. Halany, Hanna Abla, Bedea Haramy and Helena Kassisijeh—while Hol Lars (Lewis) Larsson (1881–1958), renowned photographer of the American Colony and Swedish Consul General to Jerusalem and Signe Ekblad (1894–1952), the school’s headmistress represented Sweden in this transnational meeting. Having tea in the Scandinavian inspired, *hyggelige* [cosy] office, the party discussed the school. The Director of Education pointed to two things that had caught his attention during his tour: The children were clean

¹Humphrey Bowman had worked in the Ministry of Education in Egypt and had been Inspector of Education in the Sudan before 1914. Before coming to Palestine, Bowman had also been director of education in British ruled Iraq. This colonial background was to influence and shape British educational policy during their rule in Palestine from 1918 to 1948. See Inger Marie Okkenhaug, “*The Quality of Heroic Living, of High Endeavour and Adventure*”: *Anglican Mission, Women and Education in Palestine, 1888–1948* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 60.

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and well-disciplined while at the same time they seemed happy and content. Bowman, who was known to be outspoken and not one to flatter, generously concluded that the school seemed to be characterised by an equal amount of love and severity.² During his years as head of education in Palestine from 1920 till 1936, Bowman would continue to keep the Swedish School in high regard.³ This is not surprising, as the Swedish School developed into a well respected and sought-after Arab primary school during the Mandate.

British forces occupied Jerusalem in December 1917, and a few years later Great Britain received an international mandate from the League of Nations to rule Palestine. The Mandate included the responsibility of securing the welfare of Palestine's inhabitants; both the Arab majority and Jewish minority.⁴ From the outset of the Mandate the development of education was characterised by a duality: there was a virtually independent Jewish system that included most Jewish children,⁵ and an Arab school system that was far from universal and consisted of government-controlled schools; the large majority being rural schools for boys.⁶ The Mandate authorities did not prioritise education for girls, and in urban areas especially girls' education largely became an arena for private schools (both Christian and Muslim).⁷

Due to the lack of public schools, mission-run educational institutions flourished and, unlike in Ottoman times, the mission schools during the Mandate period were independent from any government supervision. In the

² *Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidsskrift* no. 1 (1926): 29.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians, the League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁵ In theory open to all religions, there were only Jewish children in the Jewish schools. The use of Hebrew as language of instruction enforced this separation. The Jewish system consisted of government supported schools, and schools under the Vaád Leumi (the Jewish National Council), and Jewish private schools, from kindergarten up to university level.

⁶ "A review of Educational Policy 1920–1932," by Humphrey Bowman, Bowman 2/2/10, St.AP, Private Papers, Middle East Library, St. Antony's College Archives, Oxford, UK. In Palestine Bowman gave priority to primary schools in the villages. During the Mandate period there were 75 missionary schools, fourteen British government schools, 412 Muslim public village and town schools, and more than 400 Vaád Leumi Jewish schools (secular and religious) in Palestine. Thomas M. Ricks "Remembering Arab Jerusalem, 1909–1989: An Oral History of a Palestinian City, its Schools and Childhood Memories," https://www.academia.edu/15767904/Remembering_Arab_Jerusalem_1909-1989_An_Oral_History_of_a_Palestinian_City_Its_Schools_and_childhood_Memories.

⁷ In towns, the Muslim children who received any education was, as late as 1935, estimated to be 75% for boys, and 45%, for girls. In the villages, 40% of Muslim boys received some education and only 1% of Muslim girls. From "Memorandum by Government of Palestine: Description of the Educational Systems, Government, Jewish and Private, and Method of Allocation of Government Grants, 1936," by Humphrey Bowman, Bowman, 2/2, St.AP, Private Papers, Middle East Library, St. Antony's College Archives, Oxford, UK. Enaya Hammad Othman, *Negotiating Palestinian Womanhood. Encounters Between Palestinian Women and American Missionaries, 1880s–1940s* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, and London: Lexington Books, 2016), 13: The government schools provided education to approximately 20 288 students, with only 942 of those being girls.

words of Enaya Hammad Othman: “It was in this disposition that the missionary schools resumed under the Mandate with great power ...”⁸

The focus of this article is the Swedish School in Jerusalem, which was a Christian institution and one of the mission schools that made a significant contribution to Arab education.⁹ Based on published and unpublished sources from the Swedish Jerusalem’s Society’s (SJS) archives, private archives, Mandate government reports, biographies and travel literature, this article argues that while modelled on Swedish educational culture and to a large extent financed from Sweden, the school had a profound local connection to the Christian Arab community. The headmistress was Swedish, but the teachers were Christian Arabs. The pupils came from Arab families; the majority were from Christian families and Muslim pupils constituted a minority. Unlike most other mission schools, Arabic was the language of instruction. For the Christian Arabs, but also to some extent the Muslim population, the Swedish school represented a high-quality primary education and an alternative to British mission schools and Arab government schools. For the Swedish actors in Palestine and supporters at home, the Swedish school became an example of Swedish modernity exported to a less developed area of the world. Thus, while Sweden long had ceased to be an expansionist colonial power, during the 1920s and 1930s, its colonial ambitions—in the same manner as Danish and Norwegian colonialism—was to a large extent seen in mission-based welfare projects in colonial (and Mandate) settings.¹⁰ According to what Peter Forsgren and others have called “Nordic colonial thinking”,¹¹ Sweden as a developed European nation had a mission to develop Palestine. Even so, because of religious and ethnic divisions within Mandate Palestine’s population, the Swedes had competing ideas as to which population to target.

This article starts with a discussion of the SJS’ motivation for transforming a small kindergarten into a large school for Arab children in the early 1920s. In many ways, the “real history” of the Swedish School begins with the new headmistress Signe Ekblad arriving in Jerusalem in 1922.¹² It is thus necessary to look at Ekblad as the prime mover in the development of the school,

⁸Othman, *Negotiating Palestinian Womanhood*, 14.

⁹A.L. Tibawi, *Arab Education in Mandatory Palestine. A Study of Three Decades of British Administration* (London: Luzac, 1956), 76. The Arabs did not have the financial resources and the British government spent relatively little on education throughout the Mandate period, thus the demand for education among the Arab population was much greater than the Government schools could absorb.

¹⁰See for example Seija Jalagin, Inger Marie Okkenhaug and Maria Småberg, “Introduction: Nordic Missions, Gender and Humanitarian Practices: From Evangelization to Development,” *Scandinavian Journal of History* 40, no. 3 (2015): 285–297.

¹¹Peter Forsgren, “Globalization as ‘The White Man’s Burden’: Modernity and Colonialism in a Swedish Travelogue,” *Scandinavian Studies* 91, nos. 1–2 (Spring/Summer 2019): 222–223. See also Johan Höglund and Linda Andersson Burnett, “Introduction: Nordic Colonialism and Scandinavian Studies,” *Scandinavian Studies* nos. 1–2 (Spring/Summer 2019): 1–12.

¹²Märta Lindqvist, *Palestinska dagar* (Stockholm: Skoglund Bokförlag, 1931), 62.

both with regard to the board and the funders in Sweden, and to connections in Palestine. This article argues that the Mandate authorities' neglect of Arab welfare and education spurred Ekblad's focus on Arab education, despite opposition from the board and the funders in Sweden.

The second part of this article focuses on the female Christian Arab staff, their backgrounds and their interactions with the Swedish headmistress. I argue that Palestinian middle-class culture shared basic ideals with the values promoted by the Swedish Protestant headmistress, and claim that the educational culture of the school was more important to parents than its religious profile. This second part of the article also explores in what ways Arab society, including the Arab teachers, parents, and children, influenced the educational profile.

The school, however, did not only include Muslim and Christian upper- and middle-class pupils, but also took in children from poor Arab families. Despite improved living conditions among the urban lower and middle classes, many Palestinians lived in meagre material conditions. The school's policy was inspired by the idea of a "people's school", a *folkskole*, a free public school for all, prevalent in the Scandinavian countries at the time. Thus, finally I argue that the Swedish institution not only had bearings on relations between Christian Arabs and Muslims, but also on relations between children and parents from different social strata in ways that were unique among educational institutions in Palestine (Fig. 1).

BACKGROUND

With the establishment of the Swedish Jerusalem's Society (*Svenska Jerusalemsföreningen*, SJS)—an organisation with strong connections to the Swedish state church and king—Sweden became the only Scandinavian country with a national presence in Palestine in the period from 1900 to 1948.¹³ The organisation was modelled upon the German *Jerusalemsverein* [*Jerusalem Association*]. Even so, King Oscar II (1829–1907), who became the SJS' "high protector", insisted on the independence of the organisation. The SJS must not be part of the German organisation, but should represent the Swedish nation. As I have argued elsewhere, one reason might have been Sweden-Norway's position as a small state independent of international alliances. Being part of a German organisation might harm relations with other great powers.¹⁴ In addition, in Sweden and the other Nordic countries with

¹³The founders were inspired by new evangelical movements, in particular the British Lord Radstock. They belonged to the elite of society and had strong links to the Swedish royal family. See Gustaf Björk, *Sverige i Jerusalem och Betlehem. Svenska Jerusalemsföreningen 1900–1948* (Uppsala: Svenska Jerusalemsföreningen, 2000), 13–14.

¹⁴Inger Marie Okkenhaug, "Scandinavian Missionaries in Palestine: The Swedish Jerusalem's Society, Medical Mission and Education in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, 1900–1948," in *Tracing the Jerusalem Code: Christian Cultures in Scandinavia* vol. 3., eds. Anna Bohlin and Ragnhild J. Zorgati (Berlin: De Gruyter Verlag, to be published in 2021).



Fig. 1 Signe Ekblad at her desk in Jerusalem where she would write her reports and letters to the Swedish Jerusalem's Society board in Sweden, ca. 1926. Image courtesy of the Swedish Jerusalem Society. <http://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/imageViewer.jsf?dsId=ATTACHMENT-0001&pid=alvin-record%3A270063&cdswid=-6953>

a Protestant Lutheran state religion, Christian missions with their visual and written narratives of “the other in need” helped define Swedish (or Norwegian or Danish) identity during a time of competing national building projects in the Nordic countries. In their day-to-day management, the SJS was to have close connections with the German Kaiserswerth Deaconesses Institution and the Syrian Orphanage in the years before 1918.¹⁵ These German Protestants were the forerunners of today's independent Palestinian Lutheran Church (in Israel/Palestine and Jordan), but the Swedes played a very subordinate role. They never had their own church in Palestine. This can partly be explained by the fact that throughout its history the Swedish organisation has to a large degree been ecumenical in character.¹⁶ The SJS started

¹⁵Gustav Björk, *Sverige i Jerusalem och Betlehem. Svenska Jerusalemsföreningen 1900–1948* (Uppsala: Svenska Jerusalemsföreningen, 2000), 15.

¹⁶Björk, *Sverige i Jerusalem och Betlehem*, 6.

out as a mission to the Jews, but even so, their missionary agenda was very soon transformed into a cultural mission which in practice meant education, health and relief work among the Arab population. Its original and continuous aim until war¹⁷ forced the school to close down in 1948, was to provide welfare to the people “in Jesus’ own country”.¹⁸

The Swedish school opened in October 1902, providing a kindergarten for boys and girls and the first two years of primary school for girls. It served as a pre-school for children who would later attend other mission schools. The majority of the 70–80 children attending the school were Christian Arabs and in addition there were a few Muslim girls. A German deaconess, Martha Klaer from the Protestant German mission school Talitha Kumi, supervised the local Christian teacher Afifa Sliman in running the school.¹⁹ “Since 1851, the German Protestant deaconesses had established schools in various cities of the Ottoman Empire with the intention of ‘uplifting’ local girls, the mothers of future generations through education”.²⁰ This meant that the Swedes’ educational partners were not only fellow Lutherans, but also well-educated with extensive and lengthy experience from welfare work in the Levant.

The board and supporters at home were not happy with this strong German connection and requested a more direct Swedish involvement in the school. This was achieved in 1909, when the school obtained its first Swedish headmistress, Helfrid Willén. This same year the Ottoman authorities officially recognised the school as the *École de la Société de Jérusalem*.²¹ The Swedish institution was part of the large body of foreign mission schools that dominated education in Jerusalem. In 1910 there were seventeen

¹⁷The war for Palestine in 1948 is called “The War of Independence” by the Israelis, while the Arabs call it *al-Nakba* or “the disaster”.

¹⁸Sune Fahlgren, Mia Gröndahl, and Kjell Jonasson, eds., *A Swede in Jerusalem. Signe Ekblad and the Swedish School, 1922–1948* (Bethlehem: Diyar Publishing and Swedish Jerusalem’s Society, 2012), 20. In 1903 the SJS established a hospital in Bethlehem.

¹⁹Uwe Kaminsky, “The Establishment of Nursing Care in the Parish. Kaiserswerth Deaconesses in Jerusalem,” in *Deaconesses in Nursing Care. International Transfer of a Female Model of Life and Work in the 19th and 20th Century*, eds. Susanne Kreutzer and Karen Nolte (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2016), 83–85. Kaiserswerth *Orientalbeid* was founded in 1851 by Theodore Fliedner. This German Protestant organisation that became an influential ally of the Swedish mission, started providing nursing and educational services in Jerusalem in 1851. The organisation defined their vocation as evangelising among the oriental churches. In 1868 Talitha Kumi, an educational institution for girls, was established. Talitha Kumi still exists today.

²⁰Julia Hauser, “Mothers of a Future Generation: The Journey of an Argument for Female Education,” in *Entangled Education: Foreign and Local Schools in Ottoman Syria and Mandate Lebanon (19–20th Centuries)*, eds. Julia Hauser, Christine B. Lindner, and Esther Möller (Beirut: Beirut Texts and Studies, 2016), 137, 147. Their school for girls in Beirut, established in 1862, was the most exclusive Protestant school for girls in the city.

²¹Björk, *Sverige i Jerusalem och Betlehem*, 28–29. See Okkenhaug “Scandinavian Missionaries in Palestine.”

mission schools, while there were ten Islamic and Ottoman schools, and one Palestinian national school in the city.²²

With the outbreak of World War I, the Swedes became even more dependent on German colleagues in running the school. The Germans, as the Ottoman state’s central ally in the war, were allowed to stay in Palestine, while the Swedish staff left. The Christian Arab teacher Maria Harb took charge of the daily running of the institution, while formal supervision was given to a German woman, Gertrude Einzler, who had grown up in Jerusalem.²³ The Swedes’ strong ties to the German Protestant establishments and people in Jerusalem were also demonstrated by the SJS’ explicit sympathy with the German and Turkish sides in the war. In the SJS journal (in reports written by Gertrude Einzler) the British were portrayed as one of many conquerors.²⁴ Even so, with the British occupation giving way to civilian rule, the Germans had to leave Palestine. With the fellow Lutherans and close allies forced out (they were allowed back later) by the new rulers, the Swedes had to make their own way in Palestine.²⁵ What roles could they play? How did the school position itself in a British-ruled Palestine?

EARLY MANDATE YEARS

The end of both Ottoman rule and German political influence in 1918 forced the SJS to orient itself towards the new rulers of Palestine. The ecumenical orientation of the Swedish organisation meant that without major difficulties they could replace their close German cooperation with British Protestants. Thus, in order to prepare Signe Ekblad—a primary teacher with experience from social work in Sweden—for work in a Middle Eastern country under British rule, the SJS paid for a three month course of mission training at Kingsmead, the Protestant Mission home close to Birmingham.²⁶ She then spent one semester at the School of Oriental and Asian Studies (SOAS) in

²²Ricks, “Remembering Arab Jerusalem, 1909–1989,” 7. Othman, *Negotiating Palestinian Womanhood*, 11. See also Rochelle Davis, “Ottoman Jerusalem,” in *Jerusalem 1948. The Arab Neighbourhoods and Their Fate in the War*, ed. Salim Tamari (Jerusalem: Institute of Jerusalem Studies and Badil Resource Center, 2002), 10–29.

²³*Svenska Jerusalemföreningens Tidskrift* no. 1 (1921): 32–33. Gertrude Einzler was the daughter of the physician Adolph Einzler, an Austrian Catholic citizen by birth whom had moved to Jerusalem in the early 1880s, converted to Protestantism, and worked in the Moravian Brothers’ Leprosarium. He married Lydia Schick, daughter of Conrad Schick, the architect of the German consulate in Jerusalem. Lydia had an interest in popular Arab culture and beliefs, collected artifacts, and started writing ethnographic articles in the 1890s. See Suzanna Henty, “Stolen Land: Tracing Traumascapes in Four Leprosaria in the Jerusalem District,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* no. 69 (2017): 87–96.

²⁴Björk, *Sverige i Jerusalem och Betlehem*, 41.

²⁵*Svenska Jerusalemföreningens Tidskrift* no. 2 (1922): 36.

²⁶Selly Oak Colleges was a federation of colleges offering studies in theology, social work, and teacher’s training.

London, where she studied English, Arabic and Oriental religion and culture. After arriving in Jerusalem, she continued her Arabic studies at the British Anglican High School.²⁷

Foreign mission schools were usually housed in impressive buildings placed in prime locations in Beirut and other cities of Anatolia and the Levant, and were “intended to project the image of a clearly superior European or Western culture”.²⁸ This was not the case with the Swedish institution. Visiting the Swedish School for the first time in the spring of 1922, Ekblad was shocked by the small and run-down building. The teachers and children, however, had spent much time decorating the classrooms and the youngest children greeted the Swedish headmistress by singing a song written by the Arab teachers:

It is so very kind of you
To leave your happy home,
And come out to us little wee’s
For we’re not only two or three’s.
Fifty-eight we are in number ...

It is so good you left your home
And come to us out here
To teach us how to love God
Be diligent and clean.

God bless the work,
which you will do,
Here in Jerusalem
For little Arab girls and boys
To teach us sing and play.²⁹

To the pupils and teachers at the Swedish School it was clear that Ekblad had come to work among Arab children. This was not, however, such a clear-cut matter for the Swedes—to Ekblad herself, or to the SJS board or supporters in Sweden. Some among the latter, including Sweden’s prominent representative in the Middle East, Harald Bildt, ambassador to Egypt from 1922 to 1935, argued that the school should proselytise with the aim of converting Palestinians to Protestantism. Bildt wrote “an official letter criticizing the Jerusalem’s Society in strong terms”,³⁰ and he claimed that the

²⁷ *Svenska Jerusalemföreningens Tidsskrift* no. 2 (1922): 79.

²⁸ Michael F. Davie, “Local and Western Educational Institutions in Beirut: Topographical and Symbolic Dominations,” in *Entangled Education: Foreign and Local Schools in Ottoman Syria and Mandate Lebanon (19–20th Centuries)*, eds. Julia Hauser, Christine B. Lindner, and Esther Möller (Beirut: Beirut Texts and Studies, 2016), 64.

²⁹ *Svenska Jerusalemföreningens Tidsskrift* no. 2 (1922): 35. My translation from Swedish.

³⁰ Fahlgren, *A Swede in Jerusalem*, 33. This letter was written some time in 1923 or during spring of 1924.

organisation damaged the name of Sweden. According to Bildt, both the school and the hospital were neglecting their primary duty of evangelisation.³¹

Ekblad was extremely upset with Bildt’s condemnation and, in a letter to the board of the SJS, she made it clear that she had “thought a lot about the complaints in the official letter from Bildt concerning our lack of evangelisation. But the question of whether we are evangelising here or not had tormented me already before his letter”.³² The young headmistress told the board in no uncertain terms what Swedish policy should be:

1. That one cannot and should not engage in missionary work in Palestine as one does in other parts of the world, since a large part of the population already belongs to Christian Churches;
2. That we as Lutherans should not try to win new members from any of these other Churches, but rather point to the treasures these Churches have without realising it;
3. That the task of the school in relation to Mohammedanism is to show the children, through Christian education but even more through the spirit and fosterage of the school, that Christianity is not words but LIFE and STRENGTH.³³

Ekblad concluded with a clear warning to the board: “But if the school, following Bildt’s prescriptions, should be judged according to the number of conversions from Mohammedanism and ‘conquests’ from the Greek Catholic Church, it seems to me that we will find it very difficult to reach a high standard”.³⁴ It was excellence in education that Ekblad understood to be Sweden’s mission in Palestine. But education for whom? That was the question the new headmistress took to the responsible body; the British Director of Education (Fig. 2).

“NEEDED AMONG THE ARABS” IN MANDATORY PALESTINE

Even if the British authorities did not interfere in the way foreign (mission) schools were run, it was important to be on good terms with the Department of Education, which issued a yearly grant to private schools.³⁵ For the newcomer Ekblad, it was vital to meet the Director of Education and get his response to the question of the future of the school. The official visit to Bowman reflects Ekblad’s professional ambitions and marks a change in direction for the Swedish institution, from an evangelical kindergarten/school to a professional education that aimed to find a place within the Mandatory system.

³¹Fahlgren, *A Swede in Jerusalem*, 33.

³²Ibid.

³³Fahlgren, *A Swede in Jerusalem*, 34. Translated by the authors. All other translations from Swedish are my own.

³⁴Fahlgren, *A Swede in Jerusalem*, 34.

³⁵Othman, *Negotiating Palestinian Womanhood*, 13.



Fig. 2 Signe Ekblad, teacher and pupils at the Swedish School, Jerusalem, ca. 1925. Held in Uppsala University Library at the Swedish Jerusalem's Society's Collection. Image courtesy of the Swedish Jerusalem Society. <https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/attachment/download/alvin-record:294000/ATTACHMENT-0001.tiff>

When Ekblad called on Bowman in the fall of 1922, he greeted the young Swedish headmistress warmly, even though he had never heard of her school. Based on what she explained, though, he could immediately assure Ekblad that the Swedish school really did have a role to play in Jerusalem. The city was in need of more schools; especially ones providing kindergarten for Muslim children. His support and interest were also expressed by his wish to visit the school.³⁶ Using her momentum, Ekblad made her case to the funders in Sweden:

I do not believe our work is as needed among the Jews. Most Jewish children in Palestine have regular schooling. That is not the case for Arab children. The large majority of the Arab population is illiterate. In the small villages it is still the belief that girls do not need any schooling. That is why it seems to me that the SJS best fulfils its mission in the Holy Land by continuing to — as we have done — cater for the Arabs' education.³⁷

³⁶ *Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidskrift* no. 3 (1922): 79.

³⁷ *Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidskrift* no. 3 (1924): 101–103.

Ekblad included both Muslim and Christian Arab children in the Swedish educational scheme, emphasising that they were “needed” both among the Muslim population and the Orthodox Christians. Her decision to focus on the Arab population, and invest in the development of Palestinian Arab society, had deep political as well as social implications. Even so, her rhetoric when communicating with Sweden was, during these early years, in keeping with traditional evangelical discourse. Here Ekblad was merging the Apostle Paul’s vision on one of his mission journeys, of a Macedonia pleading with him and crying “Come over to Macedonia and help us” and Nordic colonial thinking, when she wrote: “We Swedes need to believe that our people have a special gift to bring even to the people of the Holy Land”.³⁸ The people of Palestine here meant Muslim and Eastern Christian Arabs. According to Ekblad, and in line with traditional evangelical views of Orthodox Christians, the local Christians of Palestine were described as having “limitless ignorance about the stories of the Bible”.³⁹ Thus, a modern, Swedish school was needed among the Arabs, not only from an educational perspective, but also as a means of promoting Protestant influence in Palestine. This endeavour included a national, Swedish responsibility to prevent Arab children from being educated in Greek Orthodox or Muslim schools, as argued by Ekblad:

We Swedes have started an evangelical enterprise in the Holy Land. We want to help and serve the people of this land. Should we refuse to accept the children that are trustingly sent to us, and whom if not accepted by our school will be sent to the Greek-Orthodox propaganda-schools or Muslim government schools? No, we should accept the children who are sent to us. It is not our task to judge among which of the populations of the Holy Land we are most needed.... Should we expand our school — as there clearly is a need for — or should we continue to be forced to let the children leave and go on to the Catholic or even Muslim schools? That is a question I leave for the friends in Sweden.⁴⁰

“The friends in Sweden” did over time accept Ekblad’s views on educating Arab children. The message the headmistress in Jerusalem transmitted to supporters in Sweden was that the organisation was giving the children of Jerusalem “a good and Christian upbringing”.⁴¹ In 1930, after a longer visit

³⁸ *Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidsskrift* no. 2 (1923): 97.

³⁹ *Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidsskrift* no. 3 (1924): 104.

⁴⁰ *Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidsskrift* no. 1 (1923): 6–7.

⁴¹ As I have written elsewhere, in 1927, as part of the funding campaign for a new school building, the weekly journal *Husmodern* [*The Housewife*], published a petition signed by four of the most significant women in Swedish society at the time, including Selma Lagerlöf whom in 1909 had been the first female writer to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. The petition encouraged Swedes to support the SJS’ work in Jerusalem, in order to give the children of Jerusalem “a good and Christian upbringing.” Okkenhaug, “Scandinavian Missionaries in Palestine.” See also Fahlgren, *A Swede in Jerusalem*, 50–51.

to the school, Swedish journalist Märta Lindqvist assured Swedish funders who might be worried at the lack of Protestant influence that “the Swedish School is a mission school, but not in the manner of Roman Catholic or American direct propaganda and attempts of proselytising. There are ... no attempts at conversion....”.⁴² The underlying message was that the Swedish mission in Palestine was to promote Protestantism through education and Swedish culture.

There were, however, Christian Arab communities that turned down the Swedish offer of education, among them the Roman Catholics. The Catholic community had a number of schools to choose from and might not have needed to consider a Protestant school for their children. That was not the case for the Orthodox Arab community, which was by far the largest of the Christian communities in Palestine yet lacked a “good school” in Jerusalem. During Ottoman times the majority of children at the Swedish School had come from the Orthodox Christian community. This was also the case during the Mandate: Orthodox parents sent their children to the Swedes, seemingly with their religious leaders’ consent.⁴³ In 1922, when Ekblad took over the school, there were 62 children; of these 43 were Greek Catholic 4 were Roman Catholic, 7 were Muslim and 8 were Protestants.⁴⁴

So far, the school had been free of charge and it had been a school for children from poor, mainly Christian, Arab families. Now Ekblad convinced her supporters and superiors (the SJS board) in Sweden of the need to support a more professional and modern school. The shift towards professionalisation was, as previously discussed, marked by close relations with the educational authorities. It was also apparent in the new policy of school fees. Ekblad introduced fees, but kept a number of free places for children from poor homes.⁴⁵ School fees were typical of Christian schools, which mostly catered for children from wealthier families including Muslim children from the upper- and middle- classes. Under Ekblad’s regime Arab girls were educated until they had finished fourth or fifth grade at the age of thirteen or fourteen, and were then qualified for further education at a secondary school, usually a British or American mission school. The boys had to leave the school at the age of nine or ten when they would continue on to similar schools.⁴⁶

By 1930 there were 150 children in the school, and the staff had expanded to seven Arab teachers, and one Swedish volunteer in addition to Ekblad. During the early 1940s the number of children had increased from 200 to 250, with ten Arab and two Swedish teachers; all female. By 1930 Ekblad

⁴²Lindqvist, *Palestinska dagar*, 74.

⁴³*Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidskrift* no. 3 (1924): 104. From early on Orthodox priests showed their interest in the Protestant school by attending the yearly Swedish Christmas party.

⁴⁴*Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidskrift* no. 2 (1922): 75.

⁴⁵*Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidskrift* no. 4 (1922): 100.

⁴⁶Inger Marie Okkenhaug, “Signe Ekblad and the Swedish School in Jerusalem,” *SMT (Swedish Missiological Themes)* no. 94/2 (2006):147–61, 154.

was supervising a major operation, which was held in high esteem by the local community as well as the Mandate authorities. In the words of Lindqvist—bearing in mind her Swedish predisposition and admiration for Signe Ekblad—“The Swedish school has under the leadership of Ekblad gained an exceptional reputation. It has developed into one of the foremost places among the foreign educational institutions in the city”.⁴⁷ An institution with such a solid reputation would attract highly qualified teachers, which raises the question: Who were the Arab teachers employed at the Swedish School?

THE ARAB TEACHERS

In the summer of 1921, the Swedish school arranged a farewell party for Maria Harb, mentioned above, who had been the main teacher at the school for five years. Harb’s fiancé, Elias Totah, an Arab businessman, was also present.⁴⁸ Marriage meant the end of her teaching career and Harb was to be replaced by a woman named Helena Kassisijeh. By the fall of 1923 three more local women teachers joined the staff: Hanna Able, Warde Abudije and Bedea Haramy.

Both Maria Harb and Elias Totah came from Christian families based in Ramallah. Harb came from a Greek Orthodox family, while Elias Totah had converted to Quakerism.⁴⁹ Elias Totah was a nephew of the Palestinian pioneer educator Khalil Totah (1886–1955), who received a PhD from Columbia University, returned to Palestine and served as Government Arab College Principal (1919–1925), and as teacher and director of the Friends Boys’ School in Ramallah from 1927 to 1944. Another of the teachers, Bedea Haramy, also had a link to Palestinian educators. Shukri Haramy, a member of the Haramy family of Jerusalem (from Baq’a, one of the city’s middle- to upper-class neighbourhoods), became famous as one of the few Palestinians who established a private national school during the Mandate period.⁵⁰ Thus, teachers at the Swedish school belonged to the upper- and middle-class Christian families that valued the modern education which could be obtained in foreign mission schools.⁵¹ They came from the minute group of Arab

⁴⁷Lindqvist, *Palestinska dagar*, 72. Signe Ekblad, *Lyckliga Arbetsår i Jerusalem* (Uppsala: J.A. Lindblad, 1949), 109. Lindqvist’s judgement aligns with the way one elderly Christian Arab I met in Jerusalem in September of 2005, who remembered the Swedish School. His sister had been a pupil at there in the 1930s. He had gone to St George, the Anglican school for boys. Both schools, he told me, were “the best” in the city.

⁴⁸*Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidsskrift* no. 3 (1921): 66.

⁴⁹Thomas Ricks, e-mail to author, April 27, 2019.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹In the SJS journals there are photographs of these young and middle-aged women from the classroom with children, in the playground with the youngest children or posing with the headmistress. These photographs are held in the SJS archive in Uppsala. They made a good and solid impression on Swedish visitors. *Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidsskrift* no. 3 (1924): 97.

women who had received formal education before the war.⁵² The fact that the teachers at the Swedish School spoke “some English”, implies an education from an English-language mission school.⁵³ One of the most important English higher education mission schools for girls in the Levant before World War I was the British Syrian Training College in Beirut.

One of these pioneer teachers educated at the Anglican institution in Beirut was Munira Badr Musa (b. 1880). Jean Said Makdisi writes of her maternal grandmother:

It was at the British Syrian Training College that Teta (Munira Badr Musa) accomplished her metamorphosis from an ordinary young girl to that archetypal figure in modern Arab cultural history, the Syrian Christian schoolteacher. The powerful and transformative influence of these women was to be felt not only in the immediate region, in historic Syria, and the countries that are today Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, but as far away as Iraq and Egypt. Under their tutelage ... students were taught new languages and a new way of life, and were trained in an educational style more in harmony with Western ways than Ottoman....⁵⁴

Witnessing this transformation first hand was the Anglican educator and missionary Mabel Warburton (1879–1961), who had been headmistress of the British Syrian Training College in the years before the First World War. As one of the first British teachers to return to the region after the war, Warburton then became the first headmistress of the Anglican British Girl’s High School and Training College in Jerusalem. Warburton writes:

Amongst many changes which have taken and are taking place in Palestine under the British Occupation, a most remarkable one is the change in the position and work of women in the land. Before the war only a very few girls received anything in the way of a liberal education, and it is noteworthy that it was these few who almost immediately came to the fore when the work of building up Palestine began- as teachers, nurses and leaders in social work.... During the war financial straits and the conscription of young men had made it necessary for the girls of the family to work and to contribute to the family support. Girls trained in Mission Schools such as the British Syrian Training College and the American Girls’ School in Beyrout, the C. M. S. Girls’ School at Bethlehem, The American Friends’ School at Ramallah, and the Bishop’s School in Jerusalem, were able to find work as teachers and nurses, and in many cases became sole supporters of their families during those terrible years of privation. This prepared the way for girls to plan for, and parents to reconcile

⁵²Tibawi, *Arab Education in Mandatory Palestine*, 229.

⁵³*Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidsskrift* no. 3 (1924): 97.

⁵⁴Jean Said Makdisi, *Teta, Mother, and Me. Three Generations of Arab Women* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 151.

themselves to, the idea of a professional career, which the latter had previously opposed to for their daughters.⁵⁵

Were these educated women Protestants? According to Laura Robson, “women in the Arab Episcopalian community had an unusual degree of access to schooling and often worked as teachers in mission schools”.⁵⁶ This would also have been true for Arab women from other Protestant congregations, including the Lutheran congregations.⁵⁷ The Arab teachers at the Swedish school may have been Protestants. Certainly, they would have been educated and shaped culturally during their most formative years at a Protestant institution. Arab Roman Catholics did not send their children to the Swedish school, and it is highly unlikely that the school recruited teachers from this community. The Greek Orthodox community established their own secondary school in the 1920s, too late for the first generation of teachers at the Swedish school during the Mandate.⁵⁸ The strong link between the Swedish institution and the Arab Protestant milieu is reflected in the fact that the minister of the Anglican-Protestant congregation in Jerusalem, pastor Saleh Saba, was invited to give a sermon for the children and teachers on the formal opening day of the new school in 1926.⁵⁹

The teachers at the Swedish School and the headmistress shared a deep spiritual commitment that was nurtured during daily rituals performed by the staff. This commitment was not only related to faith but also to professional life, as observed by Lindqvist: “The local teachers are glowingly interested, eager and determined and the relationship between the teacher and their head is characterized by understanding.... Every morning before school starts, the headmistress and the teachers gather for a morning prayer in the teacher’s room. - one would not be mistaken to say that these daily meetings in silence is one of the primary forces of power in the running of the Swedish school”.⁶⁰

The sharing of prayers did not, however, necessarily mean that these women shared the same version of Christianity. Ekblad was ecumenically oriented. The above-mentioned sermon before the official opening of the new school was, for example, modelled upon the Orthodox tradition of having a priest

⁵⁵“Women’s Education in Palestine” by Mable C. Warburton, 1923, (J&EM) XL/1, The Jerusalem and the East Mission, Private Papers Collection, Middle East Centre Archive, St. Antony’s College, Oxford, UK.

⁵⁶Laura Robson, *Colonialism and Christianity in Mandate Palestine* (Austin: University of Texas, 2011), 131.

⁵⁷Letter from Henrik Steen to SJS, Jerusalem, September 16, 1902. Published in Jan-Olof Johansson and Sten Norin, eds., *Född i Betlehem. Svenska Jerusalemsföreningen etthundra år* (Engelstad: Svenska Jerusalemsföreningen, 2000), 148–149.

⁵⁸*Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidskrift* no. 1 (1925): 12–13.

⁵⁹*Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidskrift* no. 4 (1926): 192.

⁶⁰Lindqvist, *Palestinska dagar*, 70.

bless a new home before moving into a new building.⁶¹ Members of different Christian denominations in Jerusalem also met socially during “open house”, which were regular meetings organised by Ekblad at the school. By the 1930s these events also included Jewish guests.⁶²

Ekblad’s respect for and trust in her teachers’ Christian faith is also seen in the fact that teaching religion was left to her Arab staff. When criticised by SJS members in Sweden who wanted a Swede to perform what they saw as a most crucial educational task, Ekblad answered that the local teachers knew the children better than a foreigner could ever do, and this fact was instrumental when the goal was to best reach the young with the Protestant message. It might, however, also have been a question of language: despite diligent Arabic studies it took time for the Swedish headmistress to master the language fluently.⁶³

Another reason for Ekblad not to teach Christianity/Bible studies was the fact that she became increasingly a full-time administrator, spending most of her time fundraising for the building and yard that was bought in 1926, in addition to the new school building finished in 1929/1930. The Swedish headmistress’ large-scale and impressive fundraising efforts found resonance in Palestinian middle-class culture where charity and individual donations for the welfare of society was held in high esteem. The periodical *Al-Iqtisadiyyat al-arabiyya* [*The Arab Economic Journal*] for example, promoted “charity as a basic tenant of civilized conduct and social responsibility”.⁶⁴ Charity was also important to the Arab staff at the Swedish school. The Arab teachers and Ekblad created a sewing club and the products made at these meetings, mostly embroideries, were sold in Sweden and helped finance, among other things, the purchase of the new school building.

The female teachers were the first generation of Palestinian women to earn a salary and have the possibility of managing their own finances. Compared to the majority of Palestinians, who lived in poverty, these women belonged to an elite who, in the words of Sherene Seikaly, believed that “managing money ... was crucial to maintaining social norms. Thus, the editors of *Al-Iqtisadiyyat al-arabiyya* provided precise calculations for the saving and spending patterns of the model middle (class)... The most important aim of these budgetary prescriptions was saving, which emerges as the basic principles of a healthy and successful family.... Saving was a grave matter, and if

⁶¹ *Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidsskrift* no. 4 (1926): 192.

⁶² The Ekblad Family Private Archive, letter from Signe Ekblad to her brother Martin Ekblad, Swedish school Jerusalem, June 21, 1936. I would like to thank the Ekblad family for allowing me access to this material.

⁶³ Sofia Häggman, *Hilma Granqvist. Antropolog med Hjärta i Palestina* (Helsingfors: Svenska folkskolans vänner, 2016).

⁶⁴ Sherene Seikaly, *Men of Capital. Scarcity and Economy in Mandate Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 61.

ignored, the individual would incur harm on 'himself, his family, and his surroundings'".⁶⁵

According to Said Makdisi, Munira Badr Musa was responsible for the family budget and gained great respect for her control of family and their church's finances (her husband was a Baptist minister in Nazareth in the 1920s). This skill she might have learned at the Protestant mission schools she attended. Ekblad also eagerly promoted budgeting one's finances and the importance of saving. She encouraged her staff members to open savings accounts and place their money in the bank.⁶⁶ According to Seikaly, the editors of *Al-Iqtisadiyyat* claimed that "Economic conduct would be a source of personal empowerment and great individual benefit. But the advantages were even broader. Accumulating and saving money was a national obligation".⁶⁷ When Ekblad introduced the art of saving money and opening a saving account not only to her Arab staff, but also to the pupils, she was encouraging Palestinian nation-building (Fig. 3).

PARENTS AND CHILDREN: EXPECTATIONS AND ATTRACTIONS

In the years after World War I, during the period of British rule, Jerusalem developed into a cosmopolitan and modern city. In this process of economic and social growth the rise in the general level of education played a major part.⁶⁸ According to Seikaly, it was precisely a certain level of education that was the defining component of this middle class: "It was the educational status of the man of the household that, above all, defined the Palestinian middle class".⁶⁹ It was the men who "were responsible for the financial and 'cultural' needs of the middle-class family".⁷⁰ Even so, in order to have educated men one needed educated mothers.⁷¹ This fact was reflected in the number of fathers who visited the Swedish institution looking for a suitable primary school for their daughters, and kindergarten and lower-class education for their sons. Fathers (sometimes with their wives) came with their young children to inspect the premises before deciding which school to choose for their offspring. The fathers also attended the annual Christmas

⁶⁵Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 60–61.

⁶⁶Lindqvist, *Palestinska dagar*, 70.

⁶⁷Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 61–62. The periodical *Al-Iqtisadiyyat al-arabiyya* [*The Arab Economic Journal*] "was a journal on the margins of social life, run by a group of men who would become among the most important contractors, bankers, investors, and accountants in the Middle East," (55).

⁶⁸Davis, "The Growth of the Western Communities," 39.

⁶⁹Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 58.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹On educated mothers as a major theme in Middle Eastern nationalism, see for example Ellen Fleischmann. *The Nation and its "New" Women. The Palestinian Women's Movement, 1920–1948* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003).



Fig. 3 Teachers and headmistress Ekblad at the Swedish School. Caption written on the back of the photo: “We teachers in Jerusalem, Christmas 1936”. Held in Uppsala University Library at the Swedish Jerusalem’s Society’s Collection. Image courtesy of the Swedish Jerusalem Society. <http://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/view.jsf?pid=alvin-record%3A93016&dswid=1244>

parties, and they were invited to a separate party together with non-Palestinian guests, in order not to infringe on traditions of seclusion.⁷²

What did these fathers and their wives expect from the Swedish School? There were two main items on their wish list: Before the war Arabic had been the only language of instruction at the Swedish school. From the very beginning of the Mandate, however, with English becoming one of the three official languages in Palestine, parents wanted English as a subject for their children. The Swedes responded quickly by hiring Arab teachers who were able to teach English—that is, women educated in one of the American or British Protestant mission schools of the Levant. In addition, Ekblad also taught English.

The second desire of many parents was more comprehensive: They wanted the school to become an accredited primary school with a kindergarten, something that would secure pupils access to higher educational institutions.⁷³

⁷² Okkenhaug, “Scandinavian Missionaries in Palestine.”

⁷³ *Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidsskrift* no. 2 (1928): 36.

Jerusalem was a buyers’ market when it came to Christian schools. Children and parents could choose between a number of Christian establishments, and pupils could quit school in the middle of term to start a new one that seemed to be more attractive. Thus, in order to be competitive, and not least because of Ekblad’s ambitions, the Swedish institution had become an official primary school by 1926, when they moved into their own building.

The purchase of a spacious Arab private home and garden was made possible partly because of a generous donation from the founder of the SJS, Bishop Knut Henning G. von Schéele (1838–1920) and his wife, Anna Ekman Schéele (1850–1925). Thanks to the von Schéeles the SJS was able to buy a suitable building and a large plot of land in Musrara, a wealthy Christian Arab neighbourhood just north of the Damascus Gate. The neighbourhood’s history stemmed from the nineteenth century when wealthy Arabs had opted to live outside the city wall and built large, luxurious mansions in this area: The Swedish School had found a stately neighbourhood with close proximity to their main users. From the rooftop of the school one could overlook the old city of Jerusalem and beyond. Michael F. Davie has analysed the particular topographic locations of mission schools in Beirut, arguing that: “The location of these institutions seems to have not been left to chance”.⁷⁴ This was true for the new location of the Swedish school, which was found and purchased with the help of the Swedish consul in Jerusalem, the aforementioned Lars Hol Larsen, who having grown up in the city had a deep local knowledge.

On these new premises, the Swedish school added a factor to its attractions: a modern and spacious playground. This outdoor area, where the youngest children could play, and a yard where the older children would do gymnastics, was part of the Swedish educational philosophy.⁷⁵ The new swings and seesaws, not found in many other school yards, were also extremely effective in attracting the youngest pupils. When Ekblad introduced a dramatic change to the school’s daily schedule—the children went from having a long break in the middle of the day to a Swedish school day (with lunch at school and an earlier finish)—the playground was open for children in the afternoons. This made the fact that there was no school in the afternoon easier to accept for parents. The schoolyard was also popular in the early mornings before classes. By 6:30 in the morning many of the schoolboys played football in the yard.⁷⁶ This yard and playground was open to all children, not only pupils at the school, thus contributing to the general welfare of Arab children in the neighbourhood.

At the time of the move to the new building there were 106 children in the school. Among the older girls finishing in the spring of 1927, two would

⁷⁴Davie, “Local and Western Educational Institutions in Beirut,” 50–51. Davie mentions the lack of historical research on mission buildings in the Levant.

⁷⁵Lindqvist, *Palestinska dagar*, 75.

⁷⁶*Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidsskrift* no. 3 (1927): 111.

continue on to the Jerusalem Girls' College and two on to the American Friends' School in Ramallah.⁷⁷ This was in line with Ekblad's vision of the role of the school: "The English and Americans have excellent schools for higher level education. That is why I believe we Swedes should, through limiting ourselves to a good kindergarten and primary school, create a good base for those children who later would be able to continue to study".⁷⁸ The Swedish School was by now an acknowledged part of the Christian educational system and cooperated with the important Protestant schools. The fact that Ekblad was a member of the educational committee of the United Missionary Council (the Organisation of Protestant Missions in Palestine and Syria) strengthened the Swedish role in the Christian educational community.⁷⁹

The majority of pupils continued to come from the Christian middle class. During the 1920s, however, there was a relatively large increase in the number of fee-paying Muslim students. Muslim parents wanted their children to be exempted from Christian lessons and some wanted Koran lessons, but neither the board in Uppsala or Ekblad saw this as acceptable in a Swedish school. Even so, the number of Muslim pupils kept increasing.⁸⁰ Among the Muslim pupils were children from prominent Jerusalem families; two of the first Muslim pupils were sons of the head of the Moslem Orphanage in Jerusalem. This was a case of interfaith marriage, with a Muslim father and a mother who belonged to the Protestant congregation. Even so, there were also Muslim pupils with no Christian connection attending the school. The Nashashibi family, for example, sent several children, including a nephew of Jerusalem's governor, to the Swedish School. The fact that the major's close relatives were attending the Swedish school was a great recommendation for the institution among the Muslim population.⁸¹

The Swedish School did not, however, only cater for middle-class families, it also wanted to reach out to the poorer part of the population. The focus on the underprivileged stemmed from the school policy before the war, when all pupils had come from impoverished families. In addition, Ekblad's experience from social work in poor neighbourhoods in Stockholm made her educational program give "the poor pupils, whom after finishing our school, have to work or go back to their home, good knowledge in the usual school

⁷⁷ *Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidsskrift* no. 4 (1927): 128.

⁷⁸ *Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidsskrift* no. 4 (1927): 129.

⁷⁹ Lindqvist, *Palestinska dagar*, 74.

⁸⁰ *Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidsskrift* no. 1 (1927): 21. Report from John Adler who visited the Swedish school. In a letter to Adler, Ekblad explained that the school experienced a large increase in Muslim children, despite the fact that Muslim parents wanted their children to be exempted from Christian lessons. The school did not accommodate these demands, even so, the number of Muslim pupils kept increasing.

⁸¹ *Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidsskrift* no. 1 (1923): 5–7.



Fig. 4 “School children playing in the school yard at the Swedish School, ca. 1930” Held in Uppsala University Library at the Swedish Jerusalem’s Society’s Collection. Image courtesy of the Swedish Jerusalem Society. <http://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/imageViewer.jsf?dsId=ATTACHMENT-0001&pid=alvin-record%3A194135&dswid=-2843>

subjects and evangelical Christianity”.⁸² These children, who got a free place, paid for their education by helping to clean after school.⁸³ It was an explicit policy of the school to treat the poor children the same as fee-paying pupils. There should be no favouritism from teachers towards pupils, regardless of wealth and social status. This was in theory a legacy from the Swedish school system that was free and universal. According to a Swedish observer, “the best traditions of Sweden’s *folkskola* had through its headmistress benefitted Palestinian education”.⁸⁴ In a similar manner to poor children in Sweden, these Palestinian children might experience some upward mobility because of their access to education. Even so, the fact that the pupils who received a grant had to stay behind and clean after school-hours did set them apart from the fee-paying children and must have been a social stigma (Fig. 4).

⁸² *Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidskrift* no. 4 (1927): 129.

⁸³ Lindqvist, *Palestinska dagar*, 69.

⁸⁴ Lindqvist, *Palestinska dagar*, 70, 75. *Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidskrift* no. 2 (1923): 97.

WHY DID ARAB PARENTS SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO THE SWEDISH SCHOOL?

Even if there was no attempt at conversion in Ekblad's school, Orthodox Christian and Muslim parents had to accept that their children started their day in school with a short morning prayer and the singing of a hymn, and that they had lessons in Protestant Christian Bible study.⁸⁵ As with other mission institutions in Palestine, Muslim parents were worried about their children being exposed to Christian religious teachings.⁸⁶ Greek Orthodox parents might also have had the same worries concerning Protestant influences. Why did these Palestinian parents send their children to a Protestant institution?

Firstly, the Arabs demanded more control over their educational system, which the British did not allow. As Said Makdisi put it, "in the mid-1920s, there was much dissatisfaction in the Palestinian towns with the state of the government schools, not only academically, but also administratively and politically. Furious debates surrounded the schools, which gradually became the focal point of Palestinian nationalism...".⁸⁷ Moreover, the Swedish institution's Arab language profile was an important factor that was also related to growing Arab national awareness.⁸⁸

Teaching the young to read and write their mother tongue in order for them to know the Bible had been a royal mandate in the Scandinavian countries since the eighteenth century. Scandinavian missions did not promote their own languages, but taught themselves local languages in order to teach reading and writing in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Madagascar, China and South Africa.⁸⁹ This emphasis on teaching the native language was also a characteristic of the Swedish enterprise in Jerusalem. When an experienced Palestinian teacher who had been teaching Arabic for many years came to see Ekblad to tell her that the grammar teaching at the Swedish school was not up to standard, Ekblad listened and gratefully accepted the teacher's suggestions. The Arabic teaching improved and gained a solid reputation: The Missionary Council's language school started sending interns to the Swedish School because of their

⁸⁵ *Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidskrift* no. 3 (1927): 86.

⁸⁶ Othman, *Negotiating Palestinian Womanhood*, 74. See also Ellen Fleischmann, "The Impact of American Protestant Missions in Lebanon on the Construction of Female Identity, c. 1860–1950," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 13, no. 4 (2002): 411–426.

⁸⁷ Said Makdisi, *Teta, Mother, and Me*, 252–253.

⁸⁸ Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 58. As pointed out by Seikaly: Educating the mind was a critical task that the "East" had neglected: "reading has not reached the necessary extent among the Eastern middle-class."

⁸⁹ The only exceptions were the Danish colony Greenland and the Norwegian mission to the Sami population in the North of Norway. See Hilde Nielssen, Inger Marie Okkenhaug, and Karina Hestad Skeie, eds., *Protestant Mission and Local Encounters in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

Arabic-language teaching.⁹⁰ Likewise, the Ministry of Education sent interns to the school, preferring the Swedish institution to the British schools. The school’s standing also made local teachers visit in order to learn and be inspired. This was the case with a competent female Arabic teacher from the Greek Orthodox National School that was started in 1924; she became a regular guest, wanting to know about new teaching methods and practices.⁹¹

The fact that Arabic was the main language of instruction made the Swedish school stand out from the British, American, French and Italian (and German?) mission schools where the main language of instruction would be the national language of the various schools. In addition to the lack of Arabic as the language of instruction, these schools were unpopular because they lacked connectedness to the Palestinian population. In the words of Khalil Totah:

Missionary schools are often criticised by both Moslems and Christians. The former accuse them of “missionarizing” which is perhaps a mild form of proselytising and the latter complain that the post-war (World War One) tuition fees are too heavy. Moreover, the feeling is quite universal that, in spite of their service, mission schools are detrimental to Arab solidarity. Like the Government (British) schools, they are controlled by foreigners and are said to be lacking in zeal for Arab nationalism. Some are even accused of being political propagandists for their own governments. It is pointed out, e.g. that French schools emphasise French history and geography more than the Arab; that American schools exalt American customs more than they foster Arab culture and native manners; that Italian schools serve Italian rather than Arab interests; and that German education is conducive to loyalty to Germany instead of love for Palestine.⁹²

Sweden was not a great power and did not have ambitions towards political influence in Palestine. Even so, the SJS had strong ties to the Swedish State Church and by the late 1920s the Swedish School had become a popular meeting place for Swedes living and travelling in Palestine and neighbouring countries. Signe Ekblad, known as the “Swedish ambassador” in Jerusalem, exercised “public diplomacy”; “the process by which direct relations with people in a country are pursued to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented”.⁹³ How did the Swedish School influence Jerusalem society?

Besides the Protestant religion and educational profile, the SJS built on Swedish aesthetics, arts and handicrafts in order to communicate with the Palestinian public. Instead of choosing local furniture for the new building,

⁹⁰Lindqvist, *Palestinska dagar*, 73.

⁹¹*Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidskrift* no. 1 (1925): 14.

⁹²Khalil Totah, “Education in Palestine,” in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science: Special Issue on Palestine: A Decade of Development*, vol. 164 (November 1932) (Philadelphia: Sage Publications Inc., in association with the American Academy of Political Science): 164. Quoted in Ricks, “Remembering Arab Jerusalem, 1909–1989.”

⁹³Jan Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005), 8. Paul Sharp’s definition quoted in Melissen.

Ekblad and the SJS board decided to order furniture and textiles from Sweden. The furniture was bought in Stockholm. Financed by Swedish supporters and shipped via Gothenburg, the teachers' office was furnished with a large square table, a large writing desk and a book case, all in oak and made by Swedish craftsmen. There were hand-woven textiles and table cloths from Sweden, and beautiful Swedish candle holders.⁹⁴ The class rooms had flowers and green plants in the windowsills, and copies of paintings by the popular Swedish artist Carl Larsson (1853–1919) on the walls. The Swedish element was underscored by the Swedish Christmas Party, held at the school every year, which became a popular event in Jerusalem. In addition to school children and staff, the guests included both Christian and Muslim parents and the people from the British Mandate administration.⁹⁵

The furniture and annual Christmas gifts played a significant role both materially and psychologically in the transnational links between Sweden and Palestine.⁹⁶ In addition to being a daily reminder of the donors in Sweden, it was believed that contributing to a modern, practical and aesthetically pleasing (in accordance with Scandinavian taste) environment would create a positive atmosphere for both staff and children: “The new furniture will always remind us of the love and work of many Swedes in order to secure peaceful and good working conditions at the Swedish school”.⁹⁷

While Swedish aesthetics were prominent at the school, it was, however, the fusion of the Scandinavian and Middle Eastern that made it seem exceptionally appealing. Ekblad's private rooms and hall for entertaining guests were places in which “Swedish home comfort meets oriental fantasies”.⁹⁸ According to Lindqvist, “the largest room in the house is an indescribable attractive mix between a saloon for diplomats and artist's studio, a charming, beautifully proportioned large party room characterised by entertainment and personal taste. Many are those Swedes who have felt a pang of sudden and happy longing for home, and many are those foreigners who have for the first time met and gained a lasting impression of Swedish culture”.⁹⁹ This might have been the description of a Scandinavian embassy in an Eastern context; a “saloon for diplomats”.¹⁰⁰

In addition to being part of the school's image-building, the emphasis on aesthetics was also related to modern ideas of health, hygiene and an

⁹⁴ *Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidsskrift* no. 1 (1925): 26.

⁹⁵ Inger Marie Okkenhaug, “Att avresa till Jerusalem som lärarinna: Signe Ekblad, jorsalsfarer, lærer og misjonær,” in *Religiøse reiser. Mellom gamle spor og nye mål*, eds. Siv Ellen Kraft and Ingvild S. Gilhus (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2007), 128–129.

⁹⁶ See for example Liisa H. Malkki, *The Need to Help. The Domestic Arts of International Humanitarianism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁹⁷ *Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidsskrift* no. 1 (1925): 26.

⁹⁸ Lindqvist, *Palestinska dagar*, 71.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Comment by Anthony O'Mahony, conference Leiden, March, 2019.

orderly life. Cleanliness was similarly part of modern Swedish culture.¹⁰¹ To Ekblad, with her background in both education and social work, cleanliness and order were part of Christian pedagogy.¹⁰² Swedish guests as well as British officials—the District Governor of Jerusalem, Edward Keith-Roach, and the Director of Education, Humphrey Bowman—all talked about cleanliness and order when describing the school. As seen earlier, even the Arab teachers (who had written the song) and the young pupils had greeted their Swedish headmistress by expressing a hope that she would teach them how to “be diligent and clean”. The Jerusalem health authorities, represented by the Armenian Palestinian doctor Kishishian, when visiting the new school a few days before the beginning of the school year in October 1926, were able to verify that “the level of cleanliness and order in this school is admirable”.¹⁰³

Cleanliness was not just about fighting germs, however: in a Scandinavian context a clean home or school also represented care, respect for its users, and—not least—self-respect. Not all mission schools had this practice of cleanliness. Hilda Musa Said (b. 1932?) remembered that at the American School for Girls in Beirut, where she enrolled in 1928, “the bathrooms were quite cold and the lavatories were dirty”¹⁰⁴ (Fig. 5).

CONCLUSION

For both the Christian and Muslim communities the Swedish School represented an alternative way of approaching the world. Arabic was the main language of instruction and the children were taught by well-educated Arab female teachers. The Arab language base was a contrast to the language policies in other foreign mission schools as well as British government institutions. Parents and pupils influenced the Swedish School’s educational profile with demands that arose from the new reality under British Mandatory rule. These parents and pupils were also challenged by the fact that pupils from the middle class and the urban poor attended the same lessons and were—in theory at least—treated in an equal way regardless of social or religious background.

For the Swedes, the school in Musrara represented Swedish welfare and innovation in the Holy Land but it also carried a history of Swedish national presence in Jerusalem since Ottoman times, thus becoming a symbol of both Western ideas of modernity and Nordic colonialism.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, through

¹⁰¹ See Frank Meier, “A Comparative Look at Scandinavian Cultures: Denmark, Norway and Sweden and Their Encounters with German Refugees, 1933–1940,” <https://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr12/meyer.htm>.

¹⁰² Lindqvist, *Palestinska dagar*, 75.

¹⁰³ *Svenska Jerusalemsföreningens Tidskrift* no. 3 (1927): 86.

¹⁰⁴ Said Makdissi, *Teta, Mother, and Me*, 273.

¹⁰⁵ Peter Forsgren points to the strong connections between Western ideas of modernity and colonialism. Forsgren “Globalization as ‘The White Man’s Burden’,” 222.



Fig. 5 Photo taken outside the new school buildings in 1930: From left to right: Lewis Larsson, Swedish Consul General to Jerusalem, Humphrey Bowman, Director of Education, Signe Ekblad, Eliel Löfgren, Swedish politician and former foreign minister of Sweden, Stig Sahlin, Swedish diplomat and the commission's secretary, Edward Keith-Roach, District Governor of Jerusalem, and unknown consular guard. The photo is taken in connection with the Western Wall commission's visit to Jerusalem in 1930. The commission was appointed by the British government and approved of the League of Nations to investigate the causes of 1929-ritos. Eliel Löfgren and Stig Sahlin were both members of the commission, with Sahlin as the commission's secretary. The image captures Signe Ekblad in her role as the "Swedish ambassador" in Jerusalem, thus visualising Swedish influence in "The Holy Land" for a Swedish audience. Held in Uppsala University Library at the Swedish Jerusalem's Society's Collection. Image courtesy of the Swedish Jerusalem Society. <http://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/imageViewer.jsf?dsId=ATTACHMENT-0001&pid=alvin-record%3A270058&cdswid=4603>

the leadership of Signe Ekblad the school gained a reputation as a "Swedish Embassy" in Palestine "this significant Swedish outpost, worthy of all our support and love, by the border to the Orient".¹⁰⁶ The school's Swedish "public diplomacy" lived on even after it had to close down in 1948. A

¹⁰⁶Lindqvist, *Palestinska dagar*, 76.

year before, in 1947, the Swedish State church had established the Swedish Theological Institute. In the ecumenical spirit of Ekblad and the SJS, the Institute, which still exists today, was founded with the aim of working for dialogue between Christians and Jews.

In the early 1950s different humanitarian groups within the Swedish church started collecting funds for Palestinian refugees, including for the Augusta Victoria hospital on the Mount of Olives. In 1959 the SJS took over a girls' school from the Lutheran congregation in Bethlehem, renaming it the Good Shepherd's Swedish School.¹⁰⁷ Signe Ekblad's educational endeavours also left a strong educational legacy: The Good Shepherd's Swedish School, with its 300 pupils, is among the most important Palestinian girls' schools today.¹⁰⁸

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¹⁰⁷ Björk, *Sverige i Jerusalem och Betlehem*, 59.

¹⁰⁸ The same year, in 1959, the SJS re-opened their hospital in Bethlehem. Today the hospital, named Hussein bin Talal's Hospital, is a regional hospital financed by the SJS and the Palestinian authorities. See <http://www.jerusalemsforeningen.se/>.

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