



The Power of Place: Katrina in Five Worlds

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Katrina Sa'ade, Mexico, circa 1916.
Source: Personal collection of the author.

A few years ago, while going through family mementos after my mother's death, I discovered a box of letters and an album of family pictures that once belonged to my grandmother, Katrina Sa'ade. Inside a crumbling See's candy box were more than 130 letters in Arabic, as well as notes and documents that my grandmother had put there sixty years before. Since I neither read or write Arabic, I could only guess what they contained and scarcely realized the treasure I had unearthed. Remarkably, Katrina had managed to assemble this correspondence¹, which painted a dramatic picture of what was undoubtedly a traumatic period in her life. With gripping language in archaic dialect, the letters breathe life into the story of the demise of her second marriage, and the social divides that culminated in the separation of her family.



Bethlehem, 1900. Source: *Library of Congress*.

Katrina's Worlds

Katrina Sa'ade, or Katherine as she was known in America, was born in Bethlehem Palestine in 1900 on the cusp of a new century. Her life unfolded on a parallel course with five important historical epochs. She witnessed the end of the Ottoman Empire in Palestine, the collapse of Tsarist Russia, the Mexican Revolution, the Great Depression in the United States, and colonial life in Mandate Palestine before finally settling in suburban southern California. In these far-flung places she found new homes, faced difficult personal challenges, overcame cultural constrictions, and lived through devastating political upheavals, all of which helped shape her into an independent woman.

The Sa'ade Family in late-Ottoman Bethlehem

The Sa'ade family has lived in Bethlehem for many generations. To my knowledge, the earliest known Sa'ade was my great, great, great grandfather Elias Sa'ade, who had five children². His son Mikha'in (Michael) was the first president of Bethlehem's local council in 1876. Mikha'in married Wardeh (Rose) and had three sons, Ibrahim, Yacoub and Abdullah.

Katrina Sa'ade was one of nine surviving children of Abdullah Mikha'in Sa'ade and Miriam Elias Abu Jaradeh of Bethlehem. At the turn of the 20th century Bethlehem was a Christian town where the chief economic activity was related to its importance as a religious and pilgrimage site. The Sa'ade family, like many other inhabitants of Bethlehem, made their living through the manufacture and sale of religious articles of mother of pearl and olive wood. According to Katrina's son-in law Henry Bond, *"The majority of the Sa'ade ancestors were said to be tradesmen. It was not uncommon for them to have a store on the ground floor and have their living quarters above their store. The children in the family learned their trade by working in the store at an early age."*³

The two-family stone house where Katrina was born is still owned and lived in by descendants of the Sa'ade family. It is located in the Farahiyya Quarter⁴, a few blocks uphill from Manger Square and the Nativity Church. Details of Katrina's early life in Bethlehem are obscure; the stories I remember were mostly about her antics as a small girl, hiding from the nuns in the French school in Bethlehem. She left Bethlehem when she was only six years old and never lived there permanently again. This first migration was one of many in her lifetime, and for Katrina, the beginning of a pattern that forever altered her concept of 'home'.

Katrina's Childhood in Tsarist Russia

As the Ottoman Empire crumbled and economic conditions in Palestine deteriorated, many Bethlehemites ventured abroad to seek their fortunes. Sometime before 1905 Abdullah Sa'ade, his brother Yacoub and his cousin Ibrahim immigrated to Kiev in Imperial Russia⁵, where the Tsar's strong support for the Orthodox Church ensured a large market for religious articles from the Holy Land.

The Sa'ades chose Kiev because it was a Christian center of the Russian Empire and offered economic opportunities unavailable in Palestine. When they arrived, other Bethlehemites were already living there, including Elias Kattan, an enterprising Catholic merchant who opened his first store in Kiev in 1882 and parlayed his friendship with the Orthodox Archbishop of Kiev into a large business supplying incense from Singapore and Yemen to churches throughout the entire Ukraine.

Abdullah opened his own businesses in Kiev, selling Christian religious items and Bethlehem-made olive wood and mother of pearl crafts, among other things. His brother Yacoub had a retail store that sold religious articles to churches and monasteries – rosaries, icons, incense and oregano oil⁶. They brought these items from Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Mt. Athos (Greece).

These families moved back and forth between Kiev and Palestine with surprising frequency, traveling by ship from Haifa or Jaffa to Istanbul, then to Odessa on the Black Sea and overnight train to Kiev. Some families had businesses in both places. Yacoub Sa'ade, for example, also had a souvenir business in Jerusalem. His sons Elias and George would alternate staying in Kiev and Palestine for months at a time. When they returned on vacation or for business, they brought samovars and other gifts from Russia, some of which their descendents still have today.

When Katrina was six, Abdullah brought the rest of the family to Kiev, where they prospered, grew and lived in relative luxury. These were happy times for Katrina and her family. I remember her tales of the boat trip from Palestine to Odessa, ice-skating in the winter, the beautiful clothes she wore and the servants they had. Katrina and her siblings enrolled in school where they learned to read and write Russian, and they spent their summers at a beach house. Katrina reminisced about her childhood many years later, speaking to her daughter Mary (Farhat) Bond in audiotapes made in 1975 and 1978.

"We used to have a house for the summertime, close to the beach. It was a big, nice house...we enjoy it very much. But in the wintertime we have someone to stay there, take care of it for us, and keep the place in order. ...we went ice-skating almost every Sunday. When you are skating, if the person doesn't know how to skate they have a chair with wheels for them



The Sa'ades in Russia, circa 1913. Katrina is in the center of the bottom row. Her parents Abdullah and Miriam are seated behind her. *Source: Personal collection of the author.*

to sit on. They would skate behind the chair to support them. This way they would learn how to skate. Then in a little while they would go without the chair. I did all right in a little while."

This idyllic life was cut short by the chaos that preceded the Russian Revolution, which began about 1905 and lasted until 1917 when Tsar Nicolas II was overthrown. Most of the Sa'ade family fled Kiev and returned to Palestine before 1914. There is a much repeated family story about Abdullah returning to Palestine carrying a trunk full of Russian money which was worthless by the time they arrived in Bethlehem. Katrina also spoke in the audiotapes about escaping Kiev. *"There were a lot of problems. They started killing people. My family went to a priest who made some papers to allow them to escape. They had a lot of money - paper money. They were hoping that the money would regain its value, but they lost every cent."*

Katrina described their sudden poverty and the economic conditions they encountered in Palestine in the last days of the Ottoman Empire. *"When we returned to Palestine, we had a hard time surviving. My father had a lot of land. He was forced to sell to provide for the family. There were a lot of mouths to feed. The land helped them survive."*

Marriage and Loss in Revolutionary Mexico

Within months of her homecoming, Katrina's parents arranged for her marriage to [Jamil] Emelio Demetrio Kabande, the second son of another Bethlehem family which had immigrated to Mexico earlier in the decade. Arranged marriages were common practice in Bethlehem at the time and were often used to strengthen economic ties between merchant families as well as a possible solution for, 'too many mouths to feed.' Katrina explained the practice in one of the audiotapes:

"In Palestine then...the boy's parents [would] come to the mother of the girl and asks for the boy and girl to be married." According to Henry Bond, "Katrina's parents and Emelios's parents (maybe just their mothers) had made an agreement that Emelio would marry one of the Sa'ade daughters while both families were still in Bethlehem. Katrina told us that Emelio was supposed to marry one of her older sisters but after Emelio saw her picture he told his parents that he wanted to marry Katrina instead."

Before her 14th birthday, accompanied by her future brother-in-law Demetrio Kabande and his bride Isabel Dabdoub, Katrina traveled halfway around the world from Bethlehem to marry eighteen year old Emelio. They landed on Mexico's east coast at the port of Tampico and travelled northwest by train to the colonial city of Saltillo, Coahuila, where there was a growing Arab community. The young couple was married in Saltillo before moving to the nearby agricultural town of San Pedro de Los Colonias in a cotton growing region of Coahuila in northern Mexico, where the Kabandes had established themselves in business.

The Kabandes⁷ were storekeepers and merchants from Bethlehem. The earliest known Kabande to immigrate to Mexico was Demetrio Bichara Kabande, Emelio's older brother. He landed first in Cuba and then in Tampico, working in agriculture and forming business ties with other Arab immigrants there. After about five years he brought the rest of his family from Bethlehem, including his father Bishara (1862-1907), and his siblings Emelio, Jose, Victoria and Afif. The family settled in San Pedro around 1906. By 1914, their clothing and agriculture businesses were thriving in this relatively prosperous corner of the Chihuahua Desert.

The Kabandes joined many Bethlehemites and other Arabs from greater Syria in a large out-migration that began in the late 1880's and continued until World War I. While some entered the United States, others went directly to Mexico and Latin America, where they found business opportunities, cheap land, and welcoming immigration and citizenship policies.⁸ These early immigrants were predominately Christian Arabs, who found a receptive market for their wares in Mexico and other Catholic countries. Collectively they were known as 'Turcos' because they carried Ottoman identity cards. The men, escaping political and economic instability and a yearly tax or conscription



Katrina and Emelio Kabande, 1914. *Source: Personal collection of the author.*

in the Ottoman army usually immigrated first, often working as peddlers. After establishing themselves in business, they brought over wives, relatives and friends to join them. Not everyone stayed and settled, but those who did assimilated relatively easily while continuing to maintain strong kinship and business ties to their homeland. Other families that came to Mexico around the same time included Lebanese immigrants whose descendants, telecom multi-billionaire Carlos Slim and banker Alfredo Harp Helu, became part of Mexico's economic elite.



Former Kabande family home in San Pedro de las Colonias, Coahuila, Mexico. *Photo by Kathy Kenny.*

Like the Sa'ades, The Kabandes' business experience and kinship connections allowed them to move with relative ease to other lands. They relied upon the strong network of countrymen in these places to further their own business interests and to help the family grow. The families often strengthened these merchant links through marriage of their children. This was certainly the case for Katrina and Emelio.

In the early 20th century San Pedro was a flourishing town of 7,000 residents and surprisingly multi-cultural. The local cotton industry, which exported to the United States supported the relatively large Arab community, as well as Spanish, English, Chinese and Filipino immigrants, the descendents of whom are still there today.⁹ The Kabande family home was a large Moorish-style brick structure that closely resembled the architectural style of the Palestinian hill country. Several other buildings of similar style and vintage can still be seen in San Pedro.

In 1914, Mexico was in the midst of its own revolution, which began in 1910. Francisco (Pancho) Villa and his fellow revolutionaries Alvaro Obregón, and Venustiano Carranza were leading the uprising against the government in northern Mexico during those violent years. On April 13, 1914, a few months before Katrina arrived in San Pedro, the town was the scene of a bloody battle in which Pancho Villa and his forces defeated the main Federal force of 6,000 men in northern Mexico, and



Copy of a newspaper photo of a derailed train during the Mexican Revolution, date unknown. *Source: Museo de la Revolución, San Pedro de las Colonias, Coahuila, Mexico.*

occupied San Pedro. This battle secured a large portion of northern Mexico for Villa and his allies. It was one of the turning points of the Mexican Revolution, which ended in 1917 with the adoption of the Mexican Constitution.

In spite of the political turmoil, Katrina lived in relative comfort with the large and boisterous Kabande family, and quickly learned to speak Spanish. In the recorded tapes, she reminisces about her happy life in Mexico, living in a close-knit community with her in-laws and other Palestinians. *“When I was first in Mexico...we had people from Bethlehem and Jerusalem visiting who enjoyed talking to us. We had people from Ramallah also... They stick together. They loved and helped each other; when they saw someone in need, they took care of them.”* Within a year of her marriage, in 1915, her daughter Julia was born, and less than a year after that, the couple had a second daughter, Elena.

When Julia was just 14 months old a tragedy occurred which forever changed their family life. On 19th October, 1916 while returning by train with his brothers from a Mexico City buying trip, Emelio was killed in a horrific train crash near the city of Saltillo. He was nineteen years old. The cause of the accident is shrouded in family legend. Katrina always attributed it to Pancho Villa and his rebel bands that were known to cause train accidents and rob the passengers to help fund the Mexican

Revolution. Whether or not Pancho Villa sabotaged the train, Katrina found herself a widow with two infant children, dependent for her survival on the kindness of Emelio's extended family. The baby Elena, a sickly child, died of the flu about six months after Emelio's death.

Everything had changed; Katrina had lost her husband and her daughter in the same year. She and Julia were living in Mexico without means to provide for themselves. One can only imagine how terrifying it must have been for her to be so young, so vulnerable, and so far from Bethlehem and the protection of the Sa'ade family. She was sixteen years old.

California in the 20's and early 30's and the Great Depression

Her parents in Bethlehem decided that Katrina should move to Long Beach, California where her older sister Jamileh and husband Jamil Jadallah Afana had immigrated a few years earlier. From her parent's point of view it was essential for Katrina to start a new life for herself to improve her prospects for remarriage. The Afanas owned the Holy City Bazaar, a large store on the Long Beach Pike (a popular local amusement park) which sold religious articles, Russian amber, carpets and other mementos from the Holy Land.

Katrina helped the family by working in the store, where she also learned English, making it the fourth language she spoke before the age of twenty. *"How many languages do I have? I have Syrian or Arabic, whatever you call it. Now English, broken English, and Spanish. A little bit of Russian but I have forgotten much of what I knew. I learned how to read and write but now I can't any longer. French, we took that at school...I learned to speak a little bit."* For the rest of her life, she spoke a delightful mixture of English with a heavy Russian accent, as well as Arabic and Spanish. While living in Long Beach, Katrina also learned how to knit and crochet, skills that would serve her well in later life.

Not long after moving to Long Beach, Katrina was introduced to Suleiman Jiryes Farhat. Suleiman, also known as Solomon or Sleiman, was a handsome young man from Ramallah, the third child and only son of Jiryes Suleiman Farhat and Miriam Ya'qoub Ishaq el-Ghannam Farhat. Born in 1895, Suleiman was a descendent of Farhat el-Basl; one of the original Ramallah families. The Farhats were farmers, raising mainly olives, grapes, figs, and other fruit on their land around Ramallah. According to Henry Bond, *"They raised almost everything the family needed to live well, except for the meat that they purchased at the local markets. The family did not have a car and either walked or rode a donkey. There was one bus that provided transportation from Ramallah to Jerusalem."*



The Afanas in their Long Beach, California store, Holy City Bazaar. Date unknown, probably before 1915. *Source: Personal collection of the author.*

The Farhat's two-room stone house still stands today on Sayyidat al Bishara Street in Ramallah. Like many houses of the period, there was no indoor plumbing. The family slept on mattresses and quilts that were spread over the floor at night, and moved during the day. Outside, there was a large bread baking oven, storage bins for dried fruit and wheat, and a few goats and donkeys.

Suleiman's life experience was very different from his wife's. While both families came from a farming background and spoke with the peasant dialect of the hill country, the Sa'ades were substantial merchants by the time Katrina was born. She had also been exposed to a European life-style due to her emigration to Russia, which was reflected in the Sa'ade's dress style and mannerisms [see pictures]. Suleiman and his parents were farmers, deeply rooted in rural Ramallah to their land and the olive trees they cultivated. In his youth, Suleiman's father, Jiryis, was a stone mason working in Ramallah and Jerusalem.

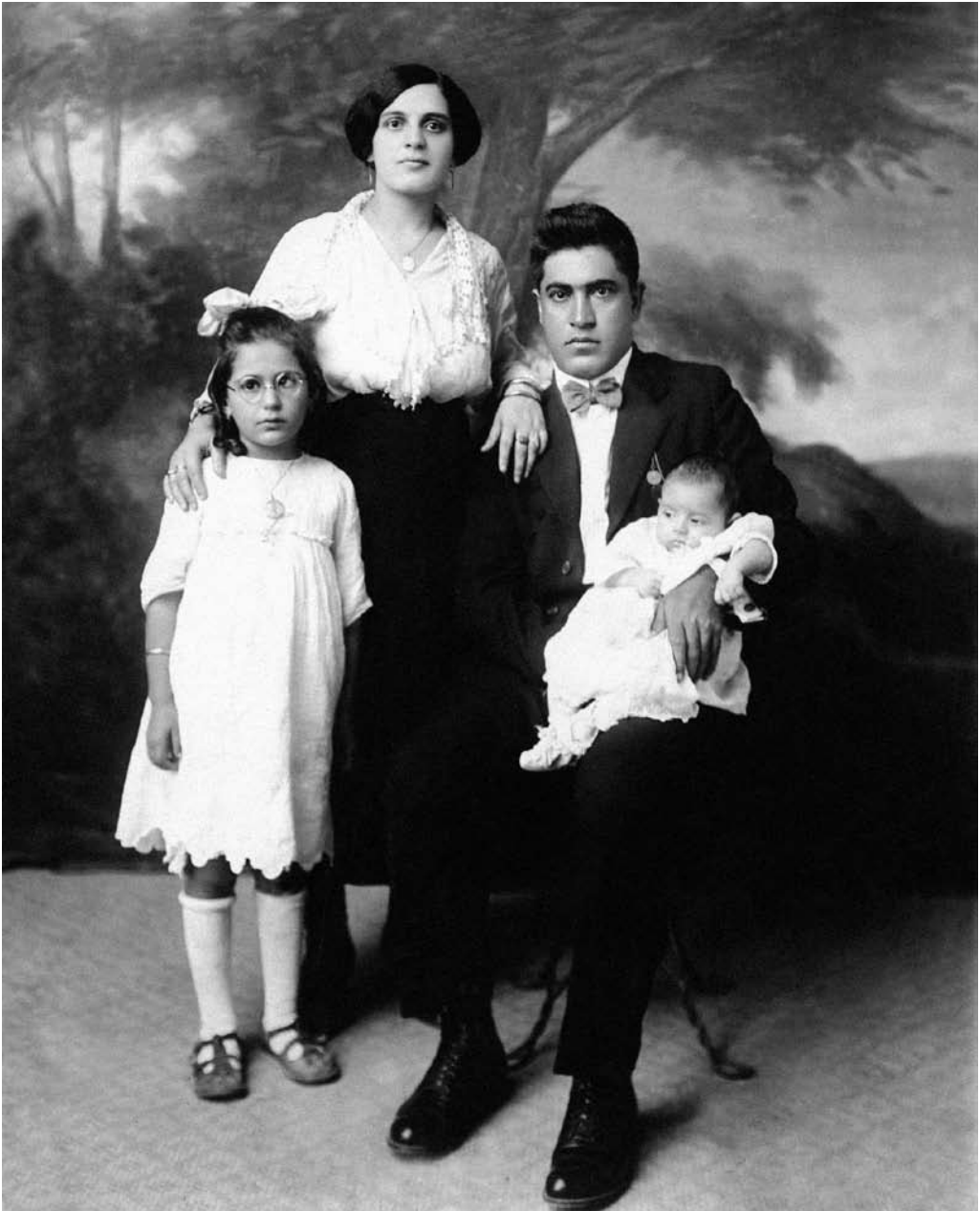
When Katrina and Suleiman met in about 1920 Suleiman had lived in the United States for several years, working first in New York as a peddler, buying goods on credit from suppliers such as the A. Shaheen Company, owned by early Palestinian immigrants from Ramallah. Suleiman's story is typical of the young Arab men of his era who arrived penniless in the United States and earned a subsistence-level living by traveling from place to place selling merchandise while learning English. The United



Members of Farhat and Sa'ade families in Palestine, 1923. This photo was a gift from Abdullah to his son-in-law Suleiman on the occasion of the birth of his son George. Seated from left: Mariam Isahaq Farhat, Issa Yacoub Farhat, Jiryes Suleiman Farhat, Miram Sa'ade, Mary Karra'a, Abdullah Sa'ade Top row, from left: Zina Sa'ade, Mitri Sa'ade, Nusa Sa'ade, Ne'meh Sa'ade Karra'a, Anton Odeh Karra'a. *Source: Personal collection of the author.*

States immigration policy made it relatively easy - no passports or visas were required - foreigners had only to be healthy and free of trachoma, an eye disease.⁸

Katrina and Suleiman married in Long Beach in August, 1921, a few days before her 21st birthday. *"I met him when I came down to Long Beach... We were from the same country and we thought it was a good idea to get married. It was not an arranged marriage."* With six year old Julia, they moved to Mexico later that year. *"When I married Suleiman Farhat...he didn't have enough money. So we said, let's go to Mexico to see if we could make a go of it [there]."* Many other factors undoubtedly contributed to their decision, but Katrina's ability to speak Spanish and her ties to Arab merchant families in Mexico were certainly an influence. A son, George (Jurgie) Suleiman Farhat was born on August 22, 1922 in Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico. After several unsuccessful business starts in northwest Mexico and Baja California, the family returned to the Los Angeles area, where they tried another series of ventures, including a grocery store. Two more children, Fred (Fuad) and Mary, were born in 1926 and 1928 in the Los Angeles area.



L to R: Julia Kabande, Katrina Farhat, Suleiman Farhat, infant George, 1922. *Source: Personal collection of the author.*

The dramatic economic downturn known as the Great Depression began with the stock market crash of October 1929 in the United States and soon spread worldwide, bringing devastating changes, massive unemployment and social upheaval. It lasted through the entire decade of the 1930's. Times were difficult for everyone and Katrina and Suleiman struggled to make a living and support the family of six. In about 1927,

the family moved to Jerome, Arizona, a booming copper mining town with a large immigrant population. They opened a 'Dollar Store' in Jerome where business was robust until the mine closed, no doubt affected by the Depression. *"The mine stopped working, so all the Mexicans shipped out to Mexico. So if we didn't have Mexican people we couldn't make a living."* The Farhats moved back to Los Angeles in 1929, tried several more ventures and eventually settled in South San Francisco, California in 1931, where they opened a 'five-and-dime' variety store on Grand Avenue, selling clothing and household goods to immigrant workers from Mexico, Italy, Greece and the Philippines. The business was relatively profitable, in spite of the difficult economic times.

Katrina surely brought considerable business acumen to their marriage, having grown up in a family of merchants. Throughout their marriage, Katrina and Suleiman were business partners, and opened a number of stores together. She worked in these businesses every day, while also caring for her small children. In doing so, she blended the traditional role of wife and mother with that of a modern working woman, who considered herself capable and equal to her husband.

Return to Palestine

As the Farhats' only son, Suleiman was under constant pressure from his family to return to Palestine. Beginning with the earliest letter, it is clear that Suleiman always intended to return to Ramallah and live the rest of his days there, tending his land, and opening a store. Virtually all the letters from the early 1930's concern money, land and financial transactions. They also divulge the fact that Suleiman was sending money home to his father Jiryes, which he invested, lent to others while charging interest and used to purchase farm land in Ramallah in his son's name and that of his children.

In the earliest letter, 1925, Suleiman's widowed sister Hilweh pleads with to him to come back, *"Your father transferred the registration of the house and land in your name...You should come back home to your land and your house. Your father is not well enough to do the work on the land and cannot take care of the olive orchards."*

The letters also reveal Suleiman's dissatisfaction with life in America, no doubt compounded by the economic hardships of the Great Depression, which had reached its nadir by 1933. His letters to his family in Ramallah are full of yearning for his homeland, and reassurances to his parents that he will soon return, bringing bounty and gifts for everyone.

"The situation here has been terrible for two years and I borrowed money to send the family back and for this reason I could not send proper gifts."

Soon, God willing, I will be happy in seeing you and will bring with me gifts and money and we will be together.”

Katrina was not so enthusiastic about returning, having left Palestine more than fifteen years earlier and establishing a life for herself and her family in America. But Suleiman apparently convinced her to give it a try. In May, 1933, he sent Katrina and their three children, Mary, Fred (Fuad), and George (Jurgie), to Ramallah to live with his parents. Julia, who was a teenager by then, stayed behind in Long Beach with her aunt and uncle to finish high school and help in their store, The Holy City Bazaar.

When Katrina and her children sailed to Haifa, Suleiman stayed in South San Francisco to operate their dry-goods business, take care of their home, and continue to support his family financially. From their correspondence, it appears that she left with the expectation that if the move to Palestine did not work out, she could always return to California.

Suleiman, on the other hand, had a great deal at stake, as described in his letter to his father Jiryes, dated June 6, 1933.

“Now I tell you, my dear father, that the family is leaving here to come to you. I beg you, mother and sister, to treat her well even if she is a ball of fire, cool it down because the customs here are different from our country’s customs, and she is used to the customs of this country. Please make every effort not to make her unhappy for the sake of the children, my father. As soon as I get rid of the shop, I will be with you. I have given Katrina some money with the tickets and other expenses, the trip has cost me \$2,000 dollars. And now I am swimming in debt, may God improve my situation. I also have to tell you that she took a paper to arrange for her return if she doesn’t like it there. And if she does come back, this time she will finish me. And if she takes her case to the government [courts], I will lose all, for in this country, judgment is always with women, even if she is guilty. What I need from you, therefore, is to hire a servant for her if necessary and to keep her satisfied until I come back. And then I will take care of her. Remember, that if you treat her well, she will respond better. I need not beseech you more than this since you are the ‘master of those who know’ [inta seed el arfeen].”

Katrina returned to a Palestine irrevocably changed from the country she left in 1914. A new economy evolved under British rule, bringing with it prosperity enhanced by war spending and a rising middle class. As the depression hit the US economy conditions in Palestine seemed prosperous and began to attract a reverse migration of Palestinians from America.



Suleiman and Katrina Farhat, 1921. *Source: Personal collection of the author.*

On arriving in Palestine in June 1933, Katrina moved in with her in-laws in Ramallah. Soon after, she hired a tutor to help the children improve their spoken Arabic and learn the basics of writing before they entered school. She studied alongside her children, and for the first time, learned to write in Arabic.¹⁰ That fall, she enrolled the boys as day students in the American Friends School in Ramallah. Mary stayed at home because she was quite young and there was little money to spare for her education, which must have been difficult for Katrina, given how highly she valued education.

Things did not go well for Katrina in Ramallah. Less than two months after her arrival her letters to Suleiman grew increasingly despairing. There are many reasons for her unhappiness. Nothing in her background prepared her for rural life and manual labour of a farming family. Her living conditions were rudimentary; she and her three children were living with Suleiman's parents in the two-room house without many amenities, a far cry from what she had been accustomed to, and money was always an issue. With every letter to Suleiman, Katrina pleaded for money and asked for his understanding of her situation.

This letter, dated October 13, 1933, illustrates how miserable and desperate she felt.

"You write to me asking me to pay all the debts owed by your father. My dear cousin [husband]¹¹ ...you know better how much money has remained with me, for according to the customs of this country [we] have bought dry foodstuff [muneh] for the whole year, and I also paid for the children's schooling and their other expenses from when I arrived until today. The money is now depleted. ...When we arrived [to the country] our godfather Bulus came to welcome us, and he brought with him a sheep [as a gift]. I said to your father, 'Uncle take this sheep, and deposit it with the butcher, so that we can take our meat from him, as we need it.' Your father took the sheep and sold it to the butcher for cash, and put the money in his pocket, without informing me. When I went to the butcher to get the meat as we agreed, the butcher told me 'your father-in-law instructed me not to give you even half a piaster worth of meat.' I returned empty handed... But what can I do, I am helpless...My dear cousin I came here not wanting a thing. All this hassle started because I refused to go with them to pick olives from the fields. My cousin, I have no ability to pick olives. I stayed home in order to cook for them. Because of this [refusal to work in the fields] they started to berate me and make trouble for me. What kind of life is this my dear cousin? A life of abuse and insults [sammit badan]. Do you consider this a life worth living? I am writing this to you while boiling with anger from the indignities I have suffered from your folks. In short they do not treat me as a member of the family, but as a stranger living in their midst. If they had treated you in this manner, how would you feel? I am sure you will never tolerate this kind of behaviour. You have placed me in a terrible predicament [with your family]. Only God can help me."

Despite Suleiman's pleas to his parents and to his wife that they get along, the situation deteriorated so badly that Katrina began staying in Bethlehem with her sisters to escape the situation with her in-laws and to get money to feed her children.

Suleiman was worried that Katrina would leave Palestine with the children before he could join them in Ramallah. In this undated letter [probably October or November, 1933], Suleiman asks his father to deprive her of the means to escape.



Katrina, 1933. Source: Personal collection of the author.

“You tell me, my dear parents, that Katrina is not happy with you and that she wants to come back to me and that you are doing your utmost to dissuade her... This is good...I would be happier if you would make her spend all the money at her disposal and then she will be unable to come back. Do whatever you can to spend all the money and then she cannot come back. My love and my eyes – make it possible for all the money to be depleted. I, on my part, will undertake not to send her money. If I send, I will send the money in your name. And that I will do in secret so that she will not know and nobody will know. And then perhaps she will see reason in that head of hers.”

It is impossible to reconstruct exactly what went wrong between Katrina and the Farhats, but their desperation over money was a constant source of tension. It was also clearly a clash of differences in family expectations, against the backdrop of traditional versus modern values and gender roles. Ultimately it was the fate of their children and whether they would grow up in Palestine as a future support for their family, or in America with their mother. Jiryes’s letters to Suleiman paint a picture of

Katrina as an outsider who refuses to accept his authority. From her upbringing, her years in Mexico and America as a single parent, and later as a business partner to her husband, Katrina's independent spirit clashed with the cultural norms of women in rural Palestine in 1933.

Both Katrina and her father-in-law Jiryas wrote many letters to Suleiman during this period. These letters present very different pictures about what was happening in Ramallah. On November 8, 1933, Katrina wrote this to Suleiman:

"When I arrived, I had left with me 50 [English] pounds. I bought house furniture and began my life in security and happiness. A month ago, all of a sudden, the situation began to change. I bought provisions for the house - wheat, and lentils and onions and coal, etc. -and we put it in the food storage bin [khazine]. Even the tithe [government tax on agricultural land], I paid from my money. Today he [Jiryas] found out that I had no money left, he closed the storage bin and refused to give us anything. Now I am compelled to buy bread by the loaf...My cousin Suleiman, I need money badly, for you know the children have their needs, especially in food... I cannot take this life at all. Either you send me money so I can live on my own or I will come to you. ... Yours, Katrina Farhat.

Jiryas also wrote to his son Suleiman, blaming Katrina for the problems between them:

"I tell you about Katrina, we treat her the best of treatment. Her health is good. She is not making commerce of her family [being helpful] and if the child wants half a piaster, she sends him to his grandfather...God help you on this catastrophe. As much as we are good to her, she does not care. This week she made a big hullabaloo on a matter that is nothing. Day and night, the devil comes out through her eyes. She cares nothing for this family or any other family. ...All day she closes the door to her room after she finishes with her lessons she goes to the neighbourhood exposing us and scandalizing us. Be careful from this wicked woman...Take care of yourself...Do what is necessary and come back, with God's will. Send me a few piasters so we can keep her busy and so we can deal with this catastrophe. May God protect you, Jiryas Suleiman Farhat

The problems between Katrina and the Farhats came to a head in a series of dramatic scenes that are graphically reported in the letters. By early 1934, Katrina was residing primarily with the Sa'ade family in Bethlehem and making plans to return to California with her three children. But Suleiman and his family had other plans. They did everything in their power, including filing for custody through the Greek Orthodox Ecclesiastical Court, to keep the children in Palestine. They must have realized that their departure could mean that Suleiman would never come home to take care of

them and their land. Also, if Katrina returned to the United States, much of the money that Suleiman and Katrina had earned would never be available for the Farhat parents' needs. These feelings boiled over into verbal and sometimes physical attacks. Mary, who was six years old at the time, recalls violent arguments between Suleiman's sister and Jiryes against Katrina.

The pivotal scene took place in February 1934. Just before her secretly scheduled and unsanctioned return to America, Katrina arrived unannounced at the Farhat home in Ramallah to collect her children. This was not the first time Katrina had tried to take them, and the Farhats had taken steps to keep them from her. Mary, who was only six years old, recalls being told by her Farhat grandparents that they were playing a trick on her mother and that she should stay hidden in the closet when her mother came looking for her.

On that final day, she left Ramallah with only one child - her son Fred (Fuad). As Jiryes reported to Suleiman,

"Two days before her departure, she came to Ramallah in secret. She went to the school and kidnapped the little boy [Fred] and took him to Bethlehem and left him there. Then she came back to town in order to take the others. When she reached our front door, she left the car, entered the house, kidnapped the girl [Mary] while nobody was at the house except your sister Hilweh's little daughter. The girl could not save Mary from her and she started screaming. The neighbours heard the screaming and came and freed the girl from her hands. Then she [Katrina] went back to Bethlehem. All this happened in my absence. When I came back home and found out that she kidnapped the boy, I ran after her to Bethlehem. And when I reached their house, the boy saw me. He jumped and ran towards me. I took the boy's hand and then they all started running after me. I fought with them but they were able to take the boy from me. Her brothers beat me up and humiliated me...I put a request with the Immigration Dept [to stop her from leaving], but she had already done all the paperwork previously. And she was able to take the boy [Fred]. She left to America on Friday, 17th February without anybody's knowledge. God knows how much I spent/lost in this period and I failed."

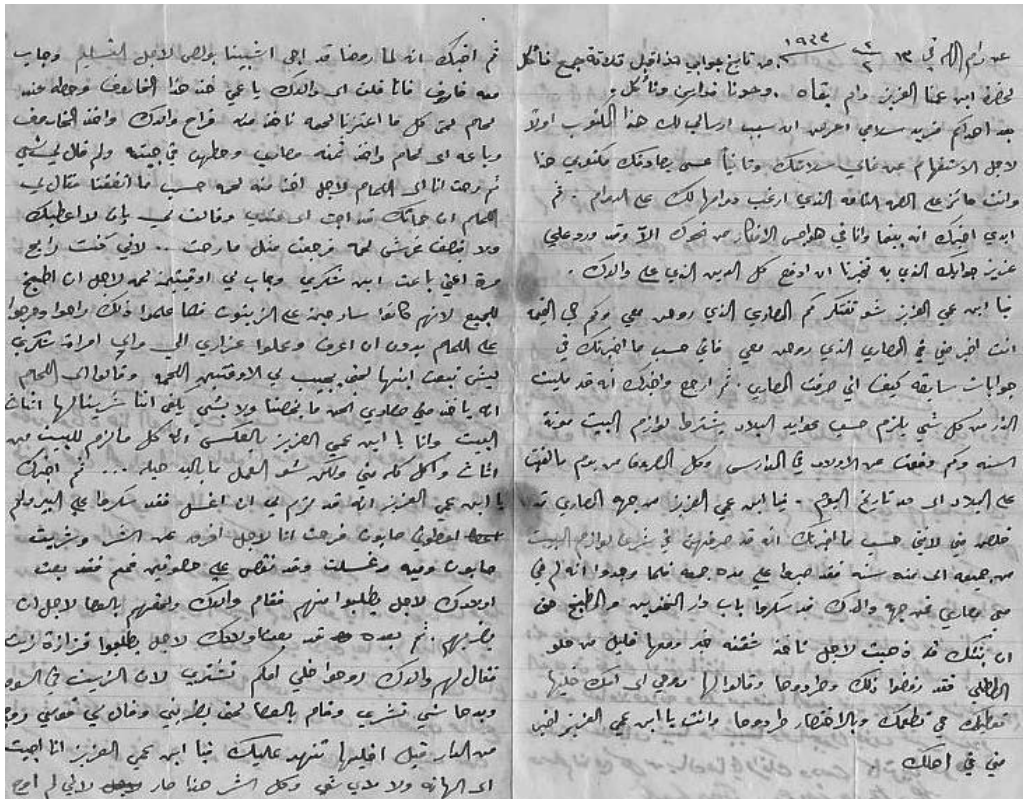
While Katrina had Fred, she was unable to retrieve Mary and George, who were left behind in Ramallah. There are different versions of why George could not be found that day. Many years later, he told Henry Bond that he was sent away from the house by his grandparents to work on the family plot, unaware that this life-changing drama was unfolding. It is also possible that he wanted to stay in Palestine with his grandparents. Whatever the reasons, the stakes had just been raised tenfold. This fight had ceased to be about money or family roles and had escalated into a battle over this torn family's children.



Mary Farhat and Fred Farhat, 1933. *Source: Personal collection of the author.*

After selling her jewellery and borrowing money for the passage, Katrina left Palestine with young Fred on the SS Bremen, which sailed to New York on February 23, 1934. It unimaginable how painful it must have been for Katrina to flee from Bethlehem with only one of her children, leaving Mary and George behind. After Katrina and Fred left Palestine, no one ever told Mary what happened. According to Henry Bond,

“She missed her mother terribly...George did many nice things for her, including playing with her, giving her rides on the donkey up into the hills and to the other farms, comforting her when she missed her mother or when she fell down, getting her figs from the storage bin...and so on.She was aware that they had taken her away from her mother.”



Part of a letter from Katrina (in Ramallah) to her husband Suleiman (in South San Francisco), 1933.

Source: Personal collection of the author.

Katrina and Fred arrived in New York and made their way by train to South San Francisco, where she found her husband Suleiman preparing to return to Palestine. They must have reconciled for a time, living together in South San Francisco and working in their store. But the gap was too great. While Suleiman loved Katrina and his children, he was steadfast in his desire to live in Palestine. Katrina did not agree and wanted to raise her family in the United States.

Mary stayed in Ramallah with George and her Farhat grandparents during this period, until Katrina prevailed upon Suleiman to pay for the child's return to the US. With the help of the Red Cross and a private nurse, Mary travelled by ship to New York in the summer of 1935 where Katrina greeted her as she disembarked. Mary, who is now 80 years old and lives in Greybull, Wyoming, has vivid memories of this trip and still has a small doll, a gift from the nurse who took care of her on the long journey across the Atlantic.

Despite valiant efforts by Katrina, her daughter Julia, her family in Mexico and the Sa'ades in Bethlehem, she was unable to arrange for George to return to the United

States. The situation was complicated because he was not a US citizen.¹¹ More than 30 of the Arabic letters from early 1937 to the last one in 1939 tell the story of the unsuccessful and sometimes desperate efforts to bring him back. In an undated letter from this period, Katrina sought the help of her brothers Saleh and Nichola [Incula] Sa'ade, who were living in Saltillo, Mexico at that time,

“Please do me a great favour and try to prepare the papers for my son George (Jurgie) from your side. Then I can request his presence, which indicates that he is born there, and have the midwife testify that he was born there and also the name of the midwife so I can bring George here. I have not been able to bring him because we could not find the name of his midwife. If you can find a way to solve this problem, then I will bring Jurgi here. If that costs any money, then I will borrow to pay it. If you cannot help me, I have no idea what to do.”

George remained in Palestine and attended Ramallah's Friends School until about 1937. He lived with the Farhats as well as the Sa'ades, worked on his family's agricultural land for a while and later enlisted in the British Army at the beginning of World War II. He fought in North Africa and Europe but was captured by the Germans in Greece and spent the remainder of the war as a prisoner of war. With the help of many friends and family who vouched for him and served as his sponsors, he was granted permission to re-enter the United States in about 1946 when the war ended. He had not seen his mother for more than thirteen years.

Suleiman's desire to return to Palestine finally won out. In the summer of 1935, he worked his way across the United States to New York, and sailed for Palestine at the end of August on the SS Rex, an Italian ship. As George Farhat said to Henry Bond many years later, *“Dad was not really a bad guy. The old man wanted to live in Palestine and Mum did not.”* Before leaving California, Suleiman left Katrina with a Power of Attorney so she could sell their mutual property and liquidate their assets.

From his conciliatory letters sent en-route, one can sense Suleiman's longing for his family and his fervent hope that Katrina and the children would soon join him in Palestine. Writing from Ramallah later that year, he seems truly happy to be home and cautiously optimistic about a reunion:

“I love our country...the work is much better than in America. My land is good and no one here is taking care of it because my father is old. Please sell the house and store and all we own and bring the children immediately... If we open a store in Jerusalem, with the income from the property, we can live well. Start selling everything upon getting this letter. Also keep the small book with the names and addresses of the merchants [who owe us money] – we might need them...I am worried about you.”

Suleiman reached Haifa in September, 1935. Once back in Palestine, he continued to appeal to Katrina to return with the children. In a May, 1936 letter to his father-in-law Abdullah Sa'ade, who was in Mexico at the time, Suleiman pleaded his case:

"After we reconciled, I tried my utmost again to convince her to go back with me. She refused and remained stubborn. To make a long story short, Mary arrived alone to New York. Her mother went and met her in NY and when she came back, I went out to make sales [as a traveling salesman] until I arrived to New York. During this period, I would send her a letter every two or three days. And she would reply to me. In every place I would arrive to, I would send gifts to her and to the children in order to soften her heart. When I went back in Palestine, I sent her a letter and I received a response from her congratulating me on my safe arrival. In another letter, I told her about my father [who] has become old and that my property here is plentiful enough to support us. No answer. I sent a second, a third, a fourth, a fifth, and a sixth letter, without receiving an answer. When I saw the situation like that, I took the Muhktar [of Ramallah] and a few members of our family and went to Bethlehem and told them [The Sa'ades] what happened and asked them to help us to resolve this issue... I ask you to do us a favour and try your best, my dear Uncle, because we have young children and it is a pity that they get humiliated. You know that women are lacking in intellect and religion and I hope you will do all you can. I am impatiently waiting for your response. Your son in law, Suleiman Jiryes Farhat"

By late 1936, Suleiman had apparently given up hope of reconciliation. He initiated divorce proceedings with the Orthodox Ecclesiastical Court. The following announcement was printed in *Filastin* newspaper on October 1, 1936:

"The Greek Orthodox Patriarchy in Jerusalem Ecclesiastical Court ...requests the appearance of Katrina, daughter of Abdullah Mikha'in Sa'ade from Bethlehem and now living in America to appear in person or via a legal representative as a defendant for the case raised against her by her husband Suleiman, the son of Jiryes Farhat of Ramallah, asking for divorce...That will be on Tuesday, December 1, 1936, Gregorian, at 9:00 am. If she does not appear the court will make a decision in absentia. The present announcement will be published three times in Palestine beginning on 29 October, 1936. Signed by Bishop Theodosius."

While Katrina and her family actively worked to stop the divorce and defend her reputation, the church granted it on March 2, 1937. In a letter to the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Katrina wrote, *"I am in astonishment and pain. I cannot believe that this is happening to me...Are we women like old clothes, whenever a man chooses he would take off his clothes and put on a new suit?"* Suleiman re-married soon after

the divorce. With his new wife from Gaza he had four children, and finally achieved his dream of living with his family in Palestine. He returned to the United States temporarily during World War II, and then again in 1969 to visit his sons George and Fred. He never saw his daughter Mary again. Suleiman died in Ramallah in 1984.

Independent Life in California

Once again, Katrina's world had shifted. Suddenly single at the age of thirty seven, she faced an unknown future caring for two children without the modern day safety net of child support or alimony. She turned to her twenty two year old daughter Julia, and with her help, began to build a life for herself in California.

Katrina returned to her merchant roots. She sold the dry-goods business in South San Francisco along with other assets that she and Suleiman had accumulated. With a loan from a family that Julia worked for, she opened her own store on Grand Avenue in South San Francisco selling women's and children's apparel, some of which she made herself. Her knitted and crocheted baby clothes were so popular that she also sold them to several local department stores. Initially, she and the children lived in an apartment in the back of the store, but she was soon able to buy a small home nearby.

The family continued to live in South San Francisco until the summer of 1939 when Katrina sold her business and moved with Julia, Fred and Mary to Long Beach. With her life savings, she purchased a two-story commercial building at the edge of downtown that consisted of a large storefront downstairs and apartments and rental rooms upstairs. Adjacent to the property were six more bungalows. The rental income supported the family and, in about 1942, she was able to buy a three bedroom home where her children, at long last, were re-united. Julia and Mary both lived with her until they married. Fred lived there until he joined the Marine Corps, while George joined her in Long Beach after his long-awaited return following World War II.

Katrina stayed in her home in Long Beach for nearly fifty years. Although her early life was shaped by repeated migrations and situations that were largely beyond her control, she transcended these constraints and emerged as an independent woman and grandmother. She died in 1989 at the age of eighty nine.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Written by Katrina Sa'ade Farhat from Palestine, her husband Suleiman Farhat in California, his father Jiryes Farhat in Ramallah, her family in Palestine and Mexico, and various other family members between 1925 and 1939. Many of the letters are in colloquial Arabic with local dialect, and contain words and phrases no longer used today. Some were dictated to a scribe, who usually transcribed the author's exact words, often without punctuation or proper grammar. Salim Tamari helped me in translating over 100 of them in 2008.
- ² 'Issa, Hanna, Mikha'in, Milada and Maria
- ³ One of Bethlehem's seven clan quarters. Under Ottoman rule, each quarter chose its Mukhtar, or selectman, whose duties were both social and official. The Local Council consisted of the Mukhtars of each of the seven quarters. It was later transformed into the Municipal Council
- ⁴ In 1906, Kiev was part of the Russian Empire, ruled by Tsar Nicholas II (1868-1917). It served as the Empire's primary Christian center, attracting many Christian Orthodox pilgrims. Kiev is now the capital of the Ukraine.
- ⁵ The oregano oil extract was popular with Russians in their tea in cold weather.
- ⁶ The name was originally Khawandeh. The family no longer lives in Bethlehem, although descendants live in Mexico, Chile and other parts of Latin America.
- ⁷ Official policy during the Porfirio Diaz era in Mexico (1876–1911) encouraged population of “empty land” with “productive white foreigners,” including Middle Eastern migrants from areas including Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine. Christians were a majority among migrants to the United States and Mexico; Brazil, Argentina, Columbia and Venezuela received Muslim migrants as well. Palestinians settled chiefly in Central America, Peru, Chile and northern Mexico. The migration continues today, albeit in reduced numbers. Source: UCLA Center for Near Eastern Studies, symposium announcement “Middle Eastern Communities in Latin America,” May, 2008.
- ⁸ Family names included Abada, Abdala, Dabdoub, Abusaid, Babu'n, Atki, Batarse, Marcos, Issa, Saca, Giaoman, Handal, Sadi, Kawavhe.) The Kabandes no longer live in San Pedro; the majority of their descendants now live in Mexicali, Tijuana, Monterrey and Guadalajara, Mexico.
- ⁹ Azeez Shaheen, *Ramallah, Its Histories and Its Genealogies*, Birzeit University, 1982, pg. 30 (English text).
- ¹⁰ Her only formal education was in Russia, but she probably read and wrote some English and Spanish.
- ¹¹ In their correspondence, Katrina and Suleiman addressed one another as ‘cousin,’ a term of endearment.
- ¹² His birth in 1922 in Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico, was attended only by a mid-wife and there were no official birth records.