



## Trouble with the In-Laws: Family Letters Between Palestine and the Americas (1925-1939)

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Saade Family Bethlehem, circa 1910. Top row, left to right: Incula (Nicholas) Sa'ade, Abdullah Sa'ade, Jamileh Sa'ade (Afana), Great Aunt Henna, Miriam Abujarade Sa'ade, Mitri (Demetrio) Sa'ade, Saleh (Sabas) Sa'ade. Bottom row, left to right: Naomi (Name) Sa'ade, Nusa Sa'ade (Nelson), Katherine Sa'ade (Kabande/Farhat), Infant (deceased), Zina Sa'ade, Liza Sa'ade. *Source: Personal Collection of Kathy Kenny.*

### Introduction

Historians of modern Palestine have generally overlooked autobiographical sources of non-elite Palestinians. For some, however, these sources have proven compelling for larger historical debates. Beshara Doumani, in *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700-1900*, argues that Ottoman Nablus has been misrepresented by many historians as socially, politically, and economically stagnant and behind the times.<sup>1</sup> He asserts that the “result [has been] a general neglect of underlying socioeconomic and cultural processes and, more important, the exclusion of the native population from the historical narrative.”<sup>2</sup> By investigating a set of family papers and oral histories, Doumani recasts the inhabitants of Nablus as active agents in the creation of a “social life” replete with

innovativeness, negotiation, mobility, and conflict.<sup>3</sup> In this paper I hope to offer a similar narrative of the quotidian lives of ordinary Palestinians during the 1920s and 30s. Using the correspondences of members of the Sa'ade and Farhat families from Ramallah and Bethlehem to Long Beach and South San Francisco, CA, I seek to rediscover, to use Doumani's term, Palestinian "social life" during this formative period in its history in order to reevaluate the dominant narratives of this history.<sup>4</sup>

The letters evince three themes on which I will elaborate throughout this paper. Moreover, each theme will critically address a component of Palestinian historiography, suggesting areas for further inquiry. The first theme concerns the rise of Palestinian nationalism as a sociopolitical and cultural identity in this history. I contend that the letters suggest an ambivalent attitude towards the idea of a Palestinian national identity among these non-elite Palestinians in the pre-1948 period. Rather, family and community matters, mostly finance- and property-related, dominated their correspondence. Secondly, the letters portray a social environment in which gender roles were renegotiated such that women came to occupy positions within Palestinian cities and towns that challenged accepted norms of paternalism and patriarchy. Finally, I aim to write emigration into this history in order to appreciate the impact of the phenomenon on these individuals' conceptions of themselves vis-à-vis their communities and the greater world they came to know through their travels.

Perhaps more immediately, this paper presents the story of the authors of the letters, namely, Katrina Sa'ade, her husband Suleiman Farhat, and his father, Jiryas Farhat. Caught in an exhausting family drama that spanned nearly a decade, these individuals' letters provide us with a lens into the lived experience of a Palestinian family torn by financial trouble, conflicting desires, and most conspicuously, emigration. Indeed, these individuals were part of a substantial number of Palestinian emigrants to the Americas in the early twentieth century whose hybrid identities and cultural affinities are worthy of nuanced investigation. For example, Katrina Sa'ade, having emigrated to Mexico at the outset of the First World War (1914) and returned to Palestine over fifteen years later, neither desired to be in Palestine nor felt connected to it emotionally, while her husband Suleiman, who had also left Palestine during the War, longed to return from America to live with his family in Palestine. These conflicting interests drove a wedge between them and their families. For Katrina, however, confidence in her own ambitions trumped adherence to others' expectations of her, and particularly those of the men in her life. Katrina's granddaughter, Kathy Saade Kenny, wrote about her grandmother that following a life "shaped by repeated migrations and situations that were largely beyond her control, she transcended these constraints and emerged as an independent woman and grandmother."<sup>5</sup>

The theme of gender emerges forcefully in these letters. Situating Katrina's story within the history of modern Arab women would have us consider a range of questions pertaining to notions of gender and the individual within Palestinian society.<sup>6</sup> Ellen Fleischmann has written extensively on the role that women played in the troubled emergence of a Palestinian nationalist movement during the British Mandate. For Fleischmann, Palestinian women during this period found themselves – much like



Miriam Girade Sa'ade, Abdullah Sa'ade, Mary (Lala) Karraa Zarar. *Source: Personal Collection of Kathy Kenny.*

women elsewhere – caught in a game of nationalist politics dominated by men. Palestine, however, was unique in that its male nationalists were unable to achieve their political aims – namely, those reflected in the discourse of self-determination during the 1920s – due to the political agendas of the Zionist and British forces. In this environment where the men were rendered ineffectual, Fleischmann argues that Palestinian women were paradoxically able to contribute to the Palestinian nationalist cause through the establishment of a range of civil services and institutions that were instrumental in propagating ideals of womanhood, citizenship, and anti-colonial nationalism.<sup>7</sup>

Although Katrina's letters are devoid of the nationalist rhetoric examined by Fleischmann, and while she was certainly more influenced by American women's rights movements in the 1920s and 30s, her experience living in Ramallah and Bethlehem – both relatively small urban centers in relation to Jerusalem and Jaffa – during the 1930s reflects what Fleischmann described as a gradual move toward liberalism in Palestine. Indeed, Katrina was able to adopt an unconventional, and perhaps avant-garde, approach to individualism that challenged the notions of patriarchy so deeply engrained in Palestinian society at the time.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in addition to emigration, this paper will also contribute to the growing body of literature that examines the history of gender in modern Palestine.

## The context

Katrina and her family were part of a considerable number of Palestinians, mostly Christians, who immigrated to the Americas during the early half of the twentieth century in pursuit of financial gain.<sup>9</sup> The experience of a different life in the west served as the temporal and spatial backdrop against which these individuals perceived themselves and coped with their situations. While economic prosperity certainly functioned as the main reason for emigration, Roberto Marin-Guzman has highlighted the multiplicity of factors involved in the choice to leave Palestine. For Guzman, many Palestinians – among other Arab ethnicities like the Lebanese and Syrians – left their homes in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and early twentieth “hoping to improve their economic situation, practice their religion freely, or to flee from political persecution in their own lands.”<sup>10</sup> According to Guzman, these Palestinians, mostly tradesmen, found welcoming markets abroad for their goods as early as the 1890s.<sup>11</sup>

Kenny’s account of her grandmother’s story corroborates this claim. Katrina’s family first immigrated to Kiev, in the Russian Empire, in 1906 in pursuit of economic gain. During this time period, the Ottoman provinces were suffering from a range of economic difficulties including the scarcity of cultivable land and job opportunities.<sup>12</sup> The Sa’ades, Kenny explains, were among a number of Palestinian families who sought profit elsewhere. As Christians, they chose Kiev, Russia due to Tsar Nicolas II’s support of the Russian Orthodox Church that “ensured a large market for religious articles from the Holy Land.”<sup>13</sup> Katrina’s father, Abdullah, opened his own business in Kiev selling “Holy Land” items such as rosaries, incense, and olive oil, a trade that afforded the Sa’ades a relatively luxurious life.<sup>14</sup> Though they frequently traveled back and forth between Russia and Palestine – the journey was surprisingly facile with reliable ship and train routes – the Sa’ades earned their livelihood in Russia. Their comfortable lives came to an end when, in the political upheaval leading up to the Russian Revolution, they were forced to return permanently to Palestine. Katrina described her family’s struggle leaving Russia and resettling in Palestine:

There were a lot of problems. They [Russians] 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. [...] 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.<sup>15</sup>

With their wealth devalued and economic conditions worsening in Palestine as the Ottoman Empire prepared for War in 1914, the Sa’ades considered immigrating to the New World.

In 1914, within months of their return from Kiev, fourteen-year-old Katrina was betrothed to a Palestinian Christian, Jamil (Emilio) Kabande, whose family had settled



Katherine Farhat date unknown. *Source: Personal Collection of Kathy Kenny.*

successfully in Mexico earlier in the decade. Escorted by her future brother-in-law and his wife, she traveled halfway across the world to marry eighteen-year-old Emilio whom she had never before met. Her experiences of displacement and transatlantic relocation at this early age were to impact the choices she would make later on in her life, and the manner in which she would come to self-identify. As for her new husband, Emilio, and his family Kenny explains that:

The Kabandes joined many Bethlehemites and other Arabs from greater Syria in a large out-migration that began in the late 1880s 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.<sup>16</sup>

Kenny states that it was often men who traveled first, some even escaping conscription in the Ottoman army. They then established themselves in the receiving country, and sent for their wives and relatives to join them shortly after.<sup>17</sup>

Kemal Karpat has investigated the factors involved in the emigration of Ottoman Arabs to the Americas in the pre-WWI period. For him, “it must be stressed [...] that the chief ‘push’ factor in the Syrian emigration was the deterioration of the socioeconomic conditions in the Ottoman state after 1860 – a deterioration that affected all population groups.”<sup>18</sup> He also explains that “pull” factors associated with the Americas were very powerful at the time, specifically, “the availability of employment in North and South America and the relatively high wages paid.”<sup>19</sup> This move westward for economic gain grew popular among many citizens of the Ottoman Arab lands, and thus set in motion a demographic relocation that was to impact the way in which ordinary Ottoman Arab citizens self-identified and secured their livelihoods. Karpat explains that, “successful emigrants who returned home from the Americas [...] represented a strong argument in favor of bold initiative and enterprise on the part of their fellow Ottomans.”<sup>20</sup> Those who heard their stories of success were impelled to seek wealth in the Americas, even if they already lived comfortably.

By the time Katrina had made it to Mexico at the age of fourteen, she had only

spent the first six years of her life in Palestine. In 1916, her husband Emilio was killed in a train crash near Saltillo, Mexico. Six months later she lost one of her two daughters, Elena, to the flu. Katrina and her daughter Julia remained with the Kabandes until 1919 when they moved to Long Beach, CA to live with Katrina's sister and brother-in-law who had recently settled there. In 1921, Katrina married another Palestinian Christian emigrant, Suleiman Farhat of Ramallah. Katrina and Suleiman moved back and forth between Mexico and the United States, opening businesses together, eventually settling in South San Francisco, CA during the Great Depression. For several reasons, including pressure from his family to return and due to the worsening economic situation in America, Suleiman was unhappy in California, and wished to return to Ramallah.

Guzman explains that during the 1930s, and with the creation of new job opportunities in Palestine under the British Mandate, many Palestinians either returned or sought to return home from the Americas.<sup>21</sup> Katrina, on the other hand, "was not so enthusiastic about returning, having left Palestine more than fifteen years earlier and established a life for herself and her family in America."<sup>22</sup> In addition to her daughter Julia from her previous marriage, Katrina had three more children with Suleiman: Mary, Fred (born Fuad), and George (born Jurgie). Kenny recounts that Suleiman convinced Katrina to return to Ramallah by agreeing that if she did not like it, she could return to California at any time.<sup>23</sup> In May 1933, Katrina boarded a ship with three of her children (the eldest, Julia, stayed with her aunt and uncle in Long Beach to finish high school) and sailed to Haifa. Suleiman, back in South San Francisco, did not, however, intend to allow Katrina and the children to return. He wanted to leave California and America, and find prosperity with his family in British Palestine.

Katrina's experience in Ramallah was anything but enjoyable. She did not get along with her in-laws and longed to return to California. She complained bitterly to her husband in a letter dated 13 October 1933:

I am writing this to you while boiling with anger from the indignities I have suffered from your parents. 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? [...] You have placed me in a terrible predicament. Only God can help me.

The situation worsened and by early 1934 Katrina was primarily residing with her family in Bethlehem and making plans to return to California with her children. With news of this reaching Suleiman in CA, he and his father Jiryas devised a plan to keep her and the children in Palestine until his return. It was to no avail. In February 1934 Katrina left Palestine with only one of her three children, Fred. Mary and George remained in Ramallah with their grandparents.

Upon arrival in California, Katrina reunited with Suleiman who was planning his return to Ramallah. The two remained in disagreement about where they would settle their family, and Katrina managed to get Mary on a ship back to the United States,



Jiryas Suleiman Farhat. *Source: Personal Collection of Kathy Kenny.*

though George remained in Ramallah, as he did not have American citizenship. Suleiman returned to Palestine in 1935 and continued his effort to have Katrina return. Finally, in late 1936 and following months of failed conciliatory efforts, Suleiman initiated divorce proceedings through the Greek Orthodox Church in Palestine. Helpless in California, Katrina's family in Bethlehem tried to protect her reputation by opposing the divorce, but the Church ultimately ruled in favor of the Farhat family.<sup>24</sup> Back in California, Katrina continued to live and work as a single mother until her death in 1989. She never returned to Palestine. George ultimately returned to America following his military service in the British Army in North Africa during WWII. He had not seen his mother in 13 years.

This intense tale of migration is undoubtedly best narrated through the letters. However, the details of each

moment of translocation are more comprehensible through a contextualization of twentieth-century Arab emigration. Moreover, the social and personal stresses that arise from the decision to return to the homeland after years abroad are compelling in this narrative. Akram Khater's *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870-1920* presents the stories of Lebanese peasant immigrants to America at the turn of the century and the impact that their return to Lebanon had on them and on the communities they inhabited once in Lebanon. For Khater, the different social questions that emerged from the experience of return among these emigrants were crucial in defining what it meant to be "Lebanese" in the modern period. These questions highlighted the changing nature of gender, class, and family identities and thrust Lebanon into a social reconfiguration of sorts that witnessed the growth of a peasant class capable of "modernity" due to its exposure to the West.<sup>25</sup>

Though Katrina's story differs from these Lebanese peasants' in that she did not return to Palestine to play a part in the construction of a "modern" and "new" Palestinian identity, Khater's contention that immigrant experiences impact social constructions and self-identities both within and without the homeland is important for our understanding of Katrina's voyages. Indeed, the idea that Katrina did not feel connected to Palestine on several levels represents a phenomenon of the emigrant experience that Khater describes. For Khater, Lebanese emigrants in the Americas were ambivalent toward the idea of a modern, national identity around the turn of the twentieth century. He argues:

[a]ny study of their experiences in the *mahjar* [abroad] would quickly reveal that there was no such thing as ‘Lebanon.’ Conversations, debates, and arguments which took place in New York and Buenos Aires manifested the ambiguity and irrelevance – in many ways – of a ‘national’ identity.<sup>26</sup>

These mechanics of modern selfhood, so to speak, are thus harder to reconcile with the dominant Arab historiography on this period that generalizes the will to nationalism to an entire population, both at home and abroad. In this sense, Khater’s work on Lebanon, like Doumani’s on Nablus, highlights the complexities – and potential contradictoriness – of individual experience during these periods of social and political change.

But as a Palestinian living in California with Russian, Mexican, and American cultural attributes, how *did* Katrina self-identify?<sup>27</sup> She was born in Bethlehem, spent six years in Russia, followed by seven in Mexico, and finally, over ten in America before returning to Palestine. She was happy in California; she married, raised her children, and enjoyed her life as a workingwoman. Moreover, she had enjoyed her life in Mexico prior to her move to the United States.<sup>28</sup> Kenny quotes her grandmother stating that she lived relatively comfortably in Mexico, even during the Mexican Revolution:

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 stuck together. They loved and helped each other; when they saw someone in need, they took care of him.<sup>29</sup>

It is small wonder then that Katrina did not take kindly to her husband’s insistence that they return to Ramallah to live with her in-laws, and fought to return to California following her short stay in Palestine. She felt at home in California, both with her family and among those with whom she shared vivid and pleasant memories. But of course, people tell their own stories best; and with that, I now turn to the letters.

## **The troubles**

Katrina and Suleiman’s letters from America to their families in Palestine reveal expressions of self-identification and affiliation that offer insight into the nuances of lived experience during the pre-1948 period. For Katrina, having lived all but six years of her life until then emigrating and resettling in distant countries with her two husbands, children, and family members, being Palestinian and connecting to Palestine while in the Diaspora represented just one aspect of her multi-faceted identity. Indeed, the letters reveal that she felt more comfortable living in Mexico and California than she did in Palestine. In this sense, notions of a historically cohesive and monolithic Palestinian identity linked to the land of Palestine – such as those that appear in the tropes of nationalism employed by historians today – are absent from



Julia Kabande, Katherine, Suleiman Farhat, George Farhat, c.1923. *Source: Personal Collection of Kathy Kenny.*

these letters. While this does not refute claims to Palestinian-ness, as it were, over the twentieth century, it does impel us to pry further into the processes of identification that constituted Palestinian emigrant identity in the pre-1948 period. Consequently, the processes of identification with the homeland that developed among displaced Palestinians following the tragedy of 1948 are thematically related yet historically distinct from the preceding era.

Reasoning through these observations, the letters lead to conclusions about what it meant to be a Palestinian emigrant precisely *because* of the absence of affiliation with Palestine as a cultural, linguistic, and sociopolitical space. Paradoxically, the nonexistence of a longing for things Palestinian, as evidenced in Katrina's letters, constituted a reality of what it meant to *be* Palestinian in the Diaspora. In other words, what we find is that in the pre-1948 period, with the absence of a palpable urgency in a sense of attachment to a land – an attachment that was not yet denied to them – feelings of ambivalence to Palestine among emigrants to the Americas was a viable component of what it meant to be a Palestinian emigrant. In this sense, and emphasizing Khater's point, the variables that emerge from the experiences of emigration and return among Palestinians before their displacement in 1948 cannot be elided in discussions of twentieth-century Palestinian identity. And for our emigrant, Katrina, since returning to her family's home in Palestine was still an option before 1948, what return represented in terms of a discontinuation of a life hitherto lived – and enjoyed – outside of Palestine was unsurprisingly unappealing.

Nonetheless, Katrina did return, and soon after realized that she did not belong in the country and community her husband had insisted was their true home. On 17 August 1933, just three months after her arrival in Ramallah, Katrina wrote her husband in South San Francisco. The letter highlights the primacy of finances in the conflict between Katrina and her in-laws, but also, the urgency with which she expressed her misery:

As for your parents during the past few months, when I had the money, they used to say, "Give us, give us, [...]." And now that the money has all gone, and we put the kids in school, they started to send out rumors that I am stingy with the money [...] but you know exactly how much you gave me.

Katrina recounts squabbles she had with her mother- and sister-in-law over jewelry. "In short I hate my life so much," she sums up, and proceeds with another anecdote about fighting over money, accusing her in-laws of wastefully spending a good deal of money on feed for their donkey. She concludes:

You know how it is in our country. We buy more than we need like yoghurt, tomatoes, lentils and whatever else. Now I am penniless. [...] Then my dear [husband] let me inform you that your father, mother and sister do not live in harmony, so how do you expect me to stay with them? [...] I regret coming to this country.

Katrina's feelings that her cultural sensibilities had drifted away from those of her kin in Palestine brought her a sense of alienation and frustration. For her, then, achieving harmony in her local and familial identity meant more than sharing a national space; thus, returning to where she felt a more congenial attachment to those around her, irrespective of geographic location, was of paramount concern.

Almost two months later, Katrina's situation grew dire. On 2 October 1933, she wrote Suleiman again:

I want to tell you that I am tired of your family because their mindset is different from mine. These people, Suleiman, keep gossiping and I hate gossip. You know that since I cannot do heavy labor, I cannot live their life. Your father doesn't seem to have a cent on him, and as for me, I don't have a cent anymore. When I had money, everybody was smiling at me. Today, nobody looks at me. [...] What am I supposed to do? I need money and what would you say: Is this a life?

Evidently, the Farhats also suffered financial troubles. Jiryas, Suleiman's father, sent his son several letters in which he implored him to send money. While Katrina complained that she bore the brunt of their frustration, she was certainly not the only victim in this story. Jiryas wrote his son on 3 October 1933:

I am writing this to tell you that since your woman has arrived, we have treated her in the best possible manner. We are keen to keep her happy so that she will not think of going back because I know that if she goes back, it will cost you a lot of money. In spite of this, she is not happy. She keeps saying, "I want to go back." I want to tell you that I have not received any money from her, not a piaster [local currency], even though I have to spend a lot of money from my own pocket. She keeps going to Bethlehem to her sisters' and she spends according to her whims. She never tells me where she is going; she does not spend a piaster on her children and I cannot hide from you, my son, that children cost more these days; and by chance, this year was a bad year for the olive crops.

Katrina would probably not have denied being stubborn herself. In the same letter to his son, Jiryas advises him to sell his business in California, liquidate his assets, and return to Palestine. The plot thickens, however, with the hint of conspiracy:

[Katrina] is very stubborn and she only does what she thinks. She never listens to me or anybody else. [...] Do not allow her to go back. [...] From our side, we will do everything possible to prevent her from leaving. One word from you is enough. Do your utmost to come to your family and stabilize your life. [...] Do not allow anybody to see my letters.

Whether Jiryas was honest in his account of Katrina's behavior is debatable. Indeed, Katrina's unhappiness seems convincing especially since she was living alone with in-laws she had never met in a place she had left as a child years earlier. She continues in her letter to Suleiman of 2 October 1933:

I feel as if I am going to die. You can see how your folks live. This is not really a life for me. I am telling you what I think, and now I need money to rent a house and live by myself to be free, not with twenty people around me, each one of them judging my every activity. If you cannot send me money and help me free me from this condition, better then, take me back. I will put the children in school and come to you. This is what I think. I am speaking to you plainly.

Regardless of who instigated the trouble, Katrina did not get on with her in-laws, or with the larger community in which she found herself. She dreamed of returning to California and planned to do just that in spite of her father-in-law's machinations.

Katrina's resolve to return to California numbed her against any desire to obey her husband's or his family's wishes. She remained steadfast in her rebellious behavior. On 1 January 1934, Jiryas wrote his son that Katrina behaved like a chameleon: "Today she is sitting here calmly, but she has her moments. [...] We tolerate her because you wrote to us, asking us to accommodate her, even though she has been

cursing us.” In this letter, we also locate the Farhats’ continued concern that Karina was plotting to take Suleiman’s money and return with it to America. Jiryas instructed his son:

Please contact the American Consulate and do what is necessary to come back because she is not going to stay here. Had she had money, she would have left a long time ago. [...] I advise you, don’t send one penny in her name because if she gets hold of it, you can be sure she will leave and she would be where you are.

Suleiman heeded his father’s advice and wrote his wife pleading with her to cooperate. Following a string of compliments, he adjures Katrina on 8 January 1934:

If you love me, you must love my folks. Try your best to live with them in peace and affection. [...] I have now put the shop [in CA] on the market. As soon as it is sold, I am coming back because this country to me is like poison, like blindness, especially since you left. I beg you to give up your idea of coming back to this country. If, God forbid, you decide otherwise and come back, think what would happen: I would sell the shop on short notice, go back to Palestine, and you would be here. [...] What would you do alone? [...] I beg you to think clearly.

While Suleiman seemed genuinely concerned for his wife’s wellbeing and her relationship with his parents, he, too, had a plan: he wanted to inherit his father’s property and resettle in Palestine. He admonishes her further:

As for sending you the money that you requested, I must say that I am afraid that you will use it to come back to this country and I have no intention for you to do that because I am coming back immediately and it is really idiotic for you to think of coming here. It will ruin us. We have lost enough and you know that. I want you to take care of the children and of yourself, and to appreciate my folks and your property.

Katrina did not listen to Suleiman. On 17 February 1934, after only six months in Palestine, she boarded a ship with her son Fred and sailed to America.

The details of her departure are murky. Jiryas wrote his son several times during those months explaining the complications they were experiencing with the courts, finances, and Katrina’s rebelliousness. Though Katrina did not provide an account of the events preceding her departure, Jiryas’ version paints a vivid picture of the deception and betrayal they must all have experienced throughout this ordeal. In a letter dated 16 February 1934, Jiryas reports to his son:<sup>30</sup>

Now I want to tell you how your woman left. First, she went from here [Ramallah] and stayed for a while in Bethlehem with her family. Then she went to the courts and filed a case against me in which she claimed that the children are hungry, roaming in the streets of Ramallah.

He continued with a description of his interactions with the different courts, explaining that he tried to fight for his rights over the children as their paternal grandfather. “I explained [to the court] that I could not release the children [to their mother] because the father is coming back,” he wrote. Notwithstanding Jiryees’ humiliation, it seemed he was not above complaining about his misfortune in the hopes of garnering sympathy:

She refused to stay with us and the Governor would not give her the right to take the children. I left her and went back to town and she went back to Bethlehem. There she secretly prepared travel papers without anybody’s knowledge. Two days before her departure, she came to Ramallah in secret. She went to the school and kidnapped the little boy [Fred], took him to Bethlehem and left him there. Then she came back to town in order to take the others [Mary and George]. When she reached our front door, she left the car, entered the house, and kidnapped [Mary] while nobody was at the house except your sister Hilweh’s little daughter [Khadra]. [Khadra] could not save Mary from [Katrina] and she started screaming. The neighbors heard the screaming and came to free the girl from her hands. Katrina then 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. Her brothers beat me up and humiliated me. I then went to the police department and informed them, so that they would bring the boy from her hands. They refused to accept the case, since it is not their concern; rather, it is the concern of the Ecclesiastical Court. I went to the Ecclesiastical Court and filed a suit, and I also filed a complaint with the court to delay her departure. I then put a request with the Immigration Department to stop her from leaving, but she had already done all the paperwork previously. She was able to take the boy. She left on Friday, 17 February without anybody’s knowledge. God knows how much I spent and lost in this period, and I failed. I was unable to take the boy, who was compelled to go with her against his will. [...] That’s what happened.

Considering the many details in this letter, there is little doubt that Katrina’s account would differ, certainly since her father-in-law was repeatedly irked by their financial situation and most likely pestered Katrina for her allowance from Suleiman. Jiryees concludes with these instructions:

Now I tell you, if you [Suleiman] are a real man, try in any way to come back with her the moment she arrives. If she refuses to go back with you, make your utmost to take the boy and come back with him the soonest. [...] If you cannot, leave the boy and come back, even if you lose the shop and the money. [...] If you cannot bring her back, maybe it's for the best. Leave her and come back because it is not safe to live with her being with you there. That's all I have to say.

While Suleiman was unhappy with Katrina's behavior, he was also unhappy with his father's handling of the situation, as evidenced in his father's response to a letter Suleiman had evidently sent weeks later. On 1 April 1934, Jiryès proceeded to repeat the details of those fateful days two months prior and why he could not protect Fred from his mother. Angrily, Jiryès declared to his son:

Even if you gather the whole wealth of America and she wants to convince you to stay, do not listen to her, for this woman is a traitor. Whatever she speaks is lies and forgeries. Wait until she leaves the house one day and ask Fred to tell you truthfully about her actions, and then you will see how she was with us here. She has made my blood dry and she shortened my life. By God, everything I am telling you is not an exaggeration. I found that she has no interest in her husband, her children and property. All she wants is the money you give her to spend on herself and her sisters, and to fill her pockets. [...] Fred will tell you everything, even about the clothes she stole for her sisters.

Jiryès and Katrina did not see eye-to-eye on many things, much less on what had happened. But these letters also tell us a great deal about the positions that different family members occupied in rural Palestinian society at the time. Moreover, they inform us about the interaction between different members of the rural class and offices of the state. For this woman, her loyal family in Bethlehem, her in-laws, and her community at large, these were clearly feuds that were not taken lightly.

Katrina's behavior reflects her independence and resoluteness. She wanted to return to America and did so in spite of the trouble it caused her, her children, and their extended family. Moreover, her behavior was certainly not common, as evidenced in the police department's reluctance to deal with Jiryès' complaint and their deferment of the case to the Ecclesiastical Court. But Katrina's own family stood by her and honored her desire to return to America. Whether they did so to protect their family's honor in the drama that was unfolding or to respect Katrina's dreams is unclear. It was most likely a combination of the two. What is of interest here, however, is the fact that in this time and place, Katrina could demand to have her own lodgings in order to feel free; and more drastically, she could take her son, flee Ramallah, and board a ship from Haifa bound for America. In addition, the very fact that Jiryès and Suleiman – among other family members – spent a great deal of time writing to one another across

oceans *about* Katrina signals her strong position within the two families. The gender and class realities that emerge from these letters are historically significant, as is the impact that emigration had on these people's lives.

## **Palestine through the letters**

Ellen Fleischmann has explored the emergence of what she calls a “gradual liberalizing tendency” in Palestine during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>31</sup> Her investigation of elite, urban Palestinian women's involvement in organizing and spearheading nationalist movements during the British Mandate highlights the multiplicity of factors involved in propelling these elements of social change. For Fleischmann, these factors included Islamic intellectual reformism, state-sponsored modernizing initiatives, the emergence of a printing press culture, and the dissemination of education and work opportunities outside the home among women.<sup>32</sup> Fleischmann adds to this list the impact of exposure to western discourses of equality and women's rights through European colonialism in the Middle East, but she does not account for the impact of emigrant experiences.

Akram Khater's work on Lebanese peasant emigrant returnees to Lebanon during the early twentieth century contributes an important viewpoint to this debate. For Khater, there is a gap in the literature on peasant emigrants from Lebanon to the Americas: while much has been written on the reasons for their emigration, their arrival in the West, “the money they sent back, and the ‘assimilation’ of those who stayed [...] nothing is said about a host of other matters, the most critical of which is the story of return.”<sup>33</sup> Though Khater's book focuses on the direct contributions of these returnees in the construction of a modern Lebanese identity – namely, through the construction of new meanings of gender, family, and class roles – he foregrounds a critical idea of change in this period by accounting for the different actors who were involved in this process. He explains:

[w]hen emigrants finally returned to [Mount Lebanon], they felt a disjunction between what they had spent years imagining and what they were facing. The contrast [...] forced on them the realization that they had changed and that those who had stayed behind in the Mountain had also changed. This social and cultural dislocation caused emigrants returning from the *mahjar* [abroad] to forge for themselves a new place in the villages and towns they had left behind.<sup>34</sup>

Although Katrina neither longed to return to Palestine nor stayed there long, her status as a returnee and her almost immediate realization upon returning of the stark differences between herself and the people among whom she found herself signal phenomena of identification and affiliation during times of sociopolitical change in Palestine.

By the time Katrina returned to Palestine in 1933, elite Palestinian women in the

cities had been organizing unions, committees, and women's rights groups for over a decade. The gradual liberalization of urban society that Fleischmann describes was, by the 1930s, felt in the smaller towns and villages of Palestine mostly due to the efforts of these urban, elite women to extend their work to these areas. Fleischmann explains that during the British Mandate (1920s-1940s), different Arab presses announced

[t]he founding of infant welfare centers, new branches of the women's union, Girl Scout troops, ladies associations, women's revival societies, student groups, and women's labor unions. The focus of most of these organizations was on developing girls through education [...]; on extending direct relief to the more indigent urban population during crises; and on setting up programs to train poorer women in vocational skills.<sup>35</sup>

Fleischmann adds that these elite women reformers were not bent on uprooting Palestinian men from their positions of power, or on completely reconfiguring gender structures. In fact, much of these women's guileful behavior reinforced patriarchal gender norms. Fleischmann explains that these women – many of them married to nationalists – exploited “British fears and timidity about upsetting patriarchal ‘tradition’” through their roles as urban elites, and thus, they were able to “exercise a certain amount of power and control” in social and political domains.<sup>36</sup> In other words, “Palestinian women, in simultaneously articulating support for ‘tradition’ while transgressing its norms, chose to utilize it as a tool that, ironically, empowered them to behave radically in the name of its defense.”<sup>37</sup>

Though Katrina did not live in Jerusalem or any large urban center, her existence in a time and place that witnessed such activity on the part of elite women certainly afforded her opportunities to behave independently. Indeed, peasant and poorer townswomen “simply did not have the time or inclination to become involved in women's associations, nor were they invited or expected to do so by the elite women who founded and controlled these groups.”<sup>38</sup> Notwithstanding, non-elite women were, by virtue of their lives outside of these urban spaces, contributors to these gradual changes. Fleischmann shows how “the women of upper- and middle-class urban families were more restricted and secluded than rural and poorer urban women, whose outdoor work responsibilities required greater personal mobility.”<sup>39</sup> So, for a woman of modest means like Katrina, residing in smaller towns like Ramallah and Bethlehem, and living off of her land, what wealthier women were doing in Jerusalem and Jaffa was worlds away. Yet within the bounds of her countryside life Katrina enjoyed liberty, mobility, and a form of individuality that emerged alongside these urban changes. In other words, Katrina's experience in this time and place, though arguably unique, offers us a glimpse into what living in Palestine was like for a woman who had chosen to defy the odds.

Indeed, this woman successfully transplanted her notions of individual liberty and gender equality from America to Palestine, a fact that tells us both a great deal about the impact of her experience abroad and about the nature of the “homeland”

to which she returned. As a Christian woman residing in Ramallah and Bethlehem, Katrina traveled as she pleased, freely made demands on the men around her, and ultimately reunited with her children following her divorce. Moreover, she was able to accomplish all of this in spite of the fact that in the Palestine of this period, “the strong grip of culture and patriarchal institutions in dictating social and behavioral norms was not pried loose, despite indications of adaptation.”<sup>40</sup> Fleischmann’s emphasis on the gradual nature of this liberalizing trend foregrounds the fact that during this period,

[m]ost fathers, brothers, and husbands still adhered to upholding certain cultural and social practices such as gender segregation, restrictions on their female relatives’ personal mobility, and the exercise of male authority over women in the family.<sup>41</sup>

It is in light of these realities that Katrina’s story provides compelling reasons for a re-investigation of Palestine in the 1930s.

Several passages in the letters indicate the patriarchal chauvinism of Jiryas and his son Suleiman, as well as Katrina’s resilience in confronting them. The letters reflect this climate of gradual, and hence oftentimes tenuous, change that was characterized by moments of tension between “tradition” and “modernity.” On 17 February 1932, Jiryas wrote his son in California that he should contain his wife, Katrina, who had been expressing resistance to the idea of returning to Palestine:

You tell me, my son that Katrina is not behaving according to your wishes. I am telling you that a good man would put his foot down, for women are lacking in intellect and in good faith. Try to be good with her, as much as you can; try to improve your relations with her as far as possible, for her family is not decent.

The persistence of notions of interfamilial tension and disrespect for women is striking in this excerpt. Jiryas unabashedly insults his daughter-in-law and her family. On 11 April 1932, Jiryas writes,

My dear son, you tell me that you are having difficulty with your wife. [...] Her folks are known to use their daughters and their in-laws and they have a reputation for having their daughters divorce their husbands [...] Get a grip. [...] If she comes back with you, good and fair, and if she refuses to come back with you, leave her and I will find you another woman immediately.

Suleiman, however, knew better than to underestimate his wife. On 3 May 1936 Suleiman, now in Ramallah, wrote his father-in-law, Abdullah, in Saltillo, Mexico. He detailed the events that led up to their divorce proceedings then explained that despite all his efforts to appease Katrina, she remained stubborn:

When she arrived [to California], I said ‘Let us solve our problems and return, and God will compensate us for the losses that accrue.’ So I had a sale at the shop, and when she saw that I started this sale, which was meant to get money for our return, she immediately began to complain that this was done without her knowledge. [...] I was forced to hire a lawyer for myself and another lawyer for her. [...] She remained stubborn and insisted on divorce.

Suleiman, however, was not entirely innocent. He, too, was stubborn in his refusal to stay in America despite his wife’s misery in Palestine. Furthermore, he was apparently an abusive father to their son George, who remained in Palestine. In a letter dated 13 May 1937, the fifteen-year-old wrote his mother from Ramallah in desperation, after weeks of suffering beatings at the hands of his father:

I’m writing this letter to you with tears in my eyes for what my father is doing here. Next Sunday the 16th, he is going to get married to a woman from Gaza. I am really sick and tired with his inhumane treatment and disrespect for me. I ran away from his house and I’m currently with my uncle in Bethlehem. My dear mother, you should have mercy on me and send me my travel documents. [...] I am experiencing oppression the likes of which has not been seen. Mom, please help me [...]. My father is treating me like a slave and he wants me to quit school. I don’t want that, please do something mother, help me!

Katrina wrote her sister in Bethlehem asking for her help in putting together George’s documents. Evidently, his birth certificate was missing and they could not verify the identity of the midwife who helped deliver him in Mexico in 1922. Later in 1937, Katrina’s eldest daughter Julia traveled to Mexico and obtained a statement from the midwife who attended George’s birth. Katrina sent the document to her brothers in Mexico. In a letter to her parents who were living in Saltillo, Mexico at that time but returned to Bethlehem shortly afterwards, she explained:

Now if George wants to come to this country, he has to prepare a Mexican passport. Try to make him a passport, but don’t let anybody know. Also try to bring George’s photos for the passport, and do all of these things without letting his father know. Send me a letter responding to me so I can send money and let me know how much it will cost.

In addition to the trouble of bringing her son back to America, Katrina and her family had to deal with divorce proceedings that were being dictated by the Farhats in Ramallah. On 1 October 1936, the newspaper *Falastin* printed an announcement requesting the official presence of Katrina Farhat at the Ecclesiastical court for a divorce hearing.<sup>42</sup> Naturally, Katrina, in California, could not attend. Her father

Abdullah, now in Bethlehem, wrote the head of the Greek Orthodox Church in Jerusalem on 27 October 1936. In the letter, he pleaded with him for compassion:

Suleiman was in America last year, with his wife Katrina. He said to her that “my intent is to visit the homeland for a few months, and then I will return.” But he took all his money in secret, without his wife’s knowledge; she did not realize that he was leaving her alone with her children in America. She is still waiting for his return until this moment and has no knowledge of this court case. From this, your Excellency, you can see that this man has a deep tradition of deceit and forgery. He has a tradition of cheating women and the people of Ramallah know of this.

Abdullah’s account certainly differs from Suleiman’s, but what these letters indicate is that the men involved dominated the debate. Katrina’s testimony seemed irrelevant, even though the conflict revolved around her. In fact, she was so upset by the news of the divorce proceedings that she wrote a letter to the head of the Greek Orthodox Church from San Francisco on 25 June 1937 in which she exposed Suleiman’s indiscretions:

I am in astonishment and pain. I cannot believe this is happening to me. He is doing to me what he did to his [previous] woman [in California]. [...] When he married me he claimed that he was single. I had no idea that he was already married. It took me two years after our marriage to find out that he had [another] woman and a daughter. [...] Now it’s been two years since he left me with the children and not a penny for support.

Although there is no further evidence in the letters for this accusation, Katrina was clearly desperate to protect her reputation. She continued in disbelief:

I beseech you, your Excellency, to intervene in the name of justice and truth. Is it permissible in our religion, we in the Greek Orthodox community, for a man to treat his wife and children in this manner? Is it permissible for a man to marry a woman in every country he visits? This must be forbidden in our religion, and I want you to say a word of justice here. Are we women like old clothes, whenever a man chooses he can get undressed and put on a new suit?<sup>43</sup>

While men still presided over such affairs, Katrina could nonetheless stake a claim in her community and family. Palestine of the 1930s was certainly a charged environment, a place undergoing what Fleischmann and others have observed to be dramatic change.

## Conclusion

Katrina's story is both remarkable and provocative. This woman was embroiled in a vicious family feud in which she shared culpability, yet her determination to do what she wanted, indeed, to challenge the patriarchy, as it were, should have a significant role in historical debates about gender, class, emigration, and individuality during this period in Palestinian history. In investigating the quotidian, or the "social life," of these ordinary residents of Bethlehem and Ramallah in the 1920s and 1930s, it should be evident from these letters that there remains much to be explored. Indeed, Palestine emerges as a unique space from this narrative, one in which women could fight to live independently, demand to move freely, and emigrate across the world against many odds.

Moreover, it has hopefully been made clearer that the historical narratives that continue to be written on Palestinian nationalism as well as British and/or Zionist colonialism tend to obscure realities about the subjectivities of individuals who actually experienced these larger historical trends. Fleischmann comments on this methodological handicap in the writing of modern Palestinian history. In responding to the dominant literature that tends to "highlight the political and diplomatic at the expense of the social, economic, and cultural history, which affects the study of women and gender," she argues that it is high time we took the individual experience into historical account.<sup>44</sup> As historian Luisa Passerini puts it: "It is an irony of history [...] that what is written about it so largely ignores the personal lives of individuals in the very period (the past hundred years) when individual subjectivity has been transformed."<sup>45</sup> Katrina's experiences are a testament to this historiographic necessity in writing the modern history of Palestinians.

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### Endnotes

- 1 Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700-1900* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of CA Press, 1995), 6.
- 2 Doumani, 7.
- 3 Doumani, 10. Though Doumani uses other sources, including land and court records from Nablus councils, to arrive at a fundamentally socioeconomic history of the city, his reliance on family papers and oral histories for a large-scale historical narrative was unprecedented.
- 4 I am deeply grateful to Kathy Saade Kenny for sharing her family's letters with me. All of the letters cited in this paper were first translated by Prof. Salim Tamari. I have made some edits based on the originals where I saw fit. I am indebted to Dr. Tamari for his hard work.
- 5 Kathy Kenny, "The Power of Place: Katrina in Five Worlds," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 35 (Autumn 2008): 5-30, 29.
- 6 While Katrina was herself not active in any anti-colonial nationalist movements during this time, nor was she a member of Jerusalem or Jaffa's women's organizations, I argue that Fleischmann's portrayal of Palestine as an active and charged social and political space allows us to understand Katrina's story in a broader context. In this sense, and while Katrina was herself more influenced by social

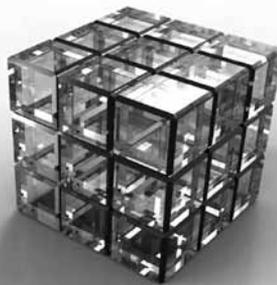
- developments in America at the time – namely, women’s rights and suffrage movements – her story *in* Palestine tells us a great deal about Palestine itself.
- 7 Ellen Fleischmann, *The Nation and its “New” Women: The Palestinian Women’s Movement, 1920-1948* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of CA Press, 2003), 111.
  - 8 Fleischmann, 27. Fleischmann discusses notions of patriarchy within Palestinian society across several domains, including economic, sociopolitical, and religious. She highlights the male-centric nature of Palestinian society most strongly in her discussion of marriage among Palestinians during this time period. For Fleischmann, marriage traditions in Palestine represented the dominance of systems of patriarchy within and among families and communities.
  - 9 Using hitherto unexplored Ottoman documents, Kemal Karpat argues against the dominant narrative that emigration from Greater Syria in the pre-WWI era was a phenomenon of the Arab Christian population. For Karpat, “impelled by many of the same causes that led Ottoman Christians to seek their fortunes in the New World, a substantial number of Ottoman Muslims left their homes and traveled west across the Atlantic” (Kemal Karpat, “The Ottoman Emigration to America, 1860-1914” in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 17 no. 2, May 1985, 175-209, 176). Notwithstanding, the proportion of Christians leaving their homes was relatively larger than that of Muslims, mainly because of the type of commodities they were selling abroad and because of their confessional ties with the western world.
  - 10 Roberto Marin-Guzman, *A Century of Palestinian Immigration into Central America: A Study of Their Economic and Cultural Contributions* (San Jose, Costa Rica: Editorial de la Universidad de Costa Rica, 2000) 17.
  - 11 Guzman, 24.
  - 12 Karpat, 176-178. Karpat explains that during the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Ottoman Empire shifted to a “primitive form of dependent capitalism that came to rely almost entirely on agriculture” (176-77) and trade with the west. He highlights the ensuing trouble this caused both for inland and coastal city and village dwellers in the Ottoman provinces.
  - 13 Kenny, 8.
  - 14 Kenny, 8.
  - 15 Katrina Sa’ade, as quoted by Kathy Kenny, 9. Kenny collected this information from audiotapes that her aunt, Mary (Farhat) Bond, Katrina’s youngest daughter, and her husband Henry bond had recorded in Wyoming during the mid-1970s.
  - 16 Kenny, 10.
  - 17 Kenny, 11. As the Ottomans found themselves embroiled in a world war, conscription policy was adjusted to include non-Muslims citizens. Nancie Gonzalez, in *Dollar, Dove and Eagle: One Hundred Years of Palestinian Migration to Honduras*, (Ann Arbor, MI: Univ. of MI Press, 1992) 28, explains that prior to 1914, Christian and Jewish Ottoman subjects could obtain exemptions from military service by paying a fee. By 1914, however, the policy had been amended and non-Muslims were required to serve. Gonzalez explains that Palestinian families went to great lengths to ensure that their sons were not conscripted, including “spirit[ing] the young men out of the country” (28n).
  - 18 Karpat, 179.
  - 19 Karpat, 179.
  - 20 Karpat, 179.
  - 21 Guzman, 27. Most of these jobs were limited to service in the British Mandate offices and other lower-level clerkships, or in translation and tutoring opportunities.
  - 22 Kenny, 19.
  - 23 Kenny, 19.
  - 24 Kenny, 28. Kenny explains that the newspaper *Falastin* published the following announcement on October 1, 1936: “The Greek Orthodox Patriarchy in Jerusalem Ecclesiastical Court [...] requests the appearance of Katrina, daughter of Abdullah Mikha’il 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, son of Jiryas Farhat of Ramallah, asking for divorce [...]” Kenny continues that Katrina and the Sa’ades tried to stop the divorce. Indeed, Katrina even wrote to the Patriarch himself in June of 1937 asking for his support; but on March 2, 1937, the Church granted Suleiman the divorce.
  - 25 Akram Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870-1920* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of CA Press, 2001), 14.
  - 26 Khater, 10.
  - 27 Kenny explains that her grandmother identified as a “Syrian” when asked about her

- nationality. Use of the term “Syrian” would indicate her awareness of her legal status as an immigrant from Greater Syria, *Bilad al-Shaam*, in the pre-Mandate period.
- 28 For an examination of the details of Mexican emigration to America during the early twentieth century, see George Sanchez’s *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993).
- 29 Katrina, as quoted by Kenny, 13. This was recorded on an audiotape that Katrina had left before her death in 1989.
- 30 Though this is dated one day prior to her departure from Palestine, it is likely that Jiryas wrote these letters over the course of several days, as they were very long. Moreover, as Jiryas was illiterate, he actually dictated many of the letters to his nephew, Issa Farhat, who may have started the transcribing days prior. The variable of a third party to these letters cannot be accounted for since little is known about Issa Farhat apart from occasional addendums addressed to his cousin, Suleiman.
- 31 Fleischmann, 30.
- 32 Fleischmann, 30.
- 33 Khater, 2.
- 34 Khater, 180.
- 35 Fleischmann, 111.
- 36 Fleischmann, 162.
- 37 Fleischmann, 174.
- 38 Fleischmann, 113.
- 39 Fleischmann, 28.
- 40 Fleischmann, 61.
- 41 Fleischmann, 61.
- 42 See note 24.
- 43 It is unclear whether the Patriarch responded to Katrina, but it is safe to assume that he did not, as the divorce had already been made official prior to Suleiman’s marriage to his (third) wife from Gaza on 16 May 1936.
- 44 Fleischmann, 17.
- 45 Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 2, as cited in Fleischmann, 19-20.



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