

Jerusalem and Bethlehem Immigrant Families to Chile in the Early Twentieth Century

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The decision to leave Jerusalem or Bethlehem early in the twentieth century was not an easy one. It was particularly difficult if the destination was a town, village, or rural hinterland far away in Chile, from which a return trip back to Palestine would be impractical, if not impossible, for most immigrants. In Chile fortunes were made and, as important, families were nurtured and with time adapted to the environment that became their own. The early immigrants invited kin to join them, family networks were expanded, and church communities were reinforced; this communal translocation ensured family continuity and closeness, and bolstered faith in the new environment.

Early Twentieth-Century Immigration to Chile: Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon

In 1941, Ahmad Hassan Mattar, an Arabic-language radio broadcaster for the “Farouq Hour” in Santiago, Chile, compiled and edited the *Guía social de la colonia árabe en Chile (Siria – Palestina – Libanesa)*. The guide was sponsored by the Club Palestino, one of the oldest Palestinian clubs and today one of the most prestigious social clubs in Santiago, and published there by the Hermanos Hueos (Uways Brothers) printing press.¹

According to Mattar’s survey, there were a total of 2,994 Arab immigrant families in Chile in 1941, comprising 14,890 members. The largest group was 1,232 Palestinian families totaling 6,590 members: 430 families from Bayt Jala; 417 families from Bethlehem; 60 families from Jerusalem and ‘Ayn Karim; 68 families from Bayt Sahur; 5 families from Taybeh village in the Ramallah area; 8 families from Jifna; 4 families from Ramallah; and 240 families from other parts of Palestine. The

number of Syrian immigrant families totaled 706, with a total of 3,520 members; almost half were from Homs, mostly Christians, followed by 67 families from Safita, and 317 families from elsewhere in Syria. The Lebanese immigrants were the smallest of the three main groups, with 448 families and an estimated 2,129 members; 26 of these families hailed from al-Kura and the rest were from all over Lebanon. The Lebanese immigrated more to Argentina and Brazil while the Palestinians ended up in Chile and Honduras, and a significant minority in Brazil.² The guide also mentions 395 Arab families without a specified date of arrival to Chile comprising 1,743 members, and 150 Arab families with 512 members who were born or migrated from other countries, which Mattar reports as East Africa, Bolivia, Cuba, Honduras, Panama, Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, Columbia, Ecuador, Spain, Austria, the United States, and Burma. This indicates that Chile was a “pull” country to Arabs who originally migrated elsewhere before deciding to move to Chile, most likely influenced by the success of Palestinian and other Arab migrants. They included some who originated from Transjordan and Egypt, but Mattar gives no details on the number of these immigrants by birth country. There were also 89 second-generation immigrant Arab families, with 392 members, whose heads of households were born in Latin America.

The first wave of immigrant families arrived between the years 1895 to 1940, during the final years of the Ottoman Empire, and through World War I, the Mandate period, and the period prior to World War II. Cecilia Baeza mentions that 81 percent of all Arabs arrived in Chile between 1900 and 1930; in the earlier years between 8,000 and 10,000 left to escape the Ottoman Conscript Law of 1909, of which half were Palestinian, 30 percent Syrian, and 20 percent Lebanese.³ According to Lorenzo Agar Corbinos, a Chilean sociologist of Syrian descent, the early immigrants were mainly small merchants, shopkeepers, and small farmers. Their contacts with foreign-operated schools had allowed them to gain languages, although Spanish was not one of them, and their education and overall experiences provided push factors toward emigration. Not only politics or religion, but also a willingness to take a risk to improve and advance one’s own life and prospects, explain the decision to migrate.⁴

Early Migrants: Origin and Journey

Early emigration from Palestine was generally thought to be by residents of the Bethlehem and Bayt Jala area. The Mattar guide confirmed this but also indicated that sixty families had migrated out of both Jerusalem and Bayt Sahur. The journey to Chile took most immigrants first to Beirut, Haifa, or Alexandria where they would board ship either to Genoa, Italy, or to Marseille, France. According to Nicole Saffie, a Chilean social scientist of Palestinian origin, the immigrants waited for days and sometimes weeks before they could board a ship, usually a cargo vessel, heading to America. Most immigrants did not distinguish between the United States or Central and Latin America. They endured the long voyage, which took them to Dakar in West Africa and onward to Santos, Brazil, before proceeding to the final port in New York or Buenos Aires.⁵ The choice of Chile as the final American destination was determined

upon docking in Buenos Aires. The Palestinians found that the Lebanese and Syrians had preceded them and so, rather than compete, the Palestinian immigrants decided to move on over the Andes Mountains to Chile. After 1910, the taxing journey over the Andes was replaced for most new immigrants by train passage, following completion of the trans-Andes railway.

The Chileans initially received the newly arrived immigrants with a combination of amazement and questioning, what were these people doing who did not know Spanish and were almost paupers? The Palestinian immigrants, nevertheless, were determined to work and to persevere. Many of them began their way to business and commerce by becoming peddlers, shouldering bags of household commodities from village to village. They were received cordially by the local residents. In fact their peddling trade may have partly contributed to the opening of the Chilean villages to social transformation.

Thus, Chile became an important country where family and community “translocation” developed for many Palestine migrant families.

The *Tanda* of the *Falte*

The immigrants first went to the outskirts, suburbs, and faraway places. They wore heavy clothing usually bought in used clothing stores. In the neighborhoods where they were selling their wares they would call out *tanda* (forty things) referring to their wares such as soap, buttons, combs, scarves, socks, mirrors, pins, spools of thread, and the like.⁶ Another account speaks of the Palestinian door-to-door peddlers as *falte* from their repetitive call: *hay algo que le falte?* (“Is there something you need?”).

In the early twentieth century, the Chilean government sought to encourage immigration to the country and accordingly offered incentives such as land grants to immigrants, especially those from Europe. Palestinians and the others coming from Ottoman-ruled areas did not enjoy these privileges because presumably they lacked the skills or professions ascribed to European immigrants. Chileans often referred to newly arrived Palestinians and other Ottoman subjects by the pejorative term *Turcos*. The term denoted both a condescending view of the newcomers and also begrudging respect, as more of these *Turcos* succeeded in their businesses. Myriam Olgún Tenorio and Patricia Peña González describe the way the early Palestinian immigrants adopted a style of life reminiscent of that described in Max Weber’s classic work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*:

Their life was simple and limited to spending only what was necessary ... Their expenses were low: rent and food. The thought of buying clothes and other extras was unthinkable. They didn’t spend on anything that they could make themselves.⁷

Another Chilean author in 1937 gave the Palestinian immigrants a similar portrait, describing them as “austere, with high morals, respectful of the law, and hardworking.”⁸

Newly arrived immigrants usually lived above or at the back of the store and in crowded houses shared by many families known as *cites*, usually with six or seven persons to a room.

Bayt Jala and Bethlehem Immigrant Families, 1894–1938

The names of the Bayt Jala and Bethlehem family members that first migrated to Chile up to 1941, mentioned in Mattar's social guide, show that emigration was not just an individual enterprise, but involved whole families and family networks. The process of consolidating a family in a particular town in Chile and pursuing similar occupational preferences may have been quite a protracted process. It involved communication with family members back home, prospective brides and their parents, siblings and cousins in the translocation of families, to the extent that in some cases whole families ceased to exist in their town of origin, whether Bethlehem or Bayt Jala.

The social guide records eight Bethlehem families arriving in Chile before 1900, and none from Bayt Jala. The first immigrant from Bethlehem was Khalil Qumandari, who arrived in 1894, followed by a member of the Lama family in 1895. The early arrivals from Bethlehem were likely attracted by the prospects they had heard of in America, not distinguishing among countries, perhaps from the touristic arts and crafts tradesmen who exhibited in the Chicago and Philadelphia expositions of the late nineteenth century.

In 1900, nine Bayt Jala residents arrived, including two each from the Shahwan and al-Husayn families. Of the fourteen Bethlehemites who immigrated that year, two were from the Uways family, whose members later founded the Hueos Printing Press in Santiago.

Between 1901 and 1909, just prior to the enactment of the Ottoman Conscription Law, 118 members of Bayt Jala families and 86 Bethlehem family members arrived in Chile. Among the largest families from Bayt Jala were: nine members of the Rabi' family; seven members of the Mansur family; six members of the Makhluḥ family; and five members each from the Abu Muhr, Nazzal, and al-Husayn families. From Bethlehem, there were seven members from the Lama family; and four each from the Za'ur and Riyadi families. It is likely that the overall social, economic, and political conditions of life in Ottoman Palestine, together with the attraction of opportunities and economic prospects in distant Chile, combined to encourage Palestinian families to risk migration. Perhaps the stories told by the three Georges who returned to Bayt Jala early in the twentieth century wearing *effendi* clothes and showing off their newly acquired wealth was also persuasive.⁹

In 1910, following the Ottoman Conscription Law of 1909 that required military service even from previously exempt religious and ethnic minorities, and after the establishment of the trans-Andean train line from Argentina to Chile, thirty-eight Bayt Jala family members arrived: three members each from the Zurayna and Nazzal families; and two members each from the Bishara, Mufdi, Hanna, 'Arja, Khuri, Hadwa, 'Umar, Lula, and Shahwan families. Out of the forty-six Bethlehemites who arrived in 1910, six were members of the Lama family followed by three each from the Qattan and Salman families, and two each from the Za'ur, Nassar, Jidi, 'Abd al-Nur, and Musallam families.

The anticipated surge in newly arrived Palestinian families in Chile following the Conscription Law and the trans-Andean railway materialized by 1911 and continued during World War I, when more Bayt Jala and Bethlehem families, in almost equal numbers, opted for immigration to Chile. Between 1911 and 1918, ninety-three families arrived from Bayt Jala and ninety-five families from Bethlehem. The Bethlehem families included: Hazbun (seven members), Giacaman (six members); Mikil and Hananiyya (five members each); Salman and Musallam (four members each). Five families had three immigrants each: Lama, Riyadi, Abu Fuhayla, Za‘rur, and Faqusa. Four families had two immigrants each: Jada‘, Qattan, Ya‘rur, and Abu Sabha.

From Bayt Jala, the families included: Massu (six members), Salman (five members), Daghsh (four members), al-Tit (three members), and Hadwa (three members). Twenty-one other families had two members each arriving in Chile during this period. The town of origin claimed by the 1941 surveyed families vacillated between Bethlehem and Bayt Jala; for example, the Salman family claimed origin in both towns.

Between 1919 and 1938, 145 family members from Bayt Jala and 129 members from Bethlehem immigrated. Among the leading Bayt Jala families arriving during this period were the families of: Nazzal, Mansur, and Hadwa (nine members each); al-Husayn (seven members); Lula (five members); ‘Awwad, Barham, and Marwani (four members each); and ‘Alam, Saba, Abu Muhr, Juriyya, Zurayna, and Abu Subl families (three members each). Of the Bethlehem families there were: Nassar (seven members); Qattan (six members); Giacaman, Hananiyya, Za‘rur, and Musallam (five members each); Sammur and Hazbun (four members each); and Salman, Ja‘ar, Riyadi, Battu, Mikil, and ‘Awwad (three members each).

Altogether there were over 376 entries for Bethlehem in the social guide from an estimated 127 families. By total number of immigrants, the Bethlehem families were: Za‘rur (twenty-five members); Lama (eighteen members); Musallam (seventeen members); Qattan (sixteen members); Giacaman (fifteen members); Hazbun and Salman (twelve members each); Riyadi (ten members); Nassar, Ya‘rur, and Hananiyya families (nine members each); Faqusa (eight members); Mikil (seven members); Hurma (seven members); Sammur (six members); ‘Asfura, ‘Awwad, and Jiddi families (five members each); ‘Atallah, Qumandari, and Sahuriyya families (four members each); and Andoniyya, Abu Fuhayla, Ja‘ar, and Battu families (three members each).

Among Bethlehem immigrants were Muhammad Hasan Abu ‘Uthman and Mahmud Khalil Jaydi in 1914. Muhammad Abu ‘Uthman adopted the name Salvador and similarly gave his children names that would aid their integration in the new environment: Salvador, twenty-one; Adila, twenty; Emilia, thirteen; Irma, twelve; Donasiano, eight; Santiago, seven; Victor, five; Dago, four; and Olga, three. There were also Muhammad Sahba al-Ta‘amari, ‘Ali Barakat, and Hayd Humaydan from al-Ta‘amira, and ‘Abid Yusuf from al-Samu‘ who immigrated in 1923.

For Bayt Jala there were around 405 immigrants listed in the social guide, representing 140 families, among them: Nazzal (twenty-two members); al-Husayn (nineteen members); Mansur and ‘Alam (eighteen members each); Hadwa (seventeen members); Rabi‘ (fifteen members); Abu Muhr (eleven members); Sabaj (ten members); Zurayna, Dawud, and

Shahwan families (eight members each); al-Tit (seven members); and Makhluf (six members).

The highest number of immigrants from Bayt Jala and Bethlehem arrived in Chile between 1919 and 1938 and then immigration tapered off. Some argue that the British Mandate authorities in Palestine had introduced economic and infrastructure improvements in the country between 1920 and 1948, which increased employment, but the Bethlehem area did not benefit immediately from these improvements, unlike Jerusalem, the administrative capital.

The Jerusalem Families

The characteristics of the early arrivals from Jerusalem are not well known; there is no information in the Mattar guide on their professional, educational, or business backgrounds. It is likely that the more than fifty families from Jerusalem would have had more urban characteristics than the fewer families from ‘Ayn Karim village, to the southwest of the city. However there is no credible information to compare the background of the immigrants from the Jerusalem area, and elsewhere in Palestine, with those from the Bethlehem and Bayt Jala area. The Mattar guide reported only the professional and business profiles of the early arrivals once they had settled in Chile and not prior to their arrival in Chile.

The Jerusalem families began immigrating in 1900, when 30-year-old Ibrahim Ja‘nini arrived. In 1909, he was joined by Nicola Ja‘nini, who opened a retail and grocery shop. Farah Ja‘nini joined them in 1912 and also engaged in a grocery and retail business. According to Adnan Musallam of Bethlehem University, who tracked the Bethlehem families’ emigration, the Ja‘nini family was initially from Bayt Jala.¹⁰ The Franciscans brought the family to Jerusalem to start a souvenir handicraft and arts workshop in ‘Ayn Karim, where the Franciscan Order had built two sanctuaries to honor the birthplace of John the Baptist and the visitation of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth.

The Karmi family from ‘Ayn Karim was the largest Jerusalem family to immigrate to Chile. Francis Karmi began the process in 1910, when he settled in Quillope and worked in commerce. Eight other Karmi family members followed him between 1914 and 1930; most engaged in commerce while one specialized in jewelry and gold and another member of the family began a retail business.

Six members of the Salah family from Jerusalem immigrated between 1910 and 1923 and all worked in trade and commerce, including import and export and building contracting. Hanna Qamar migrated in 1909 and worked successfully in industry in Santiago, followed by four family members over the next eleven years who worked in commerce. Three Katan family members immigrated early in the twentieth century and all became engaged in agriculture and farming, although their origins were from the Old City of Jerusalem. It is likely that they established their commercial farming enterprise with capital that they had brought to Chile. Eid Khuri left Jerusalem in 1909 and became a proprietor, which encouraged two of his family members to follow him in 1912 and

1914 and work in commerce. Of the smaller Jerusalem families, two members each of the Di‘das, Khashram, and Kort families immigrated between 1909 and 1927. Other families with only a single family member immigrating during this period included: ‘Atallah, Barakat, Barna, Bishara, Dahdal, Dardarian, Farraj, Fatala, al-Halabi, Hananiyya, Mazid, Rumiyya, Sabat, Sabbagh, Sahurriyya, Salim, Samara, Tumayan, Viasian, Zaytun, and Ziyada. Salih Shatat from al-Ram, a village outside Jerusalem, also immigrated in 1913 and like other immigrants worked in commerce.

Andrés Sabella, the Poet of Antofagasta

Brothers Andraos and Amin Sabella emigrated from Jerusalem to Chile in 1904 and 1905. Both became successful proprietors and made the harbor town of Antofagasta their home. Most likely Andraos accumulated property from his jewelry business which was popular among the townspeople. In 1928, their brother Salim joined them and started his own commercial enterprise. Amin, or Fidel in Spanish, worked as a manager in the Syrian-Palestinian Club in Antofagasta, which had been founded in 1908. When Andraos traveled to Chile he had brought along a panoramic photo of Jerusalem taken from the Mount of Olives, perhaps sensing he would not see his beloved city again. Eventually he passed the image on to Andrés, his son from his marriage with Carmela Galvez Tello, of Italian origin, who died in the sixth year of their marriage. The fame of the Sabellas grew in Antofagasta due to the literary and poetic skills of Andrés, who published his first book of poetry at the age of fourteen. In 1944, he published his most famous work, the novel *Norte Grande*, from which the territory comprising the regions of Tarapaca and Antofagasta in Chile was named.

Andrés Sabella became a friend of Pablo Neruda and together they joined leftist circles to oppose fascism. Andrés accompanied Neruda during his visits to Antofagasta, especially to schools where the two poets would read their poetry.¹¹ While Neruda was the undisputed national poet of Chile, Andrés Sabella earned the title of Poet of Antofagasta. With more than thirty published works of poetry and literature, some place him second to Neruda in his influence on Chilean literature. As a poet, storyteller, and university lecturer, Andrés always spoke fondly of the city of his father. Andrés devoted the second part of his 1980 collection of poems *La paloma de cemento* (The Cement Dove) to the Holy Land, the land of his father.¹² When Andrés Sabella met the late Yasir Arafat in the mid-1980s, he mentioned that he had the panoramic view of Jerusalem hanging above his bed. He told Arafat that every night he looked up to the view of Jerusalem and remembered the city and his father’s roots in it. The home of Andrés Sabella, who died in 1989 at the age of seventy-seven, was made into a museum by the town of Antofagasta, with his father’s Jerusalem panorama kept above his bed.¹³ While Andrés’s father had been a well-respected jeweler in Antofagasta, according to one Chilean author, Andrés made his verses a virtual mine of jewels. A national literary competition, as well as a high school and an international airport in the region were named in his honor.¹⁴

Many of the Bethlehem and Bayt Jala families achieved success in business, textile manufacturing and banking, but only a few became writers. The Jerusalem and Bayt Sahur emigration was not as extensive as the translocation of family and community experienced by Bethlehem and Bayt Jala families. Nine members of the Karmi family from Jerusalem and nine from the Qumsiyya family from Bayt Sahur were early immigrants to Chile, but they were not followed by a continued stream of migrating families. Jerusalem was an important center of tourism, government, and educational institutions, which provided employment opportunities for the resident population. Churches also played an important role in stabilizing the Christian indigenous population in the city. One could speculate that the relative success of the early immigrants in both Jerusalem and Bayt Sahur may have not impressed the more urban Jerusalemites. There may have been differences in the entrepreneurial spirit shaped by Bayt Sahur and Jerusalem that differed from Bethlehem and Bayt Jala. It is possible that the enterprising spirit of the Bayt Sahuris was more localized and less discontent with the overall conditions of life, and that Jerusalemites were absorbed by the public and private institutions operating in the city. The strong tribal solidarity of the Bayt Sahur families also may have prevented or raised questions about the futility of the risk of migration. The geographic factor – Bayt Sahur being downhill and separated from Bethlehem – could also partly explain why Bethlehem merchants were more open to participate in international events, such as the expositions of Chicago and Philadelphia, and not merchants from Bayt Sahur. Other explanations could also be put forward: Bayt Sahur excels in mother-of-pearl and olive wood souvenir production which are mostly family home industries supplying merchants in Bethlehem and in Jerusalem; Jerusalem families may have been less inclined to risk being uprooted for an uncertain future or they may have lacked the transferable skills and crafts well developed among Bethlehem and Bayt Jala families.

What motivated the early immigrants aside from bad overall conditions? The risks they took paid off in achievements that would never have happened at home. As for the descendants of the Jerusalem immigrants in Chile, little is known about their fate or the course of their professional, literary, and business development. Why were the links between the Jerusalem immigrant families and those of Bethlehem and Bayt Jala lost not only with their original hometowns but also with their families who stayed in Palestine? Certainly the second and later generations of Palestinian immigrant families identify with and live in harmony in Chile, a country that accepted them with graciousness and afforded them the opportunities to advance socially, economically, and culturally. Although few, the Jerusalem immigrant families contributed to Chile and its culture as exemplified by the literary imprint of the work of Andrés Sabella. Nevertheless, the question remains about early Palestinian immigrants: Why did they feel that they had to leave home and why did they carry Jerusalem in their suitcase?

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Endnotes

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- 3 Maureen Clare Murphy, “Latin America’s ‘Forgotten’ Palestinians,” *Electronic Intifada*, 26 November 2013, online at electronicintifada.net/blogs/maureen-clare-murphy/latin-americas-forgotten-palestinians (accessed 7 September 2017); Nora Barrows-Friedman, “‘A New Palestinian Consciousness’: History of the Diaspora in Latin America,” *Electronic Intifada*, 5 December 2013, online at electronicintifada.net/blogs/nora-barrows-friedman/new-palestinian-consciousness-history-diaspora-latin-america (accessed 7 September 2017).
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- 5 For the context of overall migration to Chile, see Cristián Doña-Reveco and Amanda Levinson, “Chile: A Growing Destination Country in Search of a Coherent Approach to Migration,” *Migration Information Source*, 6 June 2012, online at www.migrationpolicy.org/article/chile-growing-destination-country-search-coherent-approach-migration (accessed 7 September 2017)
- 6 Agar and Saffie, “Chilenos de origen árabe,” 3–4.
- 7 Myriam Olgún Tenorio and Patricia Peña González, *La inmigración árabe en Chile* (Santiago, Chile: Instituto Chileno-Árabe de Cultura, 1990), 93. For Weber’s account of the Protestant communities, see Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, tr. Stephen Kalberg (Los Angeles: Roxbury, 2002).
- 8 Olgún Tenorio and Peña González, *La inmigración árabe*, 93.
- 9 See Eugenio Chahuan, “Presencia árabe en Chile,” *Revista chilena de humanidades* 4 (1983): 33–45.
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- 11 Teitelbom, *Neruda*, 14.
- 12 Sergio Macías Brevis, “Palestina y otras aproximaciones árabes en la literatura chilena,” *Awraq: Estudios sobre el mundo árabe e islámico contemporáneo* 23 (2006): 156.
- 13 See the Sabella museum website, online at www.museosabella.blogspot.ru (accessed 7 September 2017).
- 14 For websites mentioning the school, airport and museum named for Andrés Sabella see: www.facebook.com/pages/Colegio-Andres-Sabella/177993892256463?rf=245261535498448 (accessed 10 October 2017); www.memoriachilena.cl/602/w3-article-3292.html (accessed 10 October 2017); hikersbay.com/museum/chile/antofagasta/Museo%20Andr%C3%A9s%20Sabella?lat=-23.648261&lon=-70.397905&lang=en (accessed 10 October 2017); www.aeropuertoantofagasta.cl/ (accessed 10 October 2017).