

'Aqlah Brice Al Shidyaq: A Woman Peddler from Northern Lebanon

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Lebanese from all social and economic classes were attracted by the international migration movement of the nineteenth century. Men and women, married and single, middle class and underprivileged all sought their fortune through migration. Rather surprisingly, given the patriarchal norms of Middle Eastern society, Christian as well as Muslim married women sometimes emigrated without their husbands and families, for, as A. Khater notes, they “had their [own] reasons to leave... Some wanted to escape an unhappy marriage, others sought a better financial status, and a few were after adventure, but most went looking for the ‘family’.”¹

'Aqlah Brice Al Shediaq² was one of the married women who left her village of Beit Moundhir in northern Lebanon. In fact, she was probably one of the first women from her society to dare such an adventure. Her reason for leaving was the unbearable control exerted by her mother-in-law, Khazoon, over her own life and the lives of her husband and children. 'Aqlah left to America in 1894 after telling her husband, who feared the sea, that she would visit relatives in Wheeling, West Virginia, for one year and see what life in America was like.

Emigration was a choice for those women who were suffi-

ciently spirited to dare to challenge the sociocultural norms of their villages. The opportunities to make money independently and to improve the family's financial status were also important factors encouraging some Lebanese women to take the sea route to the New World. 'Aqlah was not the only woman to leave an intolerable environment and emigrate: the mother of Gibran Khalil Gibran, Kamila, left an abusive husband in 1895³ and set sail for America.

According to 'Aqlah's grandson, Edward Brice, “Khazoon was a strong-willed Lebanese matriarch. Her domination and control of every aspect of life within the large household extended to her son, John, and his wife, 'Aqlah. It was to escape the tyranny of her disarmingly beautiful mother-in-law, *Allah Yirhama!* (May God have mercy on her soul), that Sitta fled Lebanon”.⁴

Flouting local conventions, 'Aqlah traveled unaccompanied on her long sea voyage. As Edward later wrote, “It is a mystery to me and my family, how my gentle, mountain village grandma of approximately thirty years of age managed the sea voyage of three to four weeks to Ellis Island, followed by a train trip from the giant and bustling metropolis of New York to Wheeling, West Virginia”.⁵



Left to right: 'Aqlah, her son Tom and his wife Mary Saadeh. Photo courtesy of Edward Brice al Shidyah, (Wheeling, WV, ca. 1914).

Upon arriving in West Virginia, 'Aqlah worked as a peddler, following in the footsteps of Levantine migrants to the United States, Canada, Brazil, and Africa before her. Despite the fact that she was illiterate, she managed to learn enough English, Italian, Polish and Hungarian to attract a good number of loyal customers to her peddling enterprise. This was unsurprising since, as Najwa Nasr observes, daily contact with Americans, some of them immigrants themselves, "facilitated the removal of the linguistic barrier. Very soon the peddlers picked up the foreign language, starting of course with the survival expressions and the business jargon".⁶

Her name, 'Aqlah, which means wise or sensible in Arabic, became Mary in the United States. Mary peddled her wares in three states, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio.

Peddling was an occupation that needed no special education or technical or language skills and no great investment, for the merchandise was available on consignment and was easily translatable into cash. Above all, peddling was lucrative, providing money and freedom, although it required considerable physical strength and psychological endurance. Peddlers trod dangerous routes in adverse weather and were sometimes confronted with unfriendly people or, worse, hostile animals.

A peddler carried a *kashshi*, which was, according to Habib Katibah, "a corruption of the Spanish word for box or 'caixa'".⁷ Alixa Naff clarifies that the peddler's

load typically included a weighty suitcase strapped to the back, an open box or *kashshi* at the chest and a satchel or bundle in each hand.⁸ Among the peddler's wares were silk and lace fabrics and 'notions' to trim a garment; thread, needles, safety pins, thimbles, scissors, buttons, elastics, and shoelaces; underwear and outerwear for the whole family; and almost anything else requested by the peddlers' clients.⁹ These items were usually bought on consignment from a wholesaler known in America as the '*kashshash*'.¹⁰ 'Aqla bought her own merchandise from Wheeling wholesalers John Naylor, L. S. Good and Sa'id George.

'Aqlah's merchandise filled two large cases and her peddling expeditions began with the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad or at the Pennsylvania train station. Her customers were spread throughout the farming regions, villages and small towns of West Virginia, Ohio and Pennsylvania, and along the Ohio River.

'Aqlah "would often stay overnight in the home of a customer who had, by then, become a trustworthy friend".¹¹ According to Louise Seymour Houghton, women peddlers could gain access to homes more readily than men could because their customers trusted them and this allowed them to develop lasting clientele, which, in many cases, grew into friendships.¹²

Despite her resolve to leave Mount Lebanon, 'Aqlah was heartbroken at the prospect of parting from her children, especially Sarkis, her youngest son, who had not yet

been weaned. Once in America, she thought constantly of the family that she had left behind. Like many of her female compatriots, she sent her earnings¹³ to her husband so that he might purchase land in Beit Moundhir and provide for their six children and other members of the family.¹⁴

It was not until six years after her emigration that she was able to have her oldest son and his family join her in Wheeling. By 1912, the rest of her children and their families were all living with her in America. The fact that her husband's fear of ocean travel did not permit him to join her broke her heart.¹⁵

Once 'Aqlah's family arrived in the United States, she decided to buy property in Wheeling. She bought a three-story apartment building in the center of the town and other residential properties.

Her family was her life and, as matriarch, she always felt responsible for them. Although her sons made her stop peddling when she reached the age of sixty, she decided to return to her trade almost six years later. Her reason for going back to the only trade that she knew was her desire to help her family during the Depression of the 1930s, especially once the family business had been robbed and her eldest son fell victim to pneumonia.

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'Aqlah was a strong believer who always prayed with the rosary that she had carried with her from Lebanon. She cherished her praying beads and wore them out with her many prayers. She always wore a scapular and some relics and medals, which she had sewn as an amulet into a little sack resembling a rosary pouch. Her grandson, Edward, remembers her telling the family once about a house that she had to pass by when peddling near Big Wheeling Creek. Her customers had told her: "Don't go past that house, Mary, it is haunted. Go around it." But 'Aqlah said that she had no time to waste taking a detour and that she reached into her *'ibb* ('bosom') to take out her amulet and toss it over her shoulder. She then proceeded bravely, with faith, calling upon God, Jesus and the saints, saying: "*Ya Rabb! Ya Yasu'! Wa kull al Adiseen*".¹⁶

'Aqlah helped to establish the Our Lady of Lebanon Church in Wheeling and contributed to the church throughout her life. Although it is her sons who are still mentioned as being among the church's founders, it was 'Aqlah who originally gave money in their names. She

was also a founding member and lifelong treasurer of Saint Tobey's Charitable Society.¹⁷

One of the most touching details of 'Aqlah's long life comes from her first days in America. As she carried her wares across three states, she constantly agonized over her inability to finish weaning her infant son in Lebanon. In 'Aqlah's culture, breast-feeding was viewed as more than a necessity: it was the source of a lifelong bond between mother and child. The same bond existed when women with excess milk helped to rear the children of other mothers who were unable to lactate, or were anemic, or had died during childbirth or shortly after. A similar bond was created between the children nurtured by wet nurses and the nurses' own children. As Elizabeth Boosahda reminds us, these milk brothers or sisters were linked in a relationship that was almost as strong as blood kinship.¹⁸ While in Lebanon, 'Aqlah herself had lived up to tradition and nursed other children in her neighborhood.

'Aqlah's inability to breast-feed her own son haunted her as she peddled her wares. Her swollen breasts reminded her that breastfeeding was a mother's first duty to her child, that her milk was a gift from God, and that wasting that milk was an almost unforgivable sin. Her grandson remembers his mother telling him about 'Aqlah's agony, saying: "When peddling, *Sittak*, your grand-

mother, would stop on the road, find a private place and get rid of the milk still in her breasts while weeping and longing for her son and the rest of her children. She would then splash her face with water and continue peddling".¹⁹

'Aqlah's memorable comments about the bounty and freedom that she found in America include: "God bless Christopher Columbus for discovering America!" and "*Bayti hown*, my home is here." She often added: "God bless Ohio! It put bread on the table, it fed us".²⁰

Women like Mary Mouakad, the mother of *Exorcist* author William Peter Blatty, and the grandmother of another novelist, Vance Bourjaily,²¹ were also peddlers and, like 'Aqlah, they worked for their families, their independence, and their survival. These women, who went against cultural norms and faced all kinds of challenges, can only be admired for their courage in the face of overwhelming odds. By remembering them and writing about them, we rescue them from oblivion and give them the honor that they so richly deserve.

Endnotes

* This article draws on the many stories and anecdotes that 'Aqlah's grandchildren shared with the author and on the article written by Edward Brice al Shidyaq, "Sitta 'Aqlah: A Woman of Faith, Strength, and Dignity: From Blawza to Wheeling, West Virginia," *Journal of Maronite Studies*, July 1997; [http://www.mari.org/JMS/july97/Sitta_Aqlah.htm], last consulted September 2006).

1. Akram Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870-1920*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, p. 66.
2. The name of the family may be spelled in different ways: El Chediaq, Al Shidiaq, and Al Chedyiac.
3. Khater, p. 66, see also Elizabeth Boosahda, *Arab-American Faces and Voices*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003, p.70.
4. Edward Brice al Shidyaq, "Sitta 'Aqlah: A Woman of Faith, Strength, and Dignity from Blawza to Wheeling, West Virginia", *Journal of Maronite Studies*, July 1997, [http://www.mari.org/JMS/july97/Sitta_Aqlah.htm], Internet consulted September 2006.
5. Al Shidyaq, n.p.
6. Najwa Nasr, "Early Lebanese Immigrant Women to the USA," Online Resources for American Studies, [http://www.americansc.org.uk/Catalogue/Immigrant_Wome

n.doc], Internet consulted October 2006.

7. Habib Katibah, *Arabic-Speaking Americans*, New York: Institute of Arab American Affairs, 1946, p. 6.
8. Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: the Early Arab Immigrant Experience*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985, p. 163.
9. Nasr, n.p.
10. Naff, p. 169.
11. Al Shidyaq, n.p.
12. Louise Seymour Houghton, *Syrians in the United States, The Survey*, Part II, August 5, 1911, p. 650 in Naff, p. 177.
13. Khater, p. 184-185.
14. Ibid.
15. Al Shidyaq, n.p.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Boosahda, p. 101.
19. Al Shidyaq, n.p.
20. Ibid.
21. Evelyn Shakir, *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States*, Connecticut & London: Praeger, 1997, p. 39.

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