

Kiev and Bethlehem connections

Interview with Nadia Kattan Seikaly July 29, 2008, amended by Jack Nicola Kattan May 1, 2011.

Questions:

1. **Why did they go to Kiev? What was the connection between Bethlehem and Kiev?** See below.

2. **When did the first Bethlehemites arrive there and how large was the community?**

Nadia's great grandfather, Elias Kattan, a Bethlehem merchant, was probably the first who went to Kiev. He was in Istanbul on a business trip and met a Russian guy from Kiev, they started to talk about business opportunities to export Bethlehem olive wood and mother of pearl handicrafts related to the Holy Land. With his encouragement, Elias went to Kiev. In 1882, he opened a store there, selling olive wood and mother of pearl. Others followed, including the Sa'ades.

3. **How did they travel from Palestine? What was their route, how long did it take and what modes of transportation did they take? It sounds as if they moved pretty easily between Palestine and Kiev - what can you tell me about their travels?**

They left by ship from Haifa to Istanbul, then to Odessa and overland to Kiev.

3. **What was their business exactly and how did they get to be so wealthy in what seems like a relatively short time?**

Elias Kattan made friends with the (Orthodox) Archbishop of Kiev, who gave him the contract to supply all of the churches in the whole Ukraine with incense (bakhour). That's how they became rich. He brought it from Singapore and Yemen. Nadia's brother in Amman has letters from Singapore and Yemeni merchants about bringing this incense. The family brought icons, samovars and other Russian things as gifts to family in Bethlehem. Nadia's mom has one in Amman and also has the china and silver that grandmother Farideh bought in Russia, purchased when she hosted a party in Kiev for the Russian Orthodox Archbishop of Kiev. The family was Catholic. Nadia has a photo of her grandparents with Shukri Deeb, and his wife, Catherine Hanania, who spent their honeymoon at her grandparent's invitation in Kiev in 1908.

Nadia's great Uncle Anton was also in Russia and was the last of the family to leave. In 1917, they fled after the Bolsheviks came. Yacoub sent his wife and children to Bethlehem, and he went to Progresso Honduras to try to establish a business there. He changed all the money into Imperial Russian bonds before he left (before the revolution) and lost it all when the Bolsheviks refused to recognize Imperial debts. One of the Tsar's doctors was a Syrian and he wrote a book that her grandmother had and gave to Nadia. The book may have been lost in the 1967 war.

Nadia's grandfather and grandmother, Yacoub and Farideh Kattan, were also in Kiev at the same time. Children of Yacoub Kattan - Jeannette (Hanneh), born in Bethlehem in 1903), Mania, born 1904 in Kiev, Elias born 1906 in Bethlehem, Nicola born 1909 in Kiev.

Nadia's father, Nicola Kattan, was Jordanian ambassador to Chile and Argentina in 1960's. Embassy was in Santiago, Chile. He was sent by the King because there was a large community of Bethlehemites in Chile. Brother Jack went to Kiev in (2006) to look for the house where his great grandparents and grandparents lived. Found the street but there were only a few old houses there now. The rest were post war II built apartment buildings. Although the street name was changed by the Communists; he managed with the help of the uncle of the Ukrainian wife of the Jordanian Consul in Kiev to locate the approximate location of the house near the place where a St Nicolas's Church once stood (after whom his father was named). Kiev museum has big pieces of Mother of Pearl and olive wood.

I assume that they sold Bethlehem crafts like mother of pearl and olive wood, but I have a hard time imagining how they could get rich doing that. Also, in one interview with an aunt in Mexico, she told me that the Sa'ades were in the printing business and that they were one of the first to offer color printing. I've never heard this from any other source, but would love to know if it is true.

5. Grandmother told stories of a big house on a lake where they would swim in the summer. Where was this? Has anybody in our generation been there? *Nadia will ask her brother about the lake. The lake was near Kiev.*

6. I would also love to know stories about how your family left Russia and the circumstances of their leaving. What happened and what did they do when they returned to Palestine?

Having lost all their money after the Bolshevik Revolution Yacoub and family went back to Bethlehem through Istanbul. With little opportunity to maintain their Kiev standard of living Yacoub with his brothers Salim and Anton went to Progreso, Honduras to try to establish a business. In Honduras there was a large community of Bethlehem emigrants. Yacoub returned to Bethlehem in 1972 at the age of 90 and died in Amman before Christmas of 1974 at the age of 92 while visiting his son Nicola and is buried there. Up to his death Yacoub maintained his conviction that sooner or later Russia will discard the communist system and government and that if this happened during his lifetime he would return to Kiev.