

## Kiev and Bethlehem connections

Interview with Sister Mary Saadeh of Northridge, CA

July 30, 2008 (Mary's father Yacoub Sa'ade and Katherine were first cousins.)

Mary Saadeh is a Russian Orthodox nun, born on Dec 7, 1926 in Bethlehem, educated at the Russian school in Bethany, and has lived in the US for many years (*how many?*)

*According to Mary, Saadeh is a Hebrew name. It means The Blessed Eternal Light That Jesus Gives Us.*

*Elias Saadeh was the first; his son Mikha'il (Michael) was the first Mayor of Bethlehem. Mikha'il married Werde, had 3 sons, Ibrahim, Ya'cub and Abudullah. Yacub was also the mayor of Bethlehem. He married Tessina Slebbe. Their children were Elias and George (b.) George m. Jamila Massou. had 11 children, Mary is the youngest. She and her sister Milada (b. Dec. 22, 1920 or 21a) grew up in the Russian Orthodox school in Bethany. She spent nine years in that school and used to pray in Gethsemane. That's where she was a novice in Russian Orthodox Church.*

*When Katherine was in Palestine in the 1930's, and left Ramallah, she came to live with Na'ame and then she stayed with her cousin George Sa'ade's family's house in Bethlehem. Her brother (Issa George Yacoub Sa'ade) drove George from school to Katherine a few weeks before she was trying to leave. Mary recalls that she went to Na'ame's house when she first arrived in Palestine. They were good to her.*

### Questions:

1. Why did they go to Kiev? What was the connection between Bethlehem and Kiev?  
*Because of trade. Not everyone could come to America at that time; Europe was closer. Two brothers, Yacoub and Abdullah both went to Russia. The third brother, Ibrahim did not go to Russia. Yacoub also had a souvenir business in Jerusalem. His sons Elias and George would alternate staying in Russia and taking care of the store in Jerusalem. They both worked in the store in Kiev, used to go back and forth going for a month or so for a vacation. Mary remembers her great uncle Abdullah from childhood; he, a box with Russian money to her house. He always felt that the situation would change again, was hoping to go back and afraid that someone would steal the money. Yacoub died young. Mary described him as very good at putting people to work and giving to the poor.*
2. When did the first Bethlehemites arrive there and how large was the community? *Many Bethlehem families went to Kiev – Kattan, Sa'ade. We are related to Kattan – my grandfather's (Yacoub) sister was married to Kattan. Once the Greek Patriarch from Syria came to Kiev to crown or install the Patriarch of Russia. The Kattans had a big party for him, attended by the Sa'ades and all the families. Russia helped the Orthodox everywhere. They sent the clothes and icons and the gospels to Jerusalem, Constantinople, Syria. The Russians had the best schools and hospitals in Syria and Palestine.*
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?*  
*Less than a week. They left by ship from Haifa to Istanbul (Constantinople), then to Odessa on the Black Sea and overnight train overland to Kiev. The boat trip from Haifa or Jaffa to Turkey took a day or two and the train was overnight.*

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

*Yacoub's family had a retail store that sold religious articles to churches and monasteries – rosaries, icons, incense, oregano oil. They brought these items from Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Mt. Athos. A Bethlehem man named Cosma married a Greek lady and they lived in Istanbul. This man and his wife took Mary's parents to pray at St. Sofia. Grandfather Yacoub had a mill in Palestine making oil from oregano. They took it to Kiev to sell. The Russians used it to drop in their tea because of the cold.*

*Doesn't know what Abdullah's family did - perhaps clothes, too.*

5. Katherine 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? *They had rivers. Mary's mother used to say that the Russians from Siberia would come to be baptized in the river Dnesk.*

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?

*It was very, very hard. The Germans came and took all the foreigners out of Russia. My mother was in Bethlehem already, but my Uncle Elias and wife and children were there. All the Arabs had to leave but they couldn't take anything with them. My parents were not there. When they came to Bethlehem, they had to face another war – the first World War, with Turkey and the British. It was very, very hard. Ibrahim's son Habib – the Turks took him from Bethlehem by force to Turkey to fight the Armenians, Syrians and Greeks. He managed to run away and on the way, the villagers dressed him like a woman.*

*Katherine's youngest brother, Demetri (Mitri) Abdullah Mikha'il Elias Sa'ade went to Romania, married a Romanian (Mania), had three girls and then a boy. She was cleaning the house on a step ladder and fell. She started bleeding and died a few weeks later, during Orthodox Holy Week. The baby boy died after his mother. Mitri then married Azize, who took care of the three girls –Luba (married Abraham Nassar, died in San Bernardino, buried her in Honduras with her son George), Shura (now a nun, living in the Russian Orthodox convent in Gethsemane – Mother Theodora 79 or 80 years old) and Lydia (married Jalil Bendek). Mitri and Azize went to Mexico had three sons – Jalil (married, lives in Beit Jala – built a mall in Bethlehem), Jacob Mitri Saade (Mexico City), Gabriel Mitri Saade (Mexico City). They took her to the hospital (where?) and Mary's parents went to see her.*

*My parents lived in Kiev across the street from St. Nicholas military church. My mother used to take her children to this church every day.*

*My mother lost three children. My brother Alexander died at 40 years old, died when he returned to Bethlehem. Sava died as well at about 40. One girl was stillborn. Wrapped in a tissue bag.*

*Crusaders expelled the Greek Orthodox patriarch from Jerusalem. They persecuted the Orthodox. When the Ottomans came, they brought him back. Russia became Orthodox from Constantinople. The Patriarch of Constantinople (Photious) sent...*

*Prince Vladimir of Russia was an idol worshiper. He captured Kiev. He sent messengers to Rome, Constantinople to see which religion would be good to his people. The messenger who went to Const. was impressed. Prince said I want this for my country. Sent Syrian and Mysobias. Prince Vladimir was baptized and married the Emperor's sister, Olga. When he*

*became Orthodox he stopped torturing. He is responsible for converting all of Russia, Serbia, Ukraine.*