

Lebanese Immigration to Mexico

AND THE AMERICAS

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*To emigrate is to relinquish,
to rend the flesh of the soul.*

Emigration is an existential metamorphosis in which the individual throws overboard the possibility of living in the land of his or her forebears, of enjoying the warmth of parents, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters. It is saying good-bye to dear friends to meet again, in the best of cases, only when their faces are disguised by the passing years and their hair whitened by the snows of time.

Emigration is so painful that there must be extreme reasons for doing it, like hunger, political persecution, oppression or war. We descendants of Lebanese immigrants who arrived in Mexico in the first quarter of this century have those reasons.

This emigration began in the mid-nineteenth century with the decline

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of the Ottoman Empire, the aggression it exercised against its subject peoples and the medium-term impossibility of change in the region. First, the intellectuals went into exile, those who fought with paper and pen. Countries like Egypt were fertile ground for their writings about their homeland, and among the founders there of prestigious newspapers like *Al Ahram* were two Lebanese named Takla. A country's liberation is achieved with drops of blood, drops of sweat and drops of ink.

The first important waves of migration to the Western Hemisphere came around 1860. At first, only a few arrived seeking their fortunes, better living conditions or decent work that the "Sublime Door" had denied them. My father used to say, "Many of us left our homelands so you could sleep peacefully."

Those emigrants walked a road with many obstacles and traversing many craggy hills and unexpected ravines. Most of them first went to

the tinsel world of the United States, but Latin America began to rise up before them with its myriad of possibilities. In the early twentieth century, thousands of men and women emigrated from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Iraq to Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Chile and other countries in the hemisphere, countries whose generosity made their hospitality a creed. We, their descendants, acquired a double commitment: loyalty to our families' new homeland and understanding that our native soil was not a matter of chance, but a deliberate choice.

The Lebanese came to Mexico at the end of the last century from the United States or by ship at the Mexican ports of Veracruz, Tampico and Progreso. Research has shown that the first Lebanese immigrant who arrived was R.P. Boutros Raffoul in 1878. Three years later Joseph M. Abad arrived, and in 1882, Santiago Saouma Adued settled in Mérida.

After 1900, migration increased. Honest men and women in great need

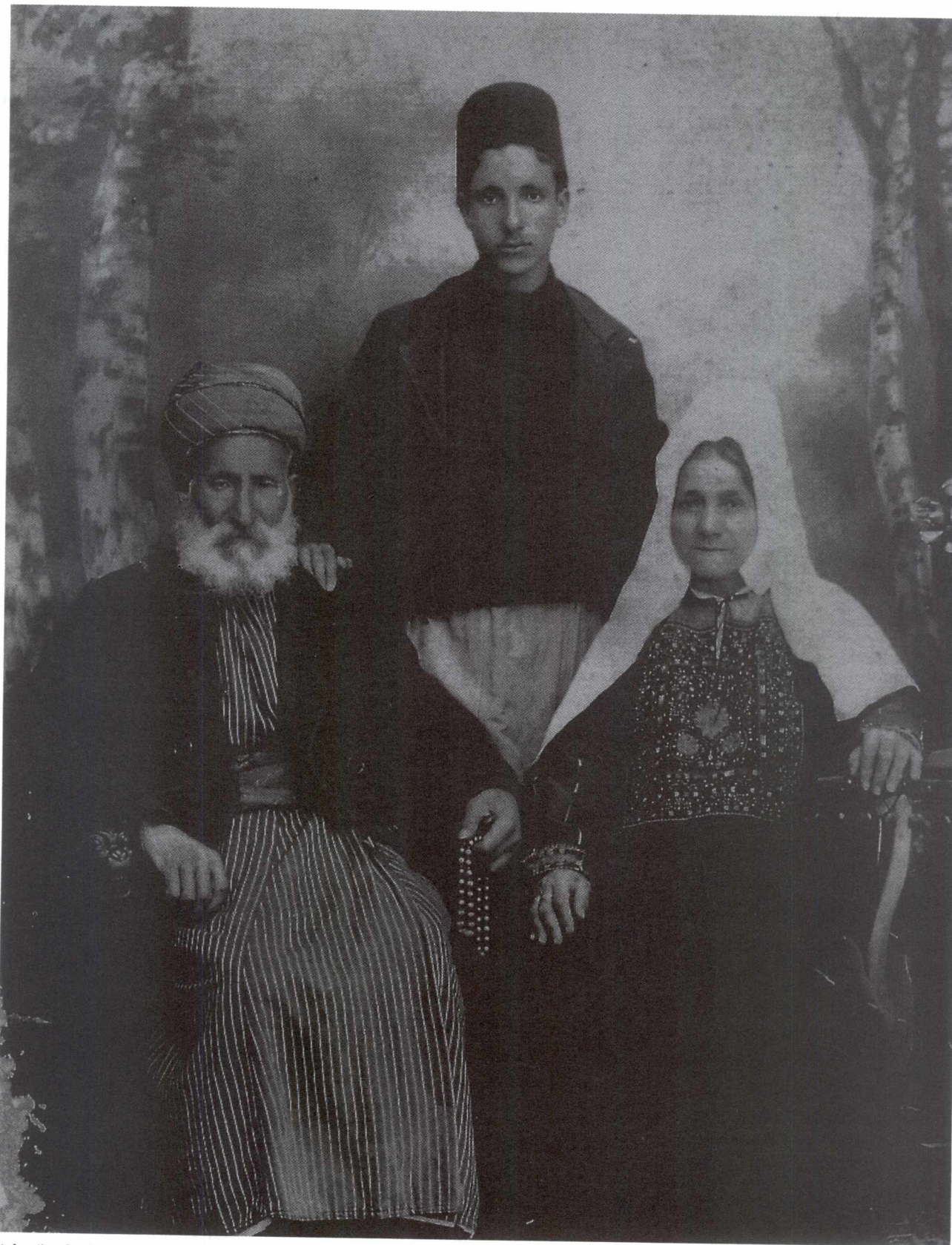


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A family of Lebanese immigrants in 1899.

learned the language and the customs of the Mexican people, making them their own. They became part of the society that opened its heart to them. They sold anything they could: belts, needles, thread, shoelaces and even dreams! From peddling their wares from a box hung around their necks, they progressed to small shops and from there to factories. Their descendants were given what they themselves never had: a university education.

One of their ways of doing business was on the installment plan, the immediate precursor of today's great retail phenomenon, the credit card. Their audacity and vision led them to occupy political positions in Latin America, everything from congressional seats to presidencies. It is important to point out that they never acted as pressure groups, but always as individuals integrated into a plural, national society.

In Mexico, they have played outstanding parts in culture, trade, industry and finance. For example, the great poet Jaime Sabines' father was Lebanese and his mother, from Chiapas; noted movie maker Miguel Zacarías, co-founder of Mexican sound film who, at the age of 92 has published 22 books, including essays, novels and poetry, is a descendent of Lebanese, as is international screen star Salma Hayek and other greats of the arts and sciences like Héctor Azar, Elías Trabulse, Charlotte Yazbek and the late Mauricio Garcés, to name only a few. Among the outstanding businessmen and financiers are Carlos Slim and Alfredo Harp; among politicians, Emilio Chuayffet; philoso-



Celebrating Lebanese Independence Day outside the Lebanese embassy in Mexico City.

phers, Miguel Manzur.¹ Hemisphere-wide, we have famed scientist Michael Debakey, actors like Murray

¹ Héctor Azar is one of Mexico's most promising playwrights and stage directors. Elías Trabulse made very important contributions in the history of science in Mexico and Latin America. Mauricio Garcés gained fame for the roles he created in Mexican comic cinema. Carlos Slim is the owner and main stockholder of such important companies as Teléfonos de México and Sanborn's Hermanos (one of Mexico's most important store and restaurant chains). Alfredo Harp is currently president and a major stockholder in the country's largest banking institution, Grupo Financiero Banamex. Emilio Chuayffet, of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, is currently Mexico's minister of the interior. Miguel Manzur is one of the country's foremost philosophers, noted for the originality of his thinking. [Editor's Note.]



Mixture of cultures.



Lebanese immigrant women in sumptuous traditional dress.

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Abraham and Danny Thomas or even the “madman” of Ecuadoran politics, Abdalá Bucaram.

The Lebanese in Mexico and the Americas are like any other ethnic group, the majority acting for the general good with good results. They water the fields of racial mix with the sap of the thousands-of-years-old cedar tree. Their ancestors did not abandon their homelands, but carried them to other

shores like the revitalizing shadow of the legendary tree, emblem of the ancestral homeland. ❧



Lebanese architecture in Mexico.