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 Naeve Naaq 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 sold at prices that were very attractive. 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’”. 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. 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. These items were usually bought on consignment from a wholesaler known in America as the ‘kashshash’. 7 ‘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. ‘Aqlah “would often stay overnight in the home of a customer who had, by then, become a trustworthy friend”. 8

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. 9

Emigration was a choice for those women who were sufficiently 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 1895 and set sail for America.

‘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 Yirhamna! (May God have mercy on her soul), that Sitta fled Lebanon”.

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”. 9

‘Aqlah Brice Al Shidyaq 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.

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Guita Hourani
Associate Director
Lebanese Emigration Research Center (LERC)

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’”.

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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...
was also a founding member and lifelong treasurer of Saint Toby'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. 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 breast-feeding was a mother’s first duty to her child, that her milk was a gift from God, and that wastaging that milk was an almost unforgivable sin. Her grandson remembers his mother telling him about ‘Aqlah’s agony, saying: “When peddling, Sittak, your grandfather 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.”28

‘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 scarpeul and some relics and medals, which she had sewn as an amulet into a little sack resembling a rosary pouche. 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 ‘ibāb (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 Rabbi! Ya Yasu’! Wā kull al-Adiseen.”29

‘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

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Endnotes


2. The name of the family may be spelled in different ways: El Chediak, Al Shidyaq, and Al Chediak.


14. Ibid.


16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.


20. Ibid.