



Historical FEATURES

Courtship in Ottoman Jerusalem

The Intimate Correspondence
of Alphonse and Afifeh

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How do you want me to leave my office for Christmas in such disarray? I have no hope that it will happen and I regret that I won't be able to pray [in Jerusalem] by your side as we did last year.

But you will think of me and pray for the one who is deprived of this dear happiness. Thus, alone, between my four walls, I will nourish myself with the hopes of celebrating merrier Christmases, and I will ask the Divine Goodness that this may be the last solitary Christmas of my life.

...Do you know for whom I am preparing all of this [household items]? For the one I have loved since I was a child; for the one I have followed in her joys and in her pains; for the one who has always shared my feelings; for the one the Divine Wisdom is reserving for me... do you know her, Foufou. I send you a tender kiss.

—Alphonse Alonzo to Afifeh Sidawi, Jaffa, 11
December, 1913

Alphonse Alonzo's letters to Afifeh Sidawi during the late Ottoman period help us shed some light on the courtship and relationship of a young, urban, Christian couple from Jerusalem. The letters open a window into the mores and taboos of that era. What is most interesting, however, is the depth and complexity of feeling as the young couple progresses from friendship to engagement to marriage.

Marriage was usually a family affair, and not a matter of personal choice and decision. Families tended to coerce women more than men, but potential bridegrooms got their fair share of pressure.¹ Since love was not a necessary prerequisite for marriage, it was customary for young girls to be married off by their fathers in the same manner as business transactions were conducted—for security, money, or status.

For this essay, I interviewed Lorraine Alonzo, Alphonse and Afifeh's daughter, who was born in Jerusalem in 1916 and was raised in the Old City until 1934. She remembers being told that her great-aunts and grandmothers were not allowed to go on outings with young men unless they were chaperoned by a relative. They were not allowed to sit in the living room with a group of mixed company that included eligible young bachelors. Writing to a male friend was unacceptable unless he had asked the young woman's parents for their permission and had declared his intentions to marry her.² It therefore comes as a surprise to read the openness and freshness of Alphonse's letters to Afifeh, and the present-day timbre of their relationship, considering prevailing conservative attitudes toward courtship and the relations between the sexes.

Alphonse Alonzo's letters to Afifeh Sidawi were donated to me by Lorraine Alonzo, on the eve of her recent move to a retirement community. Unfortunately, no letters from Afifeh survived. Alphonse's letters were saved in Afifeh's *secrétaire* (French for writing desk), a small black leather case the size of a laptop computer. The *secrétaire* has a deep bottom for correspondence and significant documents or objects, while the inside of the lid includes compartments for the ink pen, blotter and small notes.

With much trepidation, I opened Afifeh's case. Alphonse's 13 letters in French dating from 1910 to 1914 were folded carefully on top of a pile of old school notebooks, Alphonse's Jaffa diary, and yellowed baptism and marriage certificates. At the bottom, under all the letters and papers, rested an ivory fan. I held it gently in my hands, as the fabric was tattered and threadbare. I imagined for a moment young Afifeh opening it to fan herself, and I wondered if Alphonse had given it to her on their engagement day.

In 1913, when he wrote the above letter from Jaffa to Afifeh, who was residing in Jerusalem, Alphonse was a handsome, strapping young man with dark eyes and a thick drooping moustache as was fashionable in those days. He and Afifeh had been corresponding in French via mail for the past three years and were engaged to be married the following year. They both had grown up in the Christian Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem and came from respectable Catholic families.

Alphonse Alonzo was born in Jerusalem's Old City in 1883. He was the first-born



Alphonse Alonzo, right, at the French Consular Post Office in Jaffa, 1910.

Source: The collection of the author

in a family of 11 children, of whom only six survived to adulthood. He attended the local Franciscan elementary school, and travelled to Aleppo to pursue his education at the Terra Sancta School, which was founded in 1859 by the Franciscan Friars.³ The academic subjects taught at Terra Sancta were religious studies, Arabic, Italian, French, English, Turkish, mathematics, geography, and history.⁴

Because Ottoman Jerusalem was a small, provincial town, primarily serving tourists and pilgrims, it did not offer many new employment opportunities other than those related to the travel industry. At Easter time, thousands of pilgrims descended on Jerusalem each year.⁵ The guest hostels were packed and the candle-makers and religious souvenir merchants profited from this influx into the city. Most young men either remained close to home, assisting their family businesses, or immigrated to the Americas to make their fortunes or escape Ottoman military conscription.⁶

Following the long tradition of men who sought out their fortunes away from home, Alphonse traveled to Jaffa where he initially worked for the French Consular post office, and eventually for the Credit Lyonnais Bank. His command of the French language and his love of numbers made him an excellent accountant.

In those days, Jaffa was the business centre of Palestine. The legendary Jaffa oranges grew in large agricultural fields surrounding the city centre. These were picked from the trees, individually wrapped with tissue paper, crated and shipped to Europe. Jaffa was a bustling port essential to merchants, fishermen and the tourist industry. In 1892,



Afifeh Sidawi standing with Manana Sidawi, her older sister, in Jerusalem, 1904. *Source: The collection of the author*

the only railroad in Palestine, connecting Jerusalem and Jaffa, was completed. Alphonse came home from Jaffa to visit his family and Afifeh on a train that travelled daily each way the 38 miles in about four to five hours.⁷ The journey seemed interminable to anyone used to sauntering 15 minutes from one end of the Old City of Jerusalem to the other.

Afifeh had attended Notre Dame de Sion, a French Catholic School in the Old City on the Via Dolorosa near St. Stephen's Gate. The Sisters of Sion Convent, School and Orphanage for girls were built in 1868.⁸ The school was legendary for its excellent education, but also its harsh discipline and austerity. It is not clear why Afifeh, was a boarder at the school, considering her family lived in Jerusalem, except perhaps that boarders enjoyed a higher status. It is worthy

to note that in those late Ottoman days, it was highly unusual and very progressive to send one's daughter to school away from home. Sultana Abdo, a Jerusalemite contemporary of Afifeh, who later married Jerusalem essayist and pedagogue, Khalil Sakakini, was sent to board at the Ramallah Friends School, which was a three-hour mule ride away from Jerusalem.⁹

The tragedy that coloured Afifeh's entire life was the loss of her right eye due to trachoma—an eye disease very prevalent in those days in Palestine. Both Afifeh and her older brother, Amin, contracted it in their youth. Afifeh never recovered emotionally from the loss of her eye. It affected her disposition and turned her into a sombre girl, prone to fits of melancholy and depression. In fact, in all her photographs she is standing in profile, concealing her right eye.

Alphonse's father, Bonaventura, or Mantura Alonzo was born in Jerusalem and educated by the Franciscan Friars. He spoke Arabic, French and Italian, which came in handy in his line of work, as he owned a grocery store in the Old City and catered primarily to the convents, selling them, among other things, wine, cheese, and olive oil.

Alphonse was a pillar of his family and community. Kind, responsible, hardworking and loyal, he exuded confidence and trust which rendered him beloved by all. His younger sister, Elisa Alonzo wrote him a letter from Beirut when she was only 18 years old. She was heading to Paris to enter a convent, and she knew how concerned



Alphonse standing on the far right, wearing a black armband to denote mourning, Jerusalem, 1911.

Source: *The collection of the author*

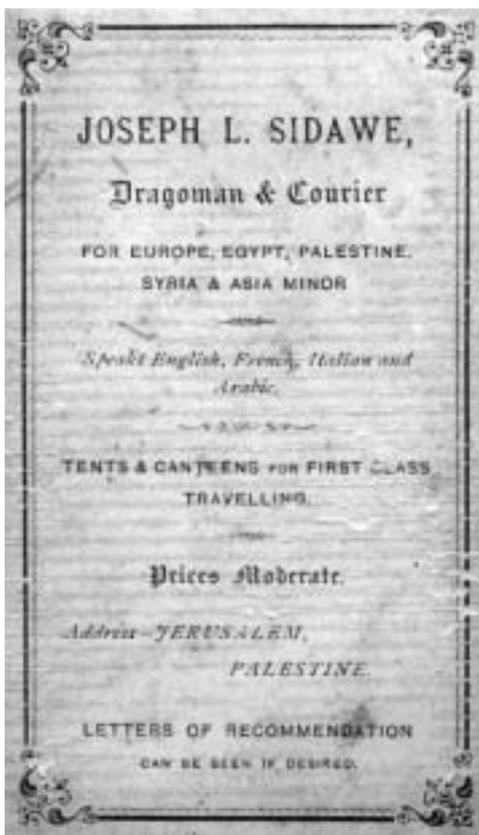
her mother was about the long distance that was separating them. “It will be your turn in Jerusalem,” she wrote, “to try to console our poor distressed mother. I know, Alphonse, that you can do it, because God gave you a heart of gold full of devotion and filial love.”¹⁰

After Alphonse’s father, Bonaventura, died on 4 February, 1911, Alphonse wore a black band on his upper arm as a sign of mourning and—as was common in those days—wrote his correspondence on paper with a black border. Manana and Afifeh must have extended their condolences to Alphonse because he thanks them, while expressing a strong faith in God.

Now father of the family, I feel the weight of the worries and big responsibility toward the little ones condemned to my destiny. Nevertheless, I am not despairing. I have confidence in the One who has supported me to this day. I have faith in the Divine Providence, which doesn’t abandon children, and if one day I fail, it would be in spite of myself.

—Jerusalem, 10 February, 1911

Afifeh’s father, Yusef Lawand Sidawi, was a dragoman and a courier. The word ‘dragoman’ originates from the Arabic word, ‘*turjman*’, meaning ‘translator’, but



Yusef Lawand Sidawi's back-to-back photo and business card, 1880s Jerusalem. *Source: The collection of the author*

it evolved to mean 'travel guide'. A dragoman's job could also involve important responsibilities, including contacts and agreements with the Ottoman authorities.¹¹ Yusef traveled extensively, escorting groups of British tourists and pilgrims to historical and holy sites. He spoke Arabic, French, English and Italian. In his youth, he, himself, had been a student at the College St Joseph in Beirut, Lebanon. He believed in education and sent his six children to attend French Catholic schools. Afifeh and Manana were doted upon and given the same opportunities and privileges as their brothers in a society where males were often arbitrarily given preferential treatment.

One might surmise that both Alphonse and Afifeh's fathers' open-mindedness was a product of their numerous business contacts with foreigners and their children's attendance in European missionary schools. However, most Jerusalemites had dealings with pilgrims and tourists, and the urban Christian bourgeoisie usually sent their children to missionary schools. Not all Jerusalemite fathers extended as much freedom and autonomy to their children as Alphonse and Afifeh's fathers, however.

We have very little documentation about the courtship rituals of young Palestinian

couples in the late Ottoman period. The publication of *Volume 1* of Khalil Sakakini's diaries provides us a rare glimpse of his courtship with Sultana Abdo.¹² Khalil and Sultana's parents were also unusually progressive and tolerant for that era. As Salim Tamari notes, "Nicola Abdo [Sultana's father] must have been a very open-minded man by contemporary standards to allow his two daughters to be courted publicly by their male acquaintances without escort."¹³

Even though Alphonse had not declared his intentions toward Afifeh, he wrote to her from Jaffa without asking her father's permission. We can deduce that among educated Christian Jerusalemites, letter-writing to the opposite sex and unescorted outings before marriage or even before professing one's intention to marry, were socially acceptable (or if they weren't completely frowned upon, they were at least tolerated).

Alphonse's Life in Jaffa

Alphonse was a man of reflection, who took up the pen to write down his thoughts and make sense of his life. He left behind a short diary written at the beginning of his stay in Jaffa in the summer of 1910 on the stationery of Hardegg's Jerusalem Hotel. Most of his entries refer to dinner invitations at the American Colony, the Franciscan convent and the Italian Consulate. However, some of his entries reflect the tensions of a young man away from home.

Reading a book is useful when one can apply its content to a scene in one's life... One day quite accidentally I happen to have read a short novel entitled, Fishermen of Ireland. The little book described fishermen's lives and their destinies.

Well then, one morning while walking along the shore [in Jaffa], I spotted two small vessels with their tricolour sails getting ready to sail off. The animation on board, the departure preparations, the nets all laid out, reminded me of the fishermen in Ireland, who left their home to seek out their tombs in the immense ocean.

–Jaffa, 15 July, 1910

What starts out as a pleasant scene on the beach with colourful sailboats setting out to sea ends with a sense of impending danger. Is Alphonse anxious about his arrival in Jaffa, and is he comparing his departure from home to the doomed journey of the Irish fishermen?

In his first letter to Afifeh, dated 27 August, 1910, Alphonse paints an unhappy picture of his life in Jaffa. When he couldn't lodge in the convent, where he had planned on spending his days, he becomes anxious and distraught:



Alphonse Alonzo standing in the back, second from the right, with members of the American Colony in Jaffa after a game of tennis. Source: *The collection of the author*

Imagine in what state I am finding myself, me, who thought I was going to be alone and in peace. What should I do? I have an unexplainable repugnancy for everything that is proposed to me, and if it had only been my honour that was at stake, I would have returned from where I had come. If only I had free choice, but alas, it's the will of others that I have to submit to. All my actions here are controlled; all my words carefully weighed and my movements registered.¹⁴

Pride and resignation take hold of Alphonse, who, feeling powerless in a situation he did not choose, decides to tough it out and remain in Jaffa, even though the circumstances are not favorable. He is at the mercy of his companions and the world, all of which intrude upon his solitude:

And when, far away from my parents, I thought I could lock myself [inside] and be at peace at the hotel, suddenly my companions from the pension, avid for pleasures and games, impose on me their will. I follow them; I enjoy myself with them. And in my pleasures, in my joys, which are not mine, I regret my previous life, and the days I will not see again...¹⁵

Even months later, Alphonse's life in Jaffa is still riddled with problems, both personal and professional. On 15 March, 1911, he writes to Afifeh:

*After spending two long months with family, in a hectic state, I am plunging myself again into a life of conformity, of politics, in other words, living a lie and being tactful, adapting to circumstances and conforming to customs. I am very surrounded, yet I'm alone. I have lots of duties and yet I have none. I belong to the world, and yet I don't.*¹⁶

A month away from their wedding day, Alphonse regrets the distance that separates them.

It is not that I want you to hide your feelings in the future. I am not concerned that someday we might lose our frankness with one another. How I wish I were next to you to talk about these matters that touch us so closely but which we have to deal with from such a distance.

–Jaffa, 24 December, 1913

Issues revolving around sincerity, frankness, honesty, and concealment of feelings abound in Alphonse's correspondence. "Sincerity is a beautiful virtue," he writes from Jaffa. "But one should still remain distrustful in life. One can fall flat due to one's frankness and talking too much can harm the body and the soul."¹⁷

The story goes that a lady guest at the hotel pretends not to speak English or French, only to astound Alphonse that same evening by ordering her dinner in perfect English and the next day, with the best of French accents, asking him if he'd ever been to Naples.

*I was indignant. Why did this woman use this ruse? What did she expect? Was it to defend herself or to attack us that she employed this strategy? A man would have never been capable of such a ruse.*¹⁸

Alphonse had an ambivalent, if not misogynistic view of women. On the one hand, he revered them and tipped his hat when encountering them in the street, but on the other hand, he thought of them as dangerous creatures, capable of mischief and intrigue, and in possession of a disproportionate amount of power. After attending a play at the Franciscan Sisters on 17 July, 1910, Alphonse cannot contain his envy of the privileges he perceives the female sex to have.

*It is the first time I see young ladies on stage, who acted at times modest and at times mischievous while playing the parts of students in a boarding school. One thing got on my nerves—when one of the girls played the role of a boy. But why? Because when a boy plays a female part, he is the subject of a controversy, but everything in the world is permitted to women.*¹⁹

When Afifeh finds Alphonse preoccupied by women, he becomes somewhat defensive. He tries to reassure her that he is not critical of women, but that he wants to understand them better.

In your letter of the 3rd, you think that issues relating to women preoccupy me. Far from wanting to meddle with feminism, I have always had a special attention for women. It's not because I want to criticize them that I study their role, but because the role of women interests me a great deal.
–Jaffa, 20 April, 1911

The rest of the letter, however, casts doubt on that assertion. Alphonse has well-formed opinions on women's role in society, which he believes have divine providence.

God gave them a destiny that they must follow and duties they must fulfil... They are endowed of certain qualities, which they should use in their home and not in the courtroom or at the helm of a carriage. They should hold themselves in the limits of their sex [sic] to answer to the universal law of nature, and to let everyone do the task that ones' destined to do.²⁰

He then throws himself into a passionate diatribe limiting the role of women to the classroom and the kitchen: "I love women in their role of educators and housewives. I hate them when they meddle in things that aren't their business."²¹ Only then does he inquire of Afifeh at the end of his letter, "I am ignorant of your ideas on this subject, but I would like to know them."²²

We will never know Afifeh's response. We can conjecture that since she was raised in a family where she and her sister were valued for their intellect and their talents, she would have vehemently disagreed with him. After all, she was a promising pianist on her way to a professional musical career. However, she could easily have acquiesced, as Alphonse's views were common at the time.

Alphonse idealizes women to the extent that they can only disappoint him. "The progress of nations depends on women; so is the happiness of people," he writes.²³ Indeed, it is Alphonse himself who assigns them with disproportionate power. "If a man does any harm, it's because of the seduction of women; if he does good things, it's often derived from her good advice."²⁴ Women are simultaneously divine and diabolic.

In the course of this discussion, Alphonse divulges his ethnocentric views: "If I see an honest boy, I can expect a model mother next to him, but next to an Apache, I see a miserable creature."²⁵ These views were equally common at the turn of the century, and may further reflect his education at the hands of western colonial missionaries. Nevertheless, it is certainly ironic that this Jerusalem boy who so cavalierly disparages

native people was at that time derogatorily perceived by western colonial powers as a native savage.

With typical youthful intransigence, Alphonse holds unbending views about the world, especially about women and mothers. After an invitation for lunch, he writes:

*This house was deserted. Someone was missing. This goddess was missing, she who has to preside at this table and give each guest her smile and her care. This soul was missing, the one who should have been hovering in this home and spreading the perfume of her tenderness. A mother was missing. This divine being that God, nature and even the elements have anointed as head of the family, was not present. In short, oh, you little ones, your mother cannot hear you; as much as you cry, your tears will not reach her. And does she think of you? Did she forget her sacred duties? Be patient, she will return. Even though her heart is harsh, maternal love will soften it.*²⁶

Sitting on a veranda overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, delectable food spread on the table and a soothing breeze blowing by, the child's mother's absence at the table begins for Alphonse an unexpected flood of lamentation. He idealizes mothers—and simultaneously he chastises them: "... your mother cannot hear you; as much as you cry, your tears will not reach her." And finally, the ultimate jab: "... her heart is harsh." Why such angry words? Why such accusations? Is Alphonse missing his mother, Maria Albina Alonzo, and angry for her possible role in his exile in Jaffa? He did write to Afifeh, 27 August, 1910, that he wished to return home, but felt unable to. "If only I had free choice, but alas, it's the will of others that I have to submit to."²⁷ Was he referring to his mother's will?

Alphonse and Afifeh: "Love Cemented by the Tears of Our Ordeals"

In Alphonse's last letter to Afifeh before their wedding day, he recounts how they met as children:

I saw you first as an innocent girl and I loved you with the tenderness of a child, and since then I have followed all the footsteps of your existence.
—Jaffa, 20 January, 1914²⁸

We can presume that as members of the same small Catholic community growing up in the Old City of Jerusalem, Alphonse and Afifeh would have met each other as children at church, and would have grown up together.



Picnic in Jerusalem circa 1906 Daoud Sidawi, second from the left, holding a cane, Amin Sidawi, standing in the back in the middle, Alphonse, standing on the right, Afifeh, sitting third from the right.
Source: The collection of the author

At Sion [School]my attention was awakened. In the shadow of Daoud I could get close to you, and every time I shook your hand, I felt my heart flutter. But until then our childhood glances could not betray the feelings of our souls.
 –Jaffa, 20 January, 1914

Afifeh went to Notre Dame de Sion, and so did Alphonse’s sister, Elisa, who was Afifeh’s junior by one year. We can assume then that Alphonse would have accompanied his family to school functions and have fraternized with Afifeh at Sion. But who is Daoud? Daoud Sidawi was Afifeh’s oldest brother, the head of the family after their father, Yusef, died in 1903. Daoud also happened to have been the manager of the Credit Lyonnais Bank in Jaffa, the same bank in which Alphonse was employed. He was another important link to Afifeh.

At Daoud’s deathbed, destiny reunites us... there a tender pity took over my being. There and then I swore that I would never leave you.
 –Jaffa, 20 January, 1914

The critical moment in Alphonse and Afifeh’s relationship takes place at Daoud’s deathbed. On 30 December, 1907, Daoud dies at the age of 32 and leaves behind a bereaved family. Alphonse and Afifeh shared this tragedy together and grew closer

as a result of their sorrow. In some ways, Daoud's death became the fulcrum around which their courtship and entire life revolved. Alphonse continues to refer to it in his letters, blending his love for Afifeh with this poignant and heartbreaking episode in their lives.

Do you know the one with whom I prayed at Daoud's deathbed? Ah, why all these memories? Nevertheless, I love them as much as I love you.
–Jaffa, 11 December, 1913

However, Alphonse and Afifeh's courtship did not develop without pressure from their families or acquaintances. Because Alphonse only refers to "they," we must assume that he was talking about their close entourage. Without knowing exactly what people objected to, we read allusions in Alphonse's letters to the stress they imposed on the young couple.

*My Dear Afifeh,
You really are hurting my feelings. Why aren't you writing me? This is my fourth letter since my arrival, to you and Manana, and not a response, which leads me to be very worried, because I don't know to what to attribute this silence. Are they making you miserable because of me, which I cannot tolerate?*
–Jaffa, 12 October, 1910

In the following letter, dated 18 October, 1910, Alphonse tries to cheer up Afifeh, who must have written him about her worries.

What do you fear, Afifeh? Your heart is pure, your conscience is clear. It cannot be God's punishment that is weighing on you. It cannot be remorse that is eating you up. It must be people's gossip persecuting me, which gives you grief.

In a conservative society, gossip is a strong deterrent for young lovers, who do not want to cause dishonour to their respective families. Yet, Alphonse and Afifeh continue to write to each other, braving the displeasure of their community.

On 24 December, 1913, Alphonse responds to Afifeh's fear that his sister, Elisa, is upset about their engagement. He uses a cajoling manner to say difficult things to Afifeh ("Foufou Darling," and "... my sweet Foufou," and "... I forgive you your less than charitable judgment by adding a gentle kiss, which you must be feeling at the moment that I am writing this letter.") However, he does not let her escape the impact of her accusations. Instead, Alphonse is diplomatic, but firm.

Your letter of before yesterday gave me grief. Why do you fear that Elisa is unhappy to hear about our engagement? Fofou Darling, you must always see the good side in people, especially in the area of feelings... don't you agree with me?

I am not talking about my sister in particular, but in the world in general. I am convinced that after some reflection, you will think like me and that when you will have a moment you will write a note to Elisa, whom I am certain, is praying for her brother and his friend.

These are not reproaches that I am making, my sweet Fofou, but I cannot allow you to have any feelings that are less than charitable. You will forgive me this boldness just as I forgive you your less than charitable judgment by adding a gentle kiss, which you must be feeling at the moment that I am writing this letter.²⁹

In his final letter before their wedding day, Alphonse refers again to the hardships they had to endure as a courting couple:

It is since then that life became a cruel combat for the two of us. Everything was against us—our close relatives first, then the elements. There were moments when I got weaker; the struggle was surpassing my strength, but an innate feeling maintained inside me the fire of your affection.

...Even those who were against us have finally realized their faults and for those who are still torturing us, we offer them our forgiveness.

—Jaffa, 20 January, 1914

Alphonse is getting married in three days to the woman he has loved for years. At this point nothing can come in their way. He feels generous and magnanimous towards those who are still disapproving of their relationship.

Afifeh Darling, can we now say that we have finally obtained the fruit of our suffering? Or will we suffer again? But who cares about the tumults of the outside world? It is you who interests me, and it is I who should interest you. Everything that will be said on the outside will never destroy our love cemented by the tears of our ordeals.³⁰

Afifeh in Jerusalem

While most urban educated young girls were contemplating marriage, the Sidawi girls were also seriously pursuing their careers. Manana, the second-born, was principal of the first academic Ottoman school for girls in the Old City of Jerusalem, while Afifeh taught music and piano at Notre Dame the Sion. Conscientious and hardworking, they devoted their youth to providing for their family, given that their widowed mother, Hanneh Tarsha Sidawi, was raising six children, ages 12 to 23. Even though it was challenging to carry the heavy responsibility of supporting the family and providing for their younger siblings' education, Afifeh and Manana, both in their '20s, refused many suitors. They eventually did marry, Manana at 38 and Afifeh at 26.



Afifeh Sidawi, circa 1920. Source: *The collection of the author*

In 1910, when Alphonse began writing to Afifeh, she was 23 years old, and he was 27. By 1914, their friendship had matured and evolved into love. Alphonse recounts the moment he felt compelled to declare his love to Afifeh, when she unexpectedly announces her departure.

...When one night you told me about your plans to leave, I became anxious. Did I dare tell you my confession? Would you believe me? I decided to confide in Manana whom I cherished like my own sister, and for whom I conserve my eternal affection.

—Jaffa, 20 January, 1914

Afifeh had planned on traveling to Paris to study piano at the Conservatory of Music. Of course, the rest is history. Alphonse proposed to Afifeh and she accepted, thus abandoning her plans.

Afifeh loved music with a passion. In their youth, she and her sister, Manana, provided the musical entertainment at charity events and private parties. Her niece, Zakia Jabr Hajjar, remembers as a child the fits of giggles she and her cousins would have as they gingerly pulled aside the curtain in her home that hung from the living room doorway to peek at the musical performance. Afifeh would be singing arias in her soprano voice while her sister Manana played the piano.³¹

When Afifeh announced to her piano teacher Mére Juliana, that she was going to marry Alphonse rather than pursue her musical studies, Mére Juliana was crushed. In a letter to Afifeh, Alphonse is surprised by Mére Juliana's reaction. Was he so egocentric about his love for Afifeh that he never thought that she was giving up her musical career for him?

Another thing that has touched me is the grief which Mére Juliana has felt in hearing about your marriage. I did not expect it.

–Jaffa, 24 December, 1913

In music, Afifeh found comfort and solace from her suffering. As mentioned earlier, the loss of her eye had been a catastrophic blow. It deeply wounded her emotionally, and affected the way she felt about herself in public. She lost her self-confidence and poise. Already vulnerable and sensitive to the vicissitudes of life, she sunk even deeper into herself after the deaths of her father, older brother, Daoud and younger brother, Afif. These tragedies took place within a short span of four years and left an indelible mark on her fragile personality.

We will never know the power of her early life experiences in shaping her character, but like all sensitive artists, Afifeh lived tormented by everyone and everything. Because she was a highly impressionable young woman, she took life seriously and tragically.

I remain however worried about you, because I know how very sensitive you are and how upset you get at the least contradiction. I don't mean to say that there is no reason to become emotional, but one must be able to repress as much as one can.³²

Alphonse begins his letter by exhorting Afifeh to repress her feelings, and ends it with the opposite advice:

I leave you while imploring you to keep me abreast of your life, without hiding whatever would pain me, because, as good friends, we should share our pains and our joys.³³

Most of Alphonse's letters to Afifeh contain appeasements and consolations. He never tires of reassuring her, of pleading with her or lecturing her. Almost like a good confessor, he listens with care, but he also knows how to dispense his admonitions and reproaches. Often Alphonse's advice and encouragement are embedded in his strong faith. He counsels Afifeh to pray and to elevate herself above the mundane problems and earthly despair.

You have placed yourself in a precarious position in this world. You only see the walls that surround you. You only hear the moaning from here below, and you stop here... You did not look higher up. You did not appeal to your Christian feelings. You did not listen to faith and reason, or else you wouldn't have said that you lived without hope.³⁴

It's interesting to note that Afifeh's despair is infectious. By the end of the letter Alphonse empathizes so much with Afifeh that he seems to agree with her that no one is happy in this world.

Alas, human beings in their moments of pain, in their hours of trial, in their days of suffering, or anxiety and of miseries appeal to despair. Who doesn't have these moments of sharp worries?

...Why sink in this whirlpool of pain, and social reprisals? I know you to be more energetic than I am, and I don't even dare lecture you. And moreover, who is happy in this world? Those who envy others are even less happy.³⁵

Sibling Rivalry

Manana, an attractive brunette with a bubbly personality was the exact opposite of her sister. Manana loved people; Afifeh preferred her solitude. Manana had a sense of humour; Afifeh was dour and retiring. Of course, life's experiences have a way of affecting one's personality, and the low self-esteem Afifeh felt due to her disfigurement may have accounted for her gloomy disposition. Manana's sense of humour and charm were, in fact, exulted by Elisa, Alphonse's sister, in a letter from Beirut to Alphonse. Elisa was entering the convent of Notre Dame de Sion in Paris and Manana was her escort.

You don't know, dear Alphonse, how happy I am to be in the company of Manana. She does everything she can to cheer me up. When she sees me unhappy, she finds a way to make me laugh. She tells me she has a hump on her back (even though I don't see it) from carrying our burdens.

—Beirut, 7 September, 1908

Alphonse had been friends with both sisters and had felt a special fondness for Manana, who was three years his senior. We will never know whether he loved her romantically, but we know that he treasured her as a sister and a friend. In many of the

letters he sends to Afifeh, he ends them by mentioning Manana and sending her his regards. Was he languishing for her, or was he being courteous and proper? “Give my regards to Manana. Tell her that Alphonse remains her brother, and that he sheds a tear while thinking of her.” (Jaffa, October 12, 1910),³⁶ or “Receive with Manana my most tender affections.” (Jaffa, March 15, 1911).³⁷ Interestingly, Manana chose not to write Alphonse when he moved to Jaffa, about which Alphonse complains to Afifeh:

I am not complaining that Manana is sticking to her decision, although this is causing me cruel pain, but you, too. Have you also sworn not to write me?

–Jaffa, 12 October, 1910

At some point, we can presume that Afifeh must have been jealous enough to talk to Alphonse about her feelings of insecurity vis-à-vis her sister. In Alphonse’s letter, dated 18 March, 1911, he alludes to a recent conversation.

I don’t understand your remorse. Why these regrets? What was wrong in your behaviour? ... Is it because I was calm that you regret your effusiveness, or did my behaviour appear as a disapprobation of yours? ... From all my meetings with you, I have a clear heart and you should, too. The human weakness in the outpouring of feelings should not be condemned. Isn’t a friend sometimes as intimate as a brother, and if you trust him, what can you regret?

*Afifeh, I repeat it, I am your friend [in French, “Je suis votre amie”], and you alone will be the friend I have chosen, and your sister will always be my own. The circumstances are not favourable to me, events strike themselves to my enterprises; even destiny itself seems to frustrate me. My poor heart is crushed, broken, persecuted, but never unfaithful.*³⁸

Through this veiled conversation we have enough clues to indicate that Afifeh must have confronted Alphonse about his attentions toward Manana, and that she is now embarrassed and regretful that she did. But Alphonse’s response is confusing. “your sister will always be my own,” is an awkward way to construct a sentence. He probably should have completed his sentence and written, “your sister will always remain my own sister,” but he did not, so we will have to assume that this is, indeed, what he meant.

Elisa, Alphonse’s sister, knows that Afifeh has been his favourite for a while. His behaviour was probably transparent to her. In her letter from Paris she reminisces happy days spent at the Sidawis, where he composed a poem for Afifeh.

Do you remember the Sidawi armchair where you always seemed to be in top form? Do you still have the little poem that you wrote on that armchair in honour of your favourite Afifeh?

–Paris, 24 December, 1908

Her letter contains no hint of disapproval or resentment toward Afifeh. This makes us wonder to what extent Afifeh's own insecurity coloured her perceptions of Elisa's displeasure ("Why do you fear that Elisa is unhappy to hear about our engagement?" wrote Alphonse.)³⁹

Engagement and Wedding Preparations

We do not know when Alphonse and Afifeh got engaged, but it must have been shortly before Alphonse's letter dated 5 November, 1913, with *Cercle Sportif Jaffa* on its letterhead.

*Foufou Darling,
I do not want to hurt your feelings, but I like to remember a proverb I learned a while back. It says: "If you are happy to the point of saying it, watch out, unhappiness is at the door."*

*It is unfortunately an incontestable truth, but I like to hope, like you do, that we will be happy. We will look for this happiness in our harmony, in our intimacy and in the good that we will do around us.*⁴⁰

A new language of intimacy emerges. Afifeh becomes "Foufou Darling," and they are finally happy—so much so that Afifeh seems to have been temporarily lifted from her depressive mood, only to be chastised by Alphonse about the risks of sharing your happiness with the world.

A month later, Alphonse takes the lead in planning their wedding day:

*For our wedding, here is my idea:
Mass at 8:00 am
Reception at 9:00
Departure for Jericho at 10:00 or 11:00
Return from Jericho Tuesday
Departure for Jaffa Wednesday or Thursday
–Jaffa, 24 December, 1913*

And he is preparing the house in Jaffa as well. Many of the responsibilities of the home that required interacting with the outside world were left to the men

of this middle class. They purchased staples, such as rice, sugar and oil from the neighbourhood grocer, or hired the carpenter or tile layer or workmen to do odd jobs for the house. Afifeh will join him in Jaffa after their wedding:

At the moment I am taking care of our couches, which are already finished. The cushions are getting done, and everything will be ready next week. All that will be required is the fabric with which to cover them.

I have also purchased all the necessary things for the laundry, as well as some things for the kitchen. These are objects I had never thought about before!

–Jaffa, 11 December, 1913

Afifeh's job was to hire a maid, and Alphonse wants to control that as well:

As for the maid, I prefer we hire a young girl whom we can train as we please. If you can't find one, bring it up to Mother and she will look as well.

–Jaffa, 24 December, 1913

Due to his many work responsibilities, Alphonse cannot join Afifeh in Jerusalem for Christmas. He is miserable. Again Daoud Sidawi's death is alluded to in his letter:

And tonight you will think of me and pray for me. Ah, Christmas, how this holiday evokes so many memories for me! I will meditate in the austere Chapel of the Franciscan Sisters. I will pray for you and for all those whom Christmas reminds me of. As for New Year's Eve, it will be a little sad, as the last one was so gay.

So, Happy Christmas, Fufou Darling. The shadow of your Alphonse will follow you tonight and the Divine Child will protect you.

Ah, how many kisses you will have deserved if I were next to you, but I still send them on this cold paper and I hold you tightly to my heart.

–Jaffa, 24 December, 1913

Three days before the ceremony, in the same letter in which Alphonse recaps their courtship and love, Alphonse bares his deepest feelings. He begs Afifeh forgiveness for his shortcomings, and makes sure to express that she hurt him as well.

*I have confessed my life to you; I have confessed my weakness,
and I beg of you forgiveness and oversight. Also you have
often punished me; your silence was crueller than torture,
and I often cried because of you.*

—Jaffa, 20 January, 1914



Alphonse and Afifeh on their wedding day.
Source: *The collection of the author*



Manana, Alphonse, Afifeh and baby Lorraine in
Jerusalem, 1917. Source: *The collection of the
author*

Alphonse and Afifeh were married on 23 January, 1914 at St. Sauveur, or San Salvatore, the Roman Catholic Church in the Old City of Jerusalem. Their families were present and so were their friends. In their wedding photo, Afifeh, with a hint of a smile painted on her face, is sitting next to Alphonse, almost leaning into him. In her long, lacy, white dress, and wreath of small white flowers wrapped loosely around her hair, she looks almost ethereal. She faces sideways, avoiding eye contact with Alphonse or the photographer. Alphonse on the other hand looks directly into the camera lens. He appears pensive and a little nervous. He is embarking on the journey of a lifetime, marrying “the favourite Afifeh.”

Did Alphonse and Afifeh live happily ever after? Life for them was definitely not a bed of roses. They encountered many hardships along the way—they were deported to Constantinople during World War I; they had six children, but only three survived. Lorraine Alonzo, Alphonse and Afifeh’s daughter, remembers that after her younger brother Marcel, age four, died of typhoid, her mother closed the cover of her piano and never played again. Afifeh never recovered from his death; with it, she silenced herself and her music. After World War I, the Alonzos were transferred to Alexandria, Egypt, with the Credit Lyonnais Bank. In 1960, while visiting his sister, Elisa, in Jerusalem, Alphonse had a sudden heart attack and died. He had always wanted to be buried

in Jerusalem, and his wish came true. Afifeh followed him to the grave two years later in Alexandria where she is buried.⁴¹

Scant information exists about young couples and courtship rituals in late Ottoman Jerusalem, but through Alphonse's letters to Afifeh and through his diary, we grow to understand their intimate life as a couple, their individual characters, the rules of conduct of that period, and their two separate worlds—his in Jaffa, and hers in Jerusalem.

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Endnotes

¹ Graham-Brown, Sarah, *Palestinians and Their Society 1880-1946* (London: Quartet Books, 1980) 69.

² Extensive interviews with Lorraine Alonzo, Montreal, Canada, June 2005.

³ See www.christusrex.org/www1/ofm/pope/10GPen/16/16.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Spafford Vester, Bertha, *Our Jerusalem* (Lebanon: Middle East Export Press, Inc, 1950) 87.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁸ Yehoshua, Ben-Arieh, *Jerusalem in the 19th Century: The Old City* (NY: St Martin's Press, 1984) 173.

⁹ Tamari, Salim, "A Miserable Year in Brooklyn: Khalil Sakakini in America, 1907-1908," *Jerusalem Quarterly File*, Issue 17 (Winter 2003).

¹⁰ Elisa Alonzo, Letter to Alphonse, Beirut, September 7, 1908

¹¹ Melkon Rose, John H., *Armenians of Jerusalem* (London: The Ratcliff Press, 1993) 133.

¹² Sakakini, Khalil, ed. Akram Musallam, *The Diaries of Khalil Sakakini, Volume I* (Ramallah: Khalil Sakakini Center and Beirut and Jerusalem: Institute of Palestine Studies, 2003) PAGE?.

¹³ Tamari, "A Miserable Year in Brooklyn," *Jerusalem Quarterly*, February 2003, Iss 17, 22.

¹⁴ Letter from Alphonse Alonzo, Jaffa, 27 August, 1910. All letters were translated from the original French by the author.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Jaffa, 15 March, 1911.

¹⁷ Alphonse Alonzo Diary, Jaffa, 16 July, 1910.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Jaffa, 17 July, 1910.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Jaffa, 20 April, 1911.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Alonzo Diary, Jaffa, 24 July, 1910.

²⁷ Alonzo letter, Jaffa, 27 August, 1910.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Jaffa, 20 January, 1914.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Jaffa, 24 December, 1913.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Jaffa, 20 January, 1914.

³¹ Extensive interviews with Zakia Jabr Hajjar, Geneva, Switzerland, August 2003.

³² Alonzo letter, Jaffa, 18 October, 1910.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Jaffa, 30 March, 1911.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Jaffa, 12 October, 1910.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Jaffa, 15 March, 1911.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Jaffa, 18 March, 1911.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Jaffa, 24 December, 1913.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Jaffa, 5 November, 1913.

⁴¹ Lorraine Alonzo, June 2005.