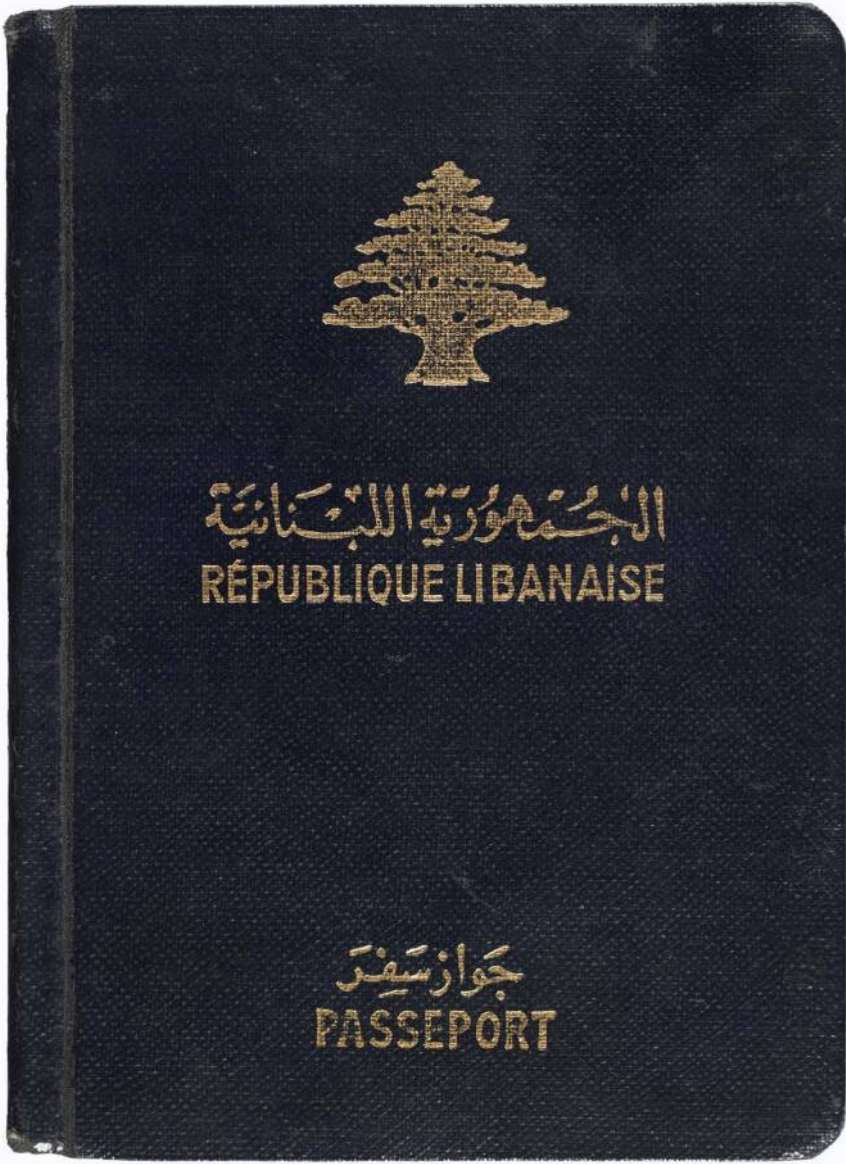


PASSPORT

GHENWA HAYEK



One of a handful of objects that I retain from my maternal grandmother, my *teta* Rose, is her passport (the other three are a ring that won't fit on my mother's more delicate fingers, a pencil skirt that won't fit *me* anymore, and a wool coat that I wore to near-death in my early twenties that I don't dare wear anymore). Like all the above, the passport was given to me by my mother.



When this passport was issued in November 1951, my grandmother was 43 years old; incidentally, the same age I am as I write this now. Lebanon, the independent nation-state which issued the document, was eight. My mother was –1. In French—the language of the twenty-year mandate (1921–1943) installed after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire—and one of the two official languages of the country that appear in the passport, the bureaucrat notes in neat cursive her height (163; 5’3” —I always thought of her as taller than that), the color of her skin (“light brown”), her hair (“dark chestnut”), her eyes (green), and the shape of her nose (straight).



The passport is clearly designed to be held by men: in Arabic, it refers to the [male] holder's photograph, and leaves a slot open for "a picture of the wife and children." Turning a blind eye to the movement of Lebanon-born women back and forth between Lebanon and diaspora, which predated the Lebanese nation-state by at least eight decades, the government did not imagine Lebanese women holding passports, let alone traveling alone. Yet in the picture slot, there is my grandmother; in the slot for children and wives is my toddler mother staring defiantly at the camera, my grandmother's youngest child and, therefore, the only one not to have a passport of her own when the document was renewed in 1954.

The reason the passport is in my possession is because I asked my mother for it when I began to write the book I am working on now. This book is about emigration from Lebanon; specifically, to West Africa. My teta's passport is a silent, yet informative witness to journey after journey to Kumasi, (now) Ghana (more on this later) where the family lived, in the 1950s and 1960s. Its story starts with that journey, in fact, since the document is issued in Beirut for the purpose of travel to that city and is initially only valid for one year.



Page six instructs its holder to report to the Lebanese consulate as soon as t[h]ey arrive at their destination. The passport cost 10-and-a-half Lebanese pounds (LBP) in passport stamps, but there are also two 2.5 piaster stamps in there (for good measure?). The regular renewals chart my grandmother's crisscrossing between West Africa and Lebanon, but they also tell a parallel story of the spread of the Lebanese diplomatic corps. In 1954, presumably, when my toddler mother joins *her* mother on this document, my grandmother renews her passport in Lagos, Nigeria, where it is signed by the Lebanese consul.



In 1956, when it is renewed *again* from Beirut, the price has risen again to 10.50 LBP. By 1957, Accra has its own honorary consul who can renew the passport without requiring a trip to Nigeria. Its final renewal is in 1961; by then, my grandmother and mother have settled in Lebanon, where they take care of my cousins, who are sent to school in Lebanon by their parents who live across West Africa, including in Bamako (Mali) and Kumasi.

While the passport documents the moves of one woman and her family members and the development and expansion of the institutions of the Lebanese state, it also registers other significant—and more obvious—transitions in its stamps and other institutional markers. One is, as I have mentioned, the fluctuating price of passport renewal. The closest exchange rate to the 1950s that I can find is the rate from 1965, when 10 Lebanese pounds were worth approximately 3.3 USD, approximately 30 of today's dollars. In 2019, the last year of relative stability for the Lebanese currency, a Lebanese passport with a validity of 10 years cost \$600. Oddly enough today, as a result of Lebanon's disastrous economic crisis and massive currency devaluation, a 10-year Lebanese passport costs approximately what it did in the 1950s.

VISAS

التأشيرة

Telegram from Qicra
No. AR 898 of 21/11/1951-

AIR PORT
BRITISH LEGATION
VISA SECTION
GOLD COAST
DATE 21/11/51 No. 4103
FOR Visa for Gold Coast
BOND...
DEPOSIT Signature Mr. Stevenson
GOOD FOR SINGLE JOURNEY ONLY

Valid until 15/1/1952-



Another transition is the one between English monarchs. When the passport was first issued in 1951, the British stamps on my tetra's British-issued visas and arrival stamps bore the mark of King George VI.

16 Mrs. Rose G. GASSOUB

17

التأشير

Seen at the passport control office
VISAS

ACCRA

VNO.

good for a single journey to

GOLD COAST

within TWELVE months of date

here of if passport remains
valid

AR. 898 EMP. (W)

G. A. SAOUDA BEAS

sgd. *Henry A. K.*

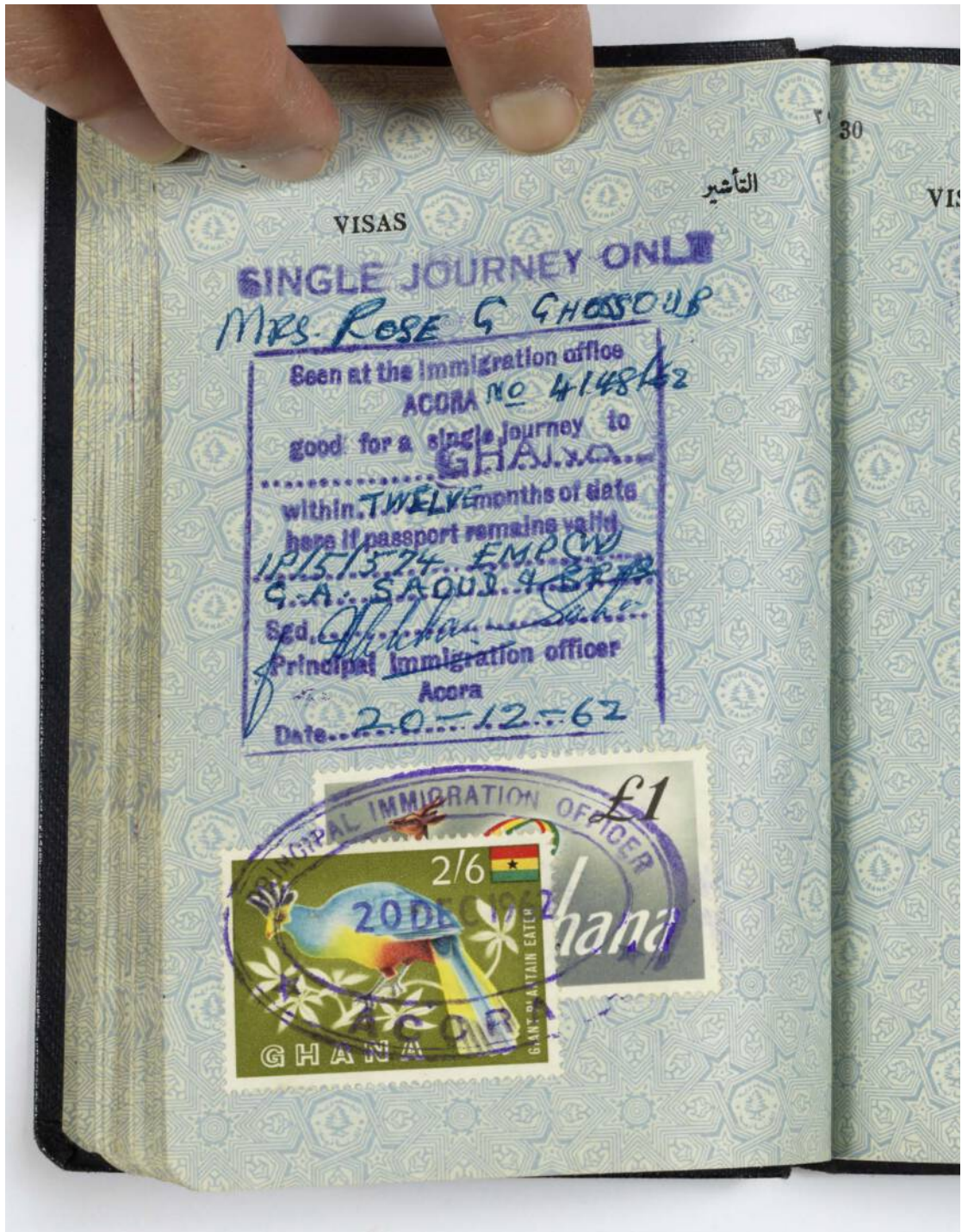
Passport Control Officer Accra

Date 31ST MARCH 1954

SINGLE JOURNEY ONLY



With his death and the coronation of the new queen in 1952, the 1954 visa stamps from Accra bear Elizabeth's face, along with the colonial name of Ghana, the Gold Coast.



The final visa bears the colorful stamps and name of a newly independent Ghana (1957), with that country's new flag and a beautiful, colorful depiction of a bird described as a Giant Plantain Eater.

This mundane object, belonging to a Lebanese housewife and mother, dutifully and without a fuss records the extremely unmundane dismantling of empire, and the rise of new nation-states whose independence forms so much of the backbone of world history in the second half of the twentieth century. Its existence helps me think through so many of the concepts that I work on today: transnational family structures, travel and movement across slippery and shifting borders, and these everyday contacts that I didn't think—or know—to think about when the person who could have told me the most about them was still here.

Many thanks to Tom Van Eynde for bringing this passport and my story to life with his beautiful photos, and for a fun morning spent learning from him at his studio, as well as to Zachary Cahill for encouraging me to sit down and write this for inclusion in this special issue on family.