

Chapel Talk  
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“A Different Time and Place...”

In the spring of 1959, my father gathered his young family in the living room and shared with some excitement that he had accepted the challenge of running a preparatory school overseas. Some preparations were required and so it was not until December 2<sup>nd</sup> of that year that we set sail on a small freighter with 32 other passengers for some place called the Middle East. Three weeks later, a few days before Christmas, after stopping at four ports of call in Europe, we set foot in the teaming port of Beirut, Lebanon, which was to be our new home.

Now what would possess a young American couple to pick up stakes and move their five children, all under the age of ten, to such a potentially unstable and dangerous place? Cultural enrichment; experiential education; unique opportunities and challenges -- and a very different environment than what it has been over the last couple of decades...

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Beirut was the garden spot of a fascinating cultural center of the world. More diverse than the famed melting pot of New York City, it was the gateway, physically, financially and intellectually to the rich heritage of the cradle of civilization.

A small country, roughly twice the size of Delaware, Lebanon enjoys an idyllic climate, tempered by the warm breezes of the Mediterranean (something like South Carolina without the humidity), and benefiting from a Smokey Mountain-type range perfectly suited to orchards and vineyards, and home to the biblically famed Cedars of Lebanon, which shelters the fertile Bekaa Valley to the east, some of the best farmland in the world.

Such beauty and natural riches did not go unnoticed by its neighbors, and many different civilizations, from the Mesopotamians to the Egyptians, from the Romans to the Crusaders and beyond, have set up camp there and left their mark -- but maybe most importantly to the Lebanese the operative word was “left”: Lebanon gained its independence as a sovereign

state most recently in 1943. A French protectorate between the two world wars of the last century, its geographic location and resort-like climate assured plenty of economic interest as soon as any area conflict was resolved. The French emphasis on education and diplomacy, coupled with emerging American international influence and commerce helped build mid-twentieth century Beirut into a teeming city of a million inhabitants, only half of whom were permanent citizens. The *mélange* of cultures and languages necessitated a skill for cross-cultural communication. And the peace-loving Lebanese, often referred to as the Swiss of the Middle East, are naturally warm and welcoming hosts, most of whom are tri-lingual in Arabic, French and English.

Times were good back then; supported by the stable and friendly government of Syria to the north and west, the Lebanese enjoyed the benefits of a democratically elected parliamentary government, carefully crafted to represent the interests of a well educated yet passionate citizenry, roughly half of whom were Christian -- the required faith of the President, and half of whom were Muslim -- the required faith of the Prime Minister.

Gingerly, at the impressionable age of nine, I stepped into this brave new world. I enjoyed a unique and rich education there, both in and outside the classroom, during my pre-adolescent and early adolescent years. For four of those years, I attended a school taught entirely in French. I had the chance to travel extensively throughout the area, with stops here and there in Europe en route back and forth to the United States most summers. While some enviable opportunities were unfortunately lost on a young American boy who missed baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolets, it unquestionably opened up and enhanced my understanding of the richness of different cultures and my view of the international community.

I was admittedly not fully aware of the extent of the mounting underlying tensions during my youth in that part of the world, but in 1967 they came rocketing to the surface. On the night of June 5<sup>th</sup> of that fateful year, we were awakened at 1:30 in the morning and given a few minutes to pack essentials. By 2:00 a.m. we were huddled in the hallways of a local school with hundreds of other Americans under the watchful eye of Lebanese militia men. At around 5 a.m. we were bussed to the airport, and in the early morning light under armed

guard we boarded a plane for Athens, Greece: Israel, abetted by the U.S. and provoked by Syrian and Egyptian sabre-rattling, was striking out in all directions, including Lebanon.

The conflict only lasted six days, as you know; but there was no going back -- the world as I had come to know it in my first sixteen years had changed forever, leading to the world as Tania Maatouk has come to know it in her first sixteen years.