

THE END OF THE ROAD

by Duncan Campbell-Smith

Duncan Campbell-Smith attended MECAS in 1978. These extracts are taken from a more detailed memoir of his time in Shemlan in 1978, which is placed in the context of the confused politics of the Lebanon through that period.

The Hittis' home sat towards the bottom of the village. Salim shuffled out to greet us, silent but grinning gleefully at my arrival. Behind him stood his wife Nouha. Clapping her hands, she gabbled excitedly and ushered us into their kitchen for coffee and cakes. Nouha Hitti was a saint, and I was swept up by her warmth and generosity from that first moment.

Salim and Nouha could speak no English whatever, so it was a relief when two sons appeared. Bassam was 16 and still at school. His older brother Amin was 25, newly married and working in Beirut for American Express.

On my first Saturday, Nouha gathered together a huge supper party in my honour. I marvelled all day at the elaborate preparations that filled the kitchen, and watched fascinated as Bassam helped his mother shave all of the hairs off the skin of an entire sheep's skull, that then disappeared into one of several huge cooking vats.

I should, of course, have been prepared for the sheep's eye, but wasn't. Didn't everyone in England know that Arabs were fond of eating sheep's eyes, and wouldn't it therefore be disappointing for me to find a first celebratory supper without one? So the meal that evening included, along with dozens of wonderful native Lebanese dishes, a vast mound of mutton atop an ocean of rice – from which Bassam triumphantly extracted a large lump of gristle, with an unmistakable black cornea attached. This was dropped onto my plate, amidst much raucous comment from all sides. I duly squirmed and wriggled, then downed it with a suitable grimace. Squeals of laughter all around – and that was the last sheep's eye I ever saw in the Lebanon.

THE SYRIAN PEACE-KEEPERS

Life quickly settled into a happy routine. I would breakfast with the family, then walk to the school for lessons starting at 8.30am each morning. My route led up the steep hill outside the house for a couple of hundred yards, then off to the right along a path that led through a small meadow and provided a short cut to the main road.

In the meadow sat a green Russian T-62 tank, and beside it a small camp occupied by a dozen or so Syrian soldiers of the Arab Peace-Keeping Force. It was often raining, sometimes heavily, and the men sat huddled in their tents leaving only a sodden sentry or two to nod miserably in my direction as I scuttled past under my umbrella.

There was never anything remotely threatening about their presence – unless you happened to be a small bird, in which case the meadow was definitely best avoided. I would often spot one of the soldiers huddled intently at some distance from the camp, with a .22 airgun trained pathetically on a nearby bush. Certainly it was rare to hear a

blackbird or a sparrow in Shemlan – the airgun snipers had done for them all. (The same, it was said, accounted for Lebanon’s lack of seagulls, which was probably apocryphal but seemed plausible enough.)

Lunch alone with Salim and Nouha should have been a strain in my early weeks, when we could hardly communicate at all. Yet it never was. Nouha was a patient teacher, always ready to help me work through some new bit of vocabulary – telling the time of the day, say, or identifying some of the foodstuffs in the kitchen. Salim would sit, hunched silent and watchful over his plate.

Then I would retreat to my room, to tackle the latest page of the Selected Word List and the rest of the day’s homework, until at 4pm without fail there would come the same daily invitation from Nouha to join her for tea and cakes in the kitchen.

EVENINGS AT HOME

This brought the second opportunity of the day to review Nouha’s preparations for the evening meal and any bits of ironmongery laid out for the task. The kitchen was often filled with more contraptions than I’d seen on one bench since quitting physics at school: some were for grinding up or mixing or hollowing out, others for stirring and stretching and sieving. There were wheels and pedals and pulleys that Nouha could sit working at for hours in her daily regime. Even in the last, cold rainy weeks before the spring, little ever seemed to come out of a tin or even a packet. She prepared food as one could imagine generations of women in her family had prepared it before her.

And Salim, doubtless also true to countless generations before him, sat and smoked while she did it. His duties as the village butcher were not onerous. Once a week, on a Friday evening, he would take delivery of a sheep that would spend the night tethered in the garage beneath the house, and early every Saturday morning he would lead the sheep across the road to his shop and cut its throat.

For a few hours, there would then be the sound of much hammering and sawing, while the street flowed red with blood. After which, Salim would return contentedly to his main routine – challenging all comers to trik-trak (aka backgammon) on the rickety table outside his shop, and steadfastly puffing his way through several packs a day of Marlboro cigarettes.

I provided him with a fresh opponent to be humiliated at the trik-trak board. My monthly rent was certainly a matter of little consequence to Salim compared with the incalculable pleasure it gave him to fox me with the dice each night. He would scuttle away after supper and sit waiting in the living room for my arrival at the board. If ever I dallied too long at the table, there would be much coughing and a clattering of counters that would grow louder by the minute. Finally, unable to tease him any longer, I would step round the living room door and feign surprise to find, yes, a beaming Marlboro Man poised and ready to roll.

And then there would follow a bout of excruciatingly bad TV – almost always Lebanese (or, worse, Egyptian) soap operas featuring dysfunctional families or star-crossed lovers. Nouha would sew and Salim would smoke, while hysterical in-laws

bickered on the small screen for an hour or so. Finally, the Lebanese national anthem would blare out, to announce the arrival of the main evening news.

WEEKEND PURSUITS

By way of grading the importance of this or that disturbance, the foreign press in February 1978 was still inclined to compare them with other events “since the civil war ended”. True, there were random explosions somewhere in Beirut on most nights, and constant reports of fighting between Palestinians and Christian militiamen in the far south near the Israeli border. These, though, were not seen as the harbingers of renewed civil war. They were rather the dying embers of the war that had supposedly burned itself out in December 1976. For the most part, life in Lebanon was supposed to be edging back to normality.

And so it seemed to us in Shemlan, based on our weekend forays into West Beirut. These were hugely enjoyable. After the single-minded focus all week on Mr McLoughlin’s *Course in Colloquial Arabic*, and the commitment to memory of five times our daily 30 words, it was no small thing to be able to escape down to the city for a day. Few other students had cars, but several would crush into the back of mine or make their own way down each Saturday morning in service taxis via Aaitat, Ain Aanoub and Choueifat.

We would generally congregate in the late morning at one or other of the British-style pubs in the city – more often than not, The Rose and Crown. Fresh newspapers could be read and swapped over cold beers and olives. Then we would move on to one of our favourite restaurants in the city – often, once the summer arrived, a marvellous place in Raouche between the corniche and the sea. It had a huge open courtyard, where we would sit under canvas umbrellas, looking across at the Pigeon Rocks in the middle of the bay. After a long self-indulgent lunch, it would be time to return to Shemlan, or perhaps see a film. And on some Saturdays, there would be invitations to be gleaned from new acquaintances or embassy staff, for a party in the city that night.

CHANTAL

It was at one of these parties, early in March, that I met Chantal Pule. Petite and ravishingly pretty, her father was a Lebanese of French extraction, her mother Italian. So Chantal spoke English, French, Italian and Arabic almost interchangeably. She seemed almost impossibly exotic, and I rashly invited her to lunch the following Saturday at a restaurant of her choice. Rather to my surprise, she accepted.

She also picked one of the best and most expensive restaurants in Lebanon. I collected her at noon from the offices of Merzario, a container shipping line where she worked as an international booking agent, and under her directions we set off north out of Beirut and up to the small harbour town of Jounieh. Just short of the town itself was a long stretch of pebbled beach, where a row of narrow piers provided access to a string of glamorous looking restaurants. Chantal, confident and *tres chic*, stared down the hard men on the door who were clearly appalled by my shabby student clothes, and in we went.

The waiters were in bow-ties and French was *de rigueur*. There was a pianist playing quietly in the corner, and tables at the centre of the restaurant sported huge statues made of ice. Conspicuously, though, most tables were simply empty. We were almost the only customers that day. It was easy to imagine such days were now all too frequent.

It made no difference to us. The food was exquisite. The window views along the seashore were surely no less beautiful than they had been before the war. And I made Chantal laugh, which seemed a good start if we were going to see each other again.

Not necessarily, though, in Jounieh. Chantal, thank God, made no pretence of being a regular. Indeed, it was quickly clear from everything she told me about her family that the Jounieh jet-set was as alien to her as to me: she lived with her parents and her younger brother in a small apartment in West Beirut. The civil war had been a difficult time. It had forced them out for a while, and they had taken refuge with her grandmother's family in the mountains. Chantal offered to take me the next day to see the village where they'd stayed.

I cannot remember now the name of that village. But I have never forgotten the shock of finding it utterly deserted, most of its houses blackened by fire. Chantal had given me only the most cryptic of warnings before we arrived. Now she wanted me to see what had happened to dozens of mountain villages in the war. It was especially distressing to see so many personal effects strewn about. Children's clothes, a pair of pyjamas, old photographs and bits of broken furniture lay scattered inside the houses. Many people had died here, though fortunately for Chantal's family they had left and taken hotel rooms in Cyprus a short while before the village was attacked.

Until this time, I'd really had only a little bookish knowledge of the war. Hearing of Chantal's personal experiences of it was a very different matter. And by the end of March I think I had a rather better appreciation of how lucky we were as MECAS students to be cocooned in Shemlan. Or more to the point, perhaps, cocooned in a beautiful corner of the Chouf where Maronite, Shia, Druze and Greek Orthodox communities seemed to have happily coexisted, despite everything.

EXPEDITIONS TO SYRIA

So cocooned, in fact, that even the Israeli invasion of the South in the third week of March seemed at first to be of no concern to us. During the mid-morning break between classes, we could stand with our coffees on the balcony of the school and just about hear the sound of distant Israeli artillery, shelling the villages south of the Litani river. But the South seemed another country: the invasion made no difference to plans that several of us had, to visit Syria over the short Easter break just ahead.

Three of us had cars – enough for a sizeable party to travel together to Damascus and back. We drove north to Aley, then east via Bhamdoun and Zahle into the Beka'a valley. I suppose we must have stopped to look at the ancient Baalbek temples, though I have only the dimmest recollection of the place. What sticks far more in the memory is the crossing into Syria.

I was the last to reach the border checkpoint, with Chantal and two fellow students in my Beetle. The other two cars were through the border in minutes. The customs man took one look at my carnet document for the VW, however, and disappeared with it into one of the tents beside the road. Only then, to my intense embarrassment, did I recall the large red letters across the back of the document: INVALID FOR SYRIA. How could I possibly have overlooked them?

The rest of the party, sensing trouble, sat glumly in their cars looking back. I made a show of coping heroically with the usual Arab bureaucratic ineptitude and tried not to think about the humiliating drive back to Shemlan. Perhaps a brave face would see us through after all. Moments later, our customs man reappeared with my carnet – and an invoice to be signed. Entry would cost me fifty Lebanese pounds and that was that. On we went to Damascus.

It was the first of three such expeditions. A group of us went again in May between the spring and summer terms, and a third time in the mid-term break in June. Always we encountered the same unwavering friendliness and warmth: wherever we stopped, nothing was too much trouble to the Syrians. Of course this was in part a simple taste of traditional Arab hospitality, and no doubt our gallant attempts to converse in Arabic endeared us to the café owner in many a remote country village. But it also dawned on us quite quickly that we were not exactly the first intrepid travellers from Shemlan to Syria.

On one long drive through the desert, we came upon a bedu walking with his camel a few hundred yards from the road. He was the only human being we had seen for an hour or two, and he waved at us frantically. We pulled up, and he came running across to us, hitching his heavy woollen jellabeh up to his thighs with one hand and clutching his scruffy head-dress with the other. It was baking hot. He glugged gratefully on a bottle of water and two small cans of orange juice that we handed over. Then he flashed us a big smile, offered thanks to Allah and said: “Wa intu al-jawasees min Shemlan?” (“So you’re spies from Shemlan?”)

Every trip brought surprises to be savoured for years afterwards: the sight of spring flowers after rain in the Syrian desert; the grandeur of the Roman ruins (and the glorious old Queen Zenobia hotel) at Palmyra; the scale of the cobbled roadway leading from the drawbridge up into the interior of the crusaders’ castle at Krak des Chevaliers; the sublime quiet and stillness within the great Umayyad mosque in Damascus, where we watched white-bearded elders reading stories to groups of illiterate working men clustered at their feet.

BATHING IN ALEPPO

Best of all, perhaps, was the surprise we got in Aleppo.

We stayed (naturally) at the Baron Hotel. The rooms were full of mosquitoes and the plumbing groaned and chuntered all through the night. But the famous bar was still there, as visited by Lawrence and Churchill and De Gaulle. As of 1978, the old place still seemed to enjoy more than its fair share of Western tourists in the city.

Inevitably, this attracted a good many citizens of Aleppo to hang around the doors of the hotel offering their services as a guide. We were a dozen or so in our party on the night we stayed there – a prize haul for any successful salesman. Leaving the hotel to find a restaurant for dinner on the first evening, we turned down a good many offers. Some way down the street, though, we were skilfully corralled by a clearly very practised operator. He told us he was a masseur in Aleppo's famous Turkish baths. He would await our return to the Baron and promised an interesting end to the evening.

It was almost midnight when we returned and our prospective masseur was all but forgotten. There he was, though, on the steps of the hotel. His name, memorably, was Ardon. The women in the party sloped off to bed, but most of the men followed him to the baths in a troop of taxis.

It was a famous night. Ardon was as good as his word. The taxis took us deep into the souk quarter of Aleppo where the baths were housed in an old Ottoman redoubt. Once inside, we undressed in cellars deep below street level and were shown through to the steam rooms. These filled an area as large as a cathedral crypt, which it resembled with its stone pillars and ceiling of ribbed arches. We sat in a line along one wall, towels wrapped modestly round our waists, wondering what had happened to Ardon.

We did not have long to wait. He reappeared, wearing virtually nothing at all, and carrying a large bucket of loofah sponges and soaps the size of bricks. Most of Ardon was dark and swarthy, but not the palms of his hands and undersides of his fingers, which we now saw were almost translucently pale. He held them up to impress his professional status upon us, then asked for a volunteer. There was a long pause. Smiling happily, he reached for the nearest arm and yanked its owner after him and off to the hammam.

The rest of us waited rather sheepishly for their return, exchanging nervously ribald remarks and wondering if all was quite as innocent as we were supposing. The question hung in the air as Ardon returned alone for his next client. One by one, he led us off. There was no going back.

We need not have worried, of course. Ardon soaped, scrubbed and pummelled each of us with a rare expertise. And when the massage was over, we were collected and escorted to a sublime Turkish lounge. Here we were all reunited among mountains of thick white towels and plates of sweet pastries. We sat on a ring of white woollen sofas, smoking enormous hookah pipes while attendants ran back and forth with dates and freshly sliced oranges and melons. If this was how the Foreign Office trained its future ambassadors, I had to reflect, then it was a diplomat's life for me.

We stayed there most of the night. Then Ardon organized everything perfectly, and a fleet of taxis swept us back to the Baron. I stared sleepily out of the back windows of my taxi, only for a moment jolted awake by the magnificent sight, in the half-light of dawn, of the citadel of Aleppo rising like a mountain above the streets.

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For most of my time at Shemlan, Syria was rather more accessible than East Beirut. In fact, I can only recall a single visit to Ashrafiyyeh, one of the main residential districts

of the Christian half of the city. And the significance of that visit had nothing whatever to do with Lebanese politics.

I went with Nouha and Amin in his car to visit an old family friend in hospital there. I cannot now remember her name: let us call her Maryam. She had been widowed or divorced some years earlier (I never did discover which), and lived in Ashrafiyyeh with her daughter, a painfully shy 17 year-old called (I think) Hanna.

It must have been the early summer. Maryam had been diagnosed with a brain tumour late in 1977. At great expense, she had just been to New York for major surgery. Now she was back and recuperating in a private clinic quite close to their apartment. She spoke excellent English: she had done a little interpreting for me back in my first month. Now perhaps three months had gone by – and what followed was a tiny epiphany of sorts. Mr McLoughlin's *Colloquial Arabic* and all those innumerable dialogue sessions with our infinitely patient MECAS teachers had wrought a magic that I only now began to appreciate.

As Nouha, Amin and I squeezed into Maryam's private room, I was able to greet all of the other well-wishers with the appropriate courtesies *in Arabic*. When Hanna perked up the courage to ask about my progress at school, I talked for a good few minutes of this and that, *in Arabic*. Hanna could hardly disguise her astonishment. And her mother, who had seemed to be lying asleep in her bed, opened her eyes wide and stared at me as though it were my brain not hers that had been seriously tampered with. A marvellous moment – though no doubt Nouha, beaming proudly beside me, had seen it all before.

Maryam made a good recovery. It was Ashrafieyh that took a serious turn for the worse. Fighting in the South was one thing, battles in Beirut quite another. A five-day battle between Christian militias and the Syrian army in the Roumanieh district in April had caused widespread alarm. In May the battle resumed and spread to Ashrafiyyeh.

A SERIOUS DETERIORATION

It was reported that Syrian checkpoints on the roads had come under sniper fire. The response from the Syrians was savage, with tanks firing shells point blank into apartment blocks suspected of harbouring the snipers. When tank fire destroyed apartments in their own street, Maryam and Hanna left for Paris and I never saw them again.

As things turned out, they timed their departure perfectly. The May battles marked a serious deterioration in Lebanon's condition. This much was apparent to everyone at the school. Through the afternoons, we started rushing on the hour to catch the latest BBC World Service news bulletin (and I have never since heard the World Service's signature tune without scenting the smells of Shemlan). At the regular roadblocks between the villages in the Chouf, soldiers of the Arab Peacekeeping Force were now checking our British Embassy identity cards with a new seriousness. When we drove down into West Beirut, it was plain to see that an influx of Shiite refugees from the South had been a disaster for the private beach clubs lining the coast road. Several

clubs, poised for the onset of their summer season, seemed to have become refugee camps overnight.

One might suppose that all of this must have made one thing very clear: we students of the '77-78 class were in Lebanon on borrowed time. Yet it did not seem so at the time. However much things on the periphery of our little world were changing, we were not to know that the civil war was simply in remission. We went on working hard and revelling in our weekends, as no doubt our predecessors at MECAS had done for 30 years.

With the arrival of summer, the Hitti household took on a new importance in Shemlan. The door from the kitchen opened onto a large veranda, where we now had our family meals – and where any number of neighbours might gather at any hour of the evening to sit, work their worry beads and exchange the village gossip.

There was one draw, of course, that it is safe to say counted for more than Salim's conversation: Nouha's hospitality. Each day she cooked enough for a small army, and many evenings each week a not-so-small army gathered from all directions to eat it. Or to be more precise, gathered for a neighbourly chat, happily in time to be offered a little supper before leaving.

Sunday evenings were the most important of the week, when Salim and Nouha would return from church just across the road, invariably accompanied by two or three of the congregation's middle-aged bachelors. Some of the shopkeepers who sat all week in the street with Salim would then appear and pull up a chair (usually hailing their friend Salim as though they were Stanley greeting the long-lost Livingstone). Finally, we would be joined by the priest and his two assistants.

And Nouha never seemed less than genuinely delighted to have them all there. She would sit through supper watching the men with the loveliest grin on her face. It often seemed as though the only thing that could give her more pleasure than cooking for them was the thought of clearing it all up afterwards – which was just as well, since she usually did that single-handed, too.

Even on the hot afternoons, as she sat on the veranda preparing vegetables or making dough, Nouha would often have one of the village's elderly gentlemen to keep her company. Men like the gloomy Nabeel, a huge and stooping figure who used to totter in slow motion around the roads of Shemlan in between long spells of sitting on village walls, clasping his walking stick in front of him and staring morosely at the ground. Years later, I heard that Nabeel had been shot dead by Israeli troops during their 1982 invasion: it was poignant to think of the old man no doubt being taken wholly unawares by the speed of the soldiers rushing around him.

Aside from Nouha's suppers, the other notable social event of early summer was the start of Shemlan's village dances. For the most part, the young women of the village kept their distance from the school, no doubt very sensibly. But they were always friendly enough – and many of them were gorgeous-looking girls. So whenever there was a dance in the village hall, there was likely to be a table or two of students in attendance, enjoying a beer and admiring the sights on the dance floor.

It must have been at about this time that Chantal introduced me to the Commodore Hotel, where the staff adored her and she enjoyed a kind of honorary-guest status. The reliability of its telexes had ensured the Commodore a full complement of Western journalists during the 1975-76 fighting, and now many of them were back again. The hotel was centrally located, a couple of blocks from the Hamra in West Beirut, and its bar was the best in the city for catching up on political gossip and rumours of the situation on the streets.

It was a strange time, with the threat of so much violence in the air and the hotel full of so many people drawn to it with conflicting motives, all of them naturally pretending not to notice that anything out of the ordinary was happening. The foreign correspondents of the London and Paris papers brought their own brand of cynicism. The staff from the British embassy affected an air of professional detachment. And most of the local political figures who milled about the place (including a pinball-obsessed Walid Jumblatt, leader of the Druzes) seemed happy to treat the hotel as a welcome strip of no-man's land, where sectarian squabbles were to be avoided at all costs. Not quite Rick's Bar out of Casablanca, perhaps, but cast in the same mould.

MOUNTING TENSION

The second half of the MECAS summer term ran from early June to the end of July. Every aspect of life in Shemlan grew more intense. There was no escaping the mounting tension. In the Lebanon at large, things were falling apart.

For our (mostly Palestinian) MECAS teachers, as for the villagers, it must have been a time of acute anxiety. One of the them, poor man, had to move temporarily into the school when his city apartment was destroyed. Most of the time, though, the teachers were remarkably stoical and went about each morning's classes as painstakingly as ever. And our Arabic, each morning, inched a little further forward.

By now I had accumulated half a dozen or so of the small orange HMSO exercise books in which we kept our Grammar Notes, our Colloquial Phrases and our Homework Assignments. We were also two thirds of the way through "*The Way Prepared*", a collection of short Arabic texts used in MECAS since time immemorial for translation practice.

It was striking how many of the texts adhered to the same kind of stilted government pronouncements – no doubt selected with one eye on the practical needs of the Arabic-speaking diplomats we were all supposedly to become. Just as, in the Latin textbooks of my childhood, Caesar had always seemed to be setting out next day *sine mora* to attack the hostile Belgians, so now it was invariably the director of this or that organization who was convening a conference, to discuss with government ministers how the general situation could be improved ...

What needed most improving was always clear enough: we needed more vocabulary. By June I had almost a shoebox full of the little white cards with which we memorized our way, page by page, through the MECAS book of ten selected word lists. The cards were about the size of a London tube-train ticket: on one side, we wrote the English and on the other its Arabic equivalent (with "pl/v.n." and "imperf.")

and an “N.B.” for any unusual feature). Every afternoon saw another thirty squirrelled away in the box.

SONIC BOOMS AND WHITE SMOKE

One afternoon was abruptly interrupted. It happened during the few weeks I spent word-listing on the flat roof of the house. The view from there was spectacular: the craggy, wooded hillsides of the Chouf fell away steeply below me, all the way down to the coast and the blue of the Mediterranean. On most days, I could pause every ten minutes to watch an MEA flight taxi into place at Beirut International Airport, take off down the shimmering runway and veer slowly out across the sea until it vanished.

There were days, though, when no planes moved on the airport tarmac. Then one listened only for the ominous sonic boom that meant Israeli F-15s were somewhere in the skies above Lebanon and no civil airliner could risk a take-off. Midway through one such afternoon, I saw an Israeli plane fall steeply down across the city and fly low along the coast before climbing back up into high clouds. Two minutes later it repeated the manoeuvre. This time, as it raced down the coast, there appeared in its wake a sudden blossoming of white smoke. A moment later, the air in Shemlan seemed to wobble and the sound of the bomb’s explosion rippled across the Chouf.

HAATIM TYE

Faced with events like that, there were aspects of the MECAS course that could sometimes seem better suited to a bygone era of Imperial Political Agents and client Gulf sheikhdoms than to the nasty business of modern Middle Eastern politics. After MECAS, we might still struggle to keep abreast of arguments in Arabic over armaments and UN resolutions; but we were seldom going to be stuck for a handy desert proverb.

Thus, we learned that Haste Comes From The Devil; we knew that it was vital that we Choose The Companion Before The Way, The Neighbour Before The House and we would not forget that He Who Takes His Clothes Off, Gets Cold.

Best of all, though, we would have just the right words to cope, in the event of encountering an act of quite heroic kindness and generosity: “*Inte akram min Haatim Tye*” – *You are more generous than Haatim Tye*. Sheikh Tye it was who slaughtered his prize stallion to serve it up as dinner for a hungry stranger arriving unannounced at his camp in the Syrian desert – only to discover too late that the stranger had travelled for weeks to offer him a fortune for the horse. If the Foreign Office ever needed a password for MECAS alumni – something instantly recognizable to them and no-one else – there could only be one choice: it would have to be Haatim Tye.

IMPRESSIONS OF THE WAR

By now Christian Beirut was almost another country. We never strayed beyond the Chouf and West Beirut. Even there, a steady rise in the activities of the Arab Peacekeeping Force was prompting a new wariness as we made our way to and from evenings in the city.

Only rarely did I stay in the city over night, at least between weekends. Late in June, though, I stayed because the evening's party had gone on far into the early hours and I was none too sure of the neighbourhood. Asleep on the sofa next morning, my waking dreams were filled with the roaring of an incredibly loud engine: it seemed to rev and rev for hours.

Suddenly awake, I rushed to the balcony. In the narrow street below was a stationary Syrian T-62, evidently inconvenienced by the fact that its route out of the street was blocked – and the obstacle in its way was my car. As the tank belched a great cloud of black diesel fumes and lurched forward, I had two flights of stairs to descend in a hurry. The tank and I reached the car more or less simultaneously, which thankfully was just in time. Syrian soldiers on the pavement waved and laughed, but it had almost been Pancake Day for the VW.

Explaining the loss of my car to Nouha would have been deeply embarrassing: though she would never have said so, it was plainly a mystery to her that anyone should want to trouble themselves driving to Beirut more than once or twice a year. She would have much preferred to see me still sitting with all the men on her veranda each evening. I made a point of being there every Sunday for the best gathering of the week. Now that it was truly summer, the warmth and fragrances of the evening were just a joy and made the harsh winter rains of January and February a distant memory.

Alas, though, things were about to change.

Fighting between the Peacekeeping Force and the Phalange had forced the port to close – a big setback for hopes of real peace (and personally disconcerting, since I had a cruise-ship berth to Athens booked for August). Worse, a heavy Syrian attack on the Christian militias in East Beirut had finally prompted street battles that looked much like those of 1976. A full resumption, in other words, of the civil war.

So the group that gathered together after church was unsurprisingly a little less lively than usual. After they had all taken their seats, but before Nouha had begun to serve the supper, the telephone rang and Salim went off to answer it. He returned as far as the kitchen, where there was a little cry from Nouha and much whispering. She came out to fetch the priest inside, at which point everyone fell silent. When the priest reappeared, it was to say that his brother (to whom he was very close) had been killed in that day's fighting.

He sat down and wept. All the guests gathered in a line and shook his hand one by one, offering what comfort they could. It was moving to see so much affection for the priest in his grief. I understood little of what was said over supper. It was plain to see, though, how the death of someone close to the village had been interpreted: everyone that evening clearly took it to mean the future would now be different. And so indeed it proved.

MURDER IN THE VILLAGE

One afternoon in April, a British expatriate man living in the village – vaguely known to us, but hardly a familiar figure – was killed by a single rifle shot as he stood with a sundowner on the balcony of his house. This prompted a huge amount of village

gossip: it was said the man had been deeply involved in arms sales to various militias around Beirut. It was clearly regarded as a serious incident by the school's director and the staff. They assembled the students together next morning, to reassure us: the word from the embassy, said the director, was that the murder was almost certainly premeditated and not a random shooting.

Still, the shock of a cold-blooded murder in the village did nothing to allay our wariness of anyone seen carrying a gun. Not that it was a common sight. Leaving aside those carried by the soldiers at road checkpoints – and of course the occasional morning sniper from our resident Syrian platoon, out in search of a bird – there was rarely a gun to be seen.

It was gunfire rather than guns that seemed by June to have become a part of normal life. In earlier months, I'd generally fallen asleep at night listening to Shemlan's resident colony of frogs: they croaked and burred in a deep empty tank that was sunk into the ground almost opposite the Hittis' home. Now, I invariably fell asleep instead to the sound of machine guns ratter-tatt-tatting somewhere along the Chouf. That sounds more alarming than it was at the time: perhaps we were unduly complacent, but soon the machine guns hardly registered as any more threatening than the occasional sound of Israeli artillery had been in the Spring.

THE HEAVY FIGHTING

Then came the heavy fighting of July, between the Syrians and the Christian militias in Beirut. By day, we could hear the constant shelling in the city and see great palls of smoke rising into the sky. And each evening, after darkness fell, the battles in East Beirut became a kind of appalling spectator sport.

Quite a crowd gathered on the Hittis' rooftop when the fighting seemed especially intense. Bassam and several of his teenage friends proudly paraded their weapons expertise, identifying this or that explosion as the work of a T-62 or an anti-tank gun or whatever. Most spectacular were the Katyusha rockets, small blobs of red light that moved through the darkness far less quickly than tracer and ended in a shocking ball of flame. On some nights, the gruesome grandstanding went on well into the early hours.

As had briefly happened back in May, the fighting made it dangerous to travel on many roads along the Chouf. A blackboard was put up at the front entrance to the school, and each morning the staff would list on it those roads that the embassy had advised them were closed by checkpoints, or simply too hazardous to use.

The list grew longer by the week. Before the end of July, we were regularly being advised not to try driving beyond Souq-El-Gharb, just a few miles down the road. I drove there one afternoon to make a telephone call to Chantal from the Post Office – all lines from Shemlan had been temporarily cut – and was dismayed to find several buildings in Souq-El-Gharb's main street protected by fresh sandbag defences.

PLANNING DEPARTURE

More than likely, I was calling Chantal for news about the port. It had been closed since July 1st, forcing the staff at Merzario's offices into a frenzy of rescheduling. Now it looked as though I might need to follow suit. My ferry to Piraeus was due to sail from Beirut on August 1st; but by mid-July it seemed most unlikely the port would be reopening at all that summer (and in the event, it didn't). The best alternative, said Chantal, might be a boat to Cyprus from Jounieh. But how certain could I be of finding the harbour open in Jounieh?

Most of the other students were booked to return home by air. The airport was still operating more or less normally most days, though no-one could be sure this would last. Suddenly everyone was obsessed with the latest transport problems, even while we prepared for our final exams on July 20 and 21. It was one measure of how quickly things seemed to be unravelling.

And it was now a clear possibility that the end of our term might also be the end of MECAS. The exams came and went, followed by our end-of-term dance on the school premises and our farewell visits round the village. These were tinged with a palpable sadness that must surely have been absent from the students' farewells in happier times.

Towards the end of the month, I was invited to lunch at their home in West Beirut by the head of Middle East Airlines, Assad Nasr, and his wife. (Their son was a good friend and they had helped arrange my tenancy with the Hittis.) Just a few blocks from the central bank in West Beirut, it was a modest house for the head of a national airline – though Assad could show his guests an intimidating row of telephones on his study desk, including a red one that would apparently ring only in the event of a crash or a hijacking.

There were several other guests, including a deputy governor from the central bank. All of them were clearly very anxious about the Syrian army's intentions, in taking on the Christian militias so robustly. MEA was in good shape, it seemed. But the deputy governor had to acknowledge an exodus of Western bankers into the hotel rooms of West Beirut, which suddenly looked far safer than any office in the financial district. Meanwhile, everyone at the table knew of one close friend or another who was busy resettling his family outside the country.

All through the lunch, I was puzzled by the noise of what I took to be a garage door somewhere nearby – it was the sound of a sheet-metal door being swung into place from an overhead rack, and it recurred every ten minutes or so. Only later in the afternoon did I discover it was actually the noise of rockets being fired into East Beirut by Syrian soldiers from a "Stalin's Organ" on the roof of the adjacent building.

The lunch finally brought home to me that hoping for a miracle in the port was a waste of time. I had to face abandoning my car for a flight, or else make alternative plans to drive home. In retrospect it seems an odd decision, but I opted for the drive.

Chantal made enquiries of Merzario's controllers in Italy and learned that most of the passenger ships out of Beirut were sailing instead to Cyprus – with just a few docking in Syria at the northern port of Latakia. This was a bit of a slog from Beirut: more than twice the distance inland to Damascus. But any Jounieh-Cyprus crossing would

be fraught with uncertainties, while a definite booking was available from Latakia. Also, Chantal had two friends working as teachers in the Syrian port city who would put us up for a night or two if necessary. The next evening – a suffocatingly humid Beirut night, with crowds gathered around televisions in the streets below us to watch the latest match in the 1978 FIFA World Cup – she and I sat in her parents' Manara apartment and plotted the trip to Latakia.

And so the day finally arrived, to bid farewell to Salim, Nouha and Bassam – and Amin and his wife, who had just become the proud parents of a baby girl. It was hard. My Arabic had been (just about) equal to the demands of the MECAS summer exams, but it was no-where near good enough to cope with such an emotional occasion.

In a useless gesture of thanks to Nouha, I had bought her a jewelled brooch in the Hamra. When the time came to leave, and Chantal (who'd been given a lift up from the city by a friend) was already waiting for me in the car below the house, I presented my tiny gift – and regretted it immediately. Nouha squealed with indignation, bending forwards and slapping her knees – I think it was the only time in seven months I had seen her just a tiny bit angry. But then we embraced warmly with tears in our eyes, and Salim silently led me down the steps to the road.

A LABOUR OF LOVE

Riding shotgun for me to Latakia was a labour of love on Chantal's part. There can be few if any greyer, grubbier cities anywhere on the Mediterranean. She was convinced, though, that I would run into some sticky bureaucracy when I got there, and of course she was right.

It was a long day's drive, from Jounieh up the coastal highway via Jbail and Tripoli. We were exhausted when we arrived late in the evening, and it took us over an hour to find our way to her friends' home. A young married couple, they lived in a bungalow on a sprawling suburban estate that looked depressingly fly-blown even in the dark.

It must have intrigued them that Chantal should be going to so much trouble to say goodbye to me, but they were far too courteous to pry. Besides, there would be plenty of time to quiz her after I'd gone (and they were planning a return trip with her to Beirut). So we talked vaguely over supper about their trips to London in the past, and about their lives as schoolteachers in Syria.

Next day, Chantal and I set off alone to the port. I had booked a cabin to Piraeus on a Greek boat called the Heraklion, scheduled to sail at 3pm, but I still half-expected to find the sailing postponed for some reason that the shipping line had not seen fit to mention. Reaching the dockside by mid-morning, it was an enormous relief to find the Heraklion exactly where it was supposed to be, and already loading vehicles.

With a revived sense of optimism, we headed for the Customs building, ready to face one last test of nerve over those magic words "INVALID FOR SYRIA". They had caused no difficulty when we were entering Syria the day before. Was it too much to hope that I could now make an elegant exit?

The answer was a fair time coming. We had to sit and wait for the rest of the morning behind a line of the usual variety of garishly painted trucks that clog every route between Turkey and the Arab world. At long last, though, we were approached by a posse of uniformed men who waved us into a reception bay. And no sooner had I handed over all my papers, than the offending phrase grabbed the eye of one of these officials, whose name was Mustafa.

Mustafa evidently held the senior rank, and seemed instantly to regard the offending condition on my carnet as a personal affront. He launched into a tirade of hostile questions. Each (painstakingly polite) answer made him more sullen than before. Finally, sweeping aside all my protests, he insisted I would have to drive to the Duty-Free Zone to have my exit papers properly stamped. It was a matter of sublime indifference to him that the Zone, as Chantal immediately established with another official, was fully 30 kilometres from the port. Defiantly, he even scribbled a little note of introduction for us to his Duty-Free colleagues (which I carried in my passport for years after).

We now faced a horrible dilemma. Given the sailing time of 3pm, there were scarcely two hours remaining in which to make a return trip to the Zone, and to cope with all of the shenanigans this might involve. What to do?

We called Chantal's friends, who with great kindness insisted they would be our guides. Clinging to our last shreds of optimism, we set off to collect them and headed for the Zone. Before long, however, the four of us were locked in an awkward silence. Was it really worthwhile trying to beat the traffic jams out of the city? With over half-an-hour gone and no real progress made, I realised it was hopeless. Despairingly and apologetically, I turned the car around and we crawled agonisingly slowly back to the port.

Since my departure papers were virtually complete, I decided there had to be a sporting chance of catching the ship at the last moment without the final stamp supposedly only available at the Zone. It seemed to have been the right call, when we reached the boarding ramp: all other vehicles had already been embarked, and my VW was waved aboard immediately.

At which point, however, my papers were demanded again and returned to Mustafa in his lair. There followed a tense stand-off, with messages relayed down to me from the ship's captain every five minutes to say he could wait no longer. Meanwhile, of Mustafa or my papers there was no sign at all.

Eventually, with the tide about to turn, the captain ordered my car removed from his ship. Unless I wanted to see it dumped into the harbour, I had little choice but to drive it back onto the quayside. This I did, watched by scores of passengers who by now were lining the stern rails to watch the commotion below. It was not a good moment, and I had missed the boat.

As its stern pulled away from the quay, a man arrived from the Customs shed and casually announced that my papers were ready to be collected.

With Chantal in tears and her friends haranguing the port officials on my behalf, it seemed the next step might well be a Syrian police station. And if Mustafa had reappeared on the dockside, we would probably have been facing a group charge of causing grievous bodily harm. Instead, a second emissary arrived from Customs – carrying my (stamped) departure papers in one hand ... and in the other an invitation to take tea with the Port Director.

Bemused, we were escorted in a convoy of cars to his offices. These occupied a former colonial mansion with a splendid view of the harbour. The Director's own room had probably been used for official receptions under the French mandate: it was vast, as was the Director's desk. He was standing behind it as we were ushered in, and he waved us into picking a sofa each from several that were clustered at the side of the room.

Then he stepped smartly round his desk to join us, clasping each of us by the hand and dropping any pretence of formality. It was suddenly apparent that he was genuinely and touchingly embarrassed.

“What can I say to you, my friends?” he asked us, in immaculate English. “You will be familiar with the work of Kafka, I think? Well, I must work every day in his castle.” He rolled his eyes and gave a deep sigh. “Kafka understood my world. *Yaa salaam!* What a wonderful writer.”

He was utterly charming. By the time trays arrived bearing glasses of mint tea and bowls with the usual huge chunks of sugar, it was already out of the question for us to mention anything so nit-picking as a missed boat. Our host plainly had to struggle every day at living with a whole nation that had missed the boat.

“You cannot imagine how hard it is, to live in a place where the simplest things go wrong every day”, he explained, though not without a tired smile. “*Kull yawm!* But we must do what we can, and one day things will get better. *Inshallaah!*”

My unfortunate experience of his port was soon put behind us. (It transpired that Mustafa was locked in a bitter feud with one of his cousins, who also worked in Customs. The offending relative had criticised Mustafa for holding us up all morning in the truck line. Mustafa had therefore been determined to give us a tricky passage, regardless of any wording on my carnet.) We talked of English manners and Arab sensitivities for an hour or more. Then the Director embraced each of us warmly and invited me to return again later in the week if I still needed help to find another boat.

There was not a hint of self-pity in this invitation. One had to wonder, though, how many weeks or months would have to pass before he would host another tea-party conversation about Kafka and the dysfunctional bureaucracies of the Arab world – and he could see we were not overly eager to spend a day longer in Latakia if we had any alternative.

We stayed one more night with Chantal's friends. It was an uncomfortable evening, and I was determined not to repeat it. After a string of telephone calls, Chantal discovered that I would have to wait another full week for the next boat to Piraeus. There was, however, one alternative: I could drive to the container port of Mersine in

the south-east corner of Turkey, and try to rendezvous with a Merzario container ship whose captain Chantal knew well. With any luck, I'd be able to hitch a berth for my VW to Italy, free of charge.

And so it happened that Chantal and I, having driven together to so many places over the past few months, shared one last drive – this time to the Syrian border with Turkey. It was a horrid way to say good-bye: all the frustrations of finding a ship made it hard for me to disguise my impatience to leave, yet she had no wish for us to be parting at all. She would be left only with a deflating journey back to Beirut after I was gone. When we would meet again, neither of us could be sure. We relied on a tape cassette to close the awkward space between us, and listened many times to Barbara singing *L'Aigle Noir* as the border grew closer.

Behind us, slightly comically, followed the husband from Latakia on a scooter. When finally we reached the border, there was an awful moment as the guards poked fun at me for leaving Chantal behind. But she wasted no time on sentimental gestures. She leapt aboard the pillion seat of the scooter and the next moment was waving behind her, as it sped back along the forested road into Syria.

Under other circumstances, the next stage of the journey would have been thoroughly enjoyable. I was totally unprepared for the fairy-tale landscape of Turkey's south-eastern corner, as stunningly beautiful as its towns were disappointing – all the more so, given names like Antioch, Iskanderun and Tarsus. As it was, I could think of little else but reaching Mersine safely and finding my Merzario captain.

We met on my second evening in the city, in a sleazy restaurant of his choice where half a dozen Polish waitresses endured the nightly attentions of scores of lascivious merchant seamen. It was a simple matter to confirm the arrangement that Chantal had already made with him: once all the containers and trucks had been loaded next day, my car would be hoisted aboard if there was any room to spare.

And mercifully, there was. The ship set sail late the next afternoon for Ravenna, on Italy's Adriatic coast. It was not quite the luxury cruise I'd planned. I slept on a bunk in a container, and took my meals with a crew of grunting Swedish sailors in a galley where hard-core porn movies played around the clock.

We reached Ravenna early on the fourth evening. I left the ship a couple of miles out to sea and went ashore on the pilot's launch. This at least allowed me to spend the night in a blissfully porn-free zone: I slept in a construction gang's unlocked caravan, parked on the dockside. My last abiding memory of a half-year in Lebanon is of waking soon after dawn, to see the massive shape of my container-ship's stern gliding slowly past the caravan's window above my head and into its berth. An hour later, my VW Beetle was yanked unceremoniously up from the hold and onto the quay, undamaged and ready for the long drive home to London.

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Whether my Arabic ever really earned a penny for the bank that funded my studies, I rather doubt. Only on one occasion did I have the chance to deal with a senior figure who could speak no English: he was the head of Yemeni Airlines, and his European

language was Italian. So we had a faltering conversation for half-an-hour in his office in Sana'a about the finances of aircraft leasing. It would have pleased my MECAS teachers and graced the pages of *"The Way Prepared"*. But how much my Yemeni friend understood, I don't really know. And he'd certainly never heard of Haatim Tye.

GOING BACK

I subsequently visited Beirut several times as a Financial Times journalist – always seeing Chantal while she remained there, and once meeting up with her in Cyprus. She went on working for Merzario in the city until 1982 and then transferred to their offices in Italy. Eventually, she met and married an Italian, and sadly we lost touch.

It was a long time before I could bring myself to re-visit Shemlan. Of course I heard the news when the school was finally evacuated back to England for good, late in 1978, and I was concerned to hear about the evacuation of the village during the Israeli invasion of 1982 that cost Nabeel his life. After years away, though, I saw little point in trying to make contact again with the family. Perhaps I should have made more effort; but I was lazy and MECAS was a chapter of my life that had closed.

Then in 1998 I returned on a business trip to Beirut. My hosts, hearing that I had studied in Shemlan, insisted that I take a car and chauffeur for the afternoon to make the old familiar drive up to the village. I half-expected a shock and duly got one. No doubt like many other alumni before me, I was startled at the rundown state of the place. So many of the houses were boarded up and abandoned that it came as no surprise, by the time we reached it, to see the Hittis' house in the same condition. Three bullet holes in the wall marked the corner where my bedroom had been.
