SHEMLAN DAYS

A Personal Memoir of Britain's Arabic-Language School in the Lebanon

By Duncan Campbell-Smith

Widely known throughout the Arab world as MECAS, the British Foreign Office's Middle East Centre for Arabic Studies was founded in 1944 and established in the Lebanese village of Shemlan in 1948. The author was a student there in 1978.

Lebanon's civil war had kept MECAS in moth-balls for eighteen months when David Owen, as Foreign Secretary, decided in the summer of 1977 that the war was history. It was safe, he announced, for the school to reopen.

Alas, of course, not so. It was twelve months, though, before his wrong call was reversed. In the meantime, there was to be one last push for the MEC to resume its AS as usual. And another opportunity for fee-paying students like myself to sign up for the fabled wonders of the Shemlan course.

I was a late arrival. At Christmas,1977 I was still in the UK, listening nervously to every news report from Chris Drake, who was the BBC's celebrated correspondent in Beirut. Intermittent fighting had begun again across the Green Line between the East and West of the city. It began to seem as though I had missed my chance.

In November, I'd been given a non-FCO place under the auspices of a City bank. (Its chairman, David Montagu, knew that at 27 I was bored to death with banking, yet had generously agreed to fund me on a kind of unearned sabbatical.) It was unlikely the bank would agree to put the whole idea on hold until some future, indeterminate date.

The FCO had asked me to be in Shemlan for the second week of January. In the days after Christmas, reports from our man in Beirut became a regular item on the news. Scheduled flights to Beirut began to be cancelled. An apologetic call from someone at the Foreign Office seemed all too likely.

So I took the best evasive action I could think of: I registered my newly-acquired VW Beetle for a Lebanese import "carnet" (marked "INVALID FOR SYRIA" in large red letters) and set off on the first working day of the New Year to drive to Beirut, incommunicado, via the heel of Italy and a ferry from Athens.

A quarter of a century on, I can recall every detail of that drive—not least my relief as I crossed the Channel. At least now I would make it to Beirut, even if they put me straight on a boat back to where I'd come from.

Light snow covered the roads and town squares of northern France. There were queues at the cinemas in Aix-en-Provence to see the newly-released Providence starring Dirk Bogarde. In Rimini I shared my out-of-season hotel dining room with a marvellous wedding party. And on the evening of the fourth day, I reached the car-

ferry port in Brindisi and took up my place in the line for a midnight embarkation to Athens.

Tickets were on sale in an elegant old building that had clearly once been a proud main railway station. Next to the ticket office was a departure hall, where I found most of my fellow passengers drinking in a bar. Some of them coped with the drink less well than others. We'd returned to our cars around eleven o'clock and were awaiting the signal to drive aboard the ferry when suddenly one of the cars, in a line parallel to mine, shot forwards and shunted heavily into the vehicle ahead of it. There was a ghastly crunch of fenders and squashed lights. The offender's engine revved madly for a second, and stalled with a tell-tale jolt.

The driver of the front car sprang out as though chased by a hornet. Shards of glass were still falling as he flung open the drunken driver's door. Beside himself with rage, he hauled the wretched culprit out by his lapels. By now my loading line was moving forwards… but I had time to see the two of them wrestling for control of a pair of owlish spectacles, which flew into the darkness as I headed for the boat.

We crossed via the Corinth canal to Athens, where I spent the next night in a seedy commercial hotel. The Athens boat to Beirut left early the following day and was altogether more luxurious.

Much of the short voyage I spent in its casino, where a Lebanese high-roller cashed his way through $25,000 before the afternoon was over. This he did cheerfully enough, until an Italian passenger made an ill-advised aside to his wife about the sight of a spendthrift Arab millionaire. The man rounded on him angrily to explain (in English) that he was entirely mistaken: a millionaire he might be, and even occasionally a spendthrift, but under no circumstances would he tolerate being called an Arab. This surprised me, though it would not have done by the end of the evening.

Odd though it may seem, it was actually the first time I had heard spoken Arabic in real, live conversation. And a year of London evening classes, with a softly spoken Iraqi academic, turned out to be no preparation at all for the torrent of high decibel hectoring that accompanied much guzzling of Johnny Walker Black Label through the next few hours.

That said, much of the intense conversation in the saloon was not in Arabic at all: many of the Lebanese passengers seemed as happy (or more so) to talk in French or English as in Arabic. They were Maronite Christians heading home to East Beirut – which they plainly preferred to think of as a kind of Geneva suburb rather than one half of a teeming Middle Eastern city.

What prompted the sharpest exchanges was obviously a deeply felt dilemma: should their putative Swiss French status mean turning their backs on the Arab world? Three generations of one well-heeled family insisted all evening that it was foolish to deny Lebanon's hybrid make-up. Several of the single men thought otherwise – and, no bones about it, were headed back to stop the rot. And what did I think? Were the people of Belfast supposed to pack up and leave, just because the IRA was letting off bombs? (No answers required, thank you, just a friendly nod will do …)

All agreed, though, on the hatefulness of all things Palestinian and the wanton abuse by the Palestinians of all things Lebanese.

Rising while it was still dark next morning, I went up to the bridge deck under a steady drizzle for my first and long-awaited glimpse of Chris-Drake-land. The captain looked at me through the door of the wheelhouse as if he thought I might be contemplating an act of piracy on the high seas, then beckoned me inside. Gratefully I stepped into the warm and stood peering through a windscreen wiper to spot Beirut with a grey dawn breaking.

As it sorted itself into distinct buildings – distinct, but uniformly drab – there was little to distinguish the ferry harbour from a sprawling industrial port like any other. Nor any obvious sign, it seemed, of a city at war with itself.

Not, at least, until we'd landed. From the boat we were shepherded in our cars into a long corrugated-iron customs shed. There, uniformed officials sat like surreal librarians behind trestle tables heaving with card-index files and trays of rubber stamps. A dapper fellow with a beautifully manicured moustache leafed cursorily through my papers. "So welcome to Beirut, my friend", he said to me with an infinite world-weariness. "*Inshallaah*, I shall see you safely out again, if I am still alive in August."

This seemed a touch gloomy at the time. But he saw the future more clearly than David Owen. Many customs men were murdered just a few months later. By August the port itself had died. And getting safely out was to be another story.

I was met outside the customs shed by Ray, the director's assistant from Shemlan – a dry Glaswegian with (as I later learned) a strong line in gallows humour and a cynical one-liner for every occasion. It must have been agony for him to keep his counsel with the New Man that morning, as he sat in my passenger seat and directed me through the city.

He was on his best behaviour, so opted for no comment. And I was just as silent, awed at the sight of so much destruction: street after street was lined with gutted buildings. Nor was there much it seemed appropriate to say. Since David Owen had been kind enough to let me enroll, it somehow seemed the least I could do now was to affect an air of "No surprises here, then".

So together Ray and I travelled glumly out of the city – south past the desolate truck parks and shanty towns of Ouza'i, along the coast road bordering the international airport and up into the Chouf mountains to the promised village of Shemlan.

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Ray and the school's director, Julian Walker, must have known otherwise, but I'm sure a good many of the other 30 or so students suspected that I had more than a passing connection with MI6. On the one hand, there was my late arrival, and sponsorship by a bank that none of them had ever heard of. And on the other was the

fact that, rather enviably perhaps, I was arriving not as a resident of the school but as a lodger with one of the families in the village.

The truth, more prosaically, was that I had struck up a close friendship in the City with a young Lebanese banker, Youssef Nasr, whose father was chief executive of Middle East Airlines. Once my interest in Arabic had reached the point of taking off for Shemlan, Youssef's mother generously mediated on my behalf with various Nasr relatives in the village. A place had been found for me with one of the Shemlan families long accustomed to taking MECAS students as lodgers.

Salim Hitti, it is safe to say, had never aspired to running an airline. Now about 60 years old, he had been the village butcher for as long as anyone could remember – so long that it was now all but an honorary title. The Hittis' home sat towards the bottom of the village, at the end of one of the steep lanes leading down from the main road into Shemlan from Souq-el-Gharb.

I was given a wonderful welcome. Ray called for Salim as I turned the car, and he shuffled out to greet us, silent but grinning gleefully at my arrival. Behind him, on the steps that led from the road up to a large first-floor veranda, stood his wife Nouha. Clapping her hands and laughing as though I'd brought them news of a big lottery win, she gabbled excitedly and ushered us into their kitchen for coffee and cakes. As I would soon come to appreciate, 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 and worked in Beirut for American Express. He had been married just a year or so, but he and his young wife, who was three months pregnant when I arrived, were still living with Salim and Nouha until work was completed on a new house being built for them on the outskirts of the village.

It was many weeks before I pieced together the rest of the family details. A third son, Nabeel, was living in Sweden, and there were two daughters: Therese, who lived in Beirut, and Nada, who was working in Italy.

On my third weekend, I asked Bassam about a sepia photo portrait of a strikingly handsome young man that hung on the wall of the (rarely used) formal dining room. Was it, perhaps, one of his grandfathers? No, said Bassam. It was the first-born son of the family, who had been epileptic and who had tragically drowned in 1965 as a young man of 23. I never heard anyone in the family speak of him again, but many times watched Nouha dusting and polishing the framed portrait.

There were few formalities that first weekend. Ray introduced me to the school's director, Julian Walker, and the rest of the students, and I remember walking a good deal up and down the village trying to take in the fabulous views of the Chouf.

On the following Saturday, though, 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 apparently 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 grizzle, with an unmistakeable 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.

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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, rejoining it just short of the entrance to the school's private drive. (Where the meadow path emerged onto the road was a kiosk that sold books and magazines. Its window displayed copies of the same book from my first walk past to my last: "From Haven to Conquest", a history of the Israelis with a picture on its jacket of a gun-toting soldier booting his way into a Palestinian home.)

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. I saw little of them in my first few weeks. 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. Once spring arrived, though, there was invariably a small gathering of soldiers round a camp-fire and they usually provided me with my first dialogue of the day:

"*Sabaah 'al-khayr!"*

"*Sabaah an-noor, yaa ustaze! Kayf haalak?"*

"Al-hamdu lillaah!"

Compared with the style of billet endured by most Syrian soldiers in the Lebanon that year, a meadow in Shemlan must have been close to paradise. Still, it was hard not to feel sorry for them. Theirs was an infinitely tedious existence: I don't remember ever once seeing them in conversation with anyone from the village. Each lunchtime, as I walked back from school to the house, I would see them lying around on the grass in much the same positions as they'd occupied four hours before.

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. From my path 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 though some new bit of vocabulary – telling the time of the day, say, or (if I was up to the challenge of a very long list) identifying some of the foodstuffs in the kitchen. Salim would sit, hunched silently over his plate, wrapping the next mouthful of his lunch in a neat pitta-bread parcel and chewing contentedly – all the while smiling vacantly as though Nouha's words meant as little to him as to me.

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 ("*Duncan, biddak btushrib al-chai?*") to join her for tea and cakes in the kitchen.

This brought the second opportunity of the day to review Nouha's preparations for the evening meal, or perhaps for the coming weekend, 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 overly 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.

None of this was much affected by my arrival, save in two respects. It maddened his sheep, which generally spent their last night kicking and butting the bodywork of my VW Beetle. And it 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. Over my first few weeks, at least, this would invariably mean more soap: President Sarkis of Lebanon receiving this or that visiting Arab dignitary, and President Assad of Syria receiving more of the same, all of them sitting woodenly in large chairs as if transfixed by the camera.

No doubt, looking back, there was little enough for them to smile about as they contemplated the political agenda. Public optimism as of February 1978 must have been fast giving ground to private despair over the future of the country.

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By way of grading the importance of this or that disturbance, the foreign press in February 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 normalcy.

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. (Our man Ray from the school was not one to stint on the beers, but drew the line at swapping newspapers. He had a fetish about the joys of a pristinely folded Guardian: I once found him in his kitchen in Shemlan ironing the creases out of a newspaper that someone had snatched to read while his back was turned.)

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 newly-met acquaintenances or embassy staff, for a party in the city that night.

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 port-side offices of Merzario, a container shipping line where she worked as an international booking agent, and under her directions we set off north along the coastal round 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 rigeur*. 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 other 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 the Manara district of West Beirut. Her father was a heating engineer. The civil war had been a difficult time. It had forced them out of Manara 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, or even its whereabouts on the map. 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 just 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, as though the atrocity had happened days rather than years before. 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 Christian, Shia, Druze and Greek Orthodox communities apparently seemed to have happily coexisted, despite everything.

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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 along the Chouf north to Aley, then east via Bhamdoun and Zahle (ah, the nostalgia of those names, years later) into the Beka'a valley. I suppose we must have stopped to look at the ancient Baalbek temples, though truthfully 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 though after all.

(I remembered one of my first trips to Jeddah in 1975, and standing in a long line of Western bankers waiting at the airport immigration desk. The man behind me, an expatriate resident in Saudi Arabia, suddenly mumbled to the rest of us that he'd forgotten his re-entry visa. Clearly used to dealing with Saudi officialdom, he pulled a UK dog licence from his wallet, affixed it to his passport, flourished it grandly at the Bedu policeman and strode through unchallenged to the taxi rank.)

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 if it made us feel more welcome. 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 close to 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 inte al-jawasees min Shemlan*?" ("So you're spies from Shemlan?")

If a desert bedu had heard of Shemlan as "the spy school", it seemed safe to expect that most people we met in Syria would sooner or later refer to our suspect status. We were seldom disappointed.

No trip, though, was without its wonderful surprises: the sight of Spring flowers after rain in the Syrian desert; the grandeur of the Roman ruins (and the glorious old Queen Zenoubia 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 Ummayad mosque in Damascus, where we watched white-bearded elders reading stories to groups of illiterate working men clustered at their feet.

Best, and most often recounted in later years, 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 any 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 certainly 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 hamam.

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 (or so we all assured each other afterwards). And when the massage was over, we were collected and escorted to a sublime Turkish lounge. Here we were all reunited amongst mountains of thick white towels and plates of sweet pastries. We sat on a ring of white woollen sofas, smoking on 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, one 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 mountainously up 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 Ashrafieyeh, 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 Maryam, an old family friend in hospital there. She had been widowed or divorced some years earlier (I never did discover which), and lived in Ashrafieyeh with her daughter, a painfully shy 17 year-old called Hanna.

It must have been the early summer, because I remember three or four Sunday visits to our house in Shemlan by mother and daughter during the Spring. But 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.

Maryam spoke excellent English: she had done a little essential 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 Ashrafieyeh 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 therefore caused widespread alarm. In May the battle resumed and spread to Ashrafieyeh.

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

As things turned out, they had 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). Suddenly it was Chris-Drake-Land once again.

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 wholly 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 beyond Ouza'i. Several clubs, poised for the onset of their summer season, seemed to have become refugee camps overnight.

It might be easy to suppose that all this must have made it clear to us by May that we students of the '77-78 class were in Lebanon on borrowed time – but it did not seem so at the time. However much things on the periphery of our little world were clearly 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, once all the paraphernalia of the Maronite service had been returned to the cupboard for another week.

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, as often as not, she did single-handed.

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.

There was only one occasion on which I saw him break with his usual sloth-like torpor. I was just setting out up the hill to school one morning. Up the road I saw two children prodding something on the ground with sticks. As I approached them, Nabeel sprang from nowhere and actually jumped up and down in front of the children. By the time I reached them, there was nothing to see but a faintly hairy brown goo where the tarantula had been.

Nabeel stood glaring at the spider's remains for a few moments while he caught his breath back, then gave a great snort and resumed his usual doddering pace down the hill. 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 spy 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 – a barn-like building just below the road to Souq-El-Gharb – there was likely to be a table or two of students in attendance, enjoying a beer and admiring the sights on the dance floor.

This must explain, I suppose, why the indispensable musical backing for a home video of the '77-78 class – the music that instantly and indelibly recalls those long summer evenings – would consist not of Fairuz but (whisper it quietly) the Bee Gees. Posters of a white-suited John Travolta were everywhere, that summer. We lived with the ubiquitous sounds not of *Habbeytak Bessayf* or *Aatini Nay*, but of *Stayin' Alive*, *More Than A Woman* and *Jive Talkin'*, from the soundtrack of Saturday Night Fever.

Actually, I had a bit of a weakness for the sound of Fairuz belting out her raw, emotive songs with a full orchestra of strings scything away behind her. But I soon learned from Chantal – whose own preference was always for French chanteuses like Barbara – that it was wrong to think of Fairuz as just a sentimental diva, a kind of Levantine Shirley Bassey. She told me how one of three murders that she had personally witnessed during the war had been the result of a quarrel over the singer – whose best-known numbers had assumed iconic significance for the Phalange and were used as patriotic anthems by all the Christian right-wing militias.

She had been walking along a street in her Manara district of West Beirut, when suddenly she saw a young man dash out of a café and into the road in front of her. He was chased out by two other men, who shot him in the back with Kalashnikov rifles. Chantal heard later that the dead youth had apparently pulled the plug on the café's jukebox, midway through a Fairuz track. The men who murdered him were Phalangist toughs who'd been taunting him over the lyrics.

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 hotel's back office had several telex machines – and a manager famous for his mysterious ability to keep them working whenever most other lines out of Beirut went down. So if Chantal had urgent messages to send from Merzario's offices, and could not get a line, the Commodore was her fall-back. In exchange, no doubt Merzario expressed its appreciation to the hotel's manager in the usual way: he was always the proud owner of a conspicuously new-looking Mercedes.

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.

Time spent at the Commodore might not have been much good for my Arabic, and definitely didn't advance my banking career. Instead, it left me wanting to be a journalist, which wasn't at all what I'd expected.

* * * * *

The second half of the MECAS summer term ran from early June to the end of July. As though scripted from the start, every aspect of life in Shemlan grew more intense with each of those eight weeks. Of course this was partly down to the prospect of exams late in July. The weekend parties also got better and more frequent as the remaining opportunities slipped by. Much as we tried to focus on our studies and our socialising, though, there was no escaping the real source of 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. Sometimes this showed through: one of the them, poor man, had to move temporarily into the school when his city apartment was destroyed. Occasionally, it even produced a political reaction. The rotund and jovial Mr Assad – a man for whom the expression "a twinkle in his eye" might well have been invented – would thump his desk with glee at the sound of Israeli shells landing on villages in the south. "It is music in my ear, really!" he would charmingly explain. "Boom, boom!" The point being, as we understood, that the Shiite militia had abandoned the Palestinians in their hour of need – so were now getting what they deserved from the enemy they all shared.

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.

Salim's occasional comments over the lunch table remained as utterly incomprehensible as ever. (That never changed – as I never expected it to, after getting Bassam one day to write down the classical Arabic equivalent of some remark his father had made. It was comparing the Queen's English to thickest Glaswegian.) But I could follow much of the television news, admittedly much assisted by the fact that its content scarcely differed from one day to the next. Most gratifyingly of all, the front page of daily newspapers like An-Nahar were starting to seem less impenetrable.

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 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* against 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 in our particular situation 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 each we wrote the English on one side and its Arabic equivalent (with "pl/v.n." and "imperf." And an "N.B." for any unusual feature) on the other.

To memorize 30 or so words at a sitting, I found it helpful to move like a nomad from one spot to another, adopting each every afternoon for a couple of weeks or so. The Hitti household and its surroundings were littered by June with cosy spots I'd got to know intimately.

This peripatetic approach was not without its distractions, once the hot weather lured me out of the house. On one occasion, I set up my chair on the edge of the allotments that bordered the steep, badly maintained road down to Ain Aanoub. As I sat murmuring words softly but audibly to myself, I was suddenly aware of someone standing behind me. I turned round to find an old man standing motionless with a rake held vertically in his right hand.

"*Marhaba*", I said a little self-consciously. Whereupon, he lifted the rake into the air with both hands, clapped it down across his right shoulder and brought his left hand smartly down to his thigh. No doubt about it, he was Presenting Arms.

He grinned back at me very proudly and explained that he had been a private in the British army in Palestine during the second World War. There was not much that he could remember about it after more than 30 years; but he had never forgotten his parade-ground drill, and wanted me to know his time in the ranks was still his finest hour. *"Al-hamdu lillaah!"*

I had one other afternoon that was abruptly and less agreeably interrupted. It happened during the few weeks I spent word-listing on the flat roof of the house.

The view from the roof 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 into the ether.

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 vertiginously 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.

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; we would be sure to Go To The Butcher For Meat, The Baker For Bread; 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.

Nothing wrong with proverbs, of course, to help bridge the silence when all else failed. And it was undoubtedly the case that for some, conversational Arabic was always incomparably trickier than the written version, even in the last weeks before our final exam. Somewhere in today's Japanese Foreign Service is a diplomat called (let us say) Kazuo, who would definitely endorse this.

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Kazuo set the pace for our class in terms of diligence and application. By June, no-one could remember him getting less than 100% in the vocabulary test with which we started each day's lessons. And his written Arabic was a thing of calligraphic beauty: each line wonderfully formed, with all its vowel signs meticulously entered at exactly parallel angles. In fact, the difficulties only began when Kazuo attempted to say anything.

There was a sadly comic Saturday morning when he joined several of us for the weekly trip into Beirut. We went as a group into a small grocery shop just off the Hamra, where Kazuo approached the girl at the till to buy a packet of cigarettes. The rest of us stood behind him, while Kazuo launched into a stream of courtesies and politely explained the frustration of having no tobacconist's shop in Shemlan. After which, the girl looked straight past him and just as politely offered us all (in English) an apology that left Kazuo mortified for weeks: "Thank you, but excuse me – I don't speak Japanese."

* * * * *

Social life at the school, come the summer, involved a lot of tennis: there were good courts at the school, and others we could use in the grounds of a beautiful old French-style villa on the road to Souq-El-Gharb. We all stuck to a strict dress code on the courts. The sight of students walking around in their tennis whites was not the least of Shemlan's oddities: it must have marked it out for years past as a singular kind of mountain village.

Once it had really turned hot, though, tennis was best left until the late afternoon. The preferred option, if time allowed, was a drive down to one of the beaches adjacent to the coast road south of Khalde. One weekend, we drove as far south as Sidon. And we even found a municipal swimming pool somewhere near the coast. In an idle moment at that pool, silly poses were struck and photographs taken – which years later turned out to be almost my only photographic record of those days, and of the lovely Chantal surrounded by her MECAS admirers. Some of them bald, portly ambassadors now, but slim and hirsute then.

For most of June, we still enjoyed the freedom to drive to and from the coast – and into West Beirut via most of the likely routes. The Israelis withdrew from the south early in the month, keeping up the occasional barrage ("Boom, boom!") but relying on Major Saad Haddad and his Christian militia to control things on the ground. The violence seen in Beirut during May seemed to have abated.

Not that anyone could suppose the country was returning to stability. In the middle of June, all the Lebanese were shaken by an act of gangsterism that seemed to come straight out of the most lurid Mafia movie.

The Gemayel and Franjieh families had vied for leadership of the Christian right for years, if not generations. Each had its own territorial fiefdom, demanding a degree of mediaeval loyalty that made Sicilian politics look frivolous. So it came as astounding news, one beautiful June morning, that the son and heir of the Franjieh dynasty – together with his young family and about 30 supporters – had been gruesomely gunned down in their own home during the night. Executed, said the morning radio, by Phalangist gunmen acting on orders from the Gemayel family. Salim stood stock still in the kitchen listening to the radio report, raised his eyebrows at me and gave a low whistle.

Chilling threats of retribution followed for weeks afterwards. Some day, somehow, the Gemayels would suffer grievously for what they'd done. (As indeed they did. I was a correspondent for the Financial Times visiting the Lebanon in 1982, when the Gemayel son and heir was buried in the rubble of the Phalangists' HQ building after a huge bomb explosion – though it was never really clear whether his murder had been the Franjiehs' revenge. By then, Beirut was such a Byzantine tangle of murderous feuds that a line-up of the plausible culprits would have stretched half way to Damascus.)

Like ominous spots on the sun, such events seemed a sign of bad times to come; but their immediate impact was hard to discern. By now, also, 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, at least, of being there every Sunday for the best gathering of the week. Now that it was truly summer, the warmth and fragrancies 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. The second Sunday of that July brought a Bad News week to a sombre end.

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 poor man 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 took it to mean the future would now be different. And so indeed it proved.

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The fact that guns were readily available for the resolution of any problem in the Lebanon had at first been a matter of some hilarity among us at the school. Back in February, there had been The Dog Story. Every night for a week, a wretched dog had barked its way through the small hours: chained to a house somewhere near to the school, it had kept us all awake, and the rest of the village too. It was already a

standing joke when, well into its incessant yapping one night, a loud gunshot rang out across Shemlan. And that was that.

The next shooting incident was a different matter. 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, anyway, 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-bloodied 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.

As for a gun raised in anger – I only saw this once, and even then it was only in the rear-view mirror of my Beetle. It was in May or June. I had just overtaken a parked car that was a few feet out from the grass verge on the road somewhere between the coastal highway and Bchammoun. It seemed an unlikely place for anyone to have stopped, far from any houses. Looking back, I saw in my mirror a man kneeling on the road with a Kalashnikov rifle raised menacingly to his shoulder. Presumably he was preparing to ambush another vehicle. He had not bothered me, and I certainly didn't slow down to bother him.

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 burbled 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.

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 Ray or Julian 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.

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.

As we prepared for our final exams, on July 20 and 21, we all shared the disagreeable sense that our studies were finally being overtaken by events in Lebanon's collapsing world. Our exams, like our end-of-term dance on the school premises and our farewell visits around the village, were not quite the climax of the year that we had hoped and anticipated they would be.

Towards the end of the month, I was invited to lunch at their home in West Beirut by Assad Nasr and his wife. 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. Middle East Airlines was in good shape, it seemed. But the deputy governor had to acknowledge a flight 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 there 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 and Nouha, Bassam and Amin, who had just become the proud father of a baby girl. It was hard: though my Arabic had been (just about) equal to the demands of the MECAS summer exams, it was nowhere near good enough to cope with all of the emotions I wanted to express that day.

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.

* * * * *

Riding shotgun for me to Latakia was truly 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. She and I 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 to his manhood. He launched into a tirade of hostile questions. Each oh-so-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 *("Biddak btushrib al-chai?")*

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 announced 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 space no words could fill, 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 couple of days would have been idyllic. 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 sleezy restaurant of his choice where half a dozen Polish waitresses would clearly be providing merchant seamen with more than a shish kebab before the night was over. 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 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.

* * * * *

Once back at my City bank, I was soon travelling to and from the Middle East with a quite usefully enhanced credibility. Colleagues who were old hands from the ex-pat community in the Gulf could hardly credit the Arabic fluency I had gained in just six months.

Given the option, I'd have returned to Shemlan after the summer break, for the one further term that was needed to complete the MECAS "long course". My employer, not unreasonably, reckoned a seven-month absence was long enough – especially since MECAS, as was generally agreed, had already delivered on its promise.

Whether my Arabic ever really earned a penny for the bank, 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 terrific 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.

North and South Yemen were brewing up for another civil war in 1979, so I used the opportunity of more than one visit to Sana'a to pen a few articles that I then sold to the Financial Times. I wrote other pieces from Muscat and from Saudi Arabia. In the autumn of 1979, I was offered a staff job with the FT, where I worked for six years.

I 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. There were three bullet holes in the wall where my bedroom had been.

Along the road where Salim had challenged all-comers at trik-trak for so many years, a few of the small village shops were still in business. By a lucky chance, one of the

shopkeepers had a telephone number for Amin. Apparently the family still owned the house, and Amin visited it from time to time to review plans for a full restoration. So I called him from the shop.

He was suitably incredulous when he heard my voice after almost exactly 20 years. Within a few moments, though, he was chatting away quite nonchalantly, as though former lodgers in Shemlan were on the telephone every other week. Amin told me that his father had died some years before, but Nouha was in good health and living with his family in Beirut. It was absurdly touching to hear she still had my brooch, and still wore it sometimes to church.

As a Financial Times writer, I travelled fairly often to the Gulf states. My MECAS Arabic was often admired, though (if I am truthful) it was rarely tested much beyond a few social courtesies. Still, this proved valuable enough on several occasions.

The first of these was the most memorable, and offers a fitting close to a memoir of Shemlan. I was still editing a Financial Times newsletter on the Middle East – hoping before long to make it onto the main newspaper – and was visiting Kuwait to interview local bankers about the progress of their local capital markets. On the third day in the city, with a flight booked to Riyadh for the late afternoon, I attended a government reception. No doubt it was to announce a conference that had been convened with a view to improving the general situation.

At the reception, I met a charming Palestinian official who was delighted with my Arabic and keen to know all about the teaching methods at MECAS. We talked for a half-hour or so; then he pressed his business card on me and insisted I call at his office en route to the airport. He worked, I saw, at the Ministry of Petroleum, that was indeed close to the airport in those days.

Two hours later, when I sat down with him in his office, he gave me the most remarkable scoop. It was a time of almost weekly panics over the price of oil, and fevered speculation over OPEC's future intentions. Opening a thick red file on the coffee table in front of us, he pointed to a section setting out fresh production levels and selling prices that had just been secretly agreed by the Gulf states. They were to be announced the following week. Provided I concealed his identity as the source, the data was mine to report as soon as I wished. I wrote my story within the hour and filed it to London from the airport.

It provided me next day with my first ever front-page exclusive, a happy event for any aspiring journalist. Whatever his motives, it was a kind and generous favour that my Palestinian friend had done me, and I needed to acknowledge this before I left his office. There was only one way to express my full appreciation in Arabic, which I duly did. And no, he'd never heard of Haatim Tye either.
