

Fading Photographs:

Recollections of the Chouf in Caparaó

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Se souvenir – du basilic et du pommier, du sirop de mûres et des amandiers. Nadia Tueni

To remember – the basil and the apple tree, blackberry syrup and the almond trees. Nadia Tueni



Miriam Ayres, Private Collection.

In the Grandparents' House

A popular Brazilian proverb maintains that “*Quem conta um conto aumenta um ponto*” (“Whoever tells a tale twists it without fail”). This adage suggests that listeners should react cautiously to the stories they are told, for their content has almost certainly been distorted or, to put it benevolently, artfully recreated. The saying also offers a cautionary note to the storyteller, since she may encounter listeners who are skeptical or completely indifferent.

Stories of forced displacement offer even more obstacles to the credibility of the narrator: they are fragmented, incongruous, romanticized, and at times tinged with the resentment of exile. These tales of fleeing the old country to build a life in a new place, orally transmitted from one member of the exilic community to another in bits and pieces, are usually reserved for the few patient listeners capable of experiencing the past as a historical drama. They are unafraid of crumbling houses and unfashionable company and admire fading portraits and furniture.



Miriam Ayres, Private Collection.

Children are almost always ideal listeners. Their immigrant grandparents' funny accents tinged with words from a foreign language easily lull them into a world of snow-frosted mountains, bleating sheep and stone houses – the stuff of fairy tales for children in a half-forgotten town in South America. And children are particularly drawn to forms of visual stimulation, like old photographs, that trigger long stories and inspire storytellers. These talismans immediately transport both the storyteller and the listeners to a remote world where life follows the rhythms of nature, until it is transformed irreparably by war, famine, and displacement.

During a childhood that my sister and I spent in our Lebanese grandparents' home, three photographs generated stories that we heard repeatedly and in turn reinvented and retold ourselves. All three featured stern-looking men who inspired our curiosity and fear. This triangle of men spurred us to ask questions to our grandparents that they generally ignored, preferring to talk of life in the village. Instead they listed the names of the cast of characters appearing in each of the three pictures, all men save for one lonely young woman seated at the end of the front row of a large portrait (see picture on page 56).

The first was an official portrait of Camille Chamoun taken during his visit to Brazil in 1954. The image of the pompous Lebanese president was the centerpiece of our grandfather's salon, placed beside his favorite carriage clock. Chamoun was our *jiddi's* (our grandfather)'s political idol, a statesman ordained to protect the Maronite community and guarantee the stability necessary so that my sister and I, his favorite granddaughters, could attend college in Beirut, which we never did.

The face of the doomed president never scared us the way the others did. It remained on our grandparents' wall until *jiddi's* death decades later at the age of 100. Growing up we were so accustomed to seeing Chamoun as a head of state that for us he became the epitome of authority, greater in our eyes than the presidents of our own country whose names we learned at school. To us his eyes seemed permanently directed toward the future in the place to which we truly belonged.

The second photograph was preserved in my grandparents' family album and depicted the visit of a Maronite missionary to the Lebanese community in Manhuaçu, in which many Lebanese émigrés settled. The third hung on the wall of my

grandparents' living room next to Chamoun's, and was an artfully retouched portrait of six of my grandmother's paternal uncles taken at the turn of the century in Beirut (see picture on page 57). This last photograph was the only one from Lebanon that my grandparents carried with them to Brazil; its story partially explains the course of their lives and our own somewhat tangled origins.

These three photographs were family blazons and proofs of our history, testaments to both a period of material wealth and forebodings of the imminent

tragedies that followed.

Images are generally guarded and treasured because they recall happier times.

These pictures were also our passport to a past country that came alive every evening when our grandparents'

émigré friends visited, bringing their grandchildren along with them to play with us while they all engaged in endless conversations in Arabic, which our generation barely understood.

A Tattered Picture, a Family's Division

Images are generally guarded and treasured because they recall happier times. However, the photographs and tattered remnants of pictures in my grandparents' house evoked memories of deprivation and loss. They seemed to confirm the family members' perception that they had been persecuted in Lebanon while treated as outsiders in their adopted country.

The photograph of the Maronite missionary, which marked a happy moment for the members of the Lebanese community in our town, was itself the recipient of an unhappy fate. One day our aunt, *tia* Regina, lifted it from the family album where as a boy her younger brother Abdallah had scribbled ink shoes onto some of the subjects. She then lent it to another man in the photograph who had lost his own copy and wished for a replacement.

A few months later when she asked to have the photograph back, he said he had lost it without a trace as he had made no copy. As a result of his cavalier attitude toward the treasured image, she went on to harbor a deep enmity toward his entire family until her sudden death at the age of 56. Only recently did his daughter return the damaged original to our mother Linda. The sacred image has been restored and copies sent to the relatives of the men in the portrait as far as Beirut and the Chouf in Lebanon.

This salvaged photograph dating back to 1938 shows twenty Lebanese émigrés as they began to build families and fortune in Brazil. Taken in Manhuaçu, the mountain hamlet located at the foot of the Caparaó range in the state of Minas Gerais where I was born and raised and where my mother still lives, it shows the priest in his cassock seated in the center, the little boy in shorts beside him, surrounded by stocky dark-haired, dark-eyed men – most mustachioed – in fresh pressed suits. These men from the Chouf were mostly Maronite (there were a few Druze among them) and arrived in Brazil in the mid-1910s seeking work and fleeing the Great War. Most were hired by their Italian precursors as immigrant laborers, as coffee crop sharers, coffee-processing machine sellers, or storekeepers.

By the time the camera snapped the picture two decades later almost all its men had become wealthy, esteemed citizens of the town. On the day it was shot, our grandfather and his best friend, the powerful Seu Felipinho, brought along their oldest sons. But the storeowner Seu Fares, out of open-mindedness, was responsible for the presence of the only woman in the portrait, his oldest daughter Nazira. The history of this photograph, which provides a portrait of the first generation of the Lebanese in town, tells another story, that of how my grandparents' children – my mother and aunts and uncles – dealt with and recounted their parents' past.

In our grandparents' tidy album, this photo was uncharacteristically marred by the ink doodles added by Abdallah, who appears in the picture

at our grandfather's side. He chose four people's feet on which to scribble: his own, two men, and Nazira's. What did he mean by marking both his feet and a single shoe on three other selected pairs of feet, as opposed to simply adding horns or mustaches to the subjects' faces, as children often mischievously do?

Perhaps he was signaling the special fate of those he chose: himself, primogeniture of the family; the two men, who would go on to hold positions of financial leadership in the community; and the young woman who would become an accomplished educator and writer.

At the time, my grandfather, a born leader, was struggling to make ends meet but posed proudly with his appointed successor. He, however, was wrong about the son he saw as the second patriarch. Our *jiddi*, once a silk trader, had a talent for politics and engineering and did not usually miscalculate, but he erred in believing his first-born son would build upon his legacy. *Jiddi's* mistake would create a new dynamic in the family and cause irreconcilable divisions.

When *jiddi* saw his oldest son – a fluent Arabic speaker and, like his father, a natural engineer – drop out of high school, marry a domineering woman and spiral into debt, his first instinct was naturally to help him. But despite a lucrative career as a car mechanic and my *jiddi's* continuous attempts to help him, *tio* Abdallah quickly developed health problems that matched his financial misfortunes. His wife and daughter, having realized that our *jiddi* would always rescue his oldest son, continually drained his financial resources. In the afternoons, when her oldest son came home to ask for food and loans, our *sitti* (our grandmother) walked about the house cursing his family, a stream of horrible words in Arabic flowing from her mouth. Then, at the end of the afternoon, when our *jiddi* came home, her fury fell upon him. It was from her fits of fury that we learned to curse in Arabic.

Tired of his wife's verbal abuse, *jiddi* picked a daughter to rule over the small empire he had built.

A harsh and at times impulsive person, he passed over our mother Linda, keeper of family memories, and chose his favorite daughter, our aunt Anice, as Abdallah's successor.

But *tia* Anice did not care about her new position. Her major concern was social mobility. She had no time to waste perfecting her Arabic or managing our grandfather's business. She moved to Rio, worked for a fashion designer and married a wealthy architect. Her beauty was her passport into sophisticated circles, and her obsession with the rules of etiquette inspired us, her nieces, to move on from the parochialism of our town to develop our own taste for elegant fashion and dining. Only much later were we to understand that by adopting this upwardly-mobile lifestyle *tia* Anice was merely following the ethos of the Lebanese immigrants who had arrived early on in the twentieth century.

Despite *tia* Anice's apparent disinterest in family lore, every time she came from Rio to visit us she sat down and worked patiently with *jiddi* to trace the origin of our family. Their collaboration ultimately resulted in a detailed family tree. They were able to identify our grandparents and great-grandparents

and tracked our grandmother's great-grandmother, Yasmine, allegedly of French descent. Anice's discovery

reinforced her pretense of being European, and she became a proponent of the idea that this trace of French blood that we allegedly carried shaped who we were culturally. Paradoxically, however, this carefully-constructed family tree only increased our interest in Lebanon – an interest which bordered on obsession.

My mother Linda married "below her station" at a time when our *jiddi* finally achieved a respectable

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financial position. In spite of the resentment she felt toward her parents and siblings from a young age, she turned out to be the Lebanese-Brazilian equivalent of Cordelia. In Shakespearean fashion, she became the keeper of family traditions and the most devoted child of our early widower *jiddi*. Although he was in excellent health well into his nineties, as he approached one hundred his eyesight

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began to fail, and for the last few years of his life it was Linda, the child he'd largely left on her own, who tenderly tended to him until his unfortunate passing.

Linda's arresting looks matched her name (appropriately, in Portuguese, 'linda' means 'beautiful') but her independence and stubborn sense of morality often compelled her to disagree with other members of the family. Born and reared in Brazil, she eagerly embraced her Lebanese roots, and through her we came to learn the details of our grandparents' families, their historical alliances and disputes, origins in the Chouf, and their own prejudices and the suffering they endured growing up. After the death of *tio* Abdallah, who visited her in the afternoons to reminisce over coffee and cake, Linda became a living archive of documents, recipes, historical events, knickknacks, and old resentments.

It is from her that we learned the story of the third photograph – the only one of the three from the old country and the one that had scared us as children – definitive proof that we were not immune to the abrupt transitions of history as so many other Brazilians seemed to be. But that photograph also transmitted to us, the children of the third generation, the fatalism that marked our traumatized *sitti*, who was never able to assimilate the inherent optimism of the New World.

We are from Fowara: Where is Fowara?

Linda removed this last photograph from our grandparents' wall and kept it wrapped in white silk paper, like a piece of jewelry. It is a heavily retouched group portrait showing six gentlemen dressed in formal attire, their eyes piercing the viewer's, looking slightly askance as if lost in reflection. The one in the center with a moustache and a *tarbush* is, Linda informed us, *sitti's* eldest paternal uncle Assad. In the row behind him appears another uncle, the authoritative *khoury* (i.e. priest) Boutros. Assad is flanked by Charif, also in a *tarbush*, and Felipe, who looks handsomely modern. On *khoury* Boutros's left and right are the mustachioed Salle and the charming Suleiman, the first to arrive in Brazil, where he was eventually murdered in a political dispute.

Linda recounts the story of this group photograph with the subtly caustic tone of her mother, Nabiha. *Sitti* was the only daughter of a wealthy family of male silk-makers and traders who lived in Fowara, a small town in the Lebanese Chouf, in a stately stone house next to a grove of mulberry trees where lavish lunches were served on Sundays. As the youngest and only girl, she was not allowed to learn to read or write, and it was simply assumed that she would marry at an early age, as indeed happened.

Later in life, I learned that Lebanese family dramas in the old country and in exile follow a predictable pattern: after the patriarch dies, infighting breaks out. Family members trade accusations, destroy and forge new alliances, and, in the end, refuse to forgive each other or each other's friends. But it was not always so... The priest, the central figure in Nabiha's gallery of close relatives, was revered and referred to simply as *khoury*, which along with *hakim* (i.e. doctor) we learned both to fear and respect. He was especially honored because he had taken in our young *sitti* after she became orphaned during the early years of World War I as Ottoman troops seized food supplies in the Chouf, causing widespread starvation.

Nabiha's two oldest children were Adma, born in 1913 after she first married my *jiddi*, and Adèle,

born a few months after our grandfather left for Brazil. They were both raised in the *khoury's* house. The girls, however, did not survive the famine that we were told followed a devastating locust plague in Mount Lebanon. They were remembered as martyrs, and their story made us fear war, starvation, and the possibility of becoming refugees ourselves. After she lost her baby girls, Nabiha fled from the priest's home to Syria on foot to look for work as a maid. She did not want to become a burden on her uncle, who had to support his family of six. Of Nabiha's life in Syria, we were never told anything, but apparently she returned to Lebanon and was eventually contacted by a relative in Brazil who wrote to tell her that *jiddi* was living in Manhuaçu. More than a decade after her husband had left, her two daughters had died, and the priest had taken her into his home, she arrived in Brazil on a cargo ship.

An immigrant in a country she never loved, she distrusted Brazilians, worked from dawn to night, frantically economized on food, water, and clothing and cursed her husband and her children, bemoaning their fate. She only showed affection to cats and to her cousin Emeline, who left Fowara shortly after her own belated re-encounter with her husband. Our grandmother never learned Portuguese, and when she spoke to us in Arabic it was usually to reprimand us or to entice us to eat homemade Arabic sweets.

For *sitti*, who seemed to us to have been born melancholic and disillusioned, the world offered only perils. She started her days by hurling insults at her husband and blaming him for his extravagant generosity to friends and guests alike. He was vain, she was frugal; he was bold while she was timid. During their life together they never seemed to consider the possibility of attempting to harmonize differences. In fact, over time the differences only accentuated, making the couple even more unhappy. But they remained oddly, stubbornly loyal to one another, locked in a relationship that transcended the vows of marriage: our grandparents, we shockingly discovered during our adolescence, were also first cousins. In the new country such kinship relations were not acceptable

and we feared that our grandparents, our mother Linda, her siblings and we, who lived and behaved so differently from most Brazilians, carried some illness related to our incestuous condition.

Unlike Nabiha, who praised the *khoury* Boutros, *jiddi*, who was himself

a nephew of Boutros, suppressed the priest entirely from his stories of life in the Chouf. *Jiddi* never spoke about his engagement to Nabiha

or about his uncle, Boutros,

who had arranged the marriage. Instead, he told us stories of his apricots, his herd of sheep, the snow-covered peaks that melted and created the springs that gave Fowara its name. He told us that their village was near Beirut, a city he had seen only briefly as he passed through on his way to the port to take the cargo ship to São Paulo.

Our grandfather's Lebanon was a place of abundance and natural beauty that would have lasted forever had it not been for the odious Turks whom he hated his entire life. Our grandmother remembered the Lebanon of her protective family, of her cousin Linda whom she saw as a sister, of the dead baby girls, of the heat on the road to Syria on which she had departed on foot. Lebanon for us was two: the Lebanon of our grandfather, of plentiful and yielding lands, and the Lebanon of our grandmother, a place of famine and fleeing villagers. Yet, ironically, it was she, not he, who eternally longed to return home and to the company of her beloved uncle and cousin.

It was not until much later, when my sister and I finally went to Beirut armed with the family tree, that we were able to confirm details of our grandparents' stories. We had decided to make a

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pilgrimage to Fowara, without anyone's assistance, but the village did not even appear on our map of Lebanon. We went to a bookstore in Beirut and asked the owner, who said he had never heard of the town. This may have been so because we pronounced the name of the village with a very Brazilian inflection. Discouraged, we called our mother in Brazil, who mentioned as a point of reference the castle in the town of Beiteddine.

We left early the next morning on board a bus. The passengers eagerly became involved in our quest and, using bits of French and Arabic, helped direct the driver to a well-known spot where he dropped us off. There we spent a sleepless, anxious night, the only guests in a former Ottoman castle. After breakfast, we left the hotel toward Fowara. I wanted to emulate *sitti* and walk, but my sister

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quickly vetoed the plan, and when an old Mercedes taxi appeared out of nowhere we hopped in and told the driver to take us to the center of Fowara. Fifteen minutes

later, he stopped in a windy place where we could hear the steady sound of water flowing and see what appeared to be the site of a church under construction. A man stumbling along the road, talking to himself, managed a mumbled greeting and disappeared; there was no one else. We looked at one another in a panic. Was this it? We had come all the way from New York and the south of Brazil to find this dried-out village sealed off by barren mountains and ghostly images of the Virgin Mary? I thought of *sitti* and her perennially dark universe and tried to imagine her life a hundred years earlier in this place.

I wanted to leave, but my sister insisted that we go on. And on we went through this seemingly depopulated hamlet until my sister spied a man

carrying a jug of olives and asked him in French if he knew where we could find the members of the Fadlallah family. Monsieur Said, which was how he introduced himself, invited us first to his own home for tea, where we met his family. He then took us to the house of the widow of one of *jiddi*'s cousins, where we spent the entire afternoon eating peaches and discussing the family tree that we brought from Brazil (in a mix of French and Arabic) with a dozen neighbors and newfound relatives. Word of our arrival in Fowara spread quickly, and by the next afternoon we found ourselves the guests of honor at a hastily arranged reception with fifty relatives from the Eid and Fadlallah clans in Beirut hosted by a newfound cousin, Fares, a diplomat who had lived in Venezuela.

Fares in turn led us to *sitt* (i.e. lady) Linda, our *sitti* Nabiha's cousin and the daughter of Boutros, who lived with her son and his family in the city. We gave her a copy of the photograph of her father and another of *sitti* in Brazil. She did not seem the least bit surprised to see us and spoke of her father and of their lives and of Nabiha in great detail. As the closest living family member in Lebanon she seemed to us like a kind of oracle. She confirmed many of the stories we had been told, including that of babies Adma and Adèle whom she said "weren't strong enough to survive anyways." A dry and stoic woman, she nonetheless embraced us as if we were her grandchildren. In doing so, she made us feel part of the alliance that had been forged during the Ottoman period in the Chouf between the Eids and the Fadlallahs by *khoury* Boutros. Later when *sitt* Linda died at the age of 98, shortly after the assassination of Rafik Hariri in February 2005, our connection to Lebanon was severed. Without her presence as a living medium between the old world and the new, most of our other relatives in Beirut appeared to have lost interest in us.

As for Boutros and his brothers, their image continues to reign imposingly on the wall of my sister's foyer in southern Brazil. A conduit between generations, Boutros is an idol for our aunts and mother, Nabiha's Brazilian daughters. Growing up, my mother told us that he had saved our *sitti* during the war and that our family would not have

existed were it not for his efforts and compassion. And during our pilgrimage to the East we had actually met Nabiha's cousin and companion, *sitt* Linda, the daughter of the ghostly man in the photograph – the priest who had a wife and children – and through her found a tactile tie to what had heretofore seemed a fragile and invented Lebanese identity.

But Boutros would have been nothing more than an oral myth had it not been for the women who literally dug him out of the shards of war and kept his memory alive. In the 1940s, in a visit to Fowara, *sitti's* cousin Emeline, who had also migrated to Manhuacu, had found, in an unintended exercise in affective archeology, the badly stained photograph of Boutros and his brothers in the ruins of what had been my grandmother's family home. Upon her return to Brazil, she had the photo restored and gave a copy of it to Nabiha, who in turn passed it on to Linda, who gave it to her daughter. The short tale of our origins in the Chouf that is recounted here would have vanished from memory had it not been for the photo and the vivid recollections it

sparked in our mother Linda. It is she who, at 82, sits with us over coffee and spins stories of friends, cousins, and villages that she derives from the old photographs she managed to keep. Like a museum guide, she tells us how each piece was rescued. She then recounts the stories of each of the men and women in the picture as if their lives had become timeless. She talks about her mother Nabiha, who never loved her, as if she was a heroine, of *sitt* Linda, as a beauty who endured only hardship, of Emeline, our grandmother's manipulative cousin, as a person our naïve *sitti* chose as a confidant, and of babies Adma and Adèle whom she oddly mourns. The content of her stories may seem romantic, but she narrates them in a form that varies between documentary and novel. In either form, she returns to them each time adding an omitted detail that brings our Lebanese heritage nearer to us.

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