

Reem Haddad: Journalist

(Born in 1969, in Beirut; currently living in Beirut; recorded in the American University of Beirut. Language: English.)

Okay, I was born in Beirut, and I don't remember anything really before the war. I have vague memories of the mountains, nothing else. Then when the war got too bad, when I was six or seven, we went to the United States. We stayed there two years and then came back. Then at the age of fifteen I went again to the US, I did my high school and college there.

Of course I remember the war, my childhood memories of the war are like everybody else's so I am not going to bore you with those. But when I left here, I left with a hatred, really, of Lebanon. I wanted out, I hated it, I hated it because of the war. I couldn't take it. So in the US I really immersed myself in American culture and tried to get away from everything Lebanese, everything, I even forgot the language. It took me a year to get over the war, the nightmares. Then, you know, you grow up. I went to college, and towards the end of my junior year, the war ended. I didn't think much about it, okay, the war has ended. Then I came back to Lebanon because I wanted to see it. In fact you grow up, and realize that you don't really hate it. Something happened and you hated it, but it's not the country. I wanted to come back and see, do I really hate it or was I affected by the war?

The first time I came, it was just for a few months. I loved it. I realized that I really do love it. That first time I immersed myself in social work. I loved -- There were lots of -- now there are lots of kids on the streets - but before there were even more. The souks were still [ruined]. It was much much poorer. I started befriending children on the streets. I stayed with them, that's why I stayed for a long time, because I couldn't leave them. Then I went back to the US, finished my studies and worked for -- okay, I have a BS in business, actually in human resource management, and BA in radio, television and film --communication. Then I worked for almost a year, at Fox News, a television station there -- it's like ABC or NBC -- in Washington DC. Then I decided to move back here. My parents had moved back and they wanted to live here. That's why I moved back. First I got a job at Future TV. I worked there for

a while, and then when the Daily Star opened I moved to the Daily Star. In a nutshell, that's it. I'm still with the Daily Star. This is my history basically. (laughs) What kind of things do you want?

Michelle: Well it's up to you. You are free to choose what you would like to talk about. It is how you see your life story.

Reem: I seem to be going through a phase in Lebanon. I am frustrated, for example, by the corruption that is going on at the government level. This is really upsetting. This is the phase I'm in, "Why? Why? Why?" I could easily go back and live in the US. Not that there's no corruption there, there is. But it's an easier life. Here, there is so much to fight for. Sometimes I feel that you write and you write and you write, but people don't listen. Nobody listens, and I feel like saying, "Hey, listen to me, you're going to regret this". For example, when you see an old house going down -- It's been a frustrating experience because when I came here, supposedly my country was being reconstructed. But I don't see it being reconstructed. Okay, the infrastructure is great. But this isn't what I came to see. To see



Picture Credit: Mona Eid

a country so beautiful, the old houses - the ignorance of pulling down an old house, you know? This frustrates me. Things like that. I wish the media were stronger. It's not strong enough. So this is my latest phase. I go through a lot of phases. (laughs) I don't know if this is interesting? Do you want anecdotes? Or experiences here?

Michelle: Whatever you feel like talking about.

Reem: You know, people don't think of their lives as interesting. You just live day by day. (pause) There's another part to the phase I'm in: here, in Lebanon, some people are very active and they fight for things, but most people just accept things as they are. This bothers me as well. You should fight for change, fight for it, don't just sit there. But they just sit there. For example, if a building is about to go up and it's going to ruin something, they sit and they don't fight it. In the US they do human chains, and they fight things. They don't accept things. We have to change things somehow. You can't

get anywhere without fighting. I don't think that this is interesting.

Michelle: Don't worry, I am sure people will find what you're saying interesting.

Reem: Let's see. (pause) Why don't you ask me some questions, anything, just to get me going?

Michelle: I know it's difficult. Think of any recollections, earliest recollections. You said you've been abroad and you've been back. Or anecdotes, events relationships with people.

Reem: Relationships -- I would say my closest relationship was with two children I adopted from the street. These were -- I wonder what has happened to them? I think my favorite relationship was with them. When I first came back, I was only twenty-one or something like that, and I loved them, I really loved them. They were beggars, and we developed a great relationship. We used to have lunch together everyday, and we became really, really good friends. And then they disappeared. The father is Syrian so he took them back to Syria. And the frustration -- I mean they were being abused all the time, he used to get drunk, hit them on the streets, and force them to beg. And my recollections are out there with the little girl and the boy. She was nine years old. I used to sit with her while she sold her gum. If I had to stay with her all night, I'd do it. She was a little girl and anyone can do anything to her. That's what I remember, sitting with her till four in the morning until she had sold her gum, and her horrible father came to take her back again. She had no mother. But I put them in school -- they'd never been to school. And then the father came and took them out, and took them away. I miss them, until now. I keep thinking about them. If only -- I was just a student then, I was poor, not that I'm rich now, but then I didn't even have a job. I didn't have anything. I was just a kid. If they were here now I could do so much more. Now that I'm working and have a salary, I could do so much more for them. I keep wondering where are they? Where did he take them? To Syria, but where? How can I get them back? What has happened to them? The father might have made them prostitutes by now, but I keep wondering if I can find them some day and bring them back. I guess by now they should be teenagers, early teens. I would say this is my strongest relationship, other than with my parents of course. But that I take for granted. It was a great experience. It opens your eyes, you learn.

My friends were all worrying about their boyfriends. I couldn't care less. I was a late developer, I never really cared about boys. It was like, okay, they exist, men exist, but they were always a bore for me. Things are happening in the world, children needed to be saved, there are things to save. I wanted to save the world. (laughs) So this is the mentality I came to Lebanon with, to save Lebanon. (laughs) Well, it didn't work

out. (laughs) You grow up and you realize. When you're young you think you can save, you think you can do something, people will listen to you. I've been here for five years now and I've grown up. People don't listen to you, and you can't save the world. But you can always take a chance on what you believe in. You have to take a chance. I wish I was more of a leader so that I could influence people to take a chance.

What else? I'm trying to think of something interesting. (pause) When I said that I immersed myself in their [American] culture, it wasn't completely so. I remember going there at fifteen. It was a completely different culture, completely. Being fifteen here was different then from being fifteen now. Because of the war we couldn't ever go out. I never had -- you are three years younger; you might have had it -- I never had the chance to date, to go out to parties, the normal teenage life. We were extra innocent because we had to be back home, because of the curfew -- not our parents' curfew, the war curfew. I remember that in the United States I was invited to a party and I went. I remember, um, first of all everybody got drunk. They were all only sixteen and they were drinking. It was a birthday party and the girl's parents, as a present, gave her a male stripper! As a present! Imagine a fifteen year old from Lebanon thinking, "What is going on?". It was a big shock. In that kind of thing I didn't immerse myself. Also I had to take a stand against certain things. And then my college life -- I insisted on living in the dorms although my parents were only twenty minutes away. It was maybe silly, to go to the dorms. But I insisted, one day I just said I'm going. The first year, I'd lived at home. Then I decided that if I were ever going to get the full experience, I have to live in a dorm and see what it's like. It's once in a lifetime. I'm only twenty-one and I'm going to enjoy it. I remember I just applied, and my parents didn't know about it. They were going and coming between the States and the Gulf -- that's where my father was working -- so I said, "Oh, I'm moving out to the dorms, good-bye!" (laughs) My mother took it well. At first my father said, "Why, why?" then he also accepted. So I moved to the dorms and it was a wonderful experience. I miss it. I was sorry to graduate. Not for studying that much but for the life. You learn a lot.

I went to the University of Maryland. There were 45,000 students. We were five hundred people in a classroom. The professor was a little person up ahead with a microphone. You learn how to learn. Nobody is spoon-feeding you. You sit there and you can't raise your hand, who's going to raise their hand in front of five hundred people? So you really learn how to depend on yourself. I don't think it's so much that you learn about the world, it's more you learn about people, about how to be independent. Is this the kind of thing you want?

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I have very, very, very loving parents, wonderful parents. If they weren't wonderful, I wouldn't be living here. Because it's difficult when you finish college and come back home, you have to adjust to your parents all over again after you've been independent. But my parents are very - - basically they have their lives and I have my life. But we live together. And I lead completely my own life. They don't interfere and I don't interfere. We just leave messages for each other, where we are, in case something happens. Definitely if they were the type that would interfere and ask me questions, I think I would have said, "Okay, this is my life". If you think about it, in the States, most people move out at twenty-one, they don't come back. Here we

stay with our parents. So if the parents aren't understanding, to accommodate and understand each other, it's difficult. I don't think I would have survived. Thanks to them I am surviving. I have an older sister. No brother. I always wished for a brother, always. When I was younger, I used to pretend I had a brother, an older brother.

If I'm going to survive in Lebanon, one of the things I really want to do is get a piece of land away from everybody, and build a small house without cutting down a single tree, and live there around the trees, because I need nature. There is no nature here. The only nature I can get is to come here to the American University. And I'm lucky that I can come in here. Most people can't come. Now I'm going crazy because there's nowhere for children to play. The other day I was at the Sana'ya Public Garden and I was so touched. I saw this old, old man sitting on a bench. He was just watching people. It's this tiny park, they just sit there and look at the trees and look at people. Where can they go? That's it, the Sana'ya Garden. Old people aren't going to the mountains to look at trees. Anyway now even the mountains don't have trees. This is another thing that is upsetting me. I can pick up and leave anytime I want, or go to the American University. But the poor people, I feel so sorry for them. And I hate this new class that has emerged, the nouveaux riches. I hate them because they are so selfish. They flap their money and they flap themselves, it's horrible. There are these poor people and the nouveaux riches are showing off. Things like that. It's for them I stay in this country, not for the rich. Seriously, I'm writing for these people. One day, somebody will listen. We must have parks, a clean environment. Maybe it's becoming boring because I am only giving my opinions?

Michelle: Don't worry. You're saying interesting things.

Reem: I wish the world would think like you. I look at the old pictures of Beirut and I feel so frustrated. I feel I was born too late, does that make sense? I should have been born in the last century, definitely. Or in the 1920s, 1930s, maximum. When I see pictures of old Beirut I want to belong there, with the people there, not now. I always have this feeling. I think a lot of people do actually. They think that this is progress, when they build high-rise buildings, but it isn't progress. It's so frustrating! Here they are, going through what the West went through forty years ago. Eventually they will become aware. But by that time they will have spoiled everything. The trees, there's nothing. It's all construction, construction. I feel dizzy, I'm going crazy with all this construction. I need some trees around me. I need it, and I'm sure everybody needs it. I think this is why people are always yelling at each other. They're so stressed. Seriously there is no place to go and calm down, just look at trees, don't you agree? You need people who fight for it. There are a handful of activists who fight, fight, fight. I know them, I interview them all the time. They're doing their best. But we need a government that understands, not just constantly doing construction. In my line of work I come across all these people who are trying so hard to improve the country, to make people aware of human rights and environment. But unless you have the government backing you, an aware government that knows that people need these things, I don't know how far they'll get, and I get upset for them. I'm very opinionated. Shut me up, I will shut up! (laughs)

Michelle: I don't want to shut you up, I want you to talk more.

Reem: Let's get away from opinions. I think everybody like me -- have you ever lived outside the country? -- it's difficult for people, sixteen to twenty-four, these are formative years - you form your opinions, and when you're between two cultures you get lost. There was a period when I didn't know, was I American or was I Lebanese? What am I exactly here? And what applies to where? Here in Lebanon, there is a difference really, you have to find your own niche. But here it's all about power, people are constantly after power, power is driving me crazy. Once I interviewed somebody who had just been appointed somewhere, and the power had already gotten to him. A few weeks before he was nothing, and now he was showing off. I thought, oh God, I've never seen power affect people this way. I'm sure it happens in the US. But here they just don't hide it. (pause) I'm trying to think of some recollections.

Michelle: You've been to so many places. It takes an effort, but I am sure you'll think of something.

Reem: I told you about the party in the US when I was fifteen. (pause) I won't talk about my childhood in the war, it was the same as everyone. Recollections -- well I enjoyed high school in the US a lot. I've always loved the theater. As a kid, I didn't think of it as 'theater', I thought of it as 'Broadway'. I wanted to be a Broadway actress. This was my dream, I'm going to be on Broadway no matter what. It wasn't just a dream, it was an obsession. All the musicals, I listened to them over and over again. I spent my childhood listening to musicals. I'd go to my room, shut the door and put on the music. I pretended it's me, I'm singing this song. This started at the age of -- it started in the US at school, I played in a musical called 'Annie', ever heard of it? It's about a little girl. I was about ten and Annie was ten. After I saw it, [I thought] I'm going to be on Broadway! Nothing can stop me, I'll be on Broadway. So I really -- it was a dream, an obsession. It wasn't healthy. (laughs)

But I went to the US, and in the US, by then, you could have this dream at ten, but you could also be taking tap-dancing lessons. By the time I got there and got myself around to it, I auditioned for everything. I used to read the papers and audition for everything. I didn't make it to Broadway, I didn't make it to my high school production. (laughs) I ended up -- my high-school was great for me -- they look at the child to see what would make that person think, and they realized that I liked theater and singing and things like that. So in my schedule, they incorporated a theater lesson. I remember I had lessons like chemistry, and in the middle I had to go to my singing lesson. It was great. They did a lot. I acted in 'The Chorus Line', it's a musical, but for kids. There in high-school, I got a little of my frustrations out, I was able to do theater and dance. I was able, finally able to do something of what I wanted. And of course, I did the usual things, the prom, which we don't have here. The prom and

Valentine dances and all these things that they do. So these are happy memories of high school. Definitely easier than Lebanese schools, education-wise.

Then college years, my recollections are -- okay, I had to work very hard, because there were so many students in the classes and sometimes I couldn't understand. I didn't have the nerve - - I'm not like that, no I felt self-conscious. That's how I learned to use the library. I discovered it. I had to find out what this guy is saying, so go look in the library. That's when I developed a love for libraries. I love libraries -- put me in a room full of books! I go crazy. I could spend days. Every time I go to the US for a vacation, there's a bookshop with three floors. Put me there and leave me for days! Here, we don't have that many bookshops. Here you can't buy books, they're so expensive. And there are no public libraries. I miss that, I miss having a public library. I love looking at all the books. You can just borrow them and return them. It's so simple.

Michelle: Can you tell me again, you first left at nine?

Reem: I was seven. Actually I turned seven on the airplane. Then at the age of nine I came back. Then I left again at fifteen, just like now in August.

If you want to know the woman I admire most, it's my grandmother. She has passed away. She was a graduate of the Beirut University College. In those days it was rare for women to go to university. She was a graduate and she was very strong. She married young, and her husband, who was much older, died and left her with two babies. She raised them by herself - - in those days that was difficult. She was Palestinian, she worked at UNRWA. There were lots of men who asked to marry her, but she refused to marry anyone. Nobody could raise her daughters, only she. People came to help her with money -- all her brothers -- and she refused. She wanted her daughters to grow up and not owe anything, even to their uncles. Nobody should help her, she refused to owe anyone anything, or to feel, "I have to be nice to this person because I owe him money". And this I admire. I think it's wonderful that she was so strong. In those days women -- we're talking about a long time ago -- women used to depend on men. She refused to. She was a feminist. When I was younger, I considered her a feminist. "Why do I need a man?" In those days, not only did she study but she worked to raise her two children. Now we think it's normal but then it was rare. She lost her man when they were kicked out

of Palestine, during her exodus. She left everything behind. All this she did on her own. It's been six years since she passed away. The problem is, when you're young, you don't appreciate the people around you. You don't look at them and say wow! It was later that I discovered that, my God! -- now if she were alive -- I mean it's so frustrating that you're old, and you understand, and now she's not there. But there's

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something. When I was younger I did realize, but more for fun, I said, "Do write your life!". I was thinking more about the Palestinian exodus than about her as a woman. I said, "I will write it for you, I will write a book about you". So she sat there and she wrote. She wrote a lot. I was supposed to edit it. I never did. I remember before she died she said, "Well, aren't you going to write my book?" At that time I was in university, I had my own studies, I didn't have time. But I still have her papers. I still have it all and one day -- I need to take a vacation -- I'll edit them. She was wonderful. I didn't really appreciate it then. She never bought anything for herself, it was all for her daughters. But the thing that impresses me is her refusal of help. I am like that. I hate to be in debt. This is very important. She is my ideal woman. What else shall I talk about? Is that okay?

Michelle: It's very good.

Reem: My life story ! (sarcastically). I don't think about having a 'life story'. I don't like to talk about myself, I'm not used to it. Especially not in our house, where my mother believes in modesty. She has the old mentality where we must all be modest. You never talk about yourself, never. You don't care about appearances as long as you are clean and neat. We don't care about beauty, we don't care about these things. We are a Protestant family, we have the Protestant ethic. We don't talk about ourselves, we don't like vanity. We must always be simple.

I remember something that might be interesting. When I first went to the US, we had a Green Card and we had to go to the US every year to keep the Green Card. So once we went and I started feeling edgy, okay, now what? My parents were going from museum to museum, and being the ignorant person that I was at thirteen, I got a little bored. "Let's put her in a camp." We didn't know anything about it but it turned out to be the best experience I could have had. Because it was a black camp. They were all black and I was the only white - if you want to call me white. I don't think we're white, we are Mediterranean. It was an incredible experience. I went there for a week, every single day with them, every single day. And if I had any racism - I don't think I had but maybe I did -- it was incredible, we became really good friends. This was an important thing in my life.

Michelle: What do your parents do?

Reem: My father is a doctor, Dr. Fuad Haddad, he's an anaesthesiologist. My mother was teaching English at BUC. Now she is the executive secretary of the Joint Christian Council Committee which cares for Palestinian refugees. I get my love of social work from her. Actually from both of them. From my father, I got more of the -- he doesn't procrastinate, he wants things done now. I'm like that. From my mom I get my love of social work, and love of trees, and love of old houses. When I was little we had to stop and say, "Look at this

old house, how beautiful!" All this comes back you know. "Look at this wonderful mountain, how green!" Now I notice all this when I write. It comes back from them. Look, look, look! (laughs) I looked so much. (pause) You want more recollections? Things that have affected my life? (pause). I think that's about it, really the things that have affected me.

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Michelle: How do you think Lebanon has been as a place for women to live in?

Reem: I think, compared to other Arab countries, Lebanon is great. Women definitely have a presence here, definitely. But I'll tell you something. I'm very sad about this new generation. I speak as if I am fifty. (laughs) But seriously, the people who have reached their twenties or are in their teens, women, they focus on looks and not on brains, or what you can achieve in life. I don't know what's happening to them. The other day, my sister came from America for a visit. She was telling me that the women here look like prostitutes. What happened? I don't know. Now the women here, they reach eighteen or nineteen, and they only focus on

how they look. Too much, it's an extreme. Well, everybody cares [about looks], but this is an extreme. Nothing about what you can achieve in life, nothing. Notice now all the modeling shows, Miss this and Miss that. Fine, the looks. But then what? What have you achieved? What do you stand for? What?

So I think, honestly, women are going backward. When you only care about how you look, wear tight clothes, and to show off, you're going backward. This is what I think about women here. They could achieve so much. I don't know where the fault is, whether the parents, or the schools, or what. Am I making sense? They're not being encouraged to feel that you can do something. My God, you - we - can change the rules, maybe, a bit. Go for it! You can do anything, everything, better than a man. We don't compare ourselves to men, why should we? We have our own standard, and we can go higher. I don't know what's wrong with them. My generation -- I think we're the last, or maybe yours -- they're more down to earth and practical. They care about education, and they work very hard and want to get somewhere, whether it's a career or something else. Here, now, they just go to college to find a boyfriend, and then get married, and just hang up the degree. Don't go to college! But they could do so much more, so much more. They're smart and they can do it. I don't know who is -- they are degrading the value of women. I don't know why. I haven't figured it out yet. They think freedom is to dress up and go out. This isn't really freedom. Freedom is thinking and fighting for what you want, achieving, being somebody in this life. And feeling that you lived, and made a difference in this world. The world should be different because somebody has lived here. Show it, do something!

Recorded and transcribed by Michelle Obeid.