

## CHAPTER TWO

# Lebanon



## Country Snapshot

The most religiously diverse country in the Middle East, Lebanon is home to Sunni and Shia Muslims, Christians of a wide variety of denominations, Druze, Baha'is, Buddhists, and Hindus, and has been home to Jews since biblical times. Although the community nowadays numbers fewer than thirty, during the first half of the twentieth century, Lebanon boasted a robust Jewish population of approximately fourteen thousand members, most of whom lived in Beirut.

Between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, the composition of Lebanese Jewry diversified as migrants and refugees from surrounding countries arrived and settled in Lebanon. In the early eighteenth century, Andalusian and Maghrebi Jews fleeing persecution sought refuge in the country's Shouf region south of Beirut; a century later, accusations of blood libel drove scores of Jews from Damascus out of Syria and into Lebanon, their neighbor to the west. In addition to these earlier waves of migration, in the aftermath of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, Lebanon again welcomed a significant influx of Jews from neighboring Syria and Iraq, making it the sole Middle Eastern country whose Jewish population increased after the state of Israel was founded in 1948. In large part due to these influxes of migrants, the Jewish population of Lebanon almost tripled in size between 1948 and 1960.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, Lebanese Jews began to consolidate geographically as they welcomed these waves of immigrants from surrounding countries. Following the Druze-Maronite War (1860), Jews from the Shouf relocated to Beirut to escape sectarian violence in their home regions. As Beirut transformed from a tranquil port town into a major industrial center, the city absorbed still more migrants, as Jews from smaller municipalities arrived in search of economic opportunities and to escape civil unrest. This internal migration was such that, during the first half of the twentieth century, the Jewish communities of Hasbaya and Tripoli all but vanished. In 1940s Tripoli, in particular, violence perpetrated by the Sunni community, who were displeased by the developments in Palestine, drove Jews to pack their bags and remake their lives in Beirut. More specifically,



MAP 3. Lebanon. Source: Bill Nelson, 2022.

in November 1945, fourteen Tripolitan Jews were killed in riots, and, in 1948, the town saw even more attacks, first in the wake of the Deir Yassin massacre, in which Jewish forces invaded the Palestinian town of Deir Yassin and killed between 100 and 250 of its residents, and then following the establishment of the state of Israel.

After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I and its ensuing dissolution, both the political and communal government of the Lebanese Jewish community shifted. As to the former, Lebanon was placed under the administration of the French, who, in 1920, created the State of Greater Lebanon out of both Lebanon and Syria. Around the same time, the elected Jewish council of Beirut, which had been created through a series of reforms several years previously, became the *de facto* representative of Lebanese Jewry as a whole due to the consolidation of Lebanese Jewish life in that city. As Beirut had become the nexus for Jewish life in Lebanon, the communal council of the city transformed into a communal body representing all Lebanese Jewry, and thus went on to serve as such in dealings with both the government and in interethnic and interreligious relations. In the years following World War I, Lebanese Jews had recognized civil status and, as such, lived as equal citizens. It was at this time that the Lebanese

Jewish bourgeoisie came into its own, with many Jews working in banking and finance. As for poorer Jews, they worked most often as merchants, or in the clothing, soap, and glass industries.

The Lebanese Jewish community had several schools, which served the different social classes of Lebanese Jews in a variety of languages. The Tiferet Israel boarding school, which was in operation during the latter quarter of the nineteenth century and into the beginning of the twentieth, attracted well-to-do Jewish pupils from across the Middle East and North Africa as it taught five languages and the language of instruction was Arabic. After the turn of the century, upper-class families frequently chose to send their children to French schools. Middle class families often sent their children to the Alliance Israélite Universelle schools, the first of which was established in Beirut in 1869, or the Mission Laïque Française, which was founded in 1909. Poorer Jewish children often attended the École Talmud Torah Selim Tarrab, which was founded in 1926. In addition to French and Arabic, many Lebanese Jews were literate in English, and Lebanese Jews published magazines and journals in all three languages.

Overall, the Jews of Lebanon maintained good relations with their Muslim and Christian neighbors, and did well for themselves as a minority religious community living in a majority-Muslim state. Lebanese Jews were an apolitical group who shared the vision for an independent, multi-confessional nation with their Christian and Muslim neighbors, and had congenial relationships with their national government, which had become sovereign in 1943 following the end of the French mandate. Although some Lebanese Jews did turn to Zionism after the fall of the Ottoman Empire (1922), they typically preferred to remain in their native homeland, rather than move to what would become the Jewish state. This loyalty was reciprocated by the Lebanese government, which protected the Lebanese Jewish community from Arab nationalist threats and from certain Palestinian groups whose ideologies equated Jewishness with Zionism. As opposed to what transpired in most other Middle Eastern nations, neither the 1967 Arab-Israeli War nor the ongoing conflict between Palestine and Israel, more broadly, had a strong effect on the Lebanese Jewish community. Indeed, Lebanese Jews both considered themselves and were considered by their fellow citizens to be part of the Lebanese national community. As such, they were somewhat less concerned by conflicts in which their country was not intimately involved.

The erosion and eventual dissolution of the Lebanese Jewish community was primarily a result of civil conflict, rather than of antagonistic international or intercommunal relations between Jews and their neighbors. The first major wave of Jewish emigration from Lebanon occurred following the 1958 civil war, in which many of the Syrian and Iraqi refugees who had immigrated the decade prior fled the infighting between Lebanese Christians and Muslims. Following the Six Days' War (1967), the Jewish community ceased to have a public presence. Most of the remaining Jews left as a result of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), as they

were literally caught in the middle: the Jewish Quarter of Wadi Abu Jamil was located on the green line and as a result, Jews, who were themselves not necessarily involved in the unrest, were inextricably caught up in the violence. Most chose to emigrate and settle among other Lebanese Jewish expatriate communities in Paris, Montreal, São Paulo, and New York. The communal decline of the Lebanese Jewish community continued its downward trend in the 1970s and 1980s. Today, there are only about two dozen Jews left in Lebanon.

—*Rebecca Glasberg*

Beirut, Lebanon

---

## The Dead-End Alley

Lucien Elia

First, there was that house in a dead-end alley on the edge of the Jewish Quarter, an architectural aberration, a graceless cube of reinforced concrete, a freezer in winter, an oven in summer.

Early every spring, we would hire a Shiite laborer to whitewash the rooftop terrace so as to shield us against the savage rays of the summer sun. When the work was done, he'd climb down from the blazing white rooftop inferno, a wild look in his eyes, crazed, as though drunk. After paying him for the work, Mother would hastily dismiss him—he reeked of sweat—with the words: “God be with you, and we’ll see you next spring.” And off he’d go, in a clamor of clanking buckets and cans, sorry he hadn’t inflated his price a little. Our dreary house overlooked a lush garden surrounded by rusty iron fencing that guarded the home of our Muslim landlords.

The setting—the exuberant vegetation where date palms mixed with citron, orange, and sumac trees, and the landlords’ stately marble house with its hewn stone patio and vibrant red tile roof—contrasted sharply with our ugly, colorless block where we either shivered with cold or marinated in the 80 percent humidity of high summer.

For three decades, a simmering conflict pitted my family against our trio of landlords, a group of pachyderms whose enormous thighs rubbed together as they walked: the eldest, Rachid Behyum, never without his garnet-red fez cocked insolently to one side, and his two sisters Khadija and Aisha, dressed in dull, tent-like robes that concealed the mountains of flesh beneath.<sup>1</sup> Rashid owned several apartment buildings in town, in addition to parking lots and other land holdings.

1. A fez, also known as a tarboosh, is a felt hat shaped like a cylinder, with a flat top. Fezes are typically red, and indeed the name comes from the Moroccan city of Fez, where the crimson-colored dye was produced.



FIGURE 7. Birthday portrait of Lucien Elia, age seven. Taken in December 1944 in Mr. Hratch's Armenian studio. His shoes squeaked as he went back and forth on the set.



Our entire neighborhood belonged to him, in fact, including our putrid alley where a dozen boisterous Jewish families lodged. Screaming children, blaring radios—usually tuned to shows featuring French singers: “This one goes out to Rina from Mimo, and from the Three Musketeers to their cousin Riro. And now, the great André Claveau, singing *“Insensiblement”*—the clanging of kitchen utensils, cross-balcony conversations: “So Rebecca, what’s for lunch today?” All this came together in a dissonant symphony, punctuated by a chorus of cooing doves over in the landlords’ garden. The tremendous threesome posed an alimentary enigma, for we never once saw them returning from the market with provisions. The most we ever glimpsed was a random rib of celery emerging from the brown paper bag Rashid used when making his rounds to collect rent. We used to imagine that there was a tunnel that snaked under our alley and somehow came out on the main street of the town that led to the marketplace. We also thought there was something strange, almost unseemly, about the three unmarried siblings; we imagined them fornicating to their heart’s content in a monstrous jelly roll of tangled flesh. Who knows. They never had guests over, they never had parties, never celebrated anything, unlike the alley folks, who would prepare a feast for every conceivable occasion: circumcisions, bar mitzvahs, birthdays, religious holidays. And still they grew fatter, oh yes, with every passing year.

The Sunni trio, richer than Croesus, was tightfisted and intolerant beyond all measure, and sprang into action whenever the alley overstepped its boundaries.<sup>2</sup> So we children couldn’t play on the graveled area leading up to our house without the Monuments erupting from their terrace and shouting at us to get off their “territory,” even though it was actually public property. Whether we were playing street soccer, tag, or hide-and-seek behind the perpetually un-rebuilt ruins of their collapsed wall, we would be interrupted by an avalanche of insults, which we thought were hysterically funny: “You trash! You little pimps! Go back home to your stinking mother! You Jews, oh you Jews!” On more than one occasion, our soccer ball would sail over their wrought-iron fence in a perfect arc, the purpose of this deliberate kick being to provide an excuse to go into their garden and recover it, while bringing back as many fallen oranges and citrons as we could gather. For the Three Sea Elephants, this was an unspeakable offense. This was *their* fruit! The fruit of *their* trees! For free? How dare we?

Once a year, the Alpha Male would come to our house to collect the rent. He would make his pompous entrance, sneering contemptuously as he settled into a chair in the front room and made himself at home, legs spread, paunch draped over his thighs, his shrewd ears protruding from his thick skull. He would doff his fez, revealing the contrast between the bald whiteness of his scalp and his tanned

2. Croesus was King of Lydia (an area corresponding to the western provinces of modern-day Turkey) whose legendary wealth is the stuff of Greek and Persian tales. The expression “as rich as Croesus” (used in both English and French), thus refers to this historical figure.

face. A nervous tic made his ankle switch back and forth, producing a squeak from his patent leather shoe. My mother's face was a map of absolute reluctance as she offered our guest Turkish coffee and *maamoul*—little pistachio-stuffed cakes shaped like Aztec pyramids, which the Warthog would decline, no doubt out of fear that she had dipped them in some biblical poison. He and my father would then exchange platitudes about the weather, local politics, and the price of lemons, which had risen again, before the greedy collector—his ankle vibrating even faster at this point—would make some scarcely veiled reference to Israel's latest moves near its border with Lebanon.

As it happens, in May 1948, date of the creation of the Jewish state, a ragtag horde poured into our alley bellowing a belligerent yet catchy chant, which the Three Ponderal Heavyweights repeated in chorus from up on their terrace: "Palestine is our country, and the Jews are our dogs." It was funnier in Arabic, since the two lyrics rhymed: *Falastine bladna, woul yahoud klabna*.

Ten years later, a younger brother turned up from out of the blue and took up residence in the marble house of the Three Ponderous Ones. His kitchenware business in Saudi Arabia having failed, he had come begging for room and board after years of epistolary silence. He must have had some schooling, for on warm nights in late spring, when he would sit on the terrace strumming his guitar, the songs he crooned to the starry sky were always in French. His elder brother would then burst onto the scene and order him back inside: "If you keep this up, I'm going to make kindling out of that instrument of yours." On some evenings, one of our lady neighbors, Vivy the Vile (*El Bich'aa*), still unmarried at twenty-five and a huge Edith Piaf fan, would echo back the lyrics of our failed kitchenware salesman in sharp trills punctuated by gasps each time she took a new breath. Her mother would mock: "Get back inside and die in your own bed, you old maid."

By June, the heat inside our cube was unbearable. Apparently, the whitewashing job on the roof wasn't doing the trick, despite my mother's orders to our Shiite painter: "If you give me three layers for the price of one, God will provide . . ." So, we'd head for the mountains. A motley pickup truck would park right at the foot of our staircase, despite strict orders from the Three Fatsos not to do so. The four Muslim movers and a driver that we hired for the trip were able to reason with the Apoplectics: a Sunni accord was quickly reached, whereby we could park for two hours, but not a minute more, by God! Under the withering gaze of the Three Deadweights, who looked on while our private effects paraded by, we quickly loaded our bed frames and mattresses, frying pans, and hastily knotted bundles of clothing. And off we went, our parents squeezed together in the passenger seat, and my sister, my brother, and me in the back, along with the muscle-bound movers, perched atop the pyramid of baggage and furniture. The Blubbers wished us a good trip, in their inimitable way: "Go on, off you go, and may your path be strewn with insurmountable obstacles." It was a three-month respite in the fresh mountain air. The alley would soon recede into distant memory, though we

couldn't help but picture the landlords reigning over the deserted neighborhood, adrift in their marble chambers in the Lebanese heatwave, for they were loath to spend good money on a summer house in the mountains, even though two-thirds of the city did just that. We would return in September with the first rains, back to the squabbles over parking, the hubbub of the Alley, the sad ballads of the former kitchenware salesman, and the passionate Piaf impersonator warbling her husbandless blues for all to hear.

When I turned eighteen, a heated family meeting involving a dozen uncles and aunts arrived at the decision that I should somehow be sent to France to attend university. "Why bother? He'll just skip all his classes and spend his time in cafés, and he'll come back with a *goy* in a short skirt who'll make fun of our cuisine and customs."<sup>3</sup> But I did leave, in the end. It was an October day, a relentless rain soaking the alley. From their verandah the Three Potbellies, rising above us like evil totems from beneath their vast black umbrellas, audibly expressed their hope that my boat would sink as soon as it had left the bay of Beirut.

. . .

I returned thirty years later, just to have a look around.

Seventeen years of intercommunal war had annihilated the alley, leaving not a single trace of the concrete cube or the marble mansion. All that remained was the citron tree that still struggled to bear fruit in the thick shadow of ostentatious apartment buildings, row upon row, gleaming white against the cerulean Mediterranean sky.

—*Translated by Jane Kuntz*

3. In both Hebrew and Yiddish, *goy* refers to a gentile, or a non-Jew. Although sometimes considered pejorative, the word itself simply means "nation."

Beirut, Zaituna

---

## The Baker's Son

Yves Turquier

His name is Ahmed; he's my best friend. He is seven years old, just like me. I know that his parents are Muslims, he knows that mine are Jews. On rue Rizkallah, in Beirut, everyone knows that. But you think that's a problem for kids who want to play marbles?

In 1947, I was five. I thought that all children were Jewish. It was very simple—they had a mother and a father like me; they went to school like me; they ate like me; they slept in their bed like me. I thought: they must certainly go to the synagogue like me.

I was bored at the synagogue. I fell asleep while the prayers, chanted by the adults, floated up into the air. To keep me entertained, my father rented *rimonim* for me, those small cylinders with bells and silver sleeves that ornament the Tablets of the Law. I was proud to show off my bells to my friends who had none. Alas, after ten minutes, the sexton took them back from me. What to do?

Lots of children played in the courtyard of the synagogue. They were violent, pulling each other's hair or slapping each other. Sometimes, they jumped on top of me, shouting "*khabissa!*" ("squash!"). They'd throw me on the ground, pummel me with their fists, and pile up on my back with the stern intention of beating me to a pulp. At the Alliance Jewish school, *khabissa* was the favorite recess game. I was quiet and timid. Off to one side on a bench, I would eat my bread, alone, while they had fun. Yet I wanted to be their friend. Sometimes, I would approach them, get hit, and cry—and that, that was the worst, because they made fun of me.

Ahmed, the baker's son on my street, never hits me, never pulls out my hair. When my mother says: "Don't stay glued to my legs, I'm cooking!" I race down the stairs, and when Ahmed sees me he jumps in the air, cries "Whoa!" and, five minutes later, we're galloping on our horses in the little street in the neighborhood.

One day, I get an idea.



FIGURE 8. Yves Turquier, who has no photos of himself as a child, is the author of this one, taken from the balcony of the family apartment on rue Rizkallah in Beirut. On the left, a hundred feet away, a bakery.

"Mama, can we take Ahmed to the synagogue?"

My mom, she is very pretty, she's tall and she loves me. But I must have said something senseless, she makes a strange face.

"So, can we?"

"No, we can't."

"Why can't we?"

"Because Ahmed is Muslim."

"So what?"

"So what, Muslims don't go to the synagogue."

"Where do they go?"

"They go to the mosque."

"What's a mosque?"

"It's a kind of synagogue for Muslims."

My project had failed. But I never lacked resources.

"So then, can I go with Ahmed to his synagogue?"

"No, you can't."

"And why?"

"Because you are Jewish."

I said: "Oh, ok."

Now I'm seven, Ahmed is still my best friend, but I have learned about religion. In our street, the shopkeeper Khawaja Farid is Maronite, the grocer Jawad is Muslim, the dry cleaner Ali is Muslim. Angèle Malhamé, our neighbor, is Christian, Madame Raftopoulo and her husband the pharmacist are Christians, the baker is Muslim, the old Russian Olga Limansky who strolls in her beautiful garden, well, she's a painter.

When my friend isn't at home, I go look for him at the bakery. His father, Muhammad Ali, is the best baker in the neighborhood. Aromas of warm bread, thyme flatbreads, and meat pizzas waft from the back of the shop. Arab breads, round and flat, are lined up on the long pieces of wood; they are slid onto the burning brick where they quiver, rise, and then blow up like soccer balls. Ahmed piles the cooked bread in wicker baskets. Sometimes he steals one and we eat it together behind the store.

My family lives in Zaituna, very close to the sea. From time to time, my parents chat during meals. They speak of "us" and they speak of "them." Us, are the Jews, the *b'nai emunah*, the sons of our people. Them, they are the *goyim*, the non-Jews. We watch them, we scrutinize their actions, their words. "They can become dangerous," says my mother. Even though I'm only seven years old, I feel that my parents are afraid.

In our street, the fruit and vegetable sellers, the copper polishers, the mattress carder, and the housecleaners are all Muslims. But you mustn't say that in front of them; they don't like that. In this case, we have to use the secret code and speak

French: Muslims become "the Muses."<sup>1</sup> "They are very kind," says my mother. "They are generous, but not all the time. Sometimes, they listen to the radio, and then they give us a funny look." My father says that it's because of Falasteen.<sup>2</sup> I don't really know what that is. One day my parents say to me:

"We're going to live with your grandparents for a while."

"Why?"

"Because there are some troubles."

"What troubles?"

"Go play," says my mother. "I'm packing the suitcases."

But why move to my grandmother's house? Our neighborhood is quiet. I don't feel in danger. Ahmed is my friend; every morning my mother buys her bread from their bakery. She is welcomed with a smile and the habitual formulas: "Welcome, *Ya Madaame*, we are at your service, how many today? Eight, as usual? Your wish is our command, would you like something else? Thyme flat-breads? Some pastries? No? Very well, may your morning be brightened . . . Go in peace."

So why go live at my grandmother's house? I finally understand—it's about the mezuzah.<sup>3</sup> The mezuzah is a little wooden cylinder which holds a tiny scroll of the Law. It's attached to the door frame outside the house. It's necessary. It's for divine protection. Except that today my mother doesn't agree.

"Our mezuzah, clearly visible on the landing, doesn't protect us at all! It puts us in danger!"

"What are you talking about?" says my father. "It's not visible from the street."

"Yes, but 'they' can come look for it in the stairwell. And 'they' can find us."

"But there aren't enough beds at my parents' place to house five people."

"You really are oblivious to danger! Carefree and careless! We have a boy and two babies. I'd rather sleep on the floor, but I won't stay here a minute longer."

I may only be seven years old, but I already know that my mother always wins. We spend a month at Téta's and Dédé's. Upon our return, our house hasn't moved and Ahmed is still there. I missed him. I'm bored when he isn't around. He asked me: "Where were you?" and I answered that I was at my grandmother's house. He smiled at me and said, "Me too, sometimes, I sleep at my grandmother's," and that's it. We started to play together again like always. Of course, I didn't tell him the story of the mezuzah. I know already that you can't talk about that with "the Muses."

1. The French pronunciation of "muses" resembles that of the first syllable of *musulman*, or Muslim.

2. This phonetic spelling is intended to render the pronunciation of the word "Palestine" in Arabic, which has no equivalent of the "p" sound.

3. The word mezuzah itself derives from the Hebrew word for doorpost, which is where the object is affixed in Jewish homes.



One day, my mother says:

"Did you hear an enormous explosion early this morning?"

"No, what happened?"

"Someone put a bomb inside your school. It exploded at seven o'clock. The school was destroyed. Today, you aren't going to class."

I say to myself, "What a break!" I have grammar homework and recitation that I hadn't worked on—I'm saved. But is it for certain? The Alliance school is five minutes from our house; I run. In the street, I come across Ahmed who says to me:

"I heard your school exploded . . ."

"Yes, I'm going to check it out!"

"I'll come too!"

Around the enormous crater, the whole neighborhood is there. Neighbors, friends, classmates, simple passersby have gathered; they gesticulate, get angry, shout. Others are dazed, despondent, absent. Some men try to contain the crowd; they yell: "Careful, don't get any closer, there might be another bomb!" The fire-fighters' sirens tear up our eardrums. Helmeted men rush to the scene. They begin to pick through the rubble; they move the scraps of metal, the wooden planks, blackened blocks of stone. I hear: "Make way, make way, hurry, they found someone!" It's Abdallah, the school's concierge. He's stuck under a girder. Slaloming through the bystanders, I manage to slip into the front of the crowd. The school has vanished. In its place, I see a pile of smoking ruins. I look up. What remains of the old building is our blackboard hanging from a piece of the wall, and the door to my classroom opens out over a void. Now there is a crowd. My school has become the neighborhood attraction. Everyone speaks loudly, everyone expresses their opinion. I hear: "May God curse them, they attack innocents, children. Thankfully, the bomb exploded at seven in the morning. At eight, there would have been 500 pupils there." Who are "they"? No one says it in public, it's too dangerous. A big, helmeted firefighter says to us:

"Get out of the way, the ambulance has to come through."

"Did they find any wounded?" asks a bystander.

"Two, a man and a woman, but they are gravely injured."

Two stretcher-bearers emerge from the rubble, staggering. Around me, the exclamations rise:

"Ahh . . . they're carrying a wounded woman! God save her. Does anyone know who it is?"

"Not at all, but we'll find out."

Waiting for the ambulance, the medics lay down their burden right at my feet. It's pure chance, just like that. I open my eyes; I see a sleeping woman. She has blood on her face like in the cowboy films. She's sleeping, but I don't understand, her eyes are open. Suddenly, I recognize her. It's our school director, Madame Penso. She whom I passed every day in the schoolyard. She who came to congratulate



us, she who scolded us when we had done poor work. She whom I dearly loved because she was protective. I was also afraid of her because she was stern.

The crowd was silent, as if petrified. Behind me, an old man murmured:

"She's dead, that woman. May God have pity on her."

All of a sudden, I don't know what's happening. Like a razor blade, emotion seizes me in the throat, I tremble from head to toe. I can barely breathe. It's the first time I've seen death. I hear myself cry. I don't want to be there anymore.

Looking up, I see my friend Ahmed. He, too, stares open-mouthed at this unmoving woman. He's stunned like me. We don't say anything; this lasts for a while. He asks:

"This woman, you know her?"

"She was the director of the school."

He doesn't say anything. He looks at me. His eyes are full of tears.<sup>4</sup>

—*Translated by Robert Watson*

4. The bombing of the AIU school in Beirut took place on January 22, 1950, when Turquier would have been about nine years old.