

The Lebanese Emigrant

I believe in you, and I believe in your destiny.

I believe that you are contributors to this new civilization.

I believe that you have inherited from your forefathers an ancient dream, a song, a prophecy, which you can proudly lay as a gift of gratitude upon the lap of America(s).

I believe that you can say to the founders of this great nation:

*'Here I am, a youth, a young tree whose roots were plucked from the hills of Lebanon, yet I am deeply rooted here, and I would be fruitful.'*¹ - Khalil Gibran

In late December 2015, I had the distinct pleasure of travelling to Mexico for the first time. Earlier that year, I had arranged to travel to the United States and upon speaking to my cousin, Rona, who had moved to Mexico from Beirut a decade earlier following her marriage to a Mexican Lebanese gentleman named Jorge, she entreated me to visit her and her family in Mexico. In my conversations with my beloved cousin, she had always spoken so highly of the Mexican Lebanese community.

Rona was particularly enamoured by the way that so many within the community had retained so much of their ancestral culture and traditions while still managing to contribute to their adopted homeland. According to Rona, their ability to hold on to their ancestral identity and love for their motherland of Lebanon, was even more impressive given that the vast majority could no longer converse in Arabic as a result of being third and fourth generation children of the 'Lebanese Emigrants' who journeyed to Mexico from the eighteenth century.

It was on her repeated recommendation that I added Mexico to my travel itinerary. I was intrigued to see for myself how the Mexican Lebanese community had adapted to life in Mexico and how they had contributed to the country's development, and in all honesty I was not disappointed. Arriving in Mexico City, I was immediately escorted from the Mexico City International Airport to the centre of the expansive metropolis for a whirlwind tour. First stop, the Metropolitan Cathedral of the Assumption of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary into Heaven, which was constructed by the conquering Spanish Conquistadors above the Templo Mayor of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan following their victorious defeat of the Moctezuma.

¹ Gibran, K. excerpt from "To Young Americans of Syrian Origin." 1926.
<https://www.aramcoworld.com/Articles/July-2019/The-Borderless-World-of-Kahlil-Gibran> . Accessed 19th September 2023

The Templo Major, in the area adjacent to the Cathedral, had been partially excavated and opened to the public as a museum. All of the history of Cortez and his Conquistadors, of the Aztec empire, and the ultimate destruction of the Aztec civilisation, lay right before my eyes and as a student of history, I was captivated. Mexico City was all that I had imagined it to be, and more.

Majestic sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish architecture coupled with the unearthing Aztec ruins while millions of Mexicans busily went about their day. History was coming to life in front of me yet in the context of a modern vibrant city. I could feel the excitement building. I was intrigued to determine how the Mexican Lebanese community had contributed to the development of this place yet I did not have long to wait before my intrigue was satisfied.

Once the short lived tour of the majestic city centre was complete, we made our way to lunch at an upmarket Mexican restaurant in the heart of an upscale suburb of the City and then directly to the Centro Libanes. Upon first appearance, the circular glass framed exterior windows, highly detailed formed concrete entranceway and impressively manicured external garden resemble the headquarters of a nondescript corporate entity.

Yet the large sign that read ‘Centro Libanes’ coupled with the embossed emblem of a stylised cedar tree provided some insight into the building’s identity and purpose. Located in an affluent area of Mexico City, the formidable complex encompasses the entirety of the block on which it was constructed. I was taken aback by the grandeur of the building and understood the statement that it was obviously designed to make on behalf of the Lebanese community in Mexico.

Located outside the complex stood a bronze statue commissioned in 1920 known as ‘The Lebanese Emigrant’ by Ramiz Barquet, a Mexican Lebanese artist. The statue, dressed in traditional nineteenth century Lebanese peasant garb, carrying a small sack over his right shoulder, signified the stark austerity that was symptomatic of the departure of millions of Lebanese migrants from their motherland. It was a lasting reminder of the fearless courage that these compatriots demonstrated in leaving their beloved homeland, venturing out into an unknown world.

The multitude who left their often chaotic motherland had no understanding of the language or culture of their soon to be adopted homelands. They undertook these journeys in the

fullness of often blind faith in order to endeavour to create a better life for themselves and their families, many of whom had suffered through religious, cultural and societal conflicts. The blood of their adventurous sea-faring Canaanite ancestors still coursing through their veins, those intrepid ancient explorers who fearlessly set sail from the ports of Byblos, Sidon and Tyre, to circumnavigate and conquer their world.

A duplicate of 'The Lebanese Emigrant' was delivered to Lebanon and installed in Beirut; a dedication from the Mexican Lebanese community and their commitment to their heritage and their homeland. The two statues face each other from opposite sides of the world to connect the people of the Mexican Lebanese community with their ancestors in their Levantine homeland. 'The Lebanese Emigrant' in Beirut stands as a sentinel overlooking the port of Beirut, the port that saw the migration of millions of Lebanese and which now lies in ruins - a sombre reminder of the reason so many Lebanese were forced to migrate from their homeland.

In stark contrast, the statue of the Lebanese migrant stands outside of the Centro Libanes as an enduring reminder of the courage of their forebears and their willingness to put aside ancient grudges to build a community that is vibrant, unified and forward thinking. Climbing the stairs towards the entrance of the building, I crossed the threshold of the doorway and entered an expansive foyer. I could not help but peer up in awe of the grand golden Cedar that adorned the foyer wall. I was then escorted into the restaurant area by my cousins.

Sitting at a table in the Centro's cafe, I took in the grandeur of the building as they began to explain to me the significance of the Centro Libanes. Jorge proceeded to explain to me in great detail and with much pride, that the Centro Libanes, colloquially referred to as 'Unit Hermes', consisted of a large auditorium that seats up to a thousand people and a number of different halls named after well known cities and towns in Lebanon.

Reminiscent of a cultural tour guide, Jorge took the lead to guide me throughout the complex pointing out the restaurant, cafe, bars, workshop classrooms, offices and conference spaces. We then walked across the grassed quadrangle to tour the gymnasium, multipurpose indoor sports court, the outdoor swimming pool and finally the accommodation facilities including aged care facilities before returning to take a seat in the cafe. I sat and listened intently as Jorge beamed with delight at the accomplishments of previous and current members of the Mexican Lebanese community.

I could not help but be caught up in a shared sense of pride at what my ancestral compatriots had been able to achieve as a community in just over a century. It spoke volumes of the shared values, community spirit and love of their ancestral culture that empowered the Mexican Lebanese community to build such an amazing living monument. Jorge drew a breath as if he had completed all that he wanted to say. Yet, before the momentary tranquillity could take hold allowing me the opportunity to unleash the multitude of questions I had running through my mind, Jorge rapidly broke his silence once more.

He began to excitedly explain that with the assistance of Mexican Lebanese billionaire and once the richest man in the world, Carlos Slim Helo, the Mexican Lebanese community had purchased and completed construction of a second Centro Libanes. Located in the outer suburbs of Mexico City, the latest iteration of the Centro Libanes was affectionately referred to as 'Unit Alfredo 'Freddy' Atala'. It seemed the inherently entrepreneurial Mexican Lebanese community was developing a franchise.

The secondary complex, Jorge stated, lay some thirty minutes away from 'Unit Hermes', and had just been completed. It consisted of all the same facilities as 'Unit Hermes' yet on a much grander scale and included a full size football and athletic pitch. Jorge made a point of highlighting the fact that only those of Lebanese ancestry were eligible to hold a membership at Centro Libanes. No distinction related to political, social or religious affiliation, which had ultimately seen the destruction and division of the Lebanese motherland, was made when considering an individual's membership application.

According to Jorge, Mexicans and other cultural groups were excluded from being members of Centro Libanes in order to ensure the continuance of the Mexican Lebanese heritage and culture. The more Jorge explained the premise behind the Mexican Lebanese community's thinking regarding the development of the Centro Libanes, the more intrigued I became particularly as it seemed that they had managed to overcome many of the political, cultural and religious differences that had plagued their motherland, and which had led a once thriving society to the depths of failed statehood.

The complex, known as The Centro Libanes 'Unit Hermes', stands as a remarkable monument to the multitude of Mexican Lebanese who migrated, settled and created a successful life in their newly adopted homeland. Each year the Centro Libanes holds a gala dinner in honour of the Mexican President, who thanks the approximately one thousand Mexican Lebanese attendees on behalf of the broader Mexican Lebanese community, for

their assistance in building a prosperous Mexico. On November 21st, 1962 at the inauguration of the Centro Libanes, held in the presence of Mexican President, Adolfo Lopez Mateos, the former President wrote in the Centro's guestbook referred to as the 'Golden Book', *"Who doesn't have a Lebanese friend should go and look for one."*

In 2017, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto met with members of the Lebanese community in Mexico, declaring:

*"Members of the Lebanese community in Mexico...gradually appropriated the values of Mexican society, and eventually became Mexicans... By preserving their ancestral customs, the Lebanese have enriched Mexican culture...The Lebanese community made Mexico its own, and Mexico made the Lebanese and their community Mexicans."*²

After an hour of touring the Centro Libanes, Jorge abruptly cut our tour short, turned to Rona and spoke to her in Spanish. Rona motioned to me that we were leaving as Jorge led us back to the family's car. Rona explained to me that we were heading about two hours south of Mexico City to the state of Morelos. We would be travelling to the family's holiday home, located in a gated complex christened, 'Beit Milad'.

"Beit Milad? As in the village in northern Lebanon?" I queried

"Exactly." Responded Rona. "The developer of the complex was a Lebanese Mexican originally from Beit Milad. When he constructed the complex he named it after his ancestral village. All of the streets, roads and avenues were named after Lebanese saints. There is Saint Charbel Street, Saint Nematalla Road and Saint Rafqa Avenue.

"Really? How many people live in this complex?"

"There are approximately fifty homes in the complex and they are all owned by Mexican Lebanese. Residents have to be of Lebanese ancestry in order to own a home in the complex. These are primarily used as holiday homes by the residents. Most come to the complex to celebrate the holidays together yet they live in other areas of Mexico. It is a community within a community." Rona stated.

"So most of the residents are wealthy?" I queried.

² President of the Republic. "Meeting with the Lebanese Community in Mexico" March 24, 2017. <https://www.gob.mx/ejn/en/articulos/meeting-with-the-lebanese-community-in-mexico>. Accessed September 19th 2023.

“Yes but not super wealthy. The super wealthy of the Mexican Lebanese community holiday in Acapulco on what is referred to as the Mexican Riviera.” Jorge interrupted.

I sat in the car with baited breath as we exited Mexico City and made our way towards Morelos, eagerly awaiting our arrival at the complex. With each passing moment I grew more and more excited at the prospect of seeing first hand what my ancestral compatriot had constructed. The thought of an isolated Lebanese oasis in the middle of Mexico intrigued and excited me. Arriving at the complex, we were met at the gates by two armed Mexican security guards who waved us through the opening gate. The complex was surrounded by six metre walls adorned with barbed wire.

“What’s with all the security?” I questioned

“Mexico isn’t the safest place, John. There are many people in this country that envy what we have managed to build and seek to take advantage of our success and prosperity, so we must protect ourselves and our families.” Jorge resolutely responded.

As we entered the complex proper, I was astonished at the immediate contrast between the landscape and scenery of Morelos in comparison to what lay behind the walls of Beit Milad. Outside the complex walls, poorly maintained roads teeming with stray dogs and lined with forests of overgrown wild bamboo coupled with agricultural plots of land littered with rusting and broken machinery. Yet once inside, the wide paved streets, superbly manicured gardens and immaculately maintained villas exuded a sense of order and calm that seemed to be absent just outside the complex gates.

I pondered Jorge’s words carefully. Nothing like this existed in Australia; a country where egalitarianism seemed to be so entrenched in society, that a complex like this, which isolated a minority community from the rest of society, would have been considered abhorrent. While the Australian Lebanese community had successfully developed its own community organisations and associations, the Mexican Lebanese seemed to be on another level altogether.

The cynical lawyer in me began to ponder whether the Mexican Lebanese community had deliberately isolated themselves from the broader Mexican community yet given the regard and esteem by which they are held in Mexico, especially by those in positions of power, it was obvious that their contribution to the development of a thriving Mexican society was highly regarded.

Taking a moment to consider the community's position within a society that I had little knowledge or understanding of, I reminded myself to remove the veil of Australian egalitarianism that filtered my perception, and to be mindful that I could not in good conscience judge the Mexican Lebanese community through my social lens, particularly as I had not experienced life in Mexico.

In reality, it was extremely difficult not to be overwhelmed by pride at what the Mexican Lebanese community had been able to achieve since their arrival in Mexico in the previous century. Cultural centres, gated communities, associations, and at one time the richest man in the world, who all seemed focused on uplifting the entire Mexican Lebanese community by catering for all of their needs regardless of ancestral grudges or religious and cultural divisions, all the while contributing to the broader development of Mexico.

Over the next few days, I had the privilege of experiencing life in Beit Milad. Walking around the complex in the mornings, I was invited to take traditional Lebanese coffee by intrigued residents who asked a million questions as to who I was and what I was doing here. Days by the pool witnessing the interactions of the residents who played cards, smoked argileh and sunbaked as if they were on holidays in Jbeil or Batroun. The highlight of the visit was the Lebanese themed New Years celebration consisting of traditional Lebanese mezze, arak, belly dancers and fireworks.

It was difficult not to feel completely at home while at the same time dumbfounded at the fact that the vast majority of the residents were now three to four generations removed from their ancestral homeland. It dawned on me that regardless of how many generations a Lebanese person may be removed from their homeland, the vast majority seem to be able to retain the quintessential essence of what it means to be Lebanese. The inherent love for life regardless of calamity, distance or time that has existed from our Canaanite ancestors to this very day.

Having spent the previous five years living and working in Lebanon, a country beset by civil war, genocide, mass migration, a corrupt administration and banking system, which oversaw the largest financial collapse in the last one hundred and fifty years coupled with the largest non nuclear explosion in the history of the world, it was so refreshing to bear witness to the successes of a Lebanese community who were unified, focused and working towards the implementation of a shared vision. The Mexican Lebanese community's ability to retain their culture and traditions while shedding the ancient grudges of their past, by fulfilling their individual and collective potential, was inspiring to say the least.

While I was not naive to assume that the Mexican Lebanese community did not have its own bones of contention, it was obvious that they had been able to set aside those issues long enough to be able to develop and fulfil a unified vision. This was the embodiment of the ‘Lebanese Emigrant’, an individual once constrained by ancient cultural, societal and religious restrictions, war, famine, displacement and financial calamity. Their rhizome uprooted from the hills and valleys of their beloved homeland, compelled to migrate away from their friends, family and beauty that was Lebanon in order to endeavour to build a new life for themselves in a completely foreign land.

Just as destiny led Dido and her companions to flee the tyrannous rule of her brother, Pygmalion, the ruler of the great Cannanite city-state of Tyre, leading her to establish the city of *Qart-hadasht*; a city that would eventually come to usurp the position of its ancestral mother, ultimately ruling the mediterranean world for centuries. The Lebanese Emigrant has established a new Carthage wherever their ships have come to rest. Individuals and communities, ‘*young trees, whose roots were plucked from the hills of Lebanon... have come to be deeply rooted the World over; and have become fruitful.*’³

³ Gibran. K. excerpt from “*To Young Americans of Syrian Origin*,” 1926.
<https://www.aramcoworld.com/Articles/July-2019/The-Borderless-World-of-Kahlil-Gibran> . Accessed 19th September 2023