

UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE CEDAR

A History of Lebanese Immigration in Brazil

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I.

PROLOGUE - "ROOTS CARRIED BY THE WIND"

It was the late 19th century. Hope for what the future might bring still offered that innocent mixture of curiosity and fear. The automobile, electricity, the telephone—everything was on the verge of becoming commonplace for the 19th-century citizen. These innovations could ease hard labor.

- “The Lebanese have a very Eurocentric view,” some would say, judging these expectations...

However, the more pessimistic and rural residents, working the fields, were unimpressed by the innovations they had heard about. Nor should they have been, for these marvels were still decades away from impacting their tranquil lives. In some remote areas, they haven’t even arrived for those who remain there to this day.

The peace with which they coexisted with different groups under Ottoman rule was no longer guaranteed.

Then, word spread:

- “In the New World, there is a land full of promise. A few years ago, they expelled the monarchs and broke the chains that kept the last men under the yoke of slavery. They need people to work the fields. Just imagine arriving in such a place at this moment.”

- “There, Italians, Germans, and Poles have settled. They worked the land, and now, they say, some have even managed to obtain their first piece of land of their own.”

The more conservative refused to leave their home, their land, for an uncertain future. However, the lack of peace in coexistence among different peoples now pitted them against each other.

The economy didn't help either. Many could not produce enough, and those who could had no one to sell their surplus to.

After all, who has money when there is barely food to put on the table?

Of course, since time immemorial, when the concept of currency was created and society opted for communal life, human self-sufficiency was taken away.

Thus, the shepherd, who produced less meat than he needed, ate what little he had. The farmer, who grew potatoes but had no one to sell to, ate his crop and gave away the surplus. And the grain seller, who didn't produce enough corn, ate the few potatoes the farmer had given him. Scarcity knocked at the door.

The option once rejected by the conservative now became a necessity. Thus, they embarked on a ship from Beirut bound for Santos, Brazil.

Like a tree deprived of space to grow and nutrients to thrive, which is uprooted entirely by the wind, what some might call a crisis uprooted a large part of the Lebanese people from their homeland.

But unlike the tree, which dies as soon as its roots are removed from the soil, the Lebanese people did not perish on this side of the ocean. However, like seeds carried by the wind, they found fertile soil and even bore fruit.

II.

"THE SOIL OF THE NEW WORLD"

After a journey spanning more than a month and a half, the determined immigrants set foot in Santos.

Not without a brief stop in Marseille. The more skeptical among them could never have imagined they would one day be so close to the Côte d'Azur, about which they had heard so much from a boisterous Frenchman who once roamed the old regions of the Levant.

Upon arriving in Santos, they saw little of that still-developing city before boarding the steam train that climbed the Serra do Mar mountains toward the metropolis of São Paulo.

The first sight of that bustling city might have been intimidating for some who, before the transatlantic journey, had never left the Lebanese hinterlands, not even to visit Beirut.

Sacrifices were necessary from the start: given the Brazilian Government's recognition of Ottoman rule over Lebanese territory, immigration documents were issued with a generic demonym they did not identify with; they were all called "Turks."

Their first home in São Paulo was called the Hospedaria. There, in shared rooms, they spent a period of adjustment with people from all over the world, especially Japanese and Italians.

The first impression of São Paulo's capital, already over three centuries old by then, was invigorating and full of hope. Everywhere, avenues were being widened, factories were springing up, and the industry was running at full steam, with hundreds of men pouring out of the facilities at the end of their shifts.

The confusion of accents and the challenges of being understood sometimes offered relief: it wasn't uncommon to occasionally encounter a Syrian or Lebanese who had been there for a while and always had positive things to say about their own experience of the New World.

For those practicing the Maronite faith, there was already a parish established on São Paulo soil. Since 1890, immigrants had founded a church dedicated to Our Lady of Lebanon.

Even just days after their arrival, job offers were already heard. Most came from foremen on farms, inviting the newcomers to join them in the countryside to work the coffee plantations.

Others, however, chose to remain in the capital, working in various sectors. Many sought to offer cultural solutions that newcomers still lacked in this new country, such as opening establishments that prepared traditional foods and produced fabrics for clothing.

There was also a third group, reserved for those willing to travel on behalf of São Paulo's merchants, whether Lebanese or not, selling their goods in various remote corners of Brazil—a task that required a bold and adventurous spirit.

The arrival in São Paulo marked the beginning of a new phase, where each day brought challenges and opportunities in equal measure.

In that New World soil, the Lebanese immigrants planted the first seeds of their new lives. The vibrant streets, unfamiliar faces, and voices in so many different languages evoked nothing but hope. Even amidst the confusion and exhaustion of those early days, a thread of determination ran through the newly arrived community.

At that moment, a new chapter in the story of their lives began to take shape, one in which every step taken in the pulsing city of São Paulo would be an affirmation of the resilience they carried from the mountains and fields of Lebanon.

III.

"THE TRAVELERS OF DREAM AND NOSTALGIA"

The time had finally come. Some of the protagonists of this story recognized that to truly prosper in this distant land, they would need to leave São Paulo.

They ventured into the deepest corners of a remote Brazil. Like pioneering explorers, some crossed lands barely touched even by those who lived there. They had always heard of a distant village, untouched by the conveniences of the metropolis, where the products they sold might be of great interest.

Thus began their lives as traveling salesmen, as many writers have preferred to call them throughout history. This narrator, however, prefers the term “mascate,” used—who knows why—in reference to the ancient city of Muscat in the Middle East, so close to the origins of our characters.

The work was arduous—perhaps as difficult as the labor on the land, as they remembered doing in the Levant. They traveled in the most precarious conditions: on foot, in cargo trains, by boat—if the coastal route favored them—and even on the backs of the most exhausted animals. They

went door to door, offering their products to locals, knowing how to promote them; they were skilled salesmen, emphasizing the most unique qualities of their goods.

Yet, they carried their dreams with them. They did not intend to spend their whole lives in this routine; their goal was clear: to save enough to open their own store in a town that could benefit from the convenience they would bring, wherever that might be.

Older Brazilians say they often heard a Lebanese or even a Syrian speaking proudly of owning their own “little shop.” The term adopted by locals for these general stores, typical of the first immigrants from the Levant, was “armazém.” This word also has Arabic origins, specifically from “al-mahazan,” which means something like a depot. And that’s exactly what these places were: true depots of non-perishable goods, each waiting for someone to take it home.

Besides their dreams, they were also obliged to carry nostalgia as a constant companion. It wasn’t uncommon for these travelers to go months without seeing close family members, who stayed behind, usually in the outskirts of big cities, waiting in a room for the head of the family to return, now and then, with the household’s livelihood.

Many of these men lacked refined cultural training, it’s true. Yet not even the harshness of the work on Brazilian roads had eroded their natural warmth. Back then, the affectionate nickname “brimo” became popular among them as a way to address anyone of similar origin—a term derived from the Portuguese “primo,” meaning cousin.

And, indeed, it was like that. Distance and hardships made them long for family and their homeland. But in one another, they found a familial bond that was perhaps essential to their success.

They had little, it’s true. But with hard work, many became successful merchants on Brazilian soil. Others weren’t as fortunate, but they built families, raised their children, became Brazilian citizens, and undoubtedly helped shape this country. They lived lives of honor and pride.

IV.

“THE THREADS WOVEN INTO THE FABRIC OF BRAZIL”

The time had come to put down roots. The “brimos”, now spread across Brazil's small, medium, and large cities, had firmly planted themselves in this new soil, ready to offer their contributions to the country they had learned to call home.

In a variety of trades—from cozy restaurants to bustling grocery stores, from gleaming jewelry shops to fabric stores—the Levantine people inscribed their mark in the commercial history of Brazil. But it was in the fabric trade that they left their deepest impression.

They brought fine fabrics, piece by piece, to clothe dreams, beautify homes, and adorn people. Among their offerings were cotton, linen, and even silk, which arrived like a soft whisper from distant lands.

For those who hadn't yet started families, it was time to find their other half, often within the Syrian-Lebanese community, while those who had already settled down focused on elevating their standard of living, cherishing each achievement as if embroidering a precious mantle, if the reader allows this narrator one more metaphor.

Education, perhaps more than any other inheritance, was their treasure. In the graduating classes of the Law School of Largo de São Francisco, of the University of São Paulo - one of Latin America's most prestigious institutions - it was not uncommon to see Arab names among the honorees, bringing pride and honor to the community.

Thus, the Brazilian people found, among the highest positions in administration and academia, descendants of these families who, like them, had Brazil's soil under their feet and dreams in their sights. Among leaders and distinguished figures like President Michel Temer, Governor Paulo Maluf, and Mayor Fernando Haddad, no one would dare say that their legacies left no mark.

Other names embroidered themselves into the fabric of Brazilian history, contributing in various fields: Tony Kanaan, a champion on the IndyCar tracks, and Antônio Houaiss, the intellectual who gave Brazil one of its most esteemed Portuguese language dictionaries.

In this way, like woven threads of linen and cotton in the shirts of workers, the Lebanese people became an essential part of Brazil's tapestry, stitching their dreams and roots alongside other people who also wrote the story of this country.

Thus, the Lebanese, like precious threads, wove their story into the vast fabric of Brazil. Each achievement, each enterprise, each new generation brought new tones and textures to this tapestry, intertwining traditions never left behind with hopes for a prosperous future. Their roots, though distant, were firmly planted in Brazil's soil, and their culture, hard work, and values became an inseparable part of the country's landscape.

V.

EPILOGUE - "UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE CEDAR"

The cedar of Lebanon, rooted for centuries in the mountains of the Levant, has found a new home in Brazilian lands. Here, it is reborn, with its roots firm and deep in distant yet welcoming soil. If in Lebanon it represented the pride and resilience of a people, in Brazil it has become a symbol of renewal, unity, and hope for generations of descendants who, under its symbolic shade, are nourished by the stories and traditions of their ancestors.

Under this shadow, each new branch and leaf of the cedar recalls the spirit of the first immigrants who arrived with hearts full of uncertainties and dreams. By planting roots in Brazil, they brought with them memories of their homeland, their music, their language, and their beliefs—seeds that, upon finding Brazil's fertile soil, blossomed. Each Lebanese who reached these shores planted in the hearts of their children and grandchildren the strength of Lebanese identity, adapted to the New World but always anchored in ancestry.

The cedar, tall and majestic, does not easily bend to the winds; instead, it withstands and strengthens. So too are the generations of descendants of the first Lebanese, who, over the decades, have kept their traditions alive while embracing Brazilian identity in all its complexity. Across the Brazilian countryside, in São Paulo neighborhoods, in small and large cities, it has become a symbolic marker of the Lebanese presence.

For many, the cedar symbolizes the capacity for adaptation without losing essence. Like the cedar itself, the Lebanese in Brazil learned to adjust without abandoning their deep roots. This adaptation, however, did not mean a break from the past but rather an expansion of what it means to be Lebanese, to be Brazilian, to be a “brimo” who, despite the distance, keeps a heart connected to two homelands. Each family, each business, each story of struggle and success is another leaf in the canopy of this cedar that proudly spreads across Brazilian lands.

Under the cedar's shadow, future generations continue to flourish, carrying in their blood the vigor of Lebanon's mountains and the tenacity of those who braved distant lands. The tree, now rooted in Brazil, shelters under its shade all who identify with this heritage, all who recognize in themselves a piece of the culture carried by the wind. But this tree, unlike others, does not only receive the new light of a welcoming country; it reflects the history, faith, and hope of those who crossed oceans in search of a better life, and with each cycle, renews its leaves, ensuring that memory is never lost.

Thus, the cedar is not merely a tree; it is a living bridge between yesterday and tomorrow. It connects the spirit of those who came with the promise of a future unfolding for those who remain. The shadows cast by its branches shelter dreams, protect memories, and at the same time propel new generations to keep walking forward. For the cedar, with its longevity and strength, reminds everyone that, even across distances, the roots never abandon the heart from where they came.

Under the shadow of the cedar, all descendants are called to remember, to value, and to honor the history that precedes them. They are heirs not only to a past but to a present that renews itself every day, where love, courage, and determination come together to shape a legacy worthy of the cedar, which, firm and strong, remains unshakable—always ready to shelter, always ready to inspire.

The End