

2

Little Boy In Beirut



My mother came to pick me up from school one day, screaming “Eddy! Eddy!”

All the other mothers came running and shouting too. Their screams pierced my ears and vibrated in my ribcage; my stomach was in knots; my heartbeat was accelerating. I was very afraid.

A tragedy was taking place. A war was starting. It all started in my fifth year of life.

Raised in the Muslim quarter of West Beirut, I was what you might call a war baby. My mother, whose father was French, got together at a very early age with my father.

When the war broke out, I wasn’t aware of Lebanon’s rich history nor of its peaceful past. At the time, there was no East or West, just a downtown Beirut: The Crazy Horse bar, the bowling center my dad owned, gambling halls with a lot of Muslims and Christians mixing; religion wasn’t an issue then—A mixture without borders.

A happy and carefree child, I went to the religious Saint Franciscan school. My friends were Christians or Muslims. What’s the difference? My parents preferred both private and religious schools.

Public schools were generally of an average standard, while private schools were often Christian and of much better quality. That made all the difference. Thus, wealthy Muslims put their children in a Christian or French school so that their children received a good Westernized education.

My five-year-old mates and I shared the same games. We got together every year before Christmas to form a choir to celebrate the holiday season together. My Muslim friend Fadi also celebrated Christmas. He learned to decorate a Christmas tree, a nativity scene, and even knows how to make a log. He believes, like me, in Santa Claus.

We little boys were the men of the future: that's what our parents told us, and in that way, they spoiled us. We thought it was normal to think of ourselves in such a mature light. My father, a man known to the rich Lebanese high society, due to his bowling alley, whom the newspaper talked about, made proud of him.

In the days following, our screaming mothers stomped into the school to find us, and everyone started to move to other areas of Beirut. Little by little, the Christians gathered in the center to create the East district of Beirut and the Muslims did the same in the West district. There was a lot of solidarity between Christians.

Around me people were moving, running back and forth, especially those who refused to hide their religious or political beliefs. They are refugees in their own town!

Barriers began going up very quickly. Some would no longer be able to return to the neighborhood they used to live in: mainly traders, homeowners, without family or friends on the other side of the "border." Alternatively, they belonged to a family of several religions, or they were just poor.

We lived, as I mentioned, in West Beirut; my father's bowling alley was in Hamra, the Champs-Élysées of

Beirut; it even had the famous “Café de Paris” influence of the French culture.

My Christian family had nothing to fear from our Muslim neighbors or friends. Besides, our closest cousins were Muslims; my grandma’s sister married one, and we have many relatives who were Muslim, so we were a comfortable mixed family. Before the war, there were many mixed marriages’ people who didn’t care so much about religion.

When the war started, we were in no hurry to go to a refugee camp on the other side of town: it was demoralizing and was no doubt uncomfortable. So, we stayed in our home. I wanted to see why adults were so scared.

Soon, the hope of peace returned quickly. So, we went back to school, which was either open or closed depending on the shelling or whatever dangerous events were going on. However, living conditions were rapidly deteriorating. We continued to live the best we could.

In our six-story building, with three apartments per floor, only an elderly couple remained beside us. All our neighbors left us their keys. My mother boiled dirty tap water, and we ate what expired canned food we had left since the grocery stores had all closed.

When the weather was nice, and bombs were hitting another neighborhood, my sister and I went to the roof of the building where my father had installed a small inflatable swimming pool. We pretended we were at the beach, but most of the time, we lived cloistered in the apartment.

Sometimes I would roller skate down the building or in the street, since there were no cars driving around.

However, it was the curfew and danger levels that decided our schedule.

In the beginning, there was silence because of the absent neighbors, then there was darkness for lack of electricity. We had a hard time getting used to this new reality. The TV didn't plug into candles, nor did the radio. Later, we will be reassured by the light brought to us by the car battery unearthed by my father: it would be our power generator.

War had one good side: it gave us schoolkids two years of mandatory vacation. Schools were closed!

By 1978, the danger was becoming very real for my family: It was too late to cross the border between the East and West of Beirut. Each side, Muslim and Christian, fortified their part of Beirut. Those who have remained in a quarter whose religious majority is not their own, would often be detained as anonymous hostages.

Roadblocks are set up between East and West Beirut. For two years, each side lived as they could as events unfolded. We waited. There was a lot of settling of scores between the various Christian and Muslim militias, and there's more bombardment. Finally, some calm, and we got a break.

I was eight years old in 1978 and preparing for my first Christian communion. It was a very important event. I had been preparing for it for several years at the rate of two to three catechism sessions per week.

The preparations were exactly as described. I would be dressed in a white robe. My whole family was invited. I rehearsed the staging of the ceremony because I would be

the leader and would have to carry the chalice. I also had to read a prayer in church in front of everybody.

Finally, on the ceremony day, I was very concerned. I had not been told that on the chalice there was a small white religious scarf that had to be balanced during the whole crossing of the church. I had to be sure I am walking straight. I was the tallest in the class; I was serious, but I wanted to laugh. It was heavy to hold, and I had to stay focused.

My uncle, a well-known pastry chef in Beirut, had a place called La Brioche. He made me a huge cake with lots of chocolate decorations. I could not believe it. The mountain of gifts that I received really made this truce a tasty one. And then suddenly I found myself in love with a friend who was also having her first communion.

Finally, we would be able to leave for a few days to get a change of scenery. There was a ceasefire, which meant we might be allowed to cross the border between West and East Beirut!



Some of the famous cakes from La Brioche at our birthdays!



Our street, sitting on our Buick Skylark near the grocery store called "Dates" (as in the palm tree fruits).



With my sister and parents during a Christian event.



The bowling alley in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, that my dad opened.
I won a bowling trophy when I was nine.



My sister, Maya, Dad, Mom, and me in our school playground
near the church.



Near the girl I liked, trying to focus on the body of Christ.



My friend Fadi and me.

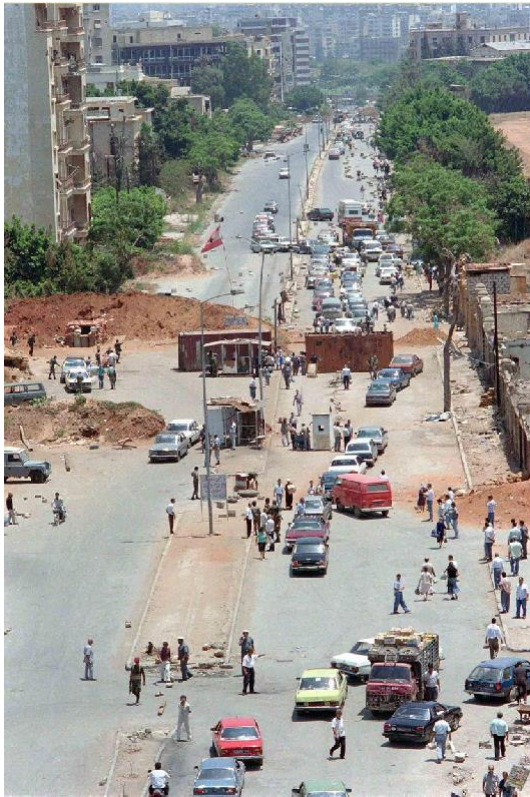


I had to share this and explain it; how is it that a six-year-old kid was carrying an AK47, you might ask? It was so heavy I could barely hold it, but, some PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) militia members, took over our next-door neighbor's apartment, so we had to be very careful and kind to them. My family made coffee for them, and they came over with their weapons and head coverings. That's when I took this picture. No PlayStation then.

It was all very real.



The demarcation line between the two sides of Beirut.



People crossing between the East and West Beirut.