

Toast – Black Tie Ball – The Gathering

It is my pleasure and indeed a privilege to propose a toast to our forebears many of whom left their homeland in Lebanon to travel thousands of miles to foreign lands.

Before I propose that toast, would you please be up standing to observe a minutes silence for all those who have gone before us, many of whom were taken too early.

Between 1880 and the outbreak of the First World War, 350,000 people left Lebanon. They were part of what was referred to as the “first wave” of emigration. Their journeys were made possible by the opening of the new transport gateways like the Suez Canal in 1869 and the development of Port Said.

They travelled to many different countries of the world. A small percentage came to New Zealand and here to Dunedin in particular.

It has often been quipped, they would've carried on to the South Pole to get value for money, had they not been made to disembark the ship at Port Chalmers.

The lack of prospects in Lebanon at the time, together with the bleak economic climate and increasing political tensions, made the promise of an exciting new world too much to resist for the younger generation. The desire to break the simple, ordered and familiar cycle of home life was fueled by tales of adventure, opportunity and prosperity.

Embracing hope, with the seeds of a dream in their hearts and taking what they could carry, the hopeful migrants made their way to the nearest Port. In many cases they bade a

final farewell to the ones they loved and the only place they knew.

Imagine how heart wrenching it would've been for a mother to say goodbye to her 14 year old daughter, who was going to be travelling to the other end of the world with her husband, knowing she may never see her again.

She took the gold earrings she was wearing, and put them in her daughter's ears as a symbol of her love.

Her daughter wore those earrings every day of her life. That woman was my paternal grandmother, Ruby "Zmoorid" Joseph.

Her Mother's fears were in fact borne out – she never saw her daughter again.

As they were to soon discover, the reality of the situation proved markedly different to their dreams.

Conditions on the passage over lacked any of the creature comforts they may have been used to. A typical journey to the other side of the world literally took months. It consisted of crowded and unsanitary conditions in the bowels of a merchant vessel. Optimism slowly eroding as each day passed, though never dissipating entirely. The new world must have seemed a distant destination when you were only allowed on to the lower deck of the ship that was taking you there, conditions permitting.

Whatever enthusiasm was left after months at sea in cargo class, must've been diminished further on arrival in a foreign land where not everyone was necessarily pleased to see that you had arrived safely.

New Zealand was a relatively new colony, where prevailing attitudes to certain ethnicities could at times, be as welcoming as the weather. Nonetheless it would have been a huge joy to sail into Port Chalmers and gaze at the beautiful hills covered with lush, green vegetation.

You could imagine the culture shock as they came ashore to a raw and muddy Victorian town that was settled primarily by Scottish, Presbyterian immigrants. The funereal coloured clothing worn by the folk of the day would have been especially foreign to the Lebanese women who were used to gold earrings and brightly coloured clothing. The local food which by comparison to what they were used to, would have seemed bland. The strange money. The architecture of the buildings and the houses. And where on earth could you expect to find Kibbeh and Tabbouleh in 1890?

But as we know, our ancestors wasted no time in settling in. Known as the “quiet immigrants”, they worked hard to establish themselves. A strong work ethic and sense of purpose compelled the migrants to, somewhat ironically, become shining examples of the Scottish brand of stoicism that was so valued in the Deep South. They gained a reputation as hard-working, god-fearing folk, who valued family, education and a strong sense of community, not to mention a flair for making a quid.

Many seized opportunities to hawk goods to isolated farmer’s and gold-miners in the back roads of rural Otago, Southland and Canterbury.

I was touched when I first read the story of Saada Bacos, who plied the roadways of Central Otago in those early years (you can read her story in the foyer for those of you who are not familiar with it).

Saada is remembered for pushing a large cane baby's pram, packed with suitcases of trinkets, jewellery and haberdashery and selling them door-to-door. She would take the lot by train up the Taieri Gorge to the railhead – and then set off along muddy and bumpy roads to tout her wares.

People like Saada were exhibiting the energy, drive and business sense that Lebanese settlers would come to be known and respected for.

It wouldn't be long before our ancestors established businesses, amongst other things, in retailing, warehousing, building, farming and manufacturing.

By the early 20th Century, second generation Lebanese – Grandparent's for many of us – were making major contributions to New Zealand life locally and nationally.

At the same time they remained attached to Lebanon emotionally and spiritually, if not physically.

Thanks to their parent's, many became well educated and were represented in most professions, while others became economically prosperous through business ventures.

I feel privileged to have grown up knowing some of the colourful characters in our community.

No doubt many of you will remember one such colourful character, Joe Reid.

Joe was an enigma in many ways.

He went by the nickname of Nazzi.

Some say it's an abbreviation of snazzy, because he was always so impeccably dressed.

Others say he got the name in WW2 when he was on duty one night down at the Otago Peninsula.

Hearing a rustling noise coming from the nearby bushes, Joe yelled "Holt, who goes there?". When there was no reply forthcoming, he fired off a 303 round into the bushes (as you do). Soon after, he heard a heavy thud. Ever so slowly and with great trepidation Joe finally went to investigate the situation believing that he may have indeed shot a German Soldier. To his great surprise, there on the ground before him, was a dead horse.

Anyway, that's all an aside. Joe was not only eccentric and idiosyncratic, he was also very intelligent.

Richard LaHood tells the story that one day when he was studying in the library, Joe Reid appeared at the librarian's desk holding the largest version of the Oxford dictionary he had ever seen.

Without any warning, Joe dropped it from a height of about 3 feet onto the librarian's desk. As you can imagine, it made a thunderous noise.

Richard then heard him say very casually to her, "You'd be surprised how many words they've left out."



Another colourful character was a lovely man by the name of Phil Coory, or PC as he was fondly known.

I remember as a pre-schooler, Mum and I walking up Carroll Street one day and Phil was cleaning his car. He looked down the street and saw us coming & bolted into his house.

When we got to his house he spoke to Mum through the slot in the door where the mail goes. He said, "You know I love you Marie, but I can't talk to you when you're wearing that bloody green coat."

Anyone who knew Phil knew that you didn't wear or even mention the colour green when you were around him as he believed the colour put the hex on you.

Phil was regarded to be only mildly superstitious, compared to some in the community.

A final story I will recount involves the Wingatui Races, a favourite haunt for many of our people.

Father Mee commented to Butch that the Lebanese were such good, god fearing people. Not only did they come to church to pray, but he noticed that they also prayed at the races, to which Butch replied, "That's right Father, but at the races we really mean it".



My heart is filled with admiration when I think of those youngsters leaving their homes in Lebanon for new and unknown territory.

What must it had been like for them to leave their homeland, a familiar world of vines, figs and olive groves, for the unfamiliar world of Victorian Dunedin?

How often did they dream of the snow covered Cedars of home, their mother's cooking, their friends and family they had left behind?

All I can feel is **deep love, great respect** and **enormous gratitude** for the journey they took – and for what they gave to all of us.

We are the living embodiment of their dreams.

Please be up standing and join me in raising your glasses to honour those wonderful, courageous pioneers to whom we will be forever grateful.

Our Forebears.