



# My Lebanese Cousins

By Paula E. Kirman

As a life-long Edmontonian, Frank Sheckter has seen a lot of changes take place within the city. One thing that has remained consistent, according to his experiences, however, has been the good relations between the Jewish and Lebanese communities.

One memory that stands out in Sheckter's mind happened when he was 14 and working for his father's business, Alberta Bakery. "In 1941, I was delivering bread to a little store in north Edmonton called Fort Road Confectionary, across from the Transit Hotel on 66th street and Fort Road. It was owned by a Lebanese fellow. I believe his name was Tarrabain. There are a lot of Tarrabain families in Edmonton and have been for over 50 years. I always made that the last stop on the route so I would sit and have a Coke with him and visit with him and talk.

"On this day, in 1941, the war had been on for two years, and I walked into the store with some bread and was met by a German lady who apparently had moved in and was living with my Lebanese friend there. When I walked in, she immediately started in on me about Jews and cursing me. I was quite shocked by this, as a young kid, and did not quite know what to make of it. Mr. Tarrabain must have heard it from the back room (they lived behind the store). He came running out, seized her by the arm, shook her, and said, 'You are talking about my cousin. This man is my cousin, and you are not allowed to say anything bad about him. If you do not apologize immediately then get out this minute.' She sort of apologized. I don't know how long she was there after that; I never saw her again and we never made any reference to it."

Sheckter remained friends with many of the Tarrabain family of that generation, most of whom have now passed away. Visits between his family and Lebanese friends worked both ways: a Lebanese shop owner across the street from where Sheckter's father's bakery was located would often come to visit as well.

Another of Sheckter's memories took place in the mid-'90s. "I was at an automotive shop almost behind Grant MacEwan on 105th Avenue just east of 105th Street. I was waiting for them to finish servicing my car. There was another fellow there, a Lebanese man, and he had a son who was about four or five at the time. He kept watching me and eyeing me. Finally he came over and asked, 'Are you Lebanese?' I said, 'No, I'm not Lebanese. I'm Jewish.' He immediately said, 'You know, in Edmonton, there is no problem between the Jews and Lebanese.' I said, 'I was born in Edmonton and I've known that all my life. We've always been close friends. We call each other cousin.' He said, 'Do you know why?' And I said, 'It's always been that way. I did not know there was a special reason for it.'



The man speaking to Sheckter had emigrated from Lebanon about ten to twelve years earlier, and was an electrician. He said, “When I arrived in Canada, the Lebanese community told me immediately that in Edmonton the Lebanese and the Jews are close friends. There are no arguments, no mistrust. They are very close.” Again, he asked me if I knew why, and I again answered that I felt that I had always known and accepted this.

“He went on to say that when the Awid family first came to Edmonton in the 1920s, they were living in a house down in the flats beside the bridge on the bottom of 95th to 98th avenue. A couple of months after they moved in, there was a flood. The river rose and came across the road. They were sitting on the front porch wondering what the next step was, because they were being flooded out of their house. Where would they go? What would they do?” Sheckter retells the story as it was told to him:

“A big Cadillac pulled up and a man got out and said to the family, ‘Come with me.’ They all got in his car. The man was Hy Weisler and he took them to his home and actually put them up in his residence. They became very good friends. They went to work for him and eventually bought out his wholesale business.”

“There were a lot of Lebanese families in the city at that time,” Sheckter continues. “None of them helped this family except for this Jewish fellow (Hy Weisler) who came and helped them out. This man speaking to me made it sound like that was the whole turning point between the two communities from that day on.” Sheckter points out that he has spoken with Weisler’s son Marvin, a urologist practicing in Edmonton, who had a cursory knowledge of the event.

In some cases, according to Sheckter, cultural differences were bridged so well that some Lebanese friends of Jewish people could indeed pass for being their cousins – or at least, members of the Jewish community. “I am not aware of ever having any cross words, anything almost. I can probably think of a half-dozen Jewish people when I was a boy, who had a Lebanese boy as one of their best friends. It was interchangeable to the point that in the 1970s, when Beth Israel was still on 119th street, Bill Lutsky had a friend who was one of the Awid family. They used to come to shul together at four or five in the afternoon. The rabbi did not know who he was and used to count him as part of the \*minyan! That happened on a regular basis. It wasn’t a case of deception or anything. They walked in together, and were both counted.”

Sheckter, a semi-retired realtor, continues to maintain and enjoy friendships with people of Lebanese background. In a day when tensions in the Middle East can sometimes spill over amongst the related ethnic groups in other parts of the world, Sheckter’s experiences demonstrate that two sides can live harmoniously as friends and family.

*\*Minyan: Quorum of ten Jewish men needed to recite certain prayers.*

## The Relationship

By Richard Awid

My father came to Canada from the present-day country of Lebanon, in 1901. He joined a very small group of other Muslims in that year which numbered about 1500 in all of Canada at that time. My father, Ahmed Awid, first settled in eastern Canada, but within four years he would move westward to settle in both Winnipeg and Brandon, Manitoba.

In Manitoba, he would meet up with Hymie Weisler, a Jewish businessman, and thus began a business relationship that lasted for years. Eventually, both Weisler and my father would move to Edmonton, Alberta. In their new city, Hymie Weisler would open a wholesale business and my father, Ahmed, started a retail business.

The two businessmen continued to do business with each other and if each person was able to make some good deals with their suppliers, they would ask one another if they were interested in buying some items they could use in their own business. This type of business exchange continued as the years moved on, but in time my father would sell his retail business, and become a self-employed salesman. Mr. Weisler continued to operate his wholesale business.

One day, my father asked Mr. Weisler if it was possible for my oldest brothers, Alex and Mickey, to work for his wholesale company. Hymie Weisler answered without hesitation that it would be an honour to have them work at the wholesale. The two brothers were employed for many years at Weisler's business.

The years flew by and as Mr. Weisler grew older, he decided to sell his business. He offered to sell it to Alex and Mickey and they soon became the new owners. They would eventually change the name to Western Varieties Wholesale, a business that family members would own for approximately fifty years. My father, while he was able, would offer his business advice to the family members.

Ahmed Awid past away in 1979 and in his last years of life, he had prostate cancer. One of his doctors, at the time, was Marvin Weisler, the son of Hymie Weisler. It seems that during ones lifetime that some relationships always continue on in one form or another.



*Mr Ahmed Awid (Centre)*