



THE LEBANESE IN GUADELOUPE

"THE ISLAND OF BEAUTIFUL WATERS"

ADAPTED FROM THE STUDY BY GUITA G. HOURANI

Researcher, The Lebanese Emigration Research Center (LERC), NDU.

Lebanese began arriving in the Caribbean (Antilles, West Indies) in the second part of the nineteenth century, part of a much larger migration from the Near East to the Americas almost entirely from Mount Lebanon. Many Lebanese migrants were small landowners or tenant farmers, who soon developed entrepreneurial and commercial skills. When the Lebanese first arrived in Guadeloupe in 1870, it was a prosperous French colony.

The Lebanese were not unknown to the islanders, for in 1860 they heard from their French priests and their newspapers about the massacres in Mount-Lebanon, and about "French protection and defense" of the Christians and sent funds to aid the sufferers.

The Island of Guadeloupe

Christopher Columbus landed on the island in 1493 and named it Saint-Mary of Guadeloupe in honor of Notre Dame of Guadeloupe in Spain. It became a stopover on the route to Spain's new territories. Abandoned by the Spanish in 1604, it became a French colony in 1635. After several occupations by the British, with the signing of the Treaty of Paris the island became French territory. The British occupied it again from 1810 to 1816, but the Treaty of Vienna restored it permanently to France.

Guadeloupe is in fact an archipelago of islands. The main island of Guadeloupe resembles a butterfly in shape and is made up of Grande-Terre and Basse-Terre.

First Lebanese Settlement on the Island

According to Challita Torbay, a Lebanese from Niha who emigrated to Guadeloupe in 1948, oral history of the Lebanese community of Guadeloupe has it that "in c. 1870 a person of the Debs family from

Bazoun in Northern Lebanon passed by Guadeloupe on his way to the Dominican Republic. Missing his boat to the Dominican Republic and lacking money, he went to a church and sold what he had with him, rosaries, crosses, holy pictures, etc. This seemed profitable to Debs, who returned to Lebanon, bought more such articles and returned to Guadeloupe to sell them. He did so twice before making the island his permanent home. He began to bring over members of his clan and village."⁽¹⁾

Guadeloupe in Brief

Location:	America, the Antilles
Latitude/Longitude	16° 15N, 61° 35W
Land Area:	1 780 sq km
Composition:	Archipelago of islands
Division:	Grande-Terre, Basse-Terre and the islands of: Marie-Galante, La Desirade, Les Saintes, Saint Barthelemy, la Petite Terre, and the French part of the island of Saint-Martin.
Capital City	Basse-Terre
Population:	435,739 (July 2002 estimate)
Religion:	Mainly Catholic
Languages:	French and Creole Patois
Political & Administrative Status:	A French Overseas Department
Money:	Euro
Economic activities:	Agriculture and Tourism
National product: GDP	\$3.8 billion (1993 estimate)

(1) Personal interview, April 18th, 2003, Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe.



Torbay describes his journey from Lebanon in 1948, which did not differ from that of his predecessors. He sailed from Beirut to Marseille, a trip that took ten days. From there he went via Paris to Le Havre and sailed on the *Colombie* to Guadeloupe, which took twelve days. The total cost was 200 Lebanese pounds.

Lebanese emigrants to Guadeloupe, like so many others, drew others from their family and village. Torbay went to Guadeloupe because "a person from Bazoun brought a friend of his from Niha by the name of Hanna (John) Francis. Hanna in turn brought a member of his village Niha by the name of Constantine Khalil. The latter brought Georges Haykel, who brought me."⁽²⁾ Torbay later brought the only two members of his immediate family - his mother and brother.⁽³⁾

According to the census of 1944, the first Lebanese actually registered as arriving in the island (in 1890), was Dora Frangy, wife of Gitany Elie, followed by Suzanne Karam, widow of Elie Sebat in 1897. Dates show that Lebanese followed in steady succession.

(2) Ibid.
 (3) Ibid.
 (4) Ibid.

Economic Activities of the First Emigrants

Arriving with little or no money, Lebanese emigrants sold dry goods, supplied by an urban wholesaler, from village to village and door to door. Torbay worked in this way even in 1948, selling such items as perfume, combs, and cloth. He used to set up his merchandise on Saturdays, which were the paydays, before the sugar factories. During weekdays, he would tour the island in his car and sell door to door.⁽⁴⁾ Many Lebanese worked in this way to pay back some fellow-countryman who had brought them to the island and perhaps supplied them with merchandise, to send money home and often to save capital to set up business for themselves.

The first census of families from the Levant, i.e., persons with Ottoman or Turkish nationality in Guadeloupe, dates back to 1917. The Lebanese and Syrians were registered as Turks, with "Syrian" in parenthesis. In the Grande-Terre, 97 persons including children formed 25 homes, most of which were in Pointe-à-Pitre, the principal city of the island. 19 were traders, one a grocer, one a doctor, and two laborers. 20 families came from Bazoun. Some of the Lebanese of Guadeloupe came directly from Lebanon, but some had come from Haiti, the USA, Paris or Venezuela. It was common to have one brother or first cousin in one country and others in another country, making it possible to have commercial links and to move fairly easily from one country to another, hence, the mobility of the Lebanese community.

The 1917 census found five Lebanese families in the Basse-Terre, numbering twenty-five individuals, mostly aged under forty. These formed the Caram (Karam), Jean, Georges, Gitany and Ebleuran families. This census gave 123 individuals for all Guadeloupe, mostly children. By 1944 there were 161 adults, and 333 individuals alto-

gether, including children under 15 and those of mixed marriages. Integration into local society and intermarriage with the French was easier for Lebanese than for Syrians due to their greater contact with European missionaries and French culture. The census found that 99 were traders, 3 peddlers, 3 dress-makers, 3 foremen and 2 mechanics. 164 had come from Bazoun, 2 from Hasroun, 31 from Niha, 6 from Zghorta and 13 from Barsa.

Status of the Lebanese Emigrants in the Island

The first Lebanese were subjects of the Ottoman Empire, those of the second wave protégés of France under the French Mandate of Lebanon, and those of the third wave citizens of the new Republic of Lebanon. This was not only confusing to the authorities in Guadeloupe, but also to the Lebanese themselves, who were undergoing an acute "identity crisis" and had continuously to prove their loyalty to their new country.

Following the Treaty of Lausanne, particularly article 34, the subjects of the late Ottoman Empire had two years in which to choose their nationality; otherwise they would retain their original nationality i.e. Turkish. One person by the name of Georges Feigelonne of Pointe-à-Pitre, about 15 from Martinique and 48 from the territory of Guyanne opted for Lebanese citizenship, but most, not only in Guadeloupe but also in other Lebanese immigrant communities, did not do so out of fears about the uncertain political situation in their homeland and about losing their status in their new home.

La Démocratie Sociale of October 3, 1935, published under the title *La Question Syrienne* that "in Guadeloupe, the Syrians and the Lebanese are not all persecuted. Active and prudent traders, they have made their place in the sun.... Having arrived with their suitcases on their back, they now own shops

and cars.... They are also unanimous in thanking the country for its hospitality...."

Their success prompted other merchants to complain and demand a ban on peddling and on shops opening on Sundays. This opposition increased when the Levantines were under scrutiny due to the popularity of the Syrian Popular Party (PPS), which called for unification of the Near East and the island of Cyprus under the "Syrian Nation". All those favoring this party were suspected as spies or traitors.

But the declaration of World War II prompted the Lebanese Guadeloupian community to support the French war effort, even to open a subscription for it. Twenty-six people contributed no less than Fr. 300,000. *La Démocratie Sociale* of October 21, 1939 warmly congratulated "Jean Sarkis and all those who have contributed and who with this unselfish gesture have proved their affection and attachment to France."

However, when Lebanon and Syria gained their independence, the immigrants became foreigners and there was a ban on their peddling which reduced many to poverty until in 1945 Governor Bertaut legalized it again. But those who in the 30s had opted for Lebanese or Syrian nationality were obliged to obtain a trading permit and difficulties were put in their way. In 1952 the Lebanese counted as foreigners numbered 166. The census of 1954 counted only 112. The restrictions no doubt prompted emigration from the island either toward the homeland or to other more favorable countries.

Naturalization for the remaining Lebanese was not easy, particularly since the political climate was continuously changing and since they were also at the mercy of the mood of the administrative personnel in the island. However, those who were born in Guadeloupe and had reached the legal age of 21 had the right under the law of August 10, 1927 to obtain French citizenship and took advantage of this. In 1950,

new regulations gave citizenship particularly to those who had long left the Near East and settled on the island.

Emigration to Guadeloupe revived during the war in Lebanon (1975-1990). Most of the new Lebanese immigrants were Christians. They had difficulty obtaining their residence cards and getting status as foreign traders. In 1981, a law was passed to regulate their status while awaiting naturalization. The Lebanese remain a distinct ethnic group, not often marrying outside it. They have strong families and continue to cherish Lebanese music and cuisine but have little organization. Clubs and associations have been short-lived.

Success of the Lebanese of Guadeloupe

Emigration demands courage, particularly for the pioneers. These emigrants struggled hard and long to be accepted in their new home. They succeeded through their own resilience, intelligence, hard work and perseverance to make a place for themselves in commerce, politics, culture and social circles. All deserve recognition for they earned it through hard work. However, some demand special mention.

Camille Jabbour founded the newspaper *Match* and left his imprint on the political and sports life of Guadeloupe. At the request of his friends in Paris, François Mitterrand and André Rousselet, he founded a local section of the *Union Démocratique et Socialiste de la Résistance (UDSR)*, Mitterrand's party. Jabbour wrote an autobiography entitled *35 Ans de souvenirs*, published by Guadeloupe Editions in 1981.

Henri Debs occupied a major place in music in the island; playing several instruments. In the 1950s, he founded his own orchestra and club. In 1958, he became a producer and was behind the great success of *Les Aiglons*, *Typical Combo*, *Tania Saint-Val* and *Zouk Machine*, to name

only a few works. His promotion and modernization of the Guadeloupian music was irreplaceable.

Jean Sarkis, was a successful businessman and the representative of the Lebanese and Syrian communities to the French and Guadeloupian authorities prior to the independence of both Lebanon and Syria. He played an indispensable role in dialogue and as negotiator. In 1977 he received the Order of Merit from the French Government.

Charles Gabriel was General Counselor to the Mayor of Sainte-Rose in the 1950s. Raphael Houry was General Counselor and Assistant to the Mayor of Pointe-à-Pitre, 1970-1980. Antoine Karma was President of the Regional Council of Guyanne in the 1990s. Nicole Sarkis was World Champion in Karate after holding the title of Champion of France for many years. The Sarkis and Haikal families both played an important role in Guadeloupe, particularly in commerce. Georges Haikal was named the first consul of Lebanon. Today, the Lebanese community in Guadeloupe remains mostly one of merchants, but among the new generation we find doctors, surgeons, lawyers administrators and professors.

Conclusion

The Lebanese of Guadeloupe, although only five thousand strong, now occupy an important place in the economic and social life of the island. The pioneer emigrants did not exceed two hundred but family ties increased their number and helped in making them a significant economic power. When we see the success of the present descendants, we find it hard to imagine the valiant epic of the first arrivals. Their memory lives in this and other records in honor of them.

Those requiring detailed sources of information may apply to Ms. Guita Hourani, LERC, NDU - Ed.