

Connecting a World Away, 100 Years Later

By: Veronica Cool ⌚ August 6, 2017



Long ago, a family gathered at a port embarking on a life-altering voyage, headed to America from Lebanon, to start anew.

Fearing the perilous journey across the ocean, the grandmother demanded that two of the children remain behind in the event the ship failed to complete the voyage... the kids, both under 6, remained living with Grandma until she passed and then moved to live with other relatives. For decades, the remaining family did not know if the family survived the journey. The ship docked in the port of Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, where the family chose to make their residence, carving a new life.

The family joined a growing Lebanese community of immigrants, known as Turcos, or "Turks" in the Dominican Republic, primarily making their living as entrepreneurs, shoemakers, retailers, tailors and more.

The family laid more roots and my dad was born, a Turco, a shoemaker, speaking Spanish to his mother, as she spoke Arabic to him. ... And the time passed.

Fast forward 100 years, and my Dominican mother living in Philadelphia receives a Facebook message from a young lady, Letisia, asking if she knows "Juan Namnun."

"Yes, that's my husband."

"Well, then you're my aunt!"

The two remaining children had grown into adults with families of their own, sowing their own seeds. One such seed migrated to Australia. Had a family of his own, Letisia being one of the children. My mother quickly drew the branches of this very far-reaching family tree, sharing the whereabouts of each original Lebanese brother (total of 9!) and their offspring and their locations. Now, thanks to the shrinking world as connected by innovative networks of social media, like Facebook, we were all reconnected.

100 years later. A world apart.

The Lebanese, the Australians, the Dominicans and now the Americans (that would be me) remained only digitally connected until I recently traveled to Australia to explore that continent. Of course, I informed the Australian branch we were headed there, hoping we could meet.

Yes, we met. But so much more occurred.

I learned so much more about my Lebanese heritage and culture and sampled the delicious Arabic food (kebes and pomegranate syrup!).

I expected the sights of Sydney, from the koalas and kangaroos to the harbor to be the highlights of this journey, but to my utter delight, it was the family. The fast and genuine love that was offered; the warm reception; the eagerness to know everything about the Dominican and the American members. The pride evidenced in their recounting of their children's accomplishments (lawyers, MBAs, even Ms. Lebanon World competing in the Ms. Universe Pageant) was beautiful.

Their generosity was humbling — they handed their car keys to us. And you all know, they drive on the wrong side of the road in Australia, right? With the steering wheel on the wrong side of the car too! And by the way, street lanes are about a foot narrower than in the States, yet, they handed their car over to us, no questions. Complete faith in family unknown to them as of 24 hours prior. Humbling.

This is a story of connection, relationship, technology and family. The power of knowing you belong to something bigger, deeper, much grander than expected was epic. I'm still processing how this web of connections developed and sorting all the facts from myths and stories.

The fact that a simple message on this silly thing we all tend to dismiss as a nuisance, social media and Facebook, connected long separated branches of this family is a blessing. My kids are now Snapchatting their second cousins all the way in Australia. How does this apply to you, amigos? I have a couple of thoughts....

- *Dig a little deeper* into your roots and re-connect with your elders, and far-flung relatives. Meaningfully. Call them, learn their story which is such a part of your foundation.
- For real. Go to Australia, Alabama or Timbuktu. Life is an adventure. When else would I get to drive a huge Land Rover on the wrong side of the road to explore the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, Australia?
- *Apply*. Remember and realize that you are not just American. Your lineage goes much further than this, whether 2nd or 4th or 8th generation, your family came from somewhere else. Keep that in mind when you see the plight of immigrants today, whether in the U.S. or elsewhere.

Until next time, amigos!

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