

When Life Was Worth a Radish

He calls me brother. Shakib Kerbej was already an old man when I was born and yet he calls me *khayé*. Perhaps he says it automatically, with highland hospitality, to every man he meets. But there is warmth deeper than the raspy voice of his age and, by the end of our meeting, I fancy that he sees me as a kindred spirit - though I have the utmost difficulty in imagining a time when he starved to an inch of death.

It is 80 years almost to the month since the end of World War I, and I have come to my “brother” for his account of those dark days. Now a youthful and ever lucid 94-year-old, Shakib was only a child when the Ottoman authorities confiscated both the nation’s reserves of grain and all the beasts of burden so the land could not be tilled. He was also far from the capital, living in Zabougha, Mount Lebanon, when the Allies blockaded Beirut with naval warships. But his testimony is as valuable as any war veteran’s.

Unlike the subsequent conflicts that have ravaged this land, the Great War was a true war of attrition, striking hardest at the elderly and children. In 1917, 40 deaths a day were reported in Beirut alone. By the time the Allied troops marched into the city in September 1918, the mortality rate had risen to a devastating 100 a day. More Lebanese children died of hunger from 1914 to 1918 than Lebanese men of gunshot wounds from 1939 to 1945.

Shakib is special for three reasons: First, he survived the war when others, including five members of his immediate family, did not. That he has lived to the grand age of 94 is also noteworthy. But the most endearing aspect about Shakib Kerbej is that he remembers all of it - as if it was only 80 minutes ago.

Shakib leads me into his living room, into the heart of the squat home of his parents. His wife, Abriza, smiles almost coquettishly and, though she is 85 and not considerably younger than her husband, she is full of pep as she rushes to and from the kitchen. She talks rapidly, her hands constantly moving to lend weight to her speech. But the power in the Kerbej household rests decidedly with Shakib. His back upright as he sits, and a hand resting regally on a cane, he is the emir. When he speaks in his deliberate tone, everyone stops to listen.

It is charming that, after almost 70 years of marriage, Abriza knows as much about Shakib’s childhood and life as he does. In fact they take turns telling me his story. They are born narrators and are at times so absorbed in their storytelling, that they forget that I am there, giving me the impression that I am eavesdropping a private conversation.

They relate horrors in casual terms, discussing famine and death as though talking about the weather. This is shocking until one remembers that it is a distant decade, closer to the nineteenth century than to the modern world; and until one understands that, after 80 years, even the deepest wounds will heal.

“What can I tell you?” says Shakib. He pauses to bring the ancient memories into sharp focus, and begins, “People ran out on the streets and shouted, ‘They’ve closed the sea! They’ve closed the sea!’ At first I wondered what they meant. I wondered how a sea could be opened or closed like a door. Of course I was only seven in 1914. It took me some time - maybe months - to understand what was happening.”

“The English and French were at war with the Turks,” Abriza explains, unnecessarily, as if this were some fact I might have missed.

“Yes. They blocked the ports and stopped all the food from coming into the country. And the Turks, angered by this, took it out on the population. They stole all our grain.”

“And they took all the animals,” adds his wife. “Donkeys, goats - everything.”

“We weren’t allowed to hunt. And we weren’t allowed to fish. How were we supposed to eat?” Shakib looks strangely dispassionate. “The entire world had declared war on us. Both the English and the Turks wanted us to die. And die we did. Slowly. By inches.”

Abriza nods solemnly. “Some families packed their bags and walked up the mountain to Sannine. I don’t know why they thought there’d be food there. We never heard from them again.”

“By the thousands,” says Shakib grimly.

“And some went down to the coast,” adds his wife. “It used to take a whole day to walk down to Beirut. But when they got there, the Turks told them to return to the mountain.”

“Khayyat.” Shakib pronounces the name slowly. “Yes. Khayyat was the first to die in Zabougha. He was walking home to his family with a bag of flour. They say he died of exhaustion. But they found his corpse on the side of the road with no trace of the flour.”

“He was killed.” Abriza’s hands appear to weigh an invisible sack. “All the land and gold in the world was not worth a single bag of flour.”

“We had become like animals. We took to eating rotten fruit off the ground. But that didn’t last long and we were soon digging up wild roots and grass.”

“A neighbor beat one of Shakib’s brothers nearly to death for having stolen a radish.”

“My mother would prepare a stew of boiled grass every day,” he says and for a while, they continue, giving their parallel accounts.

“A radish! He almost died for a radish.”

“Boiled weeds without salt and of course without bread. But it filled our stomachs. That’s all we wanted.”

“A boy’s life was not worth a radish.”

“We had become worse than animals. There was the Gibrayel family. They were rich - had lots of land and cattle before the war. They had been able to hide a few cows and, in 1916, they had one, starving cow left which they ate the day Linda died.

“Linda?” I prompt.

“During the famine,” explains Abriza, “Shakib lost his father and four of his brothers and sisters.” She counts them rapidly on her fingers, “Linda, Selim, Amin, Salah,” as though she is merely counting days of the week.

“Linda, Amin, Selim, Salah,” corrects her husband, with the impatience of a school teacher.

“But the Gibrayels died anyway.” Abriza turns to her husband to add, “Before your father, wasn’t it?”

Shakib ignores her to pursue, “People no longer ran, no longer shouted - we slept most of the time. It was always so quiet. It was always midnight in the village.”

“They’d wake up and hear that so-and-so had died.”

“The Gibrayel family died,” confirms Shakib. “All of them in one go.”

“It was a week before they knew. They were drawn by the smell, you see.”

“They were so light we carried them to the cemetery, two by two wrapped in blankets. My father performed the service. He was the village priest.”

“And when he died,” adds Abriza, “there were no more services. All who died after him were just buried.”

“Yes.”

“Just buried,” she repeats.

The eyes are truly the windows to the soul. Abriza stares with loving care at her husband, and Shakib fixes me with a proud, highlander expression. “What can I tell you, brother?” It is his tone that betrays the emotion. “I lost half my family, and the village lost half its population. *Aysh bidde illak, khaye?*”
