

THE MARINE CARP AND COUSIN KATZ

I set out for Palestine in late 1946 aboard the S.S. Marine Carp. It was bound for Haifa, with a stop at Beirut, and its passengers were a strange mix of young spirited Zionists eager to help build the future State, and old Levantines returning to their Middle Eastern origins to complete life after living in the United States for many years. The ship itself of 12000 tons had carried troops in the war just recently ended, and had not changed its facilities for these post-war civilian voyagers. We slept on sheets of canvas, lashed to metal tubing suggesting the shape of a bed, which in turn were stacked in four or five tiers on metal rods extending the height of the deck. This was my introduction to maritime life and the Marine Carp plodding along at 12 knots took two weeks to reach the eastern recesses of the Mediterranean.

A few memories of those two weeks; The Atlantic was already uneasy in those first days out of New York, but I was always at ease with the rocking, shuddering and vibrating of the ship in those rolling hillocks of waves. Those first days were gray without sun, and life was surrounded by variations on this single hue. The clouds light gray, the rain sleet gray, the waves slate gray, the ship a rusty gray, and even the old Army food trays off which we ate in the paint gray mess section had a silvery gray cast. It warmed and cleared as we sailed into the Mediterranean and made for our first port of call, Beirut to discharge the old returning Lebanese and for our group of young American Jewish Zionists to have the first taste of Arab enmity.

Beirut then was lovely, twinkling at dusk as we entered its harbor. We were excited at the prospect of going ashore to imbibe our first draught of Levantine life and color, and surely we thought, with our American passports, this would be granted handily. The Lebanese port control officers must have known that on the Marine Carp were these Zionist zealots hell bent to make further trouble for their brothers in Arab Palestine. Our passports clean of any reference to religious leanings, were scrutinized by name and a Goldstein, Levy, Cohen, were denied the right to go ashore. Since other Americans, how Waspish they were I can't remember, had their passports stamped to proceed down the gangway to enjoy fabled Beirut, we Americans were incensed at this injustice. We convened a meeting on the aft-deck, our group having grown strong and unified over two weeks of close living, discussions, Hebrew study, of singing and dancing together, and decided that if we could not go ashore then no further Americans could enjoy that right. A natural leader had evolved among us and following him, we all stormed the two Lebanese bureaucrats stamping other passports, and hustled them

off the American territory of the Marine Carp, pushed them down the gangway and last saw one of them brandishing his pistol aloft and cursing us, as we did them, as they drove off the pier and to Beirut in what I distinctly remember was a GI issue Jeep. Then, without Beirut to enjoy but proud of our action to support international law, and with the fading scent of Turkish tobacco and Araq brought aboard earlier by Arab stevedores unloading cargo, we danced and sang for hours sending the strange sounds of our hopes for a future Israel to the puzzled ears of Arabs on the pier and beyond to Beirut.

The next morning we left and made the short jaunt to Haifa. Father had, of course, written to our cousin Ephraim Katz of my expected arrival. I knew that in the perpetual confusion of youth arriving in a strange new land, that I would somehow meet up with this exalted relative, the proud pioneer who had left a comfortable life in Bucharest to plant his family and his wheat and citrus on land just north of Haifa in the early years of the British Mandate in Palestine. It was the letters of Cousin Katz to Sam Bloom in New Jersey that created my calling to agriculture, and this first encounter, the most significant to my young life, would not only introduce me to the exemplar of all the Blooms, but would begin with his blessing, my many years of study in farm animal nutrition.

My passport properly stamped by his Majesty's official, my belongings carried by an eager porter, I came down the gangway of the S.S. Marine Carp into a milling crowd on the pier. I had no idea where to turn or to whom, and in what language, to address my inquiries. As I remember this state of confusion lasted perhaps three minutes, for I saw this man, strong in bearing with close cropped salt and pepper hair approach me with supreme confidence, and without a word, enclose me completely in his strong embrace. He introduced himself to me, and when I asked how he knew whom to embrace he replied that the stamp of our family was on my face, and he had recognized me without qualm or question.

On the way to his home in the Mifratz, the bay area north of Haifa, Ephraim Katz was full of questions about my father whom he had not seen since 1914, about my immediate family and about all the Blooms who were now in America. I tried to answer the questions, but naturally I was fascinated by the scenes flashing outside the car. This was my first time abroad, and while I had been well versed in the story of Jewish settlement, I was not prepared for the Arab world I saw lining both sides of the road just outside Haifa. The dress, sounds, and smells of the Middle East needed my immediate attention as they were completely exotic to anything experienced back home, but Cousin Katz kept plying me with questions and it was difficult to answer them while trying to satisfy my curiosity of this completely

different culture. Finally we turned left, approached the small Jewish towns in the Haifa bay area and arrived in the semi-rural setting of my cousin's home.

This most famous of all homes of our family, had originally been the only house in the area surrounded by citrus orchards and wheat fields. It still had the aura of the pioneer era, with rough-hewn blocks, mortared to each other in rough lines, heavy in texture and with iron bars securing the small windows of the structure. It exuded solidity and strength to protect the family against those tenuous times in which it was built. By 1946 the kiryot, or small suburbs of the Bay area had encroached upon the original solitude of the area, and Cousin Katz had also built a few houses opposite his front yard. Beit Katz had become the center of a small neighborhood, and besides housing his children there may have been twenty families in the area.

I remember five members of the family. Cousin Katz had lost his first wife Sabena to typhus, hence the name of his neighborhood, so there were his second wife, the youngest daughter Mady, a second daughter married to an agent of the Czech Skoda company and their children, and a son with some shadowy connection with Haganah intelligence. They were all pleased to have this idealistic Halutz relative among them and there followed days full of talk, exotic meals and feeling so much at home so far away from home. All the affairs of that family and neighborhood centered around our Cousin and the postman delivered the mail for Sabena to him for distribution, and therein is a splendid story.

Cousin Katz would sit at the table in the courtyard awaiting all those coming for mail. Thus in those afternoons, I heard many languages, for those in Sabena had either escaped the Holocaust, had been settled in Palestine for some years, or like me, newly arrived from America. No matter the origin of the recipient of mail, our Cousin managed to converse successfully with all. To his wife Romanian, to those from Poland in Yiddish, Hebrew to veteran settlers, to his married daughter and her children French, for they had just left the Francophile culture of Beirut where her husband had had the Skoda agency, German to those from that benighted place, and English with me. Had an Arab farm worker entered his courtyard, I'm sure the greetings would have been most appropriate. What pride I had in family at that moment and what respect for this pioneer in Israel, this warm, superb cosmopolitan.