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## LEBANESE EXPERIENCES AND THE CHALLENGES OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN POLAND

### Abstract

The article addresses the issue of pluralism in the axiological and normative area which affects Polish-Lebanese relations. It presents the findings of a research on the Lebanese community in Poland. The research gives insight into Lebanese citizens' motivations for moving to Poland and their opinions on everyday life in this country.

**Keywords:** qualitative sociology, migration, intercultural communication, family ties

### LIBAŃSKIE DOŚWIADCZENIA I WYZWANIA ŻYCIA CODZIENNEGO W POLSCE

### Abstrakt

Artykuł dotyczy kwestii pluralizmu w obszarze aksjologicznym i normatywnym, który wpływa na stosunki polsko-libańskie. Prezentuje wyniki badań przeprowadzonych pośród Libańczyków mieszkających w Polsce. Badanie daje wgląd w motywacje obywateli Libanu do przeprowadzki do Polski i ich opinie na temat codziennego życia w tym kraju.

**Słowa kluczowe:** socjologia jakościowa, migracja, komunikacja międzykulturowa, więzi rodzinne

### INTRODUCTION

Lebanon is a relatively small Middle East country on the Mediterranean coast, bordering Syria and Israel (Korzeniewski 2004, 41). Its area equals approximately one third of the area of Poland, and in 2015 the country had over 6.85 m inhabitants (The World Bank 2021). What differentiates Lebanon from other countries in the region is its religious diversity. The amazing cultural mosaic shows that cohabitation and cooperation of different communities is possible (although

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not easy), and it has been an element of the long tradition of the region. However, as a result of the geopolitical situation many Lebanese people cannot live in their country. Therefore, a large part of the Lebanese diaspora is presently living abroad. The main reason for emigration was numerous wars which afflicted Lebanon, including the civil war which lasted from 1970s to 1990s (Reklajtis 2003, 55). Due to the political situation many citizens of the “Switzerland of the Middle East” came to Poland, although not many Lebanese people. Poland was not a primary destination for emigrants. According to Polish Central Statistical Office, in 2002 there were 174 Lebanese citizens living in Poland. It is assumed, however, that these data do not reflect the reality accurately (the number may be twice as high). According to the Office for Foreigners, in the years 2003-2005 45 Lebanese citizens received Polish visas with residence permit, 22 persons were granted residence permit in Poland, and 136 persons received temporary residence permit (Urząd do Spraw Cudzoziemców 2021). A relatively small number of Lebanese citizens living in Poland may result from the fact that diplomatic relations between the two countries have not been intensive in the last several years. Lebanese embassy in Poland opened only in 1994 (before Poland was under the “supervision” of the embassy in Prague), and diplomatic relations between Lebanon and the People’s Republic of Poland (PRL) were initiated in 1956. They have never been intensive due to, among other factors, the historical events of the World War Two.

The aim of the article is to present pluralism in the axiological and normative area which affects Polish – Lebanese relations in Poland. It uses the research performed by Elżbieta Reklajtis and the author before the migration crisis. The research was qualitative – researchers used the technique of partially structured in-depth interviews which were carried out in Poland (in Warsaw, Łódź, Poznań, Wrocław, Kielce, Cracow, Puławy, Racibórz). Almost all interviews were conducted in Polish, only three were in foreign languages (two in English and one in French); in four cases the Lebanese persons interviewed resorted to English or asked family members to translate the questions into French. The answers were given in Polish. The research was done on a purposive sample of Lebanese people living in Poland. The researchers used typological sampling, taking into account sex, age, education, religion, place of residence in Poland and, especially, citizenship and time of residence in Poland (not shorter than 12 months).

## 1. REASONS FOR MIGRATION

It is not surprising that one of the most important reasons for migration was wars experienced by the Lebanese (the present situation also cannot be regarded as stable) (Madeyska 2008, 54-69). Emigration from Lebanon is a result of the civil war and its consequences (Reklajtis 2003, 71-84). The population of Lebanese people in Lebanon is presently about 4 million. It is assumed that another 4 million live outside Lebanon, in the USA, Canada, Western Europe, Africa or Australia (Wiśniewski 2009, 163).

In the opinion of the interviewees, one of the factors influencing their choice of the destination was Poland's educational potential and the possibility of obtaining free university education. Before 1990 university studies were the main reason why Lebanese people came to Poland. This is confirmed in one of the interviews: "As far as I know many Lebanese people are studying in Poland, maybe fewer now, but my mother's generation... My mother has many Polish friends with Lebanese husbands, they met while studying in Poland, so it's not a rare case. When I'm in Germany, Canada or France, I meet Lebanese people who studied in Poland – they can name some Polish cities or say a few words in Polish. Studying in Poland is not unusual" (woman, age unknown, W1). According to the interviewees, the choice of Poland was not accidental, it was influenced by previous experience of family members and also by more prosaic factors: in Poland university education was free and costs of living were significantly lower than in Western European countries. Nowadays, the independent Poland also attracts Lebanese people with relatively cheap university studies, however the interviewees often said that Polish university diplomas are not as prestigious as the ones from Western European universities. In recent years Lebanese people have been settling in Poland because they married Polish women or set up companies here. Moreover, constant armed conflicts in the Middle East resulted in the increased number of Lebanese people of Polish origins coming to Poland. However, most contacts between Poland and Lebanon still have private character. "Polish policy regarding Lebanon has no name, and I don't think they'll pay attention to this in the near future" (man, age 49, W9)

According to respondents, the Lebanese in Poland assimilate to a large extent and without major problems. Of course, it is easier for Christians due to cultural and religious similarities. However, many Muslims, especially those who came to Poland before 1990, have not had any problems with functioning in our country. The biggest barrier was the language, yet most respondents learned it relatively fast thanks to language courses for foreign students and their own cultural capital. The command of several foreign languages was not unusual among immigrants – most of them spoke Arabic, English and French. In some cases the respondents were not limited to these languages. It should be emphasized that the respondents stressed Poland's educational potential. The relative ease with which the Lebanese adapt to the life abroad stems from their experience of living in an open, multi-religious society which the Lebanese society used to be before the numerous conflicts. This refers primarily to people coming from intelligent families living in big cities. However, this is not a rule. The assimilation of people who came to Poland in the time of communism might have been facilitated by their left-wing political views. They came from Lebanon to a socialist country that to some extent met their ideas of equality. What is surprising, is the large group of respondents who call themselves atheists or non-religious. Those are mostly immigrants from cities who came to Poland before 1990. The younger generation, regardless of religion, more frequently declare themselves as believing and practicing.

Basing on the interviews, it can be said that the Lebanese do not have major problems with living in Poland. Most of them are doing well, they achieve good financial standing and are accepted in their environment. People who settled in Poland are business people, doctors and engineers. Their competence acquired both in Lebanon and in Poland contributed to their satisfying standard of living in the 'new' country (Wiśniewski 2016).

## 2. HISTORY: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

One of the main similarities between Poland and Lebanon indicated by the respondents is complicated history of the two countries. "Surely there are similarities, in Poland there was German occupation, in Lebanon – Israeli, and last year there was a war in Lebanon – Poland had many wars" (man, age 43, W3). From the 16<sup>th</sup> century Lebanon was a part of the Ottoman Empire, and after the First World War it virtually became a French colony (Madeyska 2003, 42-56). After World War Two it took part in the conflict of Arabic countries and Israel. In 1975 a civil war between Muslims and Christians broke out, with frequent interventions of Syria and Israel (Schulze 2010, 87-96). This war brought a prosperous country to the edge of bankruptcy. "As for Poland, it was under foreign occupation for many years, that's why the present situation is like that. Polish economy does not equal the Western countries because Poland was always a colony or was divided. Polish people had to rebuilt their country from scratch while others were creating empires. Therefore, regarding history, there's a similarity. For four centuries, until the end of the First World War, Lebanon and the whole Mediterranean region was occupied by the Turks. The Turks were worse than the Germans. They didn't allow to create schools, illiteracy spread together with diseases. If a person is illiterate, he's ignorant and dumb. If he can't read, he can't tell the right and wrong. There's no knowledge; if there's no knowledge, there's no medicine; if there's no medicine, there are diseases. It's a vicious circle (man, age 61, W2). Respondents believe that the similar history may be the result of geographical location. "In Poland there were Russians and Germans, in Lebanon – Turks and the French. Poland is a kind of country of which everyone wanted a piece and everyone took a piece, it's the same in Lebanon... Poland is also a bridge between the East and the West" (man, age 43, W12). The only difference between the two countries, as one respondent said, was that Lebanon could count on the support from the French. Poland did not have such help. "Lebanon is now in such situation. On the one side of Poland there was Germany, which was an aggressor, we have Israel. On the other side there was the big brother, in our case it's Syria, so the country is between a rock and a hard place, yet Lebanon can count on French support in its contacts with European Union" (man, age unknown, W7). Both nations showed similar determination in their struggle for independence. "Lebanon was under strain for a long time. Both countries didn't allow others to control them" (man, age 52, W15). History was

not favourable for either country. For centuries strong and aggressive neighbours posed a threat to both Lebanon and Poland. Lebanon, which for almost four hundred years was a part of the Turkish Empire, gained independence only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Lebanese people organised uprisings against the occupant, however, as in the case of Poland, they were unsuccessful. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Lebanon was under French influence. After the Second World War they gained independence, but the young country had to face its powerful neighbour – Israel. In addition, Syria and Iran regard Lebanon as their area of influence. Last several years have seen constant wars, military interventions of neighbouring countries, Israeli occupations.

When looking at Lebanon's recent history, we can find many analogies with the history of Poland. Partitions, uprisings, attacks of neighbouring countries on the young state which regained independence after 123 years of occupation. Sacrificing the future of Poland for the interests of foreign powers. Even the Targowica Confederation resembles slightly Lebanese civil war. In both cases the conflict was brought about by neighbouring countries which benefited from the fratricidal war. Yet common experience can be found not only in war memories. Elżbieta Reklajtis finds universal message in the works of two great poets: Lebanese – Khaïl Gibran and Polish – Cyprian Kamil Norwid (Reklajtis 2010, 8-9).

### 3. CLIMATE

Surprisingly, many respondents talked about similarities of climate and landscape between Poland and Lebanon. Although Lebanon is a Mediterranean country, geographic features of the land (mountains) result in diverse climate conditions. "The climate is similar; in Lebanon we also have mountains, and if somebody lived in the mountains, in winter the temperature can reach minus five. On the coast, where I lived, temperature in winter is about 10-15 degrees, but in the summer it's a disaster" (man, W4). Obviously, people who came from the coast and did not live in Lebanese mountains said that the climate was one of the main difficulties in getting used to new living conditions. It referred not only to cold winters, to which they were not accustomed (one respondent got frostbite during his first winter in Poland), but also to cold and wet summer. But for people coming from Lebanese mountains it was not a problem. "No, no, I come from the cold climate, from Balbek, there, over one thousand meters above the sea level, winter is real, it must be minus twenty, it's real, there's a lot of snow, it snows a lot, it's thick, often a meter thick, after a few sunny days the snow slowly melts, but on mountain tops the snow doesn't melt until next year, from one winter to another, there is always snow on tops of Lebanese mountains, that's why the climate was not a problem for me, not at all" (man, age 37, W10). Contrary to stereotypes, snow was nothing new or surprising for the Lebanese. "There is snow. Where I come from, there is snow. And where I was born, there is always snow (laughs).

Lebanon is a small but diverse country, we have snow and four seasons, and I didn't have problem with adjusting to the temperature and the weather" (man, age 49, W9). Another geographical feature of the two countries was mentioned by one respondent. In his opinion, not only the climate is similar. "I think that Poland and Lebanon have a lot in common. Poland lies in the centre of Europe, many things go through it, trade routes. It's the same with Lebanon. Nature and landscapes are similar" (man, age 42, W17). Similar climate makes it easier for many Lebanese people to adjust to Polish conditions. It is even more so because, as many respondents said, the climate in Poland is getting warmer and scorching summers more and more resemble the summers in Lebanon.

#### 4. HOLIDAYS

One of the most important issues connecting the two countries is the way of celebrating holidays, especially religious ones, and, in broader perspective, the question of religion. "I am a Catholic, everything here looks like in Lebanon. Meeting the family... As for Easter, it's the same as in Lebanon, Christmas is also the same" (man, W4). This applies not only to Christians, and results from the character of Lebanon, which is a multi-religious country. "I come from Lebanon, and Lebanon is a multi-religious country, which means that we all live together, we celebrate holidays together – Christian, Muslim and other, regardless of religious denomination, and as far as this is concerned, we are very tolerant. Therefore, it was not the first Christian I saw, I lived among Christians, I visited a convent and attended a school run by friars. It was not a shock for me" (man, age 49, W9). The issue of celebrating religious holidays was not a problem for any of the respondents. Regardless of their initial religion, many Lebanese people attend church services with their Polish families, celebrate Catholic holidays and accept raising children in the Catholic faith. "I come from a community where we celebrated state holidays, we celebrated holidays with Muslims, with Jews, with Christians... with everybody. For me every holiday is a holiday! When I grew up I noticed the difference between Muslims and Christians. We (celebrated) with Muslims, our family with Christians, there was Christmas, but it was more symbolical than here. A person is formed by their environment... My environment was a mixture of Christians and the Druze. The Druze is a group which comes from Islam but now is autonomous. They are a little similar to Christians, a little to Muslims (in their tradition), but they are in between. I lived in a mixed environment. For me the presence of church was nothing strange – I was familiar with it. I went to a mixed school, in Lebanon we also had schools which were not mixed. There were different ethnic groups and boys and girls. It was a reputable school" (man, age 61, W2). What is surprising, is that most respondents rather celebrate Catholic holidays than holidays connected with their religion. This brings about the problem of transferring the culture of their country of origins to their children. Although many Lebanese people regularly visit their

country, in many cases their children do not speak Arabic and do not know the culture of their “second homeland”. In the homes of Lebanese men whose wives are Polish, and such constituted the majority of respondents, the main language spoken is Polish. Very often the first regular contact with Lebanese language and culture after many years of emigration was through satellite television.

In this place we should touch another issue important for emigrants, namely the food. It was the food that was indicated by the respondents as the main difference between the two countries. This subject was mentioned by both Christians and Muslims, especially those who came to Poland before 1990 and in the early 1990s. The food in communist Poland was poor and monotonous. They had come from a country where people eat plenty of fruit and vegetables, and the number and variety of dishes eaten during one meal is impressive. In Poland they were served the same meal for years – potatoes and a piece of meat. Only in the 1990s food became more varied and different kinds of food were available. What is important, even those emigrants who did not teach their children Arabic or assumed Polish way of celebrating holidays, still prepare Lebanese dishes.

To sum up, Lebanese people in Poland do not have problems with cultural isolation, adjusting to unfamiliar living conditions, the system of values connected with religion nor the way of celebrating holidays. Especially elder people who came from tolerant, multi-religious Lebanon, where diversity is respected. They came to a country where the dominant religion and traditions, for example celebrating holidays, is similar to Christian traditions present in Lebanon. Churches, monasteries and priests are the same. People on the streets dress in the same way in Lebanon and in Poland. Therefore, there is no cultural gap as in the case of immigrants coming from the countries where one religion, e.g. Islam, is dominant (as it is mentioned by one respondent). All those factors helped the Lebanese to adjust to living in new conditions.

## 5. FAMILY RELATIONS

Another similarity between Poland and Lebanon is family relations. “Polish families are similar to Lebanese, they are completely different than in other European countries. People stick together here, they live together, and there the families have fallen apart and everybody lives for themselves. In Lebanon people also live together, whole families” (man, age 43, W3). This similarity has both cultural and economic reasons. “Yes, there are a lot of similarities. Of course not everything is the same, but Poland has this oriental feeling, because Poland is an Eastern country. Maybe it will vanish in the future, but I hope not. I think you can raise a child well both here and in Lebanon. There are a lot of good people in Poland, for example John Paul II. There are differences in Lebanon, too (...) I think yes, they are similar, but since Lebanon is a small country, family ties are stronger. In Lebanon traditions are stronger, too. In general, family relations are

similar (mentality, family reunions, etc.). If we wanted to put it on a scale, I'd say that in Poland 70% of family relations are very good, in Lebanon it's 90%." (man, age 37, W10). The respondents did not notice major differences in the manner of raising children. In both countries parents try to give their children the best start in the adult life, except some pathological cases, of course, which can happen everywhere. "As for family matters, I noticed here that the family, that is mother and father, if they are normal, try to take care of their home, of their children. In Lebanon they also look after their children, if they are normal, I mean. They take care of the children's future and their education" (man, age 61, W2); "I think they are, because, generally speaking, the Polish protect their children in the same way as the Lebanese. Parents always look after their children" (man, age 43, W12). "It's the same thing. In Lebanon when a child is born, the family think what to do, to what school send the child. Now it's the same thing" (man, age 30, W23). The respondents noticed that the differences in this area have appeared in recent years and are connected with economic changes in Poland. In Lebanon, family members still have more time for each other, life goes more slowly, and the time spent together is celebrated (Reklajtis 2000, 85-103). In Poland both parents usually work, very often they work long hours and they live far from the place where they were born. As a result, they do not have time for their children nor for their parents. Therefore, family ties become looser and Polish families more and more resemble families in other European countries, which the respondents think has a negative impact on Poland's future. Lack of time also impairs the control of children, this is why, according to one respondent, the problem of young people using drugs is lower in Lebanon. Polish children have more freedom in their everyday life. "Yes, rather yes. A lot of similarities. But children in Poland have more freedom" (man, age 62, W16).

Another similarity mentioned by the respondents is hospitality. "You must say objectively that Arabic people are hospitable, but Polish people too" (man, age 57, W22). It was indicated even by those respondents who did not see any other similarities. "One characteristic which is common for the Polish and the Lebanese is hospitality. In general, they cannot be compared, the two countries are completely different" (man, age 47, W6). The similarities between the two countries: attitude to family, ways of raising children, respect for the parents, allowed Lebanese people living in Poland to have lasting and apparently happy relationships and families. Only one of the respondents talked about a break up with a Polish partner (which did not "scare" him from further attempts to settle down in Poland). In other cases marriages of Lebanese men and Polish women seem quite happy. Relationships with in-laws and other family members do not pose any problems, either. Respondents talked of close relationships and frequent visits. It can be assumed that respect shown to elders, care for the wife and resourcefulness made Polish families accept Lebanese husbands regardless of religious differences.



## 6. LIFE EXPERIENCE

According to most respondents, similar history of Poland and Lebanon resulted in similar experiences of their citizens. For example, many had to leave their countries. As it was said, many Lebanese people are living abroad. Similarly, millions of Polish people are living outside Poland. "I can see a similarity in the fact that so many Lebanese people are living outside Lebanon, apparently a few times more than in the country. Lebanon is a small country, three–four million people, and there are a lot more people of Lebanese origins around the world. In this respect, Poland and Lebanon are similar because many Poles are living outside Poland, it's estimated on fifteen million" (man, age 57, W22). Common experience of war and poverty created other similarities. "These are two nations which enjoy life, they love life. That's why the Lebanese adapt so easily in Poland and the Polish in Lebanon. There are religious differences, but if it's a Pole, there are no problems" (man, age 50, W24); "We are open people. We are resourceful, hardworking, hospitable, and we can assimilate in any country, any nation. I could say the same about the Polish" (man, age 61, W21). The similarities are not always positive. Respondents asked to describe the Lebanese said for example: "A good man but stubborn like a Pole" (man, age 37, W10). "people with entrepreneurial spirit can resemble Poles who are masters at contriving things and dealing with difficult situations" (woman, age unknown, W1).

### SUMMARY

To sum up, the research shows that Lebanese people do not have major problems with adapting to life in Poland. Most of them are not planning the return to Lebanon, even if they say they are thinking about it. They came to Poland, adjusted to the life here and they feel Polish to the same extent as they feel Lebanese. It has been facilitated by history, family relationships and, in some cases, even the climate. Lebanese people who are coming to Poland nowadays are looking for a place where they could live, do business, raise children. Now it is not a big group, but it can be assumed that the number of Lebanese immigrants in Poland will increase considering the fact that there are no signs that the situation in Lebanon might improve. Immigrants are coming to a new Poland which is undergoing an economic change. Family relations are changing and they resemble, to a large extent, Western European countries. There is a change in the way of raising children who, with falling birth rate, become most important in a family. This can be hard to accept for people brought in traditional Lebanese society. This cannot be compensated by an easier access to the kinds of food the immigrants are used to.

A question can be posed whether young Lebanese people will adapt to life in Poland as easily as their older countrymen. The research is not conclusive in this matter. One can notice a change in the character of Lebanese immigration

to Poland. Before 1990 and in the early 1990s the dominant group was students. Very often Poland was an accidental choice. They had not planned to stay here, yet their life turned out this way. They got education, made careers, started families. Presently it can be seen that Poland is no longer a transit country, it has become a final destination.

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