Ouzai: A Land of Estrangement and Displacement

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"Identity is the creation of its bearer, not an inheritance of the past."

— Mahmoud Darwish, Palestinian poet

How can identity remain open to multiplicity? This question has long lingered in my mind since leaving Ouzai, a place that marked a defining chapter of my life, from birth to upbringing. I grew up listening to countless stories of the demographic upheavals the neighborhood endured through war.

To carry the weight of childhood and youth on your shoulders and walk away is to re-examine the place of your origins through a wider, deeper lens—one that often casts doubt even on that so-called "safe square" you once knew. How did groups from such diverse backgrounds, displaced from different regions, converge at a single point of settlement? And how did what we now call "demographic segregation" come into being?

When a community loses its sense of individual identity in a closed space, the need to belong becomes the engine for building a collective one—shared wounds, shared dreams, sometimes even a shared fate. In Ouzai, this is what defined the community that emerged with the outbreak of Lebanon's Civil War: the absence of personal identity replaced by a collective one, a "place-identity" binding together those who had fled the eastern suburbs of Beirut with others uprooted from southern and Beqaa villages. They gathered on this narrow stretch of coastline, later to be called "the land of strangers."

The need for safety pushed Ouzai's people to unite, to weave a tightly knit block, distinct and self-contained, with its own code words and inner language. Groups that once spoke differently met in a single place; their words blended, until the unique dialect of Ouzai emerged and was passed down to my generation, preserved through memory and speech.

Inside the Place

As a child, I knew no official street names written on walls. My memory is framed instead by the crossroads where "Um Mohsen's shop" stood, and my school—Royal School—in the "hayy al-jawwani," (the inner neighborhood). My playground, my horizon of dreams, always ended at Ras al-Tal'a, where the main road began—the gateway to Beirut, as I later learned.

Neighborhoods lived within neighborhoods: some named after their ancestral villages, like Hayy Ahl Bleyda; others after families, like Hayy Al Assaf. Many names echoed the Civil War itself and its "martyrs," those of internal factions and repeated rounds of fighting, whether Lebanese or Israeli.

Geographically, the salty scent of the sea filled our lungs and its spray touched our lips with every morning wash, although not every house was blessed with a view of the water. The displaced were many, their homes pressed tightly together. A few windows opened to the vast Mediterranean, but most looked only into each other.

I was born after the war, but its consequences shaped the cement walls around me. The random sprawl of buildings blocked both the sea's blue horizon and the life of the city beyond. Some names that lingered in our ears as children—San Simon, Acapulco—carried heavy echoes of a past we never saw. Today, only ruins remain of those resorts and chalets where Beirut's elite, its politicians, and foreign tourists once swam and summered in the 1950s and 60s.

The war transformed this glamorous coastline into blocks of grey concrete and overcrowded quarters. Today's closed-off neighborhoods—some defined by family ties, others by lawlessness—echo daily with incidents of violence, drawing their brutality from the small wars we continue to fight among ourselves.

The Village of Hantous

Tracing further back, I often wondered about the origins of this strip of land. Once a sandy rise stretching to Ramlet al-Bayda, it was, some 1,240 years ago, a small village called Hantous, lying south of Beirut along the coast. Hantous faded with time, except for its mosque—the Mosque of Hantous—which became the resting place of Imam al-Awza'i, who died in 773 CE.

Why did such a figure—Abd al-Rahman ibn Amr al-Awza'i, born in Baalbek, revered as the Imam of the Levant and even of al-Andalus—choose to be buried here? Known for his knowledge, his piety, and his fearless pursuit of

truth before rulers and kings, his followers named him “the protector of Muslims, Christians, and Jews” in the Umayyad and Abbasid eras. Why did he will that his grave be in this tiny coastal village? Do today’s residents even know whose name their neighborhood carries?

Imam al-Awzaʻi now lies in solitude, his mausoleum hemmed in by haphazard buildings: exiled, like the people of Ouzai, in his own land. Once a landmark on Beirut’s shore, his shrine is today nearly forgotten. Even the Beiruti families who once lived and worked here by the sea gradually abandoned the place during the war. Now, only a handful still visit the mosque.

The Church of Our Lady of the Sea

Hayy al-Kanisa—the Church Quarter—was another curious name of my childhood. What was a church doing among us? For a child born after the war, “Christian” meant the other, the stranger. My first understanding of it came from the story of our neighbor, Mona Maroun, a Christian who had married a Muslim. Her children were known in the neighborhood by her surname, like her son who is still known as Mohammad Maroun.

But the Christians were not only displaced from Ouzai, they were uprooted from all of southern Metn’s coastline—Haret Hreik,

Mrayjeh, Laylaki—families whose properties were once lush with orange groves and gardens, as Mona would tell me.

This was the war’s doing. Its aftermath is what we live with, without final answers about its causes, its beginnings, or its open-ended ending. My childhood image of the “other” is reduced to Mona, and to the ruins of that church I later learned had been built in 1952 for the area’s Christian community.

History tells us that after the 1860 massacres in Mount Lebanon, Christians fled to the coast—Ouzai, Khaldeh, Damour—where they farmed, settled, and lived. Ouzai was once largely Christian, home to families like Husseini, Ibrahim, Matta, Tawil, Saadeh, and Dakkash. Wealthy Christian vacationers also frequented Ouzai’s shore, and to

worship they built the Church of Our Lady of the Sea between 1952 and 1953.

But after the Civil War, no one returned. Neither the summer resorts nor the Christian residents. The church remains abandoned, awaiting its parishioners. Like the unfinished story of the Civil War, it too is unresolved.

No answers come from the archdiocese to which it belongs, no plans from the municipality under whose jurisdiction it falls. Other churches along the southern Metn coast have been restored, their keys returned to congregations—but Our Lady of the Sea still waits alone.

On the war's 50th anniversary, I compared Ouzai before and after. Here stood the mosque of Imam al-Awza'i, once a beacon of faith and culture at Beirut's southern gate. There, the church of Our Lady of the Sea, once inaugurated with crowds waving Lebanese flags. There too, the Acapulco beach resort, built by Raja Saab and Ferdinand Dagher.

In a photograph, two women lie in swimsuits, smiling at the camera under the sun. Where did these people go? When did they pack their belongings? On what day did they leave this place?

Fifty years on, the church still does not keep company with Imam al-Awza'i in his solitude. Its people never returned to restore the memory of a community that was born, lived, and raised children here.

Fifty years on, the war has not ended. We still live with its remnants: in violence, in fractures both vertical and horizontal.
Fifty years on, we, the post-war generation, still search for its causes and beginnings, knowing we will never find its happy ending.