

Caught in the Crossfire

A Middle East Adventure for Kurt and Maha Schnelz

On the eve of their return to Michigan from a two-week vacation in Lebanon in July, State Bar of Michigan Commissioner Kurt Schnelz and his wife, Maha, dined with relatives and friends in Beirut and spoke of soon returning to the picturesque nation nestled along the Mediterranean. Little did they know that they and about a million others would spend much of the following day desperately trying to flee the country.

As the trip drew to a close, Israel began bombing Hezbollah strongholds in southern Lebanon in response to a recent raid on an Israeli border post during which the Islamic group took two Israeli soldiers hostage. One of the targets was Beirut International Airport, which was closed after Israeli forces launched two strikes on it the morning the Schnelzes were to leave.

"That," Kurt Schnelz said, "is when we really realized we had a problem."

Instead of catching a flight home, they hastily packed their belongings, left their hotel, and hired a driver to take them to Amman, Jordan, a trip that typically takes a few hours by car. This was hardly a routine drive, however: roughly a million people were also trying to get out of Lebanon (the country is a popular destination for Middle Eastern vacationers), the main road leading out of Beirut had been rendered useless by Israeli bombs, and their route would require them to pass through Syria, a nation noted for its anti-American sentiment.

"It was a nightmare. Their customs office isn't like Detroit Metro [Airport]," Kurt Schnelz explained. "It's a madhouse, like a basement—and not a finished basement. There were thousands and thousands of people trying to flee the country... pushing, shoving, shouting, and swearing."

It was here that the Schnelzes had to make a difficult decision: which one of them



Normally a four-hour trip, Kurt and Maha Schnelz's journey from Beirut, Lebanon to Amman, Jordan took about 14 hours to complete.

would brave the maelstrom that was the customs office to get the necessary approval to enter the country? Everyone in the office battling to cross the border was male; none, however, were blond, blue-eyed residents of a country with a decidedly frosty relationship with Syria. Though she'd be the only woman in the office, the Schnelzes felt Maha would have a better chance of getting their passports OK'ed and continuing on to Amman.

"I couldn't let Kurt [go in] because they'd eat him alive," Maha recalled. "I told him,

loved Lebanon, and hated to leave."

The border agents warmed to Maha, and the discussion turned to her Muslim heritage—she was born in Lebanon but moved to the United States in 1974—and how the point of view she and Kurt shared on the Middle East was vastly different from that of the average American. Before too long, the Syrians loaned the Schnelzes their cell phones so they could send text messages to worried relatives stateside, letting them know what had happened and that they were safe. In

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Once inside the customs office, Maha noticed two things almost immediately. One was the complete and utter chaos: "In Syria, there are no rules," she said. "Everyone was on top of each other." The second was that, in a Muslim society where women customarily deferred to men, she quickly became the subject of a number of condescending glares.

"They were all looking at me," Maha said, "so I went up to Syrians who were working and made small talk. I commented that we were having a good time over here,

fact, Kurt joined the chat for a time, and even posed for photos with a few of the agents.

"I guess I humanized their image of the ugly American," he said.

Though the Schnelzes had made new acquaintances in the customs office, getting the visas approved still turned out to be a frustrating, time-consuming ordeal. At one point, Maha made her way to the front of the room thinking she was about to get both passports stamped, but, since directions for getting the visas processed were non-existent, she didn't realize she had skipped a step. The customs agent grabbed the passports, looked at them, noted that something was missing, reacted angrily, and threw them up into the air.

"I reached over and grabbed them before they were gone into the crowd," Maha said. "I never thought this would happen. I had to beg."

Roughly six hours after arriving at the border, the Schnelzes were allowed to enter Syria en route to Jordan.

"It was scary and things were tight, but generally on a one-to-one level, they were helpful and personable," said Kurt, who arrived in Amman with Maha approximately 14 hours after their trip began, and ended up catching a flight to Detroit by way of Amsterdam a couple days later. "If they'd have said no, I don't know what we'd have done. We could've been there a month, two months."

Lebanon, says Kurt, ranks among the most picturesque locales he's visited. Beirut is a cosmopolitan city nestled alongside the Mediterranean. The lush Bekaa Valley, home to most of the country's agricultural production, is flanked on both sides by mountain ranges whose tallest snow-capped peaks climb more than 10,000 feet above sea level. But both Kurt and Maha added that the breathtaking scenery paled in comparison to the kindness and generosity of the Lebanese people.

"They're really not a lot different from us," Kurt said. "They love their families, they

love their children, and they want peace, [but] you do get a feeling of helplessness and an absolute lack of control over your life and your destiny. The damage to the country and the people... it upset us greatly. They have nothing."

"You can see where they get some of their anger," Maha said of the people who've lived amongst conflict for thousands of years. "But they will try to do anything for you [and] put their lives on the line."

To a certain degree, Kurt and Maha Schnelz put their lives on the line as they sought to escape Lebanon. That said, the harrowing experience hasn't deterred their collective urge to return to the nation.

"We're very anxious to get back there," Kurt said. "As soon as we have the chance, we're going back." ♦

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