



The author at age three with his mother in the mountains of Lebanon in 1946

The Road To Cigars

A Memoir

Paul B.K. Garmirian Ph.D.

CEDAR PUBLICATION

P.O. Box 6016
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Library of Congress Control Number: 2023911995

ISBN: 978-0-9627046-2-8 (Hardcover)

ISBN: 978-0-9627046-3-5 (ebook)

Printed in the United States of America, 2023.

CEDAR PUBLICATIONS

PO BOX 6016

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FOREWORD

Pride over Profit by Kevork Garmirian

My father was dismayed one day when I told him, “You’re not a businessman.” He replied, “I’ve built this company and you’ve seen my hard work.” “Dad,” I responded, “I’m saying that you’re not a businessman because you’re an artist. Who would spend so much time and care about every little detail, other than an artist?” His answer has been, “Whatever you do, big or small, you have to do it with love, care, respect, and precision.”

You will read about my father’s careers in the fields of teaching, real estate, and cigar production as well as his hobbies involving music, cars, food and wine, and other elements of being a *bon vivant* and pursuing the good life.

My father’s careers have been a trifecta of contrasting fields. This memoir covers a multitude of subjects, each one of which could be a book on its own. As an academic, my father predicted the civil war in Lebanon in 1973, two years before it broke out. When the civil war erupted, being an academic didn’t prepare him to get our family out of Beirut, but he did, using diplomacy and strategy, working tirelessly through the nightmare. He was a professor, then adapted from academia to real estate, eventually becoming the broker of his own firm. My father enjoys the search for knowledge. It led him to seriously research and catalog his hobby of cigars. He followed his passion by publishing his first book on cigars, which, in turn, led to the creation of the P.G. Cigar brand of which we are very proud.

My father starts with a concept and pursues its realization by giving it everything he has. I often think of my father as ‘the reluctant businessman.’ He values our products as a representation of diligence and patience. He follows a mantra, “When you see a need, fill it.” He does this while respecting people, seeing value in relationships. If we received a last minute order, my father would take extra care to rush it out. I would tell my father, “Take it easy. These aren’t medical supplies.” He would quote my grandfather, “Never leave until tomorrow what can be done today.”

I can confirm his conviction; genuine and unflinching commitment to his ideals. In the 1990’s, instead of advertising in major cigar magazines, he chose the artistic route by being involved in every step of the design, review and manufacturing of luxury cigar accessories. He relies on word of mouth so that discriminating cigar smokers validate the quality of his products. He always says that, ‘the proof is in the pudding.’

“Let the product speak for itself.”

When asked about advertising to get sales, my father replies, “We don’t sell anything. We try to meet the needs of the customer.” I watched my father follow this principle when I went with him to his real estate office and tagged along to properties he had listed.

I would go with my father to tobacco shops (before we were in the business) and to dinner after working long hours in our business. I was to be seen, but not heard. We spent weekends at Georgetown Tobacco and I was fascinated how a specialty shop ran and who would next walk through the door. It had a profound impact on me. It fueled my love for retail and in opening our own PG Boutique.

On their own, cigars bring people together. I found this to be even more striking as I grew up outside of Washington DC. I was impressed how cigars were a common denominator between different political parties and Federal officials. A

Pennsylvania Ave. restaurant's bar and a cigar was all that was needed. Opposing groups would put their differences aside, happy to see that they shared at least one thing in common, enjoying fine cigars.

My father practices the values instilled in him by my Armenian grandfather who taught him, "You have to know when to spend a dollar like it is a \$1,000 and spend a \$1,000 like it is a dollar." When talking about quality, my grandfather's dictum was, "What is cheap is expensive and what is expensive is cheap." The buildings that he built in Lebanon are legendary for their super solid construction that was always completed on time.

Working as a father and son presents a unique opportunity. I take pride in following the family tradition of my grandfather and father's hard work. I am blessed to be able to work every day with my father.

Our values place integrity over commercialism, truthfulness over hype, and pride in our products, over profits.

-KG

PROLOGUE

My passion in life has been to discover different peoples, and their cultures, and learn about them in all of their facets. It started with my fascination with music. Then my interests diverged to the study of languages, economics and politics and from there to the production of cigars. In each case, there was an attraction and a natural curiosity that led me to being immersed in that particular field.

With music it involved listening and learning how it is expressed with passion, joy, or sometimes sadness. In the study of politics and diplomacy, my career interests led me to pursue studies in international relations in order to understand different political systems based on the history of specific countries, their ideologies, their domestic politics, their cultures and the interaction of different political actors within their political system as well as their foreign policy vis-à-vis other countries.

My attempt in this book is to report and share what took place in my life in Lebanon, England, France, the United States and the Dominican Republic, the fascinating people I met, and observing different cultures in Egypt, Italy, Switzerland, Greece, Canada, England, Cyprus, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg and Puerto Rico.

I had the great privilege of meeting wonderful people and many public figures especially in the United States. After a decade of studies in Washington, I had been preparing to return to my native Lebanon in 1975 to pursue a career in teaching and public service, but because the 1975-1990 civil war which coincided with the completion of my studies in the United States since 1965, that career became an impossibility. After teaching

politics for nine months in Beirut, I was fortunate to be evacuated from Lebanon during the civil war in June 1976 by the US Navy ship, the *Spiegel Grove*.

I made one more trip to Lebanon in 1977 to teach politics, and in 1978, made a permanent move to the United States with my American wife Stephanie and my young son Kevork. After establishing a successful real estate business in McLean, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, D.C from 1978 to 1991, it was my hobbyist's interest in cigars, which led me to write a book, *The Gourmet Guide to Cigars*. The book's success was followed by the production of PG cigars in the Dominican Republic. I had at last, found my vocation in America and have pursued it with joy and dedication since 1990.

In the past few years, whenever I shared a story or an experience with friends during a conversation, a phrase I heard frequently was, "You should write a book about your life experiences and share your stories."

This memoir is intended to be a tribute to my late father. I will be talking a great deal about him and the examples he has set as his legacy to me and my son Kevork. Many of the stories about my father were very endearing to him and he was very proud of his accomplishments on the humanitarian and business levels. It is also a tribute to America which has been very good to me.

I have often been told that I write the way I speak. As you read on, it is my fervent hope that sharing my experiences and cultural perspectives will enlighten and entertain my friends and other readers about the fortunate life I have had especially in the United States.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

It was a question of survival in June 1976. We were all huddled in the bomb shelter next to the underground parking of my father's building in Beirut, Lebanon. Luckily, my father had built it. The bomb shelter my father had built was surrounded by three feet of solid reinforced concrete, exceeding building regulations. As soon as the intensive bombing started, my parents and I rushed down to the shelter, with about fifteen of our tenants. The battle was raging between two Palestinian guerilla groups: the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) of Yasser Arafat, and the PLA (Palestine Liberation Army) allied with the Syrian regime of Hafez Assad in Damascus.

Both groups had taken over my father's just-completed new building, in Bir Hassan, a suburb of Beirut, next to the building we lived in. When a crisis developed between Yasser Arafat, head of the PLO and President Assad, the PLA moved out and relocated in Khalde, two miles away near Beirut International Airport. They started lobbing Katyusha rockets on the PLO force in the very building they had stayed in. Our entire neighborhood had become a battleground, with rockets, mortars and machine guns. I had just returned to Beirut from the United States the previous year after ten years of study.

After a few hours in the bomb shelter, we all wondered, where and how to get food and water. Each family of tenants

sent someone to their apartment to bring down whatever they could carry quickly. After a few days of bombing that would not abate, I ventured up to the lobby carrying a bottle of Lebanese spring water “Sohat” and walked to the carport behind the building to assess any damage to the parked cars. I ran into a Palestinian PLO fighter holding an RPG 7, rocket propelled grenade. I raised both hands and offered the water to the guerilla. He guzzled the water down and was soon joined by other guerillas to get a drink. They advised me to go back to the shelter as the battle was raging on.

I rushed back down and sat on the concrete floor with my mother and father on each side of me. The three of us were holding hands while the fighting was raging above. I was trying to comfort my parents and they were trying to do the same for me. I asked my father if the building could sustain a direct hit from the Katyusha rockets. He assured me the building was solid unless the columns holding the building would take a hit. It reminded me of the earthquake in Lebanon in March 1956 when I had asked my father if our building in Beirut’s Rauche area would survive. He sat calmly, lit a cigar and said, “If there are three building standing after the earthquake, this will be one of them.” He was very confident about the quality of his construction.

This ordeal in the shelter in June 1976, lasted for fifteen days. We survived on snacks of crackers, water and “La Vache Qui Rit” processed cheese (i.e., “The Laughing Cow”). It was not a laughing matter. I had lost fifteen pounds. There was no electricity or phones. Luckily, my American wife who was expecting our first child, (Kevork) had left in early June 1976, just before the airport had closed down before the fighting had intensified.

During the bombings, we had gotten used to catching a few moments of sleep. But as soon as the bombing subsided for a little while, we found it harder to get any sleep at all. The silence