

THE CHILDREN'S VILLAGE, SOS

THE MOUNTAINOUS ROAD was steep and had sharp curves. Uncle Frank sat in the front of the taxi beside the driver who spoke loudly over Middle Eastern music. His Mercedes Diesel car reeked of cigarette smoke and diesel but was decorated with pictures of Jesus, Mary and many Saints. From the mirror hung a turquoise stone to ward off evil spirits and bad luck. Right over it the driver had hung the rosary which clunked together while driving on the bumpy road full of pot holes. Christa, Lara, and Noussa sat in the back seat, and Tina and I sat on our sisters' laps. I looked out the window and wondered where we were going. Down the mountain on the right were Beirut and its surrounding towns and up ahead towards our destination was more of a rural setting. A shepherd slept peacefully against a tree while his sheep wandered around him in the field. On the left, the hillside had a row of houses with similar design but different colors. We drove for some time, not talking much, but taking in the beautiful scenery of the mountains. We noticed some houses that were quite different from the others. As we

approached, it looked like a tiny village. There were two rows of brightly painted houses. The village was surrounded by a fence, trees, and a landscaped yard. We saw red, green, blue, and purple houses. As we got closer, we saw painted murals of doves flying and many children playing.

Uncle Frank, who had not said much during the two-hour ride, gave quiet instructions to the driver, and we soon turned into the opened gate of the village. Uncle Frank told the driver to stop in front of one of the buildings. This one was gray. He got out of the car and paid the driver but asked him to wait for him, then reached in the back and squeezed my hand and Tina's hand. He smiled weakly and began to remove our belongings from the trunk; I smiled back and wondered why we were there as we stared at our cardboard boxes sitting beside the car.



Our house is on the bottom, right.

Where the car had stopped, several kids stood staring at us and at the car. My uncle asked us to play in the front yard, stay together, and guard our clothes, which were packed in cardboard boxes, until he came back. He was going to find out what to do next. We watched him knock at the door of the gray house labeled "Administration." A blonde woman, heavy-set with a smile on her face, greeted him in French: "Bonjour." She opened the door wider and invited him to come in.

He was in the house for a long time. Confused, we stood quietly beside our belongings and wondered what was keeping him. He finally came back and introduced us to the woman he called the director. Then, with tears in his eyes, he kissed each of us and said good-bye. As the taxi pulled away, my uncle turned around in his seat and waved. We could see him looking at us from the back of the car as if this was the last time he would see us.

The director asked the other children to leave us alone for a while, and she led us through the village to a blue house. As instructed, we carried our clothes and calmly followed her. She spoke very little Arabic because she was German, but we could understand her instructions in French. She told us to knock at the door of the blue house. A black-haired lady answered the door. She invited us in and directed us to the living room. As we listened to both ladies giving us what sounded like a history lesson about the house, we all sat quietly and looked around. The living room was painted a rust color, several pictures hung on the wall, and all the furniture was made of wood. In one corner, a round dining room table was set for nine people, and on the opposite side, there was a play and study area.

"I am Aunt Helen. I am the director of this village, and this is your house mother, Mother Angelle," the director told us. Mother Angelle shook her head and smiled. The director continued, "This is Camile, Camelia, and George; we call him Joujou. They'll be your sister and brothers, too." She pointed

to three children, who had waited patiently and quietly in the sitting area. “Your Mother Angelle will take care of you and show you the house and your new brothers and sister will show you around and introduce you to the neighbors. You will like it here, I’m sure.” She stood up, smiled, and left us with Mother Angelle, who took us upstairs, showed us our beds and the bathrooms, and listed some house rules we were supposed to remember.



Mother Angelle, Camille, Bearta, Tina, Noussa, Camelia, Lara, Christa, and Joujou (front).



We had few toys. Notice the eyes on Lara’s doll.

Mother Angelle asked us to stand still while she cut our hair short one by one. She then told us to close our eyes, while she poured gasoline on our heads. We stood in shock and said nothing. "This will kill all the lice, if there are any. We do this to all the children who come here." She put our clothes in a bag, and we never saw any of our belongings again. As we sat on a blanket outside on the terrace with gasoline on our hair and wool hats on our heads, we played cards and talked about lice for a long time. Some of the other kids came to say hello to us and some of the adults stopped by to say hello to Mother Angelle, drink coffee, smoke a cigarette, and see her new children. We wondered what lice were and how long it would take for the gasoline to kill them. As we quietly watched the sunset, we wondered what was going on, how long we had to stay there, and how long it would be before we saw any of our relatives again. As hungry as we were, the overpowering smell of gas kept us from thinking about eating. The wool hats made our heads itchy, hot and uncomfortable.

Ever since my mother died, Christa and Lara had cared for us and continued to do so, even in the children's village. We all liked taking care of Tina since she was about three. Christa was a little over 11 years old, but she knew how to cook, wash dishes, wash clothes, bathe us and put us to bed. Christa remembered so many good things about our parents. Before bed, we enjoyed listening to her endless stories about how caring and loving our mother and our dad had been. Of all of us, Christa loved my mother the most by far; she remembered so many stories and missed her so much. She even remembered the smell of her skin. She told us stories about me falling in a sewer pipe one time when I was two years old; Lara plunged to my rescue. I have a scar on the right side of my neck where I burned myself with coffee as I was fighting to bring my mother her coffee. She told us many details about my brother throwing a hammer at Lara when she was about

seven years old and causing her to bleed from a cut close to her eye. One time, a cousin pushed Christa from a two-story building while playing and my mother thought Christa had died. She ran to her rescue and figured out that only her nose was broken, so she started yelling at her not to play on the roof. The physical scars we have are there for a reason, maybe so we can better remember our parents. The emotional scars are there to remind us of our own strength.

Lara was nine years old, and she helped with the house chores and helped take care of us kids. Christa used to say that Lara inherited our mother's energy to clean; she gave us baths, fixed our hair, cleaned the bathroom, and sometimes cleaned the whole house by herself.

Noussa, my only brother, was everybody's favorite. He liked playing with tools, and he got in trouble for messing with my father's tools. He was eight years old and liked creating things with his hands; he was always carving something from wood. He inherited my father's gift of wood carving. My dad had carved many beautiful art made out of wood and plaster. One that we remember clearly was one of Saint Nicolas. All of our parents' belongings and few of our belongings were left at my dad's apartment.

Neither Lara nor Christa seemed to mind the fact our uncle had left us there maybe they understood that we had no choice after the director explained that we were turned over to the orphanage. When it became apparent to me that we would be staying for a while, I wondered what would happen to our favorite big, long-haired doll my dad gave us for our last Christmas with him and my mother. I wondered what would happen to our toys, our clothes, our parents' pictures, my father's tools, and our mother's belongings. Here, we didn't have many toys and not many clothes, but we had each other, and that was important. As I sat staring at the sunset, thinking about all that, I heard the house mother calling, "You

can take a bath now; and then we'll eat supper." And we all rushed upstairs to take baths one at a time. Since Tina was the youngest and she cried because her eyes were burning from the potent gasoline, we decided to let her go first. We then decided to bathe from youngest to oldest.



A few days after we got to the SOS.

The three bedrooms all looked the same; they each had three wooden beds. Beside each bed, there was a wooden nightstand. Each child had a bed, a nightstand, and a closet which we were warned would be inspected on regular basis. Christa explained that we might be spending a few nights here. Christa, Lara, and I were assigned to one room. Tina, who was only three, was given a bedroom with Camelia, and the third bed was vacant. As Tina made her way to her bed, I wondered if she was scared and if we could hear her if she called for us. Noussa's bed was in the room with the other two boys, Camile and Joujou. Since we were used to sleeping together

with my mother and father, this particular arrangement seemed difficult, but at least we were all in the same house. We wondered whether the house mother would notice if we snuck out of our rooms at night and piled up in the bed together, like we used to do with our mother and father.

Christa chose the bed closest to the balcony overlooking the terrace, Lara chose the one in the middle, and I got the one toward the hallway and closest to a window. We put sheets and blankets on our bed after supper and said good night several times. We closed our eyes after whispering a few words to each other. I fell asleep remembering how, during my father's infrequent visits, after having played hide-and-seek for a long time, he used to tuck us in and close the mosquito net above the bed then lay beside us to go to sleep. Christa had only one picture of our parents, so she gave it to Tina to put under her pillow to help her go to sleep.

The next morning, the bright sunlight woke me up. The sound of several children playing outside in the courtyard was loud. I could hear their laughter, so I stood up on my bed to look out the window and watched them chasing each other and playing. We all quickly got dressed and went downstairs, where the house mother was already warming milk and making sandwiches for breakfast. She reminded us of a few house rules and our chores then encouraged us to go outside after breakfast to meet the other kids. We quickly ate and rushed outside.

Outside in the courtyard, some kids just stare and said nothing, but some introduced themselves and pointed out the house they lived in. They didn't wait long before they asked us how we ended up there. They seemed to have no trouble talking about what happened to their parents and how they ended up here, but it was difficult for us to open up and answer their numerous questions about our parents and relatives. After answering as little as possible to satisfy their curiosity, I

insisted, “Our uncle will come and get us any day now; we are just here temporarily.”

When Lara heard me say that, she took me to the side and whispered, “No one comes here temporarily. We are here for good.” I so much wanted to believe otherwise.

We were in the SOS Village originally founded in 1949 by Hermann Gmeiner, a man from Austria who lost his mother at an early age and his oldest sister had to raise the large family. He developed the house mother concept and children’s villages SOS, and built over 130 orphanages, starting in Germany and spreading worldwide, including the United States. Lebanon was lucky to be identified as one of the countries where an SOS Village needed to be built.

Each house held between nine and 12 children and one paid house mother. Funding relied on donations from godparents, and businesses. Organizations like UNICEF, United Nations Children’s Fund, and UNHCR, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees provided support as well. A godparent sponsored a child or a family. Those kids with godparents felt special; the continuous letters, pictures, and financial support meant a lot to everyone. When I heard I had a sponsor or godmother, I was thrilled. My godmother wrote letters and sent me pictures of her and her family in Denmark. I looked forward to getting her letters. She sent pictures and I longed to meet her one day.

Aunt Micha was also a sponsor or godmother to our entire family, and she lived in Beirut, about an hour away. She was the most stylish and classy person we had ever seen. She came to see us the first time after we had been in the SOS for about six months. I remember being very quiet and looking at her with admiration for a long time. She was beautiful and showed so much care and love. She had a little girl and a boy of her own. After her first visit, we looked forward to seeing her again. She invited us to her house several times and arranged

transportation either taxi or the orphanage bus would take us. She would have games prepared and serve a delicious variety of cakes we didn’t have the privilege of eating before. We felt special whenever we spent a whole day with her. She had two maids from Sri Lanka and they would play with us too. Almost always, she would slip few dollars in our pockets which made us happy.

For my first communion, in 1974, Aunt Micha gave me a gold ring with a blue stone in it. I had never gotten anything this nice before, so I was really happy, even if it was a bit too big. I showed it to my friends and wore it all the time. It must have fallen off one day while we were playing soccer. I was disappointed to have lost such a special gift, and I searched the playground over and over, trying to find it. I never did.

Like Aunt Micha, people from all over the world donated money, time, clothes, gifts, and food to our village, and made so many kids feel special. Many people wrote letters to the kids in the village which made us feel wanted, cared for, and in touch with the outside world.

