22nd September 2014

The Australian Lebanese Historical Society

Coogee

Sydney NSW

Dear Sir/Madam

In a recent newsletter, the Australian Lebanese Historical Society mentioned Australian Servicemen of Lebanese descent. This was deeply touching for me, to realize that there had been servicemen of Lebanese background serving in WWI. I was born in New Zealand, to the New Zealand Lebanese diaspora, and I decided some weeks ago to write and share with your readers the intriguing story of my great uncle Rizk’allah, which raises very many questions for me.

Kareem Al-Iskander Moukheiber arrived in New Zealand in 1909 from Beit Meri, Mount Lebanon, Syria. Al-Iskander is Arabic for Alexander, and within a short time he had dropped the surname Moukheiber for Alexander, much easier to say in an English speaking country like New Zealand.

In 1912, Rizk’allah Al-Iskander Moukheiber sailed from Lebanon to join Kareem in Wellington, NZ. With the advent of WWI, Rizk Alexander (as he was by then known), joined the Wellington regiment, Royal New Zealand Army Corps, and was deployed to France. He served with distinction, distinguishing himself and being awarded the Military Medal for bravery in battle.

Eventually after sustaining war injuries, he was repatriated to New Zealand. At the close of WWI, he married a local New Zealand born girl of Lebanese descent, having two children before dying of war wounds in 1924.

Over the next 15 years, all his remaining brothers and sisters in Lebanon made their way to New Zealand. My grandmother Tisbena was the fourth to arrive with her husband, George, a cousin. George and Tisbena felt unable to part with their family name, but over the next few years they acquiesced to their name becoming anglicized to McIvor.

Rizk’allah died of war wounds in 1924 and he was given a serviceman’s grave in Wellington (and his wife received a war widows pension). Recounted above is the family history that I had learned as a young boy, and I was very familiar with this story from my childhood, just filling in the odd gap as I became older. But a few years ago a cousin showed me the documents relating to Kareem’s naturalization. As you will recall, Kareem was the first to arrive in NZ in 1909. He had obtained a copy of Kareem’s naturalization papers from New Zealand Archives. The file was 2cm thick, and within weeks I had written to New Zealand Archives in Wellington to procure myself a copy of his naturalization papers. Upon receiving them and perusing them in detail, I was astonished and deeply touched at what I found.

Poor uncle Kareem had arrived in New Zealand in 1909 and in 1914 written to the New Zealand government to apply for British subject status (until the 1940’s, NZ was a dominion, and we were all apparently British subjects rather than New Zealand citizens). Very quickly came back the reply that he was not eligible for subject status as he was an Ottoman subject, and therefore an enemy alien. He was told that he was not allowed to own land or marry a locally born New Zealander.

This must have been incredibly frustrating as his brother within a short period of time was serving overseas in the New Zealand Army Corps. It becomes astonishing for me to realize that my poor great uncle Rizk was serving in France as an infantryman in the Wellington regiment, when he was actually an Ottoman subject, and his brother was not being allowed to obtain subject status even after five years in NZ! Not only that, but his parents and most of his siblings were still living in Ottoman territories!

Poor uncle Kareem’s file then consists of 15 years of letters to the government with all their replies stalling him. In 1929 he eventually obtained British subject status, with his brother having already predeceased him. It was apparent to me that my poor uncle Rizk’allah never received British subject status even though he had fought for the Wellington regiment and eventually lost his life. I plan to write to New Zealand Archives to see if indeed Rizk was naturalized at any stage before he died. But it intrigues me to contemplate that he made the supreme sacrifice for an Empire he was not even considered a subject of.

It brings tears to my eyes, to think of what our forebears did, in the search for a better life. Their gift to us is limitless, and it always fires my imagination to think of the difficulties they must have endured, on the path of trying to be accepted in to their adopted countries. I would be intrigued to hear of other stories from Australia, and in particular how the issue of their subject status was treated, both for the servicemen involved, and their family in Australia.

Kind regards

Dr. Peter McIvor