

Poet's legacy is one of breaking down barriers between East and West

Jawdat Haydar, at 98, is a contemporary icon in Lebanon and is also well known in the United States

Poet, traveler and human being extraordinary: Jawdat Haydar is a living literary legend in the country of his birth, as testified by his receiving the Order of the Cedars in June of this year. His work has also been widely recognized and honored abroad

Photos by Afif Khair



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When Jawdat Haydar was a little boy he liked to buy sweets from the store the British had set up in his village in the Bekaa. He thought to himself, "If I could just speak English I would certainly get all the sweets I want from them."

That was before World War I when European powers were stationed in Lebanon to overlook the functionings of the fading Ottoman Empire.

Today, Haydar is 98 years old and one of the most renowned poets of Lebanon. His poem, The Temple in Baalbek, is part of the official curriculum for the

English, his adopted language, provided his passport to a life dedicated to writing

baccalaureate program in public schools. Last year Youssef Bakay wrote Haydar's biography, compiled from a series of interviews.

But Haydar is also a well-known name in the English-speaking world. The little boy from the Bekaa had made his wish come true. He learned English but it ended up being not only to buy sweets. For the rest of his life he would write most of his poems in English.

His life is one of moving between the countries of the Fertile Crescent as if it were all one country not separated by the boundaries marked by European colonialism. He is a believer in freedom and citizenship of the world.

The Daily Star met Haydar while he was in the midst of finishing a new poetry collection. At the house of one of his daughters in the Beirut district of Hamra, the poet recites from manuscripts while three of his daughters take turns typing their father's work on a computer.

Haydar only writes his poems by hand.

"I have to get up at 4 o'clock

in the morning and then I begin to think deeply about subjects. So, I get up quickly, write them down and develop them during the day," he says.

Many of them deal with the state of the world, with war, peace and injustice.

"I am one of the pacifiers in the world," says Haydar. "Why should we fight? Why should I go to heaven from East and the other from West?"

He picks up one of the manuscripts for his new book and reads: "Love is loved in Life and hate is hated. So why should we hate to be hated. Our existence by God was created and his word to us love was translated."

When Haydar was a freshman at the Syrian Protestant College, which was later to become the American University of Beirut, he realized that he "wouldn't have much of a chance here," he recalls.

His dream was to go to the United States. But he was denied the visa, so he set off to France for his studies instead. In a cinema in Lyon he got a second chance, however.

"At that time, there was no air conditioning, you know," he recounts, "It was quite hot, so people had handkerchiefs."

The handkerchief of a lady dropped on the floor and he was gentlemanly enough to pick it up. When the lady said "thank you," he asked her if she was English or American. She turned out to be the American consul's wife. Two weeks later he had his visa and booked passage on a ship to New York.

Haydar was heading to the North Texas State University, a military school, to study education. It still remains a place he has fond memories of.

"During the three days on the train I only ate Corn Flakes to save money. Yet, when I arrived I didn't have any money left," he recounts.

Upon his arrival his professor suggested he take the time left before semester to travel.

"I told him 'I don't have any money,'" says Haydar, "He gave me \$300

It was about

could afford it – the Haydar family was one of the wealthiest families in the Bekaa.

Yet, this background did not stop him from taking sides with those oppressed, victimized or less fortunate than himself. In the Iraq Petroleum Company he even sympathized with the workers' unions' demands.

"I convinced my superiors that better-paid employees and workers would serve the company better than poor and needy people would," he says, basic management logic that is still applied today.

Haydar returned to Lebanon in 1960 where he tried his hand at farming and worked in the plastics industry and even dabbled in the country's muddled politics. He ran twice as a candi-

Many poems are critical of war, and of his home country's civil war in particular

date in the parliamentary elections but without any success.

"The system is so corrupt that it would not allow genuine people (to) ever reach decision making positions," he says. But Haydar doesn't like to talk about Lebanese politics.

His interest in global politics is much more vivid. As early as 1950 he started writing poems about pollution.

"What a bolt from the blue falling in the west,

"Building up the darkest gloom around the world

"Fringed with thunder lightnings flaring curves abreast;

"Inside a nuclear weapon yet unhurled

The above is one of more than 20 poems he has written about the topic and the most recent one will be published in the new collection.

"We are destined surely to be exterminated on this planet," he says today.

Many of Haydar's poems criticize war in general and the Lebanese civil war in particular. Other