

MALCOLM X IN BEIRUT

Someone shared with me this excerpt from Malcolm X's Diary, dated September 28, 1964:

"Azizah the Lebanese student (nationalist leader) met me at the airport with about 10 other girl students, all white & American. We went to Prof. Hope's home and had 7UP. Azizah went out, while the rest of us talked & came back informing us that the Dean had agreed to let me lecture on campus in just two hrs., from 12 to 1pm. Azizah and I had dinner at the American Embassy cafeteria and then walked to the lecture hall. I had an overflow crowd with just two hours' notice. The students were receptive, their questions objective. There was a cross section represented. Azizah had driven me to the airport; we sat and had ice cream and talked while waiting for my plane."

Malcolm X wrote this excerpt on his second trip to Lebanon. On his way to Hajj in spring of 1964, he stopped in Beirut and delivered a speech at a Sudanese Cultural Center near the American University of Beirut (AUB). I attended the lecture along with many students, local leaders, and educators who were full of anticipation and questions. This was my first encounter with Malcolm X in person.

Like many others, I had read about Malcolm X through the papers. He was described admiringly as a freedom fighter and an American Muslim civil rights leader. However, I heard more about him from an American Episcopal priest named Malcolm Boyd, (or Malcolm Y, as he liked to call himself). Malcolm Boyd had come to AUB about a month or two before Malcolm X, and his visit focused the attention of AUB students and local leaders on civil right problems in the US.

So, when I heard that Malcom X was going to lecture at the Sudanese Cultural Center, my best friend Mona and I rushed to the site. The room was overflowing with people. There was no place to sit or stand. But given Arab chivalry, Mona and I were given a front-line position and were able to watch and listen to Malcolm X intently.

Everyone was inspired by Malcolm X's speech. It was very clear that he was a world leader, not just a local American leader. A group of AUB students and faculty invited him (and us) to a faculty campus residence following the speech for some snacks and juice. So, we went and chatted with him about serious matters. For, he was a very serious person. It was at that time that I began forming a friendship with Malcolm X, now Brother Malcolm.

So, after Brother Malcolm completed his Hajj and returned to the US, he wrote me on June 1st, 1964, from 97th street, East Elmhurst 69, N.Y., to inquire about the truth of the news reported in the American press. He said:

"To my amazement the American press here in this country reported that my speech in Beirut caused a riot among the students there. This must have taken place after I left because I certainly don't know anything about it. Would you please write to me and give

me your opinion of the students [sic] reactions to my lecture there, and what kind of an impact it had?

We are very anxious to give everyone the true picture of things as they are here in the States and also to establish communication, understanding, and cooperation between the Muslims here and the Muslims there.”

I was shocked by the information in his letter. I immediately wrote and assured him that there were no riots in Beirut after his speech, and that his speech received nothing less than rave reviews from everyone.

Later that year, I received a letter from Brother Malcolm, from the Phoenicia Hotel in Kuwait, dated September 25th. He informed me that he will be arriving in Beirut on September 29th at 9:10 a.m., and leaving to Khartoum that same day at 3:00 p.m. He expressed interest in meeting me during his short stop-over, as well as the other students he met on his way to Hajj. That was my signal to go all out and organize a speech by Brother Malcolm at AUB’s Mary Dodge Hall. After all, I was the President of the Debating Society then. So, I ran to Dean Arnold, Dean of Students, asking for permission to invite Brother Malcolm on campus. The administration was not enthused by the idea because they felt he was airing American dirty linen abroad. I, on the other hand, was more interested in free speech and the students’ right to know.

Dean Arnold and I had an amicable relationship, and I knew I could win this fight in the end. So, I proceeded on that basis, reserved the hall for a noon event, and prepared a large number of leaflets and signs announcing Brother Malcolm’s speech. I also lined up students to distribute them as soon as I got the OK.

The time arrived to go to the airport and I still did not have Dean Arnold’s OK. I decided to take with me to the airport a delegation of American women to show Brother Malcolm that he was welcome among all of us. One of the women rode back with us. Later, she published an article about her experience of meeting “Mr. X,” as she initially called him. Although she had a mixed reaction to the political discussion later that day, she still found Mr. X “likeable.”

From the airport, we went directly to the home of Professor Edward Hope. Professor Hope had left Howard University to establish a new school of engineering at AUB. His wife Marion was an amazingly thoughtful and gracious hostess. They lived at the faculty residences on campus. So, it was convenient for us to take Brother Malcolm to rest there before his speech. Once I dropped Brother Malcolm at their home, I ran to the office of Dean Arnold, trying to close the deal. By then it was just about one hour before noon. Dean Arnold relented and the leaflets immediately covered the campus. I also appointed a member of the Debating Club’s Executive Committee to tape the lecture. When noon came, it was standing room only in Dodge Hall. Brother Malcolm was pleased and very surprised.

The speech was amazing. Speaking without notes for a whole hour, he covered topics ranging from civil rights in America, to the right of people in the Arab World to self-determination, and control of their own resources. He discussed oil as a powerful weapon that could be used to achieve these ends.

Brother Malcolm's analysis was quite thorough and thoughtful, and it was clear that he was a world leader. By the time he was done, the audience had become quite intense and full of fervor. Everyone wanted to talk to Malcolm X, or touch him. I quickly ushered him out of the hall and rushed him to the U.S. Embassy at the foot of the hill, to give him lunch (not dinner, as his notes state) at its cafeteria before he boarded his plane.

Finally sitting down with our trays in the cafeteria, we began chatting. He told me about his recent meeting with Martin Luther King, and that other future meetings were scheduled. Their visions, Brother Malcolm said, were converging, but that each one of them had his own role in the movement. He shared with me his sadness about his home being firebombed, especially since the bomb was placed under his daughters' bedroom window. Why would they harm his daughters? He asked indignantly. The conflict was with him.

We wrapped up lunch quickly and rushed to the airport. We were able to have him check in very quickly and we still had about half an hour before boarding. He suggested that we sit and talk some more somewhere. He then thrust his hand in his pocket and pulled out some Lebanese loose change. He offered it to me, saying that he will no longer have any use for it. I gently refused. It was against our customs, but I did not have the heart to tell him that. He then quickly suggested buying me ice cream instead, and I agreed.

Two days later, I looked up the person I put in charge of taping Brother Malcolm's speech. I had noticed him in the hall taping but was too busy whisking Brother Malcolm out of the hall to talk to him. I asked this person for the tape. He said he did not know where it was. He acted strangely, like he knew nothing about it. I was quite upset. Several years later, I met him again, this time he had become a US citizen. We never spoke of this matter again. But somewhere out there, there is a tape of a terrific world class speech given in Beirut at AUB's Mary Dodge Hall by Brother Malcolm on September 29th, 1964.