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Shin’ichi Yamamoto arrives in Lebanon. There are no Soka Gakkai members there, but he wants to ‘see for himself the religious situation of the country, which British historian Arnold Toynbee had so aptly described as a museum of living religious history.’

Jan. 21, the day after Shin’ichi Yamamoto and his party visited Pompeii, the group went sightseeing in Rome, visiting the city’s ancient ruins and sites like St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican. Shin’ichi especially wanted to show Eisuke Akizuki and Yoshihiko Ohya, both in Europe for the first time, the famous sights of Rome, hoping it might serve them well in the future.

A light rain fell in the morning but gradually lifted. As Shin’ichi stood in front of St. Peter’s, the sun’s rays started to break through the clouds.

That night, a discussion meeting was held at Mr. and Mrs. Yamagishi’s home. It was an informal, relaxed gathering. As it wound to a close, Shin’ichi asked Mrs. Yamagishi to play a record he had brought with him that featured music from the first-ever Soka Gakkai culture festival, which had been held in October 1962.

The room resounded with the strains of classical compositions, Japanese folk songs and energetic Gakkai songs, all performed by the Brass Band and Fife and Drum Corps. The eyes of Mr. and Mrs. Yamagishi and Sumiko Kojima lit up as they listened.

Shin’ichi said: “Soka Gakkai songs really cheer one up, don’t they? When you’re having a difficult time, try playing this record after you do gongyo. It’s sure to give you courage.

“There won’t always be other members around to encourage you. That’s what’s so hard about practicing abroad. Nichiren Daishonin elucidates the path we must take as practitioners of Buddhism—but without others around us to support and guide us in faith, it’s easy to give in to our personal weaknesses, emotions and desires.

“Faith means struggling against those weaknesses. Nichiren Daishonin cites the teaching ‘to become the master of your mind rather than let your mind master you’ (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 486). Only when we can control our minds can we become true champions of faith.

“I am always chanting for your happiness. I will support you as long as I live. If there’s ever anything you want to tell me, please don’t hesitate to write. We’re Soka family, after all.”

Compared with West Germany and France, there were few members in Italy. But Shin’ichi knew that if he fostered these key members, the organization in Italy would one day, too, develop greatly. He earnestly strove to plant the seeds for wonderful personal growth in the lives of these Italian members.

When Shin’ichi returned to his hotel room, a telegram from Katsu Kiyohara in the United States was waiting for him. She reported the formation of Seattle Chapter on Jan. 19. In both Europe and the United States, the wheels of kosen-rufu had begun to turn with vigorous momentum.

Just after 11:30 a.m. on the 22nd, Shin'ichi and his party left Rome for Beirut, the capital of Lebanon. For about two-and-a-half hours, they flew over a sea of clouds. Finally, descending through the fluffy white barrier, they saw the blue Mediterranean Sea and in the distance the snowcapped peaks of the Lebanon Mountains. The name *Lebanon* derives from a word meaning white, the country being named for its snowy white mountains.

Located on the Mediterranean, Lebanon has put its fine harbors to good use. Thousands of years ago, it was home to the Phoenicians, a great trading and seafaring people.

Down through the centuries, it has flourished as a center of trade, linking Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean. But its role as an important crossroads also led to its repeated invasion and rule by outside powers, including the Persian Empire, the Umayyad Islamic Dynasty, the Christian Crusaders, the Mamluk state of Egypt and the Ottoman Empire.

In modern times, the influence of European powers has dominated. Lebanon came under French mandate for more than 20 years before achieving its independence in the mid-20th century. Given this historical backdrop, several Christian and Islamic schools spread throughout the country, and it became an area of considerable religious conflict.

As yet, there was not a single Soka Gakkai member in Lebanon. Shin'ichi Yamamoto decided to visit Beirut to see for himself the religious situation of the country, which British historian Arnold Toynbee had so aptly described as a museum of living religious history.

At the time of Shin'ichi's visit, Lebanon was the only nation in the Middle East in which Islam and Christianity existed side by side with Christians being slightly in the majority. But the situation among the Christians was rather complex, since they were split among various denominations and factions.

The largest of these were the Maronites, followed by the Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic and Armenian Orthodox churches. There were, in addition, some Armenian Catholics and followers of Protestant denominations as well as other minor groups.

Islam in Lebanon, meanwhile, was similarly split. There were three main factions: the Sunnite and the Shiite Muslims—the two largest Islamic schools in the world—and the Druze, which had a large following in Lebanon and neighboring Syria. Lebanon also had a small Jewish population.

There were more than 10 officially recognized religious groups, and each had its own social institution as well. Together, they formed the complex, intricately patterned mosaic that made up Lebanese society.

Daisaku Ikeda appears in the
novel as Shin'ichi Yamamoto.
The events take place in 1963.