

# Shweir: An Introduction

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The township of Shweir consists of the villages of Shweir, Ain el Sindyaneh and Dhour el Shweir, which was known as Marhata until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is an area about 1200 meters above sea level in the mountains, 26 kilometers North East of Beirut, lying under the majestic mount Sannin. The landscape is known for its natural beauty and its pine forests, Italian pine having been introduced to Lebanon by Prince Fakhreddin Al Ma'ni II after his exile to Tuscany.

There are several theories about the origin of the name "Shweir". The most likely is that the name derives from the Syriac word "Shoro", equivalent to "sur" in Arabic which means a defensive wall. It is an apt name because the village of Shweir is nestled at the bottom of a U shaped valley surrounded by high hills on all sides except for a small opening to the East at the mouth of the U where there are huge rock formations, thus making the village a natural fortress easy to protect against unwanted outsiders. The village started getting populated after the Ottoman conquests of 1517, mainly by people seeking refuge from persecution or otherwise escaping from pursuit by the authorities. They were a hardy and resilient people. By 1624 there were just a few families eking out a living mainly from shepherding and agriculture. The earliest known reference to Shweir is in relation to the battles between the Qaisis and the Yamanis for leadership of the mountains when, in 1636, Shweiris joined the fight on the side of the Qaisis in the hills of Marhata and drove the Yamanis back to the forests of Mrouj. By and by, Shweir grew and became a trading hub for wheat (from Zahle) and other products, catering to nearby farming communities. During the feudal period, Shweir "belonged" to the (then) Druze Emirate of Abi Allama' whose seat was in Mtein, but the people of Shweir were a troublesome lot and refused to pay taxes. It is to be noted that Shweir itself never had a feudal chief nor were there in Shweir any feudal palaces as in some other villages of the Lebanese mountains.

Being a land inhospitable to agriculture except for the hardy pine, pine seeds and other pine derivatives, (wood and cones for fuel and pine powder for eye makeup, Kohl), became a source of income. Other industries grew. The red soil in Dhour el Shweir and its environs contained some iron ore. The Romans had started iron smelters in early times and until recently remnants of a Roman smelter could still be seen in the high hill above Dhour (Tallet Dahdouh) and there are several Roman sarcophagi in Ain el Kassis and Zaa'rour). But the iron ore was not rich enough and smelting was abandoned until it was picked up again in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century when Shweiris re-learned the industry from the master blacksmiths of Baalbeck. Iron works then resurged in Shweir bringing rich iron ore from Douma in the North on muleback. Iron smiths abounded and Shweir made a very lucrative trade in weapons and horseshoes sold to the Ottoman army through Prince Bashir al Shahabi who monopolized the iron industry. The

people of Shweir also picked up and became highly skilled in the industry of stone masonry and construction and became famous and very much in demand not only in Lebanon but also in Syria, Palestine and Jordan, so much so that the word “Shweiri” became synonymous with “builder”, no matter where the builder came from. So a person in Tripoli who wanted to build a house was told to get a “Shweiri” from Homs. Beiteddine, the palace of Prince Bashir al Shahabi, was built by Shweiris under the leadership of Rustum Mujais. A fourth industry, silk, grew in Shweir. At its height in the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were 11 silk factories. It was not until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that the hills of Marhata became known as Dhour el Shweir and was built up and flourished as an attractive summer resort for families from Beirut as well as Egypt, Iraq and elsewhere.

But perhaps Shweir is best known for the number of authors and intellectuals it has produced among whom are Dr. Khalil Saadeh, Antoun Saadeh, Jirjis Hammam, Sheikh Daher Khairallah, Sheikh Amin Daher Khairallah, Fares Meshreq, Shadid Yafet, Mkhaiel Sawaya, Asad Rustum, Salwa Nassar, Khalil Hawi, Elia Hawi, Mansour Jurdak, Toufic Ataya, Salim Katul, Iskandar Harik, Melhem Kurban, Remon Ghosn and others. Not being part of Lebanon’s urban elite, the landowning class, or the feudal aristocracy, the people of Shweir valued education as a means of getting ahead so they sent their children to school. Many studied at the school of Deir Mar Elias and other village schools, but education took a qualitative leap when the Protestant Mission had to close its school in Abey (Shouf) and chose to open a mission school in Shweir in 1874. Since in Ottoman times foreigners were not allowed to own land, the land for the school was first purchased in Ain El Kassis in the name of the educator Jirjis Hammam and later turned over to the mission when the law allowed. The school was first established by the reverend John Ray of the Free Church of Scotland and flourished under the leadership of the Scotsman Dr. William Carslaw, engineer, medical doctor and pastor. Henry Jessup of the Syrian Protestant College (AUB) was on the board of the school and its graduates were guaranteed acceptance to AUB if they wished to pursue higher studies and many did. The school compound remains active now as the Evangelical Conference Center at Ain el Kassis.

Since the 1890s, people from Shweir began emigrating mostly to the United States and Australia seeking a better future. As of the early 1970s, many Shweiris followed the oil boom to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, making lucrative careers especially as engineers and builders. Almost every family of Shweir has one or more members working abroad. While Lebanon’s civil war 1975-1990 devastated Dhour el Shweir as a summer resort for people from Beirut and elsewhere, it still thrives on its own expatriates, their children and grand children who return every year to the land that they love. Every summer a Festival of Emigrants is organized by the municipality featuring musical performances, exhibits, nature tours and cultural events.