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An Evening in Jounieh

DURING THE first Lebanon war, I visited Jounieh, a town some 20 km north of Beirut. At the time, it served as a port for the Christian forces. It was an exciting evening.

In spite of the war raging in nearby Beirut, Jounieh was full of life. The Christian elite spent the day in the sun-drenched marina, the women lounging in bikinis, the men slugging whisky. The three of us (myself and two young women from my editorial staff - a correspondent and a photographer) were the only Israelis in town, and so we were feted. Everybody invited us onto their yachts, and one rich couple insisted that we come to their home as guests of a family celebration.

It was indeed something special. The dozens of family members belonged to the cream of the elite - rich merchants, a well-known painter, several university professors. The drinks flowed like water, the conversation flowed in several languages.

Around midnight, everybody was slightly drunk. The men got me into a "political" conversation. They knew that I was an Israeli, but had no idea about my views.

"Why don't you go into West Beirut?" one portly gentleman asked me. West Beirut was held by Arafat's PLO forces, who were defending hundreds of thousands of Sunni inhabitants.

"Why? What for?" I queried.

"What do you mean? To kill them! To kill everybody!"

"Everybody? Women and children, too?"

"Of course! All of them!"

For a moment, I thought that he was joking. But the faces of the men around him told me that he was deadly serious and that everybody agreed with him.

At that moment I grasped that this beautiful country, rich in history, blessed with all the pleasure of life, is sick. Very, very sick.

The next day I indeed went into West Beirut, but for another purpose altogether. I crossed the lines to meet with Yasser Arafat.

(By the way, at the end of the party in Jounieh my hosts gave me a parting present: a big packet of hashish. On the morrow, on my way back to Israel, after Arafat had made our meeting public, I heard over the radio that four

ministers were demanding that I should be put on trial for treason. I remembered the hashish and it went sailing out of the car window.)

I AM reminded of that conversation in Jounieh every time something happens in Lebanon. This week, for example.

Much nonsense is being spoken and written about that country, as if it were a country like any other. George W. Bush talks about "Lebanese democracy" as if there were such a thing, others speak about the "parliamentary majority" and "minority factions" about the need for "national unity" to uphold "national independence", as if they were talking about the Netherlands or Finland. All these have no connection with Lebanese reality.

Geographically, Lebanon is a torn country, and there lies a part of the secret of its beauty. Snow-covered mountain chains, green valleys, picturesque villages, beautiful sea-shore. But Lebanon is also torn socially. The two schisms are inter-connected: in the course of history, persecuted minorities from all over the region sought refuge between its mountains, where they could defend themselves.

The result: a large number of big and small communities, ready to spring to arms at any moment. At best, Lebanon is a loose federation of mutually suspicious communities, at worst a battlefield of feuding groups which hate each other's guts. The annals of Lebanon are full of civil wars and horrible massacres. Many times, this or that community called in foreign enemies to assist it against its neighbors.

Between the communities, there are no permanent alliances. One day, communities A and B get together to fight community C. The next day, B and C fight against A. Moreover, there are sub-communities, which more than once have been known to make an alliance with an opposing community against their own.

Altogether, a fascinating mosaic, but also a very dangerous one - the more so since every community keeps a private army, equipped with the best of weapons. The official Lebanese army, composed of men from all communities, is unable to carry out any meaningful mission.

What is a Lebanese "community"? On the face of it, it's all about religion. But not only religion. The community is also an ethnic tribe, with some national attributes. A Jew will easily understand this, since the Jews are also such a community, even if spread around the world. But for an ordinary European or American, it is difficult to understand this structure. It is easier to think about a "Lebanese nation" - a nation that exists only in the imagination or as a vision of the future.

The loyalty to the community comes before any other loyalty - and certainly before any loyalty to Lebanon. When the rights of a community or sub-

community are menaced, its members rise up as one in order to destroy those who are threatening them.

THE MAIN communities are the Christian, the Sunni-Muslim, the Shiite-Muslim and the Druze (who, as far as religion goes, are a kind of extreme Shiites.) The Christians are divided into several sub-communities, the most important of which are the Maronites (named after a saint who lived some 1600 years ago.) The Sunnis were brought to Lebanon by the (Sunni) Ottoman rulers to strengthen their hold, and were mainly settled in the large port cities. The Druze came to find refuge in the mountains. The Shiites, whose importance has risen over the last few decades, were for many centuries a poor and down-trodden community, a doormat for all the others.

As in almost all Arab societies, the Hamula (extended family) plays a vital role in all communities. Loyalty to the Hamula precedes even loyalty to the community, according to the ancient Arab saying: "With my cousin against the foreigner, with my brother against my cousin." Almost all Lebanese leaders are chiefs of the great families.

TO GIVE some idea of the Lebanese tangle, a few recent examples: in the civil war that broke out in 1975, Pierre Gemayel, the chief of a Maronite family, called upon the Syrians to invade Lebanon in order to help him against his Sunni neighbors, who were about to attack his territory. His grandson by the same name, who was murdered this week, was a member of a coalition whose aim is to liquidate Syrian influence in Lebanon. The Sunnis, who were fighting against the Syrians and the Christians, are now the allies of the Christians against the Syrians.

The Gemayel family was the main ally of Ariel Sharon, when he invaded Lebanon in 1982. The common aim was to drive out the (mainly Sunni) Palestinians. For that purpose, Gemayel's men carried out the horrendous massacre of Sabra and Shatila, after the assassination of Bashir Gemayel, the uncle of the man who was murdered this week. The massacre was overseen by Elie Hobeika from the roof of the headquarters of the Israeli general Amos Yaron. Afterwards, Hobeika became a minister under Syrian auspices. Another person responsible for the slaughter was Samir Geagea, the only one who was put on trial in a Lebanese court. He was condemned to several life prison terms and later pardoned. This week he was one of the main speakers at the funeral of Pierre Gemayel the grandson.

In 1982, the Shiites welcomed the invading Israeli army with flowers, rice and candy. A few months later they started a guerilla war against them, which lasted for 18 years, in the course of which Hizbullah became a major force in Lebanon.

One of the leading Maronites in the fight against the Syrians was General Michel Aoun, who was elected president by the Maronites and later driven out. Now he is an ally of Hizbullah, the main supporter of Syria.

All this resembles Italy at the time of the Renaissance or Germany during the 30-Years War. But in Lebanon this is the present and the foreseeable future.

In such a reality, using the term "democracy" is, of course, a joke. By agreement, the government of the country is divided between the communities. The president is always a Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni, the speaker of the parliament a Shiite. The same applies to all positions in the country, at all levels: a member of a community cannot aspire to a position suited to his talents if it "belongs" to another community. Almost all citizens vote according to family affiliation. A Druze voter, for example, has no chance of overthrowing Walid Jumblat, whose family has ruled the Druze community for 500 years at least (and whose father was murdered by the Syrians.) He doles out all the jobs "belonging" to his community.

The Lebanese parliament is a senate of community chiefs, who divide the spoils between them. The "democratic coalition" which was put in power by the Americans after the murder of the Sunni Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, is a temporary alliance of the Maronite, Sunni and Druze chiefs. The "opposition", which enjoys Syrian patronage, is composed of the Shiites and one Maronite faction. The wheel can turn at a moment's notice, when other alliances are formed.

Hizbullah, which appears to Israelis as an extension of Iran and Syria, is first of all a Shiite movement that strives to obtain for its community a larger part of the Lebanese pie, as indeed is its due in accordance with its size. Hassan Nasrallah - who is also the scion of an important family - has his eyes on the government in Beirut, not on the mosques in Jerusalem.

WHAT DOES all this say about the present situation?

For decades now, Israel has been stirring the Lebanese pot. In the past, it supported the Gemayel family but was bitterly disappointed: the family's "Phalanges" (the name was taken from Fascist Spain, which was greatly admired by grandfather Pierre), were revealed in the 1982 war as a gang of thugs without military value. But the Israeli involvement in Lebanon continues to this day. The aim is to eliminate Hizbullah, remove the Syrians and threaten nearby Damascus. All these tasks are hopeless.

Some history: in the 30s, when the Maronites were the leading force in Lebanon, the Maronite Patriarch expressed open sympathy for the Zionist enterprise. At that time, many young people from Tel-Aviv and Haifa studied at the American University of Beirut, and rich Jewish people from Palestine spent their holidays at Lebanese resorts. Once, before the founding of Israel, I crossed the Lebanese border by mistake and a Lebanese Gendarme politely showed me the way back.

During the first years of Israel, the Lebanese border was our only peaceful one. Those days there was a saying: "Lebanon will be the second Arab

country to make peace with Israel. It will not dare to be the first". Only in 1970, when King Hussein drove the PLO from Jordan into Lebanon, with the active help of Israel, did this border heat up. Now even Fuad Siniora, the prime minister appointed by the Americans, feels compelled to declare that "Lebanon will be the last Arab state to make peace with Israel!"

All efforts to remove Syrian influence from Lebanon are bound to fail. In order to understand this, it is enough to look at the map. Historically, Lebanon is a part of the land of Syria ("Sham" in Arabic). The Syrians have never resigned themselves to the fact that the French colonial regime tore Lebanon from their land.

The conclusions: First, let's not get stuck in the Lebanese mess again. As experience has shown, we shall always come out the losers. Second, in order to have peace on our northern border, all the potential enemies, and first of all Syria, must be involved.

Meaning: we must give back the Golan Heights.

The Bush administration forbids our government to talk with the Syrians. They want to talk with them themselves, when the time comes. Quite possibly, they will then sell them the Golan in return for Syrian help in Iraq. If so, should we not hurry and "sell" them the Golan (which belongs to them anyhow) for a better price for ourselves?

Lately, voices have been heard, even of senior army people, that hint at this possibility. It should be said loudly and clearly: Because of a few thousands of settlers and the politicians who do not dare to confront them, we are liable to be dragged into more superfluous wars and to endanger the population of Israel.

This is the third conclusion: There is only one way to win a war in Lebanon - and that is to avoid it.