

A Strange Feeling of Familiarity

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1. Beaufort Castle, South Lebanon (Still from *A Journey*, video, 41', 2006)

How many times have I wondered if 'this' was Israel or Lebanon? How was I to tell the difference?

When you don't see any Israeli settlements, now almost a trademark, on the landscape, the terrain looks exactly the same.

The first time a friend took me to the South Lebanese border was in 2000, after the Israelis withdrew from the South, or I shall say, after the South was liberated. We were on the road for a long time, and I was absorbed in our conversation when she suddenly stopped the car and said, "This is Israel". I was very shocked by the way she said it so naturally and without warning; shocked by the proximity and the banality of this frontier, which meant so much to me that it remained unimaginable even as I stood upon it. In all my life I had never been that far into the South (the border is a maximum of three hours from Beirut, the capital); the South was not accessible since it had been occupied for almost two decades by Israel.

This border not only represented the long and lasting war between Lebanon and Israel, and therefore the fact that I couldn't access a large part of my country; above all, it meant Palestine. Palestine was also, and still is, beyond my imagination. Palestine, the major political cause of the Arab world; Palestine the lost land, home of my grandmother; and Palestine intricately linked to the Lebanese civil war.

These issues were the thread for my documentary *A Journey* (video, 41', 2006), where I used archival images, written and filmed notes from 1999 to 2005, and in which I followed the journey of my grandmother Rose, as her personal story meets the collective history of our region.

In 1947, Yaffa, the most developed city of Palestine, should have remained Palestinian, according to the United Nations partition plan. But the campaign of terror led by the Irgun and the Haganah¹ forced its inhabitants into exile, and less than 4,000 out of a population of 70,000 were able to stay. Leaving everything or almost everything behind them, some went to Gaza, others to Jerusalem, Amman, and also Beirut. Among them were Teta Amale, Aunt Marie, her brothers and their families. They took refuge with Tati Rose, who had lived in Lebanon since 1930 with her husband Alfred...

- My name is Rose Kettaneh, I was born in Jerusalem, I was educated at the Dames de Sion, I got married in 1930, and since that year I live in Beirut, or I live in Lebanon.

Look, this is my father's tomb.

- Your father? In Yaffa?

- Who knows what it has become? We can't even go to see it.

The journey of my grandmother Rose through life parallels my journey to the just-liberated South, reflecting on the conflicts in our region, questioning my identity and political choices, and also reflecting on loss and disappearance.

- And tell me, mother, why have you never talked to us about Palestine, and never told us that you were originally Palestinian?

- I'm not originally Palestinian; I am Lebanese. I was born in Lebanon, of a Lebanese-born father. My mother was Palestinian, yes.

- So you're half-Palestinian...

- Yes, my mother was... was Palestinian, yes.

I couldn't understand that my mother never felt Palestinian, not even slightly. I couldn't understand that my mother was not on the side of the leftist pro-Palestinians during the



2. The Channel at Jaffa, Palestine, 1940s (Still from *A Journey*, video, 41', 2006)



3. Wedding of Alfred and Rose Kettaneh, Beirut, 1930 (Still from *A Journey*, video, 41', 2006)



4. Road, South Lebanon



5. View of Israel Border Control Point, Fatima's Door, South Lebanon (Still from *A Journey*, video, 41', 2006)

Lebanese civil war. I felt she was betraying her origins and our cause. All this was confusing to me, and things were not as simple as they appeared.

... I may have been clumsy. Were my questions revealing my phantasm of Palestine, the phantasm of an origin, of a community, of a cause?

I wanted to understand. What was paradoxical to me wasn't so to my mother. Exiled from Palestine, her bourgeois and Christian family was easily integrated into Lebanese society.

It seems impossible for us to agree. It's a fact; this war wasn't the same for her as for me. When it started in 1975 I was only a child, then a teenager. What she may have seen, what she may have experienced, wasn't and will never be the same for her as for me...

Would I have had the same commitment as hers, would I have left to protect my children, would I have fought beside the Palestinians?

How would I know?



6. Fatima's Door, Border, South Lebanon (Still from *A Journey*, video, 41', 2006)

My grandmother often told me in a very casual way how she used to come to Beirut on weekends from Jerusalem just to buy a dress and meet her friends. My uncle recounted that it used to take him seven hours to go by car from Beirut to Jerusalem. My grandfather and great-uncles travelled by car for long periods of time for

reasons related to work, throughout the region. And I, for most of my life, couldn't even get close to this border.

This border was a real frontier to an unknown world. I was nostalgic for something I hadn't lived through, for a time without frontiers; and I worried about a future that didn't promise to be peaceful.

They travelled far away, for months, to Egypt, Iraq, Iran, not worrying about borders, it was all one territory to them (...) Of those days she evoked, through the occupation of Palestine and the exile of its population, upto the Lebanese war – what am I left with? An unattainable elsewhere? A fragmented territory, where past promises made way for an unbearable and irreversible reality?

Indeed our reality was irreversible and the loss unredeemable. Even more, things were to get much worse, and places in our region were destined to become more isolated, fragmented and controlled.

I had barely finished *A Journey* when another war was to start. On 11 July 2006, Hezbollah² kidnapped two Israeli soldiers on the border of South-Lebanon. On 12 July 2006, Israel took this operation as a pretext and attacked Lebanon, launching a war which lasted 33 days, killed 1190 civilians, displaced 1,000,000 Lebanese, destroyed the infrastructure of the country from North to South, and imposed a full blockade on the population. This war made me confront issues similar to those faced by my parents in 1975. They were in their thirties when the civil war started; they didn't know if it would last a month or a year. At that time, no one thought it would last.

Was this war also going to last for 15 years?

I could easily assert now what I had always believed: that in fact, 'the war' never really stopped. Today's conflict was simply a continuation of it, after a long pause. But then, how long would it last? Were we to look for peace at any price?

In *Nights and Days*, (video, 17', 2007) I used personal written notes and video recordings, both made during the war of 2006, to recount this experience in a personal way, reflecting on the passage of time, the awaiting, the fears as well as the transformations forced by this war.

You asked me to record the sound of



7. View of a Border Road in Israel from 'Aita el Cha'eb, South Lebanon



8. On the Road to South Lebanon
(Still from *Nights and Days*, 17', 2007)

bombs, so that elsewhere they'll understand what is happening to us, here, in Lebanon. But that would mean waiting for a bomb to fall, almost wishing it to fall, to record its sound. No, that is not possible. But while filming day after day, a bomb, always unexpected and terrifying, might explode and its sound captured; then, I'll keep it for you.

The second part of *Nights and Days* is a journey to South Lebanon a few weeks after the area has been devastated. It reflects on the horror that may be hidden behind beauty, alternating beautiful and peaceful landscapes with ruins and destruction, with only music for sound; for at that moment, no word could adequately express this devastation. Some villages and towns were almost 'erased': Khiam, Bint Jbeil, 'Aita el Chae'b, Markaba. I wondered: why destroy Khiam, a place of memory, the memory of the torture and abuse perpetrated there for decades by the occupying Israeli forces? Why destroy that prison camp and reduce it to rubble and stones, if not to erase the evidence of the pain inflicted there, if not to erase its trace?

Ironically, today there are rumours about Khiam prison camp being reconstructed exactly as it was before, in the name of memory and history.

At Markaba, I stopped at the main square. The town's centre was entirely destroyed. All was quiet; there was no activity, work or reconstruction. A strange aura of appeasement stemmed from that place. Have the inhabitants in the South become so familiar with the violence of their closest enemy? Is it a reality, a generalisation, or my own projection, to think that those who lost everything here in the South and whose home was destroyed,



9. On the Road to Bint Jbeil, South Lebanon (Still from *Nights and Days*, 17', 2007)

express relatively little anger with regard to the tragic events that they experienced? Is it that they considered the violence part of their destiny: a fated outcome of the resistance against a very old enemy? They are habituated to the Israeli planes and tanks. It is understood that these battles may continue to be part of their life for decades...



10. Road, South Lebanon
(Still from *Nights and Days*, 17', 2007)



11. Kham Prison Camp, South Lebanon
(Still from *Nights and Days*, 17', 2007)

A few months later I went back to the South and saw the devastation again. The landscape had changed. The main roads had been cleared and the debris of the bombing removed. You could interpret what had taken place only through absence. Houses, entire buildings, were 'missing', marked only by empty space. Had I not been there before, it wouldn't have struck me that a house had once stood 'there'.

In towns such as Bint Jbeil and 'Aita el Chae'b, you could still see the remnants of some neighbourhoods almost entirely destroyed. I thought to myself: my eyes are now used to destruction. I am now naturally attracted to vistas of desolation. Is it because the first time I picked up a video camera in 1991, I started by filming the ruins in Beirut's downtown district after it was devastated by civil war, and since then, across the rest of the city as well...?

While filming in the South, I was taken by a strange feeling of familiarity.

I recognised what I saw. I knew it even if it was not exactly the same elsewhere. I could film it the way one would film a *genre*: a still life, a couple in love, a view of the sea, a devastated neighbourhood. The images had become so familiar and intimate, I felt almost at ease while viewing the dereliction.

When preparing my frame, I have my references, my preferences; some responses became reflexes, and some reflexes became normative. The landscape of war became a genre with its own specificities and significant details: the tree that grew from the midst of



12. Bint Jbeil, South Lebanon (Still from *Nights and Days*, 17', 2007)

the rubble, the red flowers at the lower edge of the demolished door, a bedroom with a photograph of a man on the only wall that remains standing. A suspended room, threatening to fall at any moment; an entire wall torn down. An immense hole in the façade. A pile of stones, the rubble of rubble, the remains of remains, where no one can imagine what once existed intact in that place. The wreckage of a burnt car...

All these images are familiar, almost banal. How has this disturbing familiarity accustomed us to visions of ruin?

So many of us so easily imagine a house, a neighbourhood, even an entire town, being shelled and demolished by an enemy. Have we become insane? Those ruins – I recognise them, though they are different everywhere. When I first filmed Beirut's ravaged downtown district, the buildings had already been destroyed during the first years of the civil war and long abandoned by their residents. The ones I was looking at now still smelt of the death of those buried in the rubble. Sometimes a man or woman could be found next to a house, dazed and grieving, waiting to see their home rebuilt...

Author's Note

Timeline of the modern frontier conflict between Lebanon and Israel:

> In the early 1970s, tension along the Israel-Lebanon border increased, especially after the relocation of Palestinian armed elements from Jordan to Lebanon.

> 1978: On 11 March, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) claimed responsibility for a commando attack in Israel that resulted in many dead and wounded. On 15 March, Israeli forces invaded Lebanon, and in a few days occupied the entire southern part of the country, except for the city of Tyre and its surrounding area. The Lebanese government submitted a protest to the UN Security Council, stating that Lebanon had no connection with the Palestinian commando operation. On 19 March, the Council adopted Resolutions 425 and 426, in which it called upon Israel to immediately cease its military action and withdraw its forces from all Lebanese territory.

> 1982: In June, after intense exchange of fire in southern Lebanon and across the Israel-Lebanon border, Israel invaded Lebanon again, reaching and surrounding Beirut, bombarding it heavily.



13. 'Aita el Cha'eb, South Lebanon



14. View of a Border Road in Israel, South Lebanon

> 1985: Israel carried out a partial withdrawal, but kept control of an area in South Lebanon manned by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) and the so-called South Lebanon Army (SLA).

> 1996: On 18 April, Israel shelled a UN compound at Qana, Lebanon, killing 120 Lebanese civilians and wounding up to 2000. On 25 May, Israel withdrew its forces from Lebanon, except from the controversial 'Shebaa farms'. As of today, it is not officially specified if this territory is Lebanese or Syrian.

> 2006: On 11 July, Hezbollah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers on the border of South Lebanon. On 12 July, Israel attacked Lebanon, launching a 33-day war that imposed a full blockade on the population.

Editors' Note

For a personal account of the conflict in Lebanon, see Walid Raad, "This Morning, This Evening: Beirut, 15 July 2006" in *Sarai Reader 06: Turbulence* (CSDS, 2006, Delhi), pp. 450-53. For Reader online text, see http://www.sarai.net/journal/reader_06.html

Notes

1. The Haganah (in Hebrew, 'The Defence') was a Jewish paramilitary organisation in what was then the British Mandate of Palestine from 1920-1948. The Zionist leadership created the Haganah to protect the Jewish communities from attacks by Palestinian Arabs. Over the years it went from being an untrained militia to an army that mobilised 10,000 men along with 40,000 reservists in 1936. Although the British administration did not officially recognise the Haganah, the British security forces cooperated with it by forming the Jewish Settlement Police, Jewish Auxiliary Forces and Special Night Squads. Many Haganah fighters objected to the official policy of *havlagah* (restraint) that Jewish political leaders (who had become increasingly controlling of the Haganah) had imposed on the militia. Fighters had been instructed to only defend Jewish settlements and not initiate counter attacks against Arab gangs or their communities. This policy appeared defeatist to many, and in 1931 the most militant elements of the Haganah formed a splinter group, the Irgun Tsva'i-Leumi ('National Military Organisation'), better known as Irgun, that followed a policy of armed retaliation against the Arabs, and later against the British administration. In May 1948, shortly after the creation of the state of Israel, the provisional government created the Israeli Defence Forces that would succeed the Haganah. It also outlawed maintenance of any other armed force.



15. Bint Jbeil, South Lebanon



16. Bint Jbeil, South Lebanon

2. Hezbollah (in Arabic, 'Party of God') is a Shi'a Islamic political and paramilitary organisation based in Lebanon. It first emerged in 1982 as a militia of Shi'a followers of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, and was formed primarily to combat the Israeli occupation following the 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Hezbollah is a strong ally of Iran and Syria from which, it is widely believed, the organisation receives financial and political assistance, as well as weapons and training. Initially a small militia, Hezbollah now has seats in government, owns media, and implements programmes for social development. During the 1990s, Hezbollah militias became at least as powerful as the Lebanese national army in South Lebanon. In 1992, Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah was chosen as the secretary-general of Hezbollah after Israeli forces assassinated Seyyed Abbas al-Musawi. Hezbollah joined the new government for the first time in 2005, winning 14 parliamentary seats that year. In November 2006, Hezbollah and their allies unsuccessfully demanded the establishment of a new government and staked a claim to one-third of the cabinet seats. Today they vigorously oppose the rule of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora.



17. Bint Jbeil, South Lebanon



18. Bint Jbeil, South Lebanon



19. Bint Jbeil, South Lebanon