

Four Hours in Shatila

JEAN GENET*

"*Goyim* kill *goyim*,
and they come to hang the Jews."

Menachem Begin
(Knesset, September 1982)

No one, nothing, no narrative technique, can put into words the six months, and especially the first weeks, which the fedayeen spent in the mountains of Jerash and Ajloun in Jordan. As for relating the events, establishing the chronology, the successes and failures of the PLO, that has been done by others. The feeling in the air, the color of the sky, of the earth, of the trees, these can be told; but never the faint intoxication, the lightness of footsteps barely touching the earth, the sparkle in the eyes, the openness of relationships not only between the fedayeen but also between them and their leaders. Under the trees, everything, everyone was aquiver, laughing, filled with wonder at this life, so new for all, and in these vibrations there was something strangely immovable, watchful, reserved, protected like someone praying. Everything belonged to everyone. Everyone was alone in himself. And perhaps not. In the end, smiling and haggard. The area in Jordan where they had withdrawn for political reasons extended from the Syrian border to Salt, and was bounded by the Jordan River and the road from Jerash to Irbid. About 60 kilometers long

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and 20 deep, this mountainous area was covered with holm oaks, little Jordanian villages and sparse crops. Under the trees and the camouflaged tents the fedayeen had set up combat units and emplaced light and semi-heavy arms. The artillery in place, directed mainly against possible Jordanian operations, young soldiers would take care of their weapons, disassemble them to clean and grease them, then reassemble them quickly. Some managed this feat of disassembling and reassembling their weapons blindfolded so they could do it at night. Between each soldier and his weapon a loving, magical bond had developed. Since the fedayeen had only recently left adolescence behind, the rifle, as a weapon, was the sign of triumphant virility and gave assurance of being. Aggressiveness disappeared: teeth showed behind the smile.

The rest of the time, the fedayeen drank tea, criticized their leaders and the rich, Palestinian and others, insulted Israel, and above all they talked about the revolution, the one they were involved in and the one they were about to enter upon.

For me, the word "Palestinians," whether in a headline, in the body of an article, on a handout, immediately calls to mind fedayeen in a specific spot—Jordan—and at an easily determined date: October, November, December 1970, January, February, March, April 1971. It was then and there that I discovered the Palestinian Revolution. The extraordinary evidence of what was happening, the intensity of this joy at being alive is also called beauty.

Ten years went by, and I heard nothing about them, except that the fedayeen were in Lebanon. The European press spoke off-handedly, even disdainfully, about the Palestinian people. Then suddenly, West Beirut.

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A photograph has two dimensions, so does a television screen; neither can be walked through. From one wall of the street to the other, bent or arched, with their feet pushing against one wall and their heads pressing against the other, the black and bloated corpses that I had to step over were all Palestinian and Lebanese. For me, as for what remained of the population, walking through Shatila and Sabra resembled a game of hopscotch. Sometimes a dead child blocked the streets: they were so small, so narrow, and the dead so numerous. The smell is probably familiar to old people; it didn't bother me. But there were so many flies. If I lifted the handkerchief or the Arab newspaper placed over a head, I disturbed them. Infuriated by my action, they swarmed onto the back of my hand and tried to feed there.

The first corpse I saw was that of a man fifty or sixty years old. He would have had a shock of white hair if a wound (an axe blow, it seemed to me) hadn't split his skull. Part of the blackened brain was on the ground, next to the head. The whole body was lying in a pool of black and clotted blood. The belt was unbuckled, a single button held the pants. The dead man's feet and legs were bare and black, purple and blue; perhaps he had been taken by surprise at night or at dawn. Was he running away? He was lying in a little alley immediately to the right of the entry to Shatila camp which is across from the Kuwaiti Embassy. Did the Shatila massacre take place in hushed tones or in total silence, if the Israelis, both soldiers and officers, claim to have heard nothing, to have suspected nothing whereas they had been occupying this building since Wednesday afternoon?

A photograph doesn't show the flies nor the thick white smell of death. Neither does it show how you must jump over bodies as you walk along from one corpse to the next. If you look closely at a corpse, an odd phenomenon occurs: the absence of life in this body corresponds to the total absence of the body, or rather to its continuous backing away. You feel that even by coming closer you can never touch it. That happens when you look at it carefully. But should you make a move in its direction, get down next to it, move an arm or a finger, suddenly it is very much there and almost friendly.

Love and death. These two words are quickly associated when one of them is written down. I had to go to Shatila to understand the obscenity of love and the obscenity of death. In both cases the body has nothing more to hide: positions, contortions, gestures, signs, even silences belong to one world and to the other. The body of a man of thirty to thirty-five was lying face down. As if the whole body was nothing but a bladder in the shape of a man, it had become so bloated in the sun and through the chemistry of decomposition that the pants were stretched tight as though they were going to burst open at the buttocks and thighs. The only part of the face that I could see was purple and black. Slightly above the knee you could see a thigh wound under the torn fabric. Cause of the wound: a bayonet, a knife, a dagger? Flies on the wound and around it. His head was larger than a watermelon—a black watermelon. I asked his name; he was a Muslim.

"Who is it?"

"A Palestinian," a man about forty answered in French. "See what they've done."

He pulled back the blanket covering the feet and part of the legs. The calves were bare, black and swollen. The feet, in black unlaced army boots,

and the ankles of both feet were very tightly bound together by the knot of a strong rope—its strength was obvious—about nine feet long, which I arranged so that Mrs. S. (an American) could get a good picture of it. I asked the man of forty if I could see the face.

“If you want to, but look at it yourself.”

“Would you help me turn his head?”

“No.”

“Did they drag him through the streets with this rope?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Who tied him up?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Was it Haddad’s men?”

“I don’t know.”

“The Israelis?”

“I don’t know.”

“The Kataeb?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you know him?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see him die?”

“Yes.”

“Who killed him?”

“I don’t know.”

He hastily walked away from the dead man and me. From afar he looked back at me and disappeared into a side street.

Which alley should I take now? I was drawn by men fifty years old, by young men of twenty, by two old Arab women, and I felt as if I were the center of a compass whose quadrants contained hundreds of dead.

I jot this down now, not knowing exactly why at this point in my narrative: “The French have a habit of using the insipid expression ‘dirty work.’ Well, just like the Israeli army ordered the Kataeb or the Haddadists to do their ‘dirty work,’ the Labor Party had its ‘dirty work’ done by the Likud, Begin, Sharon, Shamir.” I have just quoted R., a Palestinian journalist who was still in Beirut on Sunday, September 19.

In the middle, near them, all these tortured victims, my mind can’t get rid of this “invisible vision”: what was the torturer like? Who was he? I see him and I don’t see him. He’s as large as life and the only shape he will ever have is the one formed by the stances, positions, and grotesque gestures of the dead fermenting in the sun under clouds of flies.

If the American Marines, the French paratroopers, and the Italian *bersagliere* who made up an intervention force in Lebanon left so quickly (the Italians, who arrived by ship two days late, fled in Hercules airplanes!) one day or thirty-six hours before their official departure date, as if they were running away, and on the day before Bashir Gemayel's assassination, are the Palestinians really wrong in wondering if Americans, French and Italians had not been warned to clear out pronto so as not to appear mixed up in the bombing of the Kataeb headquarters?

They left very quickly and very early. Israel brags and boasts about its combat efficiency, its battle preparedness, its skill in turning circumstances to its favor, in creating circumstances. Let's see; the PLO leaves Beirut in triumph, on a Greek ship, with a naval escort. Bashir, hiding as best he can, visits Begin in Israel. The intervention of the three armies (American, French, Italian) comes to an end on Monday. On Tuesday, Bashir is assassinated. Tsahal [Israel Defense Forces] enters West Beirut on Wednesday morning. As if they were coming from the port, Israeli soldiers were advancing on Beirut the morning of Bashir's funeral. With binoculars, from the eighth floor of my house I saw them coming in single file: one column. I was surprised that nothing else happened, because with a good rifle with a sight they could have been picked off. Their brutality preceded them.

The tanks came after them. Then the jeeps.

Tired out by such a long early-morning march, they stopped near the French Embassy, letting the tanks go on ahead of them, going right into Hamra. The soldiers sat down on the sidewalk at thirty foot intervals and leaned against the embassy wall, their rifles pointed straight ahead. With their long torsos they looked like boas with two legs stretched out in front of them.

"Israel had promised the American representative Habib not to set foot in West Beirut and especially to respect the civilian populations of the Palestinian camps. Arafat still has the letter in which Reagan made the same promise. Habib supposedly promised Arafat that nine thousand prisoners in Israel would be freed. On Thursday the massacres in Shatila and Sabra begin. The 'bloodbath' that Israel claimed it would prevent by restoring order to the camps . . ." a Lebanese writer told me.

"It will be very easy for Israel to clear itself of all the accusations. Journalists of all the European press are already at work clearing them: no one will say that on the nights from Thursday to Friday and from Friday to

Saturday Hebrew was spoken in Shatila.” That is what another Lebanese told me.

The Palestinian woman—for I couldn’t leave Shatila without going from one corpse to another and this *jeu de l’oie** would inevitably end up at this miracle: Shatila and Sabra razed to the ground and real estate battles to rebuild on this very flat cemetery—the Palestinian woman was probably elderly because her hair was gray. She was stretched out on her back, laid or left there on the rubble, the bricks, the twisted iron rods, without comfort. At first I was surprised by a strange braid made of rope and cloth which went from one wrist to the other, holding the two arms apart horizontally, as if crucified. Her black and swollen face, turned towards the sky, revealed an open mouth, black with flies, and teeth that seemed very white to me, a face that seemed, without moving a muscle, either to grin or smile or else to cry out in a silent and unbroken scream. Her stockings were black wool, and her pink and gray flowered dress, slightly hiked up or too short, I don’t know which, revealed the tops of swollen black calves, again with the delicate mauve tints matched by a similar purple and mauve in the cheeks. Were these bruises or the natural result of rotting in the sun?

“Did they strike her with the butt of the rifle?”

“Look, sir, look at her hands.”

I hadn’t noticed. The fingers of the two hands were spread out and the ten fingers were cut as if with gardening shears. Soldiers, laughing like kids and gaily singing, had probably had fun discovering and using these shears.

“Look, sir.”

The ends of the fingers, the top joints, with the nail, lay in the dust. The young man, who was simply and naturally showing me how the dead had been tortured, calmly put a cloth back over the face and hands of the Palestinian woman, and a piece of corrugated cardboard over her legs. All I could distinguish now was a heap of pink and gray cloth, hovered over by flies.

Three young men led me down an alley.

“Go in, sir, we’ll wait for you outside.”

The first room was what remained of a two-story house. The room gave an impression of serenity and even friendliness, of near happiness; perhaps real happiness had been created out of others’ throwaways, with what survives from a destroyed piece of wall, with what I first thought

*Literally, game of goose, similar to “snakes and ladders,” a game of chance using dice—Ed.

were three armchairs, actually three car seats (perhaps a Mercedes from a junkyard), a couch with cushions covered with gaudy flowered material with stylized designs, a small silent radio, two unlit candelabras. A fairly quiet room, in spite of the carpet of spent shells. The door swung, as if there were a draft. I walked on the spent shells and pushed the door, which opened towards the other room, but I had to push hard: the heel of a boot blocked the way, the heel of a corpse lying on its back, near two other corpses of men lying face down, all of them resting on another carpet of spent shells. I nearly fell several times because of them.

At the back of the room another door was open, without lock or latch. I stepped over the bodies as one crosses chasms. The room contained the corpses of four men, piled on top of each other on a single bed, as if each one had taken care to protect the one under him, or as if they had been caught in a decaying orgiastic copulation. This pile of shields smelled strongly, but it didn't smell bad. The smell and the flies had, so it seemed, gotten used to me. I no longer disturbed anything in these ruins, in this quiet.

During the night from Thursday to Friday, and during those from Friday to Saturday and Saturday to Sunday no one had kept vigil with them, I thought.

Yet, it seemed to me that someone had visited these dead men before me and after their death. The three young men were waiting fairly far from the house with handkerchiefs over their noses.

It was then, as I was coming out of the house, that I had a sudden attack of slight madness that made me almost smile. I thought to myself that there would never be enough boards or carpenters to make the coffins. But then why would they need coffins? The dead men and women were all Muslims, who are sewn into shrouds. How many yards would it take to enshroud so many corpses? And how many prayers? What was missing here, I realized, was the rhythm of prayers.

"Come, sir, come quickly."

It is time to note that this sudden and quite momentary madness which made me count yards of white cloth gave an almost brisk liveliness to my step, and that it may have been caused by a remark I heard a Palestinian womanfriend make the day before.

"I was waiting for them to bring me my keys (which keys: to her car, her house, all I know now is the word keys) when an old man went running by. 'Where are you going?' 'To get help. I'm the gravedigger. They've

bombed the cemetery. All the bones are uncovered. I need help gathering the bones'."

This friend is a Christian, I think. She continued:

"When the vacuum bomb, a so-called implosion bomb, killed two hundred and fifty people, we had only one box. The men dug a mass grave in the Orthodox Church cemetery. We filled the box, and went to empty it. We back and forth under the bombs, digging out bodies and limbs as best we could."

Over the last three months, hands have had a double function: during the day to grasp and touch, at night, to see. Electricity cuts made this "school for the blind" necessary, as it did the climbing, two or three times a day, of that white marble cliff, the eight-floor stairway. We had to fill all the containers in the house with water. The telephone was cut off when the Israeli soldiers entered West Beirut along with their Hebrew inscriptions. So were the roads around Beirut. The Merkava tanks which never stopped showed they were keeping an eye on the whole city, and at the same time one imagined those inside scared they would become a fixed target. They no doubt feared the activity of the Murabitoun* and the fedayeen who might remain in sections of West Beirut.

The day after the entrance of the Israeli army we were prisoners, but it seemed to me that the invaders were less feared than despised, they caused less fear than disgust. No soldier was laughing or smiling. No one was throwing rice or flowers.

Since the roads had been cut off and the telephone was silent, deprived of contact with the rest of the world, for the first time in my life, I felt myself become Palestinian and hate Israel.

At the Sports Stadium, near the Beirut-Damascus highway, which was already nearly completely destroyed by aerial bombardment, the Lebanese deliver piles of weapons, all supposedly voluntarily damaged, to Israeli officers.

In the apartment where I am staying, everyone has a radio. We listen to Radio-Kataeb, Radio-Murabitoun, Radio-Amman, Radio-Jerusalem (in French), Radio-Lebanon. They are probably doing the same thing in every apartment.

"We are linked to Israel by many currents which bring us bombs, tanks, soldiers, fruit, vegetables; they carry off our soldiers, our children to Palestine, in a continual and unceasing coming and going, because

*A Nasserite group in the pro-Palestinian Lebanese National Movement—Ed.

according to them, we have been linked to them since Abraham, in his lineage, in his language, in the same origins. . .” (A Palestinian fedai).

“In short,” he adds, “they invade us, they stuff us, suffocate us and would like to hug us. They say they are our cousins. They’re very sad to see us turn away from them. They must be furious with us and with themselves.”

* * *

The statement that there is a beauty peculiar to revolutionaries raises many problems. Everyone knows, everyone suspects, that young children or adolescents living in old and harsh surroundings have a beauty of face, body, movement and gaze similar to that of the fedayeen. Perhaps this may be explained in the following way: breaking with the ancient ways, a new freedom pushes through the dead skin, and fathers and grandfathers will have a hard time extinguishing the gleam in the eyes, the throbbing in the temples, the joy of blood flowing through the veins.

In the spring of 1971, in the Palestinian bases, that beauty subtly pervaded a forest made alive by the freedom of the fedayeen. In the camps a different, more muted beauty prevailed because of the presence of women and children. The camps received a sort of light from the combat bases, and as for the women, it would take a long and complex discussion to explain their radiance. Even more than the men, more than the fedayeen in combat, the Palestinian women seemed strong enough to sustain the resistance and accept the changes that came along with a revolution. They had already disobeyed the customs: they looked the men straight in the eye, they refused to wear a veil, their hair was visible, sometimes completely uncovered, their voices steady. The briefest and most prosaic of their tasks was but a small step in the self-assured journey towards a new, and therefore unknown, order, but which gave them a hint of a cleansing liberation for themselves, and a glowing pride for the men. They were ready to become both the wives and the mothers of heroes, as they already were for their men.

In the woods of Ajloun, the fedayeen were perhaps dreaming of girls though it seems, rather, that each one conjured up or shaped a girl lying against him, hence the particular gracefulness, the strength—with their amused laughter—of the armed fedayeen. We were not only at the dawn of pre-revolution but in a sensual limbo. A crystallizing frost gave a gentleness to every action.

Constantly, and every day for a month, always in Ajloun, I saw a skinny but strong woman crouching in the cold, crouching like the Andean Indians or certain Black Africans, the untouchables of Tokyo, the Tziganes at market, ready to take off suddenly in case of danger, under trees in front of the guardhouse, a small, hastily erected permanent structure. She was waiting barefoot in her black dress trimmed with braid at the hem and on the edge of the sleeves. Her face was serious but not ill-tempered, tired but not weary. The commando leader would prepare a nearly empty room, then he would signal her. She would enter the room, closing the door, but not locking it. Then she would come out, without a word or a smile, and barefoot and very erect, would return to Jerash and to Baq'a camp. I found out that in the room reserved for her in the guardhouse she used to take off her two black skirts, remove the envelopes and the letters sewn inside, bundle them together and knock once on the door. Turning the letters over to the leader she would go out and leave without saying a word. She would come back the next day.

Other older women would laugh because for a home they had only three blackened stones which, at Jebel Hussein (Amman), they gleefully referred to as "our house." They showed me the three stones, and sometimes the glowing coals, with such childlike voices, laughing and saying: "*darna*." These old women belonged neither to the revolution nor to the Palestinian resistance: they were mirth which has lost all hope. The sun above them continued its journey. An arm or an extended finger created an increasingly thin shadow. But what land? Jordan, through an administrative and political fiction created by France, England, Turkey, America. . . . "Mirth which has lost all hope," most joyful because it is the most desperate. They still saw a Palestine which no longer existed when they were sixteen, but finally they had a land. They were neither under nor on top of it, but in a disturbing space where any movement was a wrong one. Under the bare feet of these octogenarian and supremely elegant tragediennes was the earth solid? It was less and less true. After having fled Hebron under Israeli threats the earth here seemed solid, everyone was lighthearted and moved sensuously in the Arabic language. As time went by the earth seemed to experience this: the Palestinians were less and less bearable at the same time as these same Palestinians, these peasant-farmers, were discovering movement, walking, running, the pleasure of ideas dealt out nearly every day like playing cards, the weapons assembled, disassembled and used. Each of the women speaks in turn. They are laughing. One of them is reported to have said:

“Heroes! What a joke! I gave birth to and spanked five or six of them who are in the *jebel*. I wiped their bottoms. I know what they’re made of, and I can make some more.”

In the ever-blue sky the sun has continued its journey, but it is still warm. These tragediennes remember and imagine at the same time. To emphasize what they say they point their finger at the end of a sentence and stress the emphatic consonants. Should a Jordanian soldier happen by he would be delighted: in the rhythm of the sentences he would rediscover the rhythm of Bedouin dances. Without the sentences, an Israeli soldier, should he see these goddesses, would empty his automatic rifle into their skulls.

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Here in the ruins of Shatila there is nothing left. A few silent old women hastily hiding behind a door where a white cloth is nailed. As for the very young fedayeen, I will meet some in Damascus.

You can select a particular community other than that of your birth, whereas you are born into a people; this selection is based on an irrational affinity, which is not to say that justice has no role, but this justice and the entire defense of this community take place because of an emotional—perhaps intuitive, sensual—attraction; I am French, but I defend the Palestinians wholeheartedly and automatically. They are in the right because I love them. But would I love them if injustice had not turned them into a wandering people?

Almost all the buildings in Beirut have been hit, in what they still call West Beirut. They crumble in different ways: like puff pastry squeezed between the fingers of some indifferent and voracious giant King Kong; other times the top three or four floors lean deliciously in an elegant pleat, giving a sort of Lebanese draping to the building. If one facade is intact, go around the house; the other walls will be shell-pocked. If the four walls are standing with no cracks, the bomb dropped by the airplane fell in the center and made a hole out of what was the staircase and the elevator shaft.

In West Beirut, after the Israelis arrived, S. told me: “Night had fallen; it must have been seven o’clock. All of a sudden there was a loud clank, clank, clank. Everybody, my sister, my brother-in-law and I ran out on the balcony. The night was very dark. And every once in a while there was something like lightning less than a hundred yards away. You know that almost across from us there is a kind of Israeli command post: four tanks, a house occupied by soldiers, officers and guards. Night. And the clanking

noise is getting closer. The lightning; a few lit torches. And forty or fifty kids about twelve or thirteen years old beating rhythmically on little jerrycans, either with rocks or hammers or something else. They were screaming, chanting: *La ilah illa Allah, la Kataeb wa la yahoud* (There is no God but Allah; no to the Kataeb; no to the Jews.)”

H. said to me: “When you came to Beirut and Damascus in 1928 Damascus was destroyed. General Gouraud and his troops, Moroccan and Tunisian infantry, had been shooting and cleaned out Damascus. Whom did the Syrian people accuse?”

Me: “The Syrians blamed France for the massacres and the destruction in Damascus.”

He: “We blame Israel for the massacres in Shatila and Sabra. Don’t only blame the Kataeb who replaced them. Israel is guilty of allowing two companies of Kataeb to enter the camps, of giving them orders and of encouraging them for three days and nights, of bringing them food and drink, of lighting the camps at night.”

H. again, professor of history: “In 1917 Abraham’s trick was brought up to date, or if you prefer, God was already the prefiguration of Lord Balfour. The Jews used to say and still say that God had promised Abraham and his descendents a land of milk and honey. But this land, which didn’t belong to the God of the Jews (this land was full of gods), this land was inhabited by the Canaanites, who had their own gods, and who fought against Joshua’s troops and ended up stealing the famous Ark of the Covenant, without which the Jews would never have won. And England, in 1917, didn’t yet rule over Palestine (that land of milk and honey) since the treaty giving it a mandate had not yet been signed.”

“Begin claims that he came to the country”

“That’s the name of a movie: *The Long Absence*. Does that Pole strike you as the heir to Solomon?”

In the camps, after twenty years of exile, the refugees dreamed of their Palestine, and no one dared to think or say that Israel had destroyed it from top to bottom, that where the barley field had been there was a bank, and a power station where a climbing vine had grown.

“Shall we replace the gate to the field?”

“We’ll have to rebuild part of the wall next to the fig tree.”

“All the pans must be rusted: buy an emery-cloth.”

“Maybe we should hook up electricity to the barn.”

“Oh no, no more hand-embroidered dresses: you can get me one machine for sewing and one for embroidering.”

The old people of the camps were wretched; they may also have been so in Palestine but there nostalgia played a magical role. They may remain prisoners of the camp's unhappy spell. It is not certain that this Palestinian group will leave the camps with regret. In this sense, extreme destitution makes you yearn for the past. The man who has known this, along with bitterness has known a joy which is extreme, solitary and impossible to communicate. The Jordanian camps perched on the rocky slopes are bare, but around them there is a more desolate barrenness: shanties, tents with holes in them inhabited by families whose pride glows. Anyone who denies that men can become fond and proud of their obvious destitution understands nothing of the human heart; they can be proud because this obvious destitution veils a hidden glory.

The solitude of the dead in Shatila camp was even more palpable because they had gestures and poses which they had not planned. Dead any old how. Dead and abandoned. Yet around us, in the camp, all the affection, the tenderness and love floated in search of Palestinians who would never answer.

"What can we say to their families who left with Arafat, trusting in the promises of Reagan, Mitterrand and Perini, who had assured them that the civilian population of the camps would be safe? How can we explain that we allowed children, old people and women to be massacred, and that we are abandoning their bodies without prayers? How can we tell them that we don't know where they are buried?"

The massacres did not take place in silence and darkness. Lit by Israeli flares, the Israelis were listening to Shatila as early as Thursday evening. What partying, what feasting went on there as death seemed to take part in the pranks of soldiers drunk on wine, on hatred, and probably drunk on the joy of entertaining the Israeli army which was listening, looking, giving encouragement, egging them on. I didn't see this Israeli army listening and watching. I saw what it did.

To the argument: What did Israel gain by assassinating Bashir: entering Beirut, reestablishing order and preventing the bloodbath.

What did Israel gain in the Shatila massacre? Answer: what did it gain by entering Lebanon? What did it gain by bombing the civilian population for two months; by hunting down and destroying Palestinians? What did it want to gain in Shatila: the destruction of Palestinians.

It kills men, it kills corpses. It razes Shatila. It is not uninterested in the real estate speculation on the improved land: it's worth five million old francs per square yard still in ruins. But "cleaned up" it will be worth . . . ?

I am writing this in Beirut where, perhaps because death is so close, still lying on the ground, everything is truer than in France: everything seems to be happening as if, weary and tired of being an example, of being untouchable, of taking advantage of what it believes it has become—the vengeful saint of the Inquisition—Israel had decided to allow itself to be judged coldly.

Thanks to a skillful but predictable metamorphosis, it is now what it has long been becoming: a loathsome, temporal power, colonialist in a way which few dare to imitate, having become the Definitive Judge which it owes to its longstanding curse as much as to its chosen status.

Many questions remain.

If the Israelis merely lit up the camp, listened to it, heard the shots fired by so many guns, whose spent shells I kicked underfoot (tens of thousands), who was actually firing? Who was risking their skin by killing? The Phalangists? The Haddadists? Who? And how many?

What happened to the weapons responsible for all these corpses? And what about the weapons of those who defended themselves? In the part of the camp which I visited, I saw only two unused anti-tank weapons.

How did the assassins get into the camps? Were the Israelis at all the exits to Shatila? In any case, on Thursday they were already at the Akka Hospital, across from one camp entrance.

According to the newspapers, the Israelis entered Shatila camp as soon as they knew about the massacres, and they stopped them immediately, that is, on Saturday. But what did they do with the slayers and where have they gone?

After the assassination of Bashir Gemayel and twenty of his friends, after the massacres, Mrs. B., a member of the Beirut upper class, came to see me when she found out I was coming back from Shatila. She climbed the eight floors of the building—no electricity; I suppose she is elderly, elegant but elderly.

“Before Bashir’s death, before the massacres, you were right to tell me that the worst was about to happen. I saw it.”

“Please don’t tell me what you saw in Shatila. I am too highly strung, and I must keep my strength to face the worst which is still to come.”

She lives alone with her husband (seventy years old) and her maid in a large apartment in Ras Beirut. She is very elegant. Very refined. Her furniture is antique, Louis XVI, I think.

“We knew that Bashir had gone to Israel. He was wrong. An elected head of state should not associate with people like that. I was sure that

something awful would happen to him. But I don't want to hear about it. I have to save my strength to withstand the terrible blows that are yet to come. Bashir was going to give back that letter in which Mr. Begin calls him my dear friend."

The upper class, with its silent servants, has its own way of resisting. Mrs. B. and her husband "don't quite believe in metempsychosis." What will happen if they are reborn as Israelis?

The day of Bashir's burial is also the day the Israeli army enters West Beirut. The explosions get closer to the building where we are; finally everyone goes to the shelter in the basement. Ambassadors, doctors, their wives and daughters, a UN representative to Lebanon, their servants.

"Carlos, bring me a pillow."

"Carlos, my glasses."

"Carlos, a little water."

The servants, too, are accepted in the shelter as they also speak French. It may be necessary to look after them, their wounds, their transport to the hospital or the cemetery, what a predicament!

You have to know that the Palestinian camps of Shatila and Sabra are made up of miles and miles of narrow little alleys—for here, even the alleys are so skinny, so thread-like that sometimes two people cannot walk together unless one walks sideways—strewn with rubbish, cement blocks, bricks, dirty multi-colored rags, and that at night, under the light of the Israeli flares which lit up the camps, fifteen or twenty even well-armed fighters would have been unable to carry out this slaughter. The killers worked and they were numerous, and probably accompanied by torture squads who split skulls, slashed thighs, cut off arms, hands and fingers, and dragged the dying at the end of a rope, men and women who were still alive since blood had flowed from the bodies for a long time, so much that I was unable to determine who, in the hall of a house, had left this trickle of dried blood, from the end of the hall where there was a pool as far as the doorstep where it disappeared into the dust. Was it a Palestinian man? A woman? A Phalangist whose body had been removed?

From Paris, one can entertain doubts about the whole thing, especially if one knows nothing about the layout of the camps. One can allow Israel to claim that the journalists from Jerusalem were the first to report the massacre. How did they phrase it for the Arab countries and in Arabic? And how in English and French? And exactly when? Just think about the precautions surrounding a suspicious death in the West, fingerprints, ballistics reports, autopsies, testimonies and counter-testimonies! In Bei-

rut, scarcely had the massacre become known than the Lebanese army officially took charge of the camps and immediately eradicated the ruins of the houses and the remains of the bodies. Who ordered this haste? Especially after this statement had swept the world that Christians and Muslims had killed each other, and even after cameras had recorded the brutality of the slayings.

Akka Hospital, occupied by the Israelis, and across from an entrance to Shatila, is not two hundred yards from the camp, but forty. They saw nothing, heard nothing, understood nothing?

Because that's just what Begin declared to the Knesset: "*Goyim* kill *goyim*, and they come to hang the Jews."

I must conclude my description of Shatila, which was briefly interrupted. Here are the bodies I saw last, on Sunday, about two o'clock in the afternoon, when the International Red Cross came in with its bulldozers. The stench of death was coming neither from a house nor a victim: my body, my being, seemed to emit it. In a narrow street, in the shadow of a wall, I thought I saw a black boxer sitting on the ground, laughing, surprised to have been knocked out. No one had had the heart to close his eyelids, his eyes as white as porcelain and bulging out, were looking at me. He seemed crestfallen, with his arm raised, leaning against this angle of the wall. He was a Palestinian who had been dead two or three days. If I mistook him at first for a black boxer it is because his head was enormous, swollen and black, like all the heads and all the bodies, whether in the sun or in the shadow of the houses. I walked near his feet. I picked up an upper dental plate in the dust and set it on what remained of the window ledge. The palm of his hand open towards the sky, his open mouth, the opening in his pants where the belt was missing: all hives where flies were feeding.

I stepped over one corpse, then another. There in the dust, in the space between the two bodies, there was at last a very living object, intact in the carnage, a translucent pink object which could still be used: an artificial leg, apparently in plastic, and wearing a black shoe and a gray sock. As I looked closer, it became clear that it had been brutally wrenched off the amputated leg, because the straps that usually held it to the thigh were all broken.

This artificial leg belonged to the second body, the one on which I had noticed only one leg with a foot wearing a black shoe and a gray sock.

In the street perpendicular to the one where I left the three bodies, there was another. It was not completely blocking the way, but it was lying at the entrance of the street so that I had to walk by it and turn around to

see the sight: seated on a chair, surrounded by fairly young and silent men and women, a woman—in Arab dress—was sobbing; she could have been sixteen or sixty. She was crying over her brother whose body almost blocked the way. I came closer to her. I looked more carefully. She had a scarf tied around her neck. She was crying, mourning the death of her brother next to her. Her face was pink, a baby pink, the same color all over, very soft, tender, but without eyelashes or eyebrows, and what I thought was pink was not the top layer of skin but an under layer edged in gray skin. Her whole face was burned. I don't know by what, but I understood by whom.

With the first bodies, I tried to count them. When I got to twelve or fifteen, surrounded by the smell, the sun, stumbling over each ruin, it was impossible; everything became confused.

I have seen lots of crumbling buildings and gutted houses spilling out eiderdown and have not been moved, but when I looked at those in West Beirut and Shatila I saw fear. The dead generally become very familiar, even friendly to me, but when I saw those in the camps I perceived only the hatred and joy of those who had killed them. A barbaric party had taken place there: rage, drunkenness, dances, songs, curses, laments, moans, in honor of the *voyeurs* who were laughing on the top floor of Akka Hospital.

In France, before the Algerian war, the Arabs weren't beautiful, their gait was awkward, shuffling, they had ugly mugs, and almost suddenly victory made them beautiful; but a little before victory was assured, while more than half a million French soldiers were straining and dying in the Aures and throughout Algeria, a curious thing happened to the faces and bodies of the Arab workers: something like the intimation, the hint of a still fragile beauty which was going to blind us when the scales finally fell from their skin and our eyes. We had to admit it: they had achieved political freedom in order to be seen as they were: very beautiful. In the same way, once they had escaped from the refugee camps, from the morality and the order of the camps, from a morality imposed by the need to survive, once they had at the same time escaped from shame, the *fedayeen* were very beautiful; and since this beauty was new, shall we say pristine, naive, it was fresh, so alive that it discovered at once what connected it to all the beauties of the world, freeing themselves from shame.

Lots of Algerian pimps walking through Pigalle at night used their charms in the service of the Algerian revolution. Virtue was also there. It is Hannah Arendt, I believe, who distinguishes between revolutions accord-

ing to whether they aspire to freedom or virtue—and therefore work. Perhaps we should also recognize that revolutions or liberations aim—obscurely—at discovering or rediscovering beauty, that is the intangible, unnamable except by this word. But no, on the other hand: let us mean by beauty a laughing insolence goaded by past unhappiness, systems and men responsible for unhappiness and shame, above all a laughing insolence which realizes that, freed of shame, growth is easy.

But on this page we should also address the following question: is a revolution a revolution when it has not removed from faces and bodies the dead skin that made them ugly? I am not speaking about academic beauty, but about the intangible—unnamable—joy of bodies, faces, cries, words which are no longer cheerless, I mean a sensual joy so strong that it chases away all eroticism.

* * *

Here I am again in Ajloun, in Jordan, then in Irbid. I remove what I believe is one of my white hairs from my sweater and put it on the knee of Hamza, sitting near me. He takes it between his thumb and middle finger, looks at it, smiles, puts it in the pocket of his black jacket, and pats it saying:

“A hair from the Prophet’s beard is worth less than that.”

He takes a slightly deeper breath and starts over:

“A hair from the Prophet’s beard is not worth more than that.”

He was only twenty-two years old, his thoughts leaped easily high above the Palestinians who were forty, but he was already bearing the signs—on himself, on his body, in his actions—which linked him to the older ones.

In the old days farmers used to blow their noses in their fingers. Then they flipped the snot into the thorns. They wiped their noses on their corduroy sleeves, which at the end of a month were covered with a pearly luster. So did the fedayeen. They blew their noses the same way noblemen and churchmen took snuff: slightly stooped over. I did the same thing, which they taught me without realizing.

And the women? Night and day they embroidered the seven dresses (one for each day of the week) of the engagement trousseau given by a generally older husband chosen by the family, painful awakening. The Palestinian girls became very beautiful when they revolted against their fathers and broke their needles and embroidery scissors. It was on the mountains of Ajloun, Salt and Irbid, in the forests themselves that sensual-

ity had come down, freed by the revolution and by guns, let's not forget the guns. That was enough, everyone was happy. Without realizing it, the fedayeen—is it true?—were perfecting a new beauty: the liveliness of their actions and their obvious fatigue, the quickness and brightness of their eyes, the clearer tone of voice harmonized with the swiftness and brevity of the reply. With its precision too. They had done away with long sentences, learned and glib rhetoric.

Many died in Shatila, and my friendship, my affection for their rotting corpses was also immense, because I had known them. Blackened, swollen, decayed by the sun and by death, they were still fedayeen.

Around two o'clock in the afternoon on Sunday three soldiers from the Lebanese army drove me, at gunpoint, to a jeep where an officer was dozing. I asked him:

"Do you speak French?"

"English."

The voice was dry, maybe because I had awakened it with a start. He looked at my passport, and said to me, in French:

"Have you just been there?" He pointed to Shatila.

"Yes."

"And did you see?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to write about it?"

"Yes."

He gave me back my passport. He signaled me to leave. The three rifles were lowered. I had spent four hours in Shatila. About forty bodies remained in my memory. All of them—and I mean all—had been tortured, probably against a backdrop of drunkenness, song, laughter, the smell of gunpowder and already of decaying flesh.

I was probably alone, I mean the only European (with a few old Palestinian women still clinging to a torn white cloth; with a few young unarmed fedayeen), but if these five or six human beings had not been there and I had discovered this butchered city, black and swollen Palestinians lying there, I would have gone crazy. Or did I? That city lying in smithereens which I saw or thought I saw, which I walked through, felt, and whose death stench I wore, had all that taken place? I had explored, and poorly at that, only a twentieth of Shatila and Sabra, nothing of Bir Hassan, nothing of Bourj al-Barajneh.

It's not because of my leanings that I lived through the Jordanian period as if it were a fairy tale. Europeans and North African Arabs have told me about the spell that kept them there. As I lived through this long span of six months, barely colored by night for twelve or thirteen hours, I discovered the ethereality of what was happening, the exceptional quality of the fedayeen, but I had a premonition of the fragility of the structure. Everywhere in Jordan where the Palestinian army had assembled, near the Jordan River, there were checkpoints where the fedayeen were so sure of their rights and their might that the arrival of a visitor, by night or by day, at one of the checkpoints was a pretext for tea, for talk mixed with bursts of laughter and brotherly kisses (the one they embraced would be leaving that night, cross the Jordan River to plant bombs in Palestine and often would not return). The only islands of silence were the Jordanian villages; they kept their mouths shut. All the fedayeen seemed to be walking slightly above the ground, like the effect of a very light glass of wine or a drag on a little hashish. What was it? Youth, oblivious of death and with Czech and Chinese weapons to fire into the air. Protected by weapons that talked so big, the fedayeen weren't afraid of anything.

Any reader who has seen a map of Palestine and Jordan knows that the land is not like a sheet of paper. Along the Jordan River the land is in high relief. This whole escapade should have been subtitled *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in spite of the flare-ups between the forty-year-old leaders. All that was possible because of youth, the joy of being under the trees, of playing with weapons, of being away from women, in other words, of conjuring away a difficult problem, of being the brightest and the most forward point of the revolution, of having the approval of the population of the camps, or being photogenic no matter what, and perhaps of foreseeing that this revolutionary fairy tale might soon be defiled: the fedayeen didn't want power; they had freedom.

At the Damascus airport on my way back from Beirut I met some young fedayeen who had escaped from the Israeli hell. They were sixteen or seventeen. They were laughing; they were like the ones in Ajloun. They will die like them. The struggle for a country can fill a very rich life, but a short one. That was the choice, as we recall, of Achilles in the *Iliad*.

Translated by Daniel R. Dupêcher
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