

MEMOIR

Surviving Beirut

Just as Guernica symbolized to an earlier generation the horror of indiscriminate total war, so Beirut, with its kidnappings, car bombs, and artillery barrages, has today come to represent the specter of random political violence. During 14 years of civil strife, Lebanon's warring ideological and religious factions—Maronite Christians, Druse, Sunni and Shiite Muslims—have battled not only one another but Syria, Israel, the PLO, and U.N. peacekeepers. Beirut has been the main battlefield. Yet, many Beirutis have adapted and survived; civilization has not vanished. Here, Thomas L. Friedman, who reported from Beirut for United Press International (1979–81) and the *New York Times* (1982–84), describes how Beirut's battered citizens have coped.

by Thomas L. Friedman

I once watched a man being kidnapped in Beirut. It took only a few seconds.

I was on my way to Beirut International Airport when my taxi became stalled in traffic. Suddenly I saw off to my right four men with pistols tucked into their belts who were dragging another man out his front door. A woman, probably his wife, was standing just inside the shadow of the door, clutching her bathrobe and weeping. The man was struggling and kicking with all his might, a look of sheer terror in his eyes. Somehow the scene reminded me of a group of football players carrying their coach off the field after a victory, but this was no celebration. Just for a second my eyes met those of the hapless victim, right before he was bundled into a waiting car. His eyes did not say "Help me"; all they spoke was fear. He knew I couldn't help him. This was Beirut.

Moments later the traffic jam broke and my taxi moved on to the airport. The Lebanese driver, who had kept his eyes frozen straight ahead the whole time, never

said a word about the horror show which had just unfolded. He talked instead about his family, politics, about anything but what had happened alongside us. While he spoke, my mind remained locked on the kidnap victim. Who was he? What had he done? Maybe he was a bad guy and the others good, or was it the other way around?

Beirut was always a city that provoked more questions than answers, both for those who lived there and for those who did not. The most frequent from my readers and friends back home all began with "How?"—How do people cope? How do people survive? How do people go on living in a city where violence has killed or injured 100,000 souls in 14 years of civil strife?

What I always answered was that surviving Beirut required many things, but first and foremost it required a wild imagination. Because in a few seconds on the way to the airport or to the corner grocery store you could find yourself watching

something you not only hadn't seen before in your life but had never even imagined. The visitors who learned to respect the surprises that a place like Beirut could offer did well there; others, like the American Marines or the Israelis, who never really understood the shocks that could greet you around any Beirut street corner, paid heavily.

Amnon Shahak taught me that. Shahak, a brilliant Israeli major general who eventually rose to be Chief of Military Intelligence, commanded the Israeli division that was stationed in the Shouf Mountains, which overlook Beirut from the southeast, during the year following Israel's June 1982 invasion. Shortly before General Shahak assumed his post, the Druse and the Phalangist Christian militias became locked in a bitter, no-holds-barred fight for control of the Shouf—a fight they carried out with hatchets, bazookas, and tanks, uninhibited by the Israeli army surrounding both of them. General Shahak once told me about his first day in command in Lebanon—the day he discovered how much he did not know. Although he was a hard-bitten soldier who had seen many men die and had no doubt put away a few himself, Shahak admitted that he lacked the imagination Beirut and Lebanon required.

"The first night after I arrived," Shahak recalled, "I was in my room in Aley, in the Shouf, which we were using as our command post. At about 9:00 P.M. a group of Druse elders came to our headquarters and demanded to see me. They were very upset. They would not tell me what it was about, they just kept saying, 'Please, please, you must come with us.' They seemed very angry, so I thought I had better go along. When we got to the hospital, there was a crowd of about a hundred Druse men



A Beirut sniper, affiliation unknown.

standing in front of the building. They were all shouting and waving their arms. They took me through the crowd to the front, and I found set before me on the steps three orange crates. One had human heads in it, another had torsos, and the other arms and legs. They said these were Druse sheiks whom the Christians had ambushed and then carved up. They looked to me like sheiks because all the heads had black beards.

"I was really shocked," Shahak continued. "I had never seen anything like this in all my years as a soldier. I decided that no matter what time it was, I was going to go down to the Phalangist headquarters in Beirut and get an explanation. So I got in a jeep and went down to Beirut. Fuad Abu Nader, one of the Phalangist commanders, was waiting for me with some of his men. He is a doctor by training. I demanded an explanation. Abu Nader listened and was very calm. When I got done describing ev-

everything, he said to me, 'Oh, I know this trick.' He said that there had been a fight that day between some of his men and some Druse, and that some Druse were killed trying to attack a Phalangist position in the Shouf, and the dead were left in the battlefield. He said the Druse took their dead away and then carved them up to make it look as though the Maronites did it and then brought the chopped-up bodies to Aley to stir up their own people. I just shook my head. I realized at that moment that I was in the middle of a game I did not understand."

After spending nearly five years in Beirut, I eventually developed the imagination the city demanded. I came to think of Beirut as a huge abyss, the darkest corner of human behavior, an urban jungle where not even the law of the jungle applied. Experiencing such an abyss not only left scars but also new *muscles*. Life can no longer deal you many surprises or shocks after you've lived in Beirut. The experience leaves you wearing an emotional bullet-proof vest.

But like everyone else who lived there, I acquired mine the hard way.

It was June 8, 1982. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon had begun 48 hours earlier. Mohammed Kasrawi, the *New York Times* Beirut bureau driver and news assistant since 1953, and I had been down in south Lebanon covering the first exchanges of fire between Israeli and Syrian troops. That evening, when we returned to my apartment house, an ornate, high-ceilinged, six-story colonial building overlooking the Mediterranean, we found Nadia, my maid, looking down on us from the balcony in a state of total panic.

We had visitors.

Standing in the parking lot was an extended Palestinian family—father, mother, grandmother, with babies in everyone's arms and children of assorted ages at everyone's feet. Their eyes, too, were round with fear, like deer caught in headlights.

They were carrying bags of canned food and bulging suitcases with tongues of clothing licking out from all sides. What I remember most, though, was that the father was standing amid them all with a rocket-propelled grenade launcher on his shoulder. They looked to me like a weird Beirut version of Grant Wood's *American Gothic*. Like thousands of other Palestinian and Lebanese families, this extended clan had been driven out of the Palestinian refugee camps and neighborhoods on the southern edge of Beirut by merciless Israeli bombing and shelling and were desperately looking for empty apartments closer to the heart of West Beirut, where the fighting had yet to encroach. Other Palestinian refugee families had already broken into three empty apartments in our building, including the absent landlord's elegant penthouse, with its imported Italian marble floors and "Louis de Lebanon" overstuffed furniture. To get into the landlord's flat, the refugees had dynamited the two-inch-thick steel safe door he had installed to prevent precisely such an occurrence. This particular family in the parking lot had tried to get into my apartment but Nadia had temporarily kept them at bay by saying I was a very important foreigner "with connections"—which in Beirut argot always meant connections to people who kill other people.

After Mohammed and I showed up, the family backed off. But this little encounter on the third day of the Israeli invasion led me to think that I would be much safer moving into the Commodore Hotel, where most of the foreign press corps was lodged; my wife, Ann, was finishing up her job in New York and so had not yet arrived in Beirut. Mohammed, ever faithful to me and the *New York Times*, volunteered to put two of his 13 children—his 20-year-old daughter Azizza and seven-year-old daughter Hanan—into the apartment. If any more refugees tried to knock down the door, they would simply explain to them in perfect Palestinian colloquial accents that

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they, too, were refugees and were squatting in the apartment.

The plan worked until Friday evening, June 11. I finished writing my story that day for the *Times* and, as usual, sent it to my editors via the telex at the Reuters news agency in West Beirut. It was time to head back to the Commodore Hotel for the night. The stairwell in the Reuters building was totally dark, because the electricity had been out since the second day of the war, and my colleague Bill Farrell and I were feeling our way down the stairs like two blind men, using the wall to guide us. Just as we rounded the turn onto the last flight of stairs, we were met by a human shadow, panting and breathless from racing up the lobby steps two at a time.

"Tom? Tom, is that you?" The familiar voice of the *Times'* local Palestinian reporter, Ihsan Hijazi, issued from the shadowy figure.

"Yeah, Ihsan," I said nonchalantly. "It's me. It's me."

"Oh, thank God, you're alive," he said, gripping me by the shoulders, his face right up to mine. "Abdul just called. He heard it on the radio. Someone has blown up your house."

"Oh my God," I gasped. "Mohammed's children are in there. He just left to go see them."

We all scrambled down the stairs, tiptoed our way through the lobby packed with refugees living on mattresses and cooking with portable gas burners, and out the front door into Ihsan's old Dodge. Gas pedal to the floor, Ihsan sped through the empty streets to my apartment, which was located in the once-posh Manara (lighthouse) district of West Beirut. As we drove, I kept thinking to myself, This cannot be happening to me. I'm just a reporter. Why my apartment building? Sure, people kill reporters in Beirut, but I've been here only a few weeks.

When Bill, Ihsan, and I arrived at the apartment house, the first thing I saw was a piece of my blue metal window shutters that had been blown by the force of the explosion some 75 feet across the parking lot and was stuck deep into the side of a tree like a thrown hatchet. The apartment building itself had been blown in half. The part still standing was cut open, as though

it were a life-size dollhouse, with jagged pieces of concrete dangling from every floor. Stainless-steel pots and pans still hung on the walls of someone's kitchen, unaffected by the blast. The pharmacist's wife who lived upstairs, a striking, tall, Lebanese blonde, was sandwiched with her son in her arms between two walls that had been blown together, forming a grotesque human fossil. Below, her dazed husband staggered around like a zombie looking for their other son. The half of the building that had been brought down by the explosion collapsed into a 30-foot-high smoldering avalanche of concrete, steel reinforcement rods, books, clothing, and bodies that covered all the cars in the parking lot. I noticed my business cards scattered all over the pile. Red Cross volunteers were already picking through the tangled mound with crowbars, looking for survivors, while shouting with bullhorns into every crack to see if anyone was buried alive.

The second thing I saw was Mohammed. He was sitting on the back of a fire engine, weeping into his hands. Bill walked over and cradled Mohammed in his long arms, while he wailed in grief, "I am not a man of war. I never hurt anyone, I never hurt anyone."

In a sobbing voice, Mohammed explained that a few hours earlier his wife, Nazira, had come to the house to visit her two daughters and their only son, Ahmed, then 18, who had stopped by to say hello to his sisters. Ahmed left around 5:00 P.M., and minutes later, as Mohammed was on his way to the building, it was blown apart, with Nazira, Azizza, and Hanan all inside.

The pile of rubble proved to be too heavy for the rescue workers, and we had to wait until the next morning for a crane to arrive and lift the crushed concrete off the dead. On a clear blue Saturday morning Bill, Mohammed, and his surviving children sat under the tree with the piece of shutter stuck into it and waited as the crane went about its grizzly task. First Nazira was uncovered, then Azizza, and finally little dimple-cheeked Hanan. They had obviously been in my office watching television when someone placed the explosive charge in the hallway, apparently

not far from my door. We knew where they had been sitting because Hanan was found with her tiny fingers still gripping my black Texas Instruments digital watch, which she must have been playing with at my desk when the blast brought the walls down on them. The watch was still keeping time.

When they unearthed Hanan's body, Mohammed went to pieces. Only seven years old, she was Mohammed's favorite of his 13 children. She had been born shortly after the Lebanese civil war began in April 1975 and had grown up in the anarchy of the ensuing years. She died never having known a day's peace.

We buried them the next morning in the Palestinian cemetery on the road to Beirut Airport. Their three bodies, covered only with white sheets and already beginning to decompose in the June heat, were laid out under a 130 mm cannon the PLO had hidden in the funeral chapel. A Muslim sheik with a red turban said a few prayers over the corpses in guttural Arabic that was innocent of compassion and empty of all grief. Then one by one, Nazira, Azizza, and little Hanan were gently fitted by Mohammed's sons-in-law into a single grave. They all had to be buried together; there wasn't room in the overflowing cemetery for three separate graves.

Who had done this? A few days later, the neighborhood police said that some of the Palestinian clans who had squatted in our building had apparently gotten into a fight over one of the apartments. Each family was associated with a different PLO faction, the police claimed. The clan that lost, they said, went to their PLO group and got someone to bring in some plastique explosives and blow up the whole building. Moments before they lit the fuse, they warned their own kin, who scrambled out the doors. The rest were not so lucky. In all, 19 people, including refugees, the Dutch banker in the apartment below me, and the beautiful blonde upstairs, whose name I never did know, died a Beirut death, which is the most absurd and scandalous death possible: death for no reason.

One of the worst cases of Beirut death I ever witnessed, besides that in my own

apartment house, occurred in August 1982, when Israeli jets bombed an eight-story building in West Beirut that was also packed with several hundred Palestinian refugees. The building fell into itself like a house of cards, burying everyone inside alive. Rumor had it that the PLO maintained a communications center in the basement, but I never found any proof of this. Shortly after I arrived on the scene, a woman who had lived in the building returned home only to find her whole family smothered in the rubble. She immediately tried to fling herself onto the ruins. A dramatic photograph was taken of her being held back by one arm, as she struggled to get free. Her other arm reached out toward her vanished family, while her face was twisted into a portrait of utter anguish. About an hour after that picture was taken, a small car bomb went off half a block away, across from the Ministry of Information, and this woman, who happened to be standing by the car, was killed instantly.

That was Beirut. No one was keeping score. No matter how you lived your life, whether you were decent or indecent, sinner or saint, it was all irrelevant. Men and women there could suffer wrenching tragedies once or twice or even three times, and then suffer some more. The evening Mohammed's family perished in my apartment we ran over to the local police station on nearby Bliss Street to see if, by some miracle, Mohammed's wife and children were among those who might have been taken out of the rubble alive to local hospitals. There was a lone policeman on duty. He was sitting at a bare metal desk watching television.

"Sorry," he said, between glances back and forth at the TV set, "no names." Nobody had bothered to even try to make a list, of either the survivors or the victims. No one was keeping score. Death had no echo in Beirut. No one's life seemed to leave any mark on the city or reverberate in its ear.

Hana Abu Salman, a young psychology researcher whom I got to know at the American University of Beirut, once did a project interviewing her classmates about their deepest anxieties. Among their greatest fears, she found, was this fear of dying in a city without echoes, where you knew

that your tombstone could end up as someone's doorstep before the grass had even grown over your grave.

"In the United States if you die in a car accident, at least your name gets mentioned on television," Hana remarked. "Here they don't even mention your name anymore. They just say, 'Thirty people died.' Well, what 30 people? They don't even bother to give their names. At least say their names. I want to feel that I was something more than a body when I die."



As a news story, Beirut was always more interesting for its psychology than for its politics. People used to ask me if I wasn't terrified living in Beirut. There were moments, of course, but most of the time I was too intrigued observing people's behavior in this real-life Skinner Box to think about being frightened.

In his classic work *Leviathan*, the 17th-century English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes described what he called "the state of nature" that would exist if government and society completely broke down and the law of the jungle reigned. In such a condition, wrote Hobbes, "where every man is enemy to every man . . . there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing, such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

I don't know if Beirut is a perfect Hobbesian state of nature, but it is probably the closest thing to it that exists in the world today. If so, Hobbes was right about life in such a world being "nasty, brutish, and short," but he was quite wrong about its being "poor" and "solitary." Indeed, if I learned any lesson from living in Beirut it is that when authority breaks down and a society collapses into a state of nature, men will do anything to avoid being poor

or solitary.

This instinctive desire to bring order and comfort to one's life amid chaos is precisely what gave Beirut its distinctive and bizarre flavor—a flavor best captured for me in a single sentence uttered by a Lebanese socialite who had invited an American friend of mine for dinner on Christmas Eve. The elegant holiday banquet was held at her apartment near the Green Line, a swath of gutted and burned-out buildings that formed the no-man's-land between predominantly Muslim West Beirut and Christian East Beirut. On this particular Christmas Eve in 1983, despite the holiday, rival Christian and Muslim militiamen were trading artillery salvos and machine-gun fire into the early evening, rocking the whole neighborhood. The hostess put off serving dinner, hoping things would settle down, but she could see that her friends were getting hungry, not to mention nervous. Finally, in an overture you won't find in Emily Post's book of etiquette, she turned to her guests and asked, "Would you like to eat now or wait for the cease-fire?"

Outsiders looking at Beirut only through newspaper photographs and 60-second television news clips might have thought life in the city was one massacre after another, from sunrise to sunset. It wasn't. In fact, the explosions of violence, while often indiscriminate, were usually sporadic and unsustained—sometimes a few hours, maybe a few days, rarely more than a week. The minute a cease-fire took effect in one neighborhood, the storekeepers cranked up their steel shutters and life immediately returned to the streets, as people scrambled to restore whatever semblance of normality they could—even if they knew it would last only an hour or a day. Beirutis always lived in this peculiar half-light between security and insecurity, war and truce, in which there were always enough periods of quiet to go about one's day but never enough to feel confident that it wouldn't be one's last.

Beirut was the par-5 first hole at the Beirut Golf and Country Club, where Ann and I were members in good standing. The golfers at the Beirut Club didn't call their first hole a "dangerous par-5" for nothing. Several members were hit by bullets while

in mid-backswing because the fairway ran perpendicular to a PLO firing range. The Beirut Country Club was the only golf course I ever played where I was relieved when my ball went into a sand bunker; it was the safest place on the course.

Beirut was also the announcement tacked to the bulletin board at the golf course during the summer of '82 which read: "Due to the circumstances, the club championship will be postponed."

Beirut was the slick advertisement in between the hairdresser ads and the wedding announcements of a popular English-language Beirut weekly, *Monday Morning*, offering shatter-resistant window coating "to protect yourself and the people around you from the danger of flying glass." The ad went on to warn: "Anytime, anyplace, an explosion can happen."

Beirut was the bridge in East Beirut with a sign at its foot which read: NO TANKS ALLOWED.

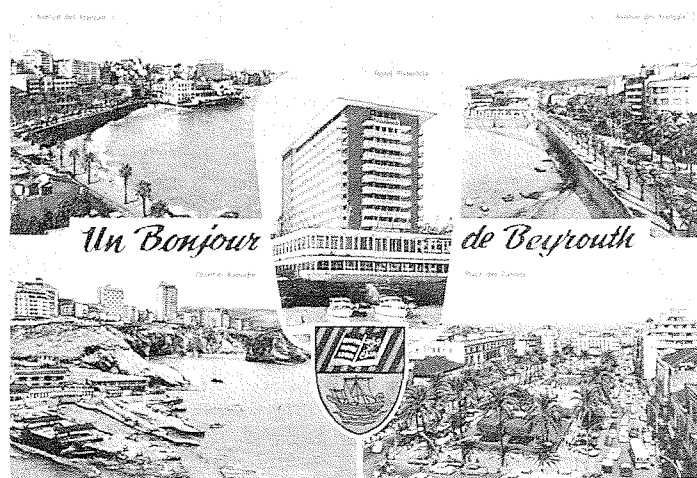
Beirut was Goodies Supermarket—the gourmet food store that offered a cornucopia of foodstuffs ranging from quail eggs to *foie gras* flown in daily from Paris. Amine Halwany, Goodies' unflappable and ever-upbeat owner, used to tell me that his was the ideal business for a city like Beirut, because he had products to offer people under any and all conditions.

"In times of crisis," explained Amine, "everyone wants bread, water, and canned food—things that are easy to prepare and won't need much refrigeration. People go back to a very primitive style of cooking. They also buy a lot of sweets and nuts during the troubles—nervous food they can pop in their mouths while sitting at home. But as soon as things calm down for a few days, the high-class customers are back buying caviar and smoked salmon."

Actually, Beirut's wealthiest flocked to Goodies to buy all their food. A pack of Mercedes-Benzes could always be found parked outside. Legend has it that one day a disheveled young man

entered Goodies, walked up to the cash register with a rifle, and demanded all the money. Within seconds three different women drew pistols out of their Gucci handbags, pumped several rounds into the thief, and then continued pushing their shopping carts down the bountiful aisles.

Beirut was the Summerland Hotel, built along the coast just west of the airport, and opened in 1979 as the first resort hotel designed for people who wanted to vacation inside a civil-war zone—in style. The Summerland's innovations included the installation of two 12,000-gallon fuel tanks to feed its two generators and satisfy all the hotel's energy needs for more than a month, should the city's electricity be entirely cut off—which it often was. The hotel also had a separate 3,400-gallon gasoline tank for its own fleet of taxis and employee cars, thus ensuring that both the staff and the hotel guests could move around the city oblivious to the regular gasoline shortages. The Summerland had an underground garage that doubled as a bomb shelter, its own artesian wells and water purification system, its own fire department, and a maintenance shop that could rebuild or repair anything in the hotel. Instead of installing only the four large refrigerators that a 151-room hotel would normally require, the Summerland installed 18 freezers, so that veal, beef, and



Beirut in better days (shown here about 1975) was a tourist mecca and the commercial crossroads of Europe and the Middle East.

smoked salmon could be flown in from Paris and stored for an entire summer season, when the hotel's pool and restaurant were packed with Beirut's finest. Most important, the Summerland's owners organized their own militia, which conducted the hotel's "diplomatic relations" with the various other militias and gangs around West Beirut and protected the grounds.

When I asked Khaled Saab, the Summerland's cherubic general manager, about his well-armed team of bellhops, he demurred, "I wouldn't call [them] a militia, but let's just say if 10 or 15 armed men came here and wanted to cause trouble, we could handle them."

Because "the circumstances" in Beirut kept foreign tourists away, the Summerland sold all the cabanas around its pool to Lebanese families and turned itself into an all-around amusement center, catering exclusively to locals. To this day, it remains open as a one-stop, totally secure fantasy village where for enough money any Lebanese can buy himself out of Beirut's nightmare for a few hours or days. The fantasy begins from the moment you pull off Beirut's pockmarked streets and cruise up to the Summerland's front door, where you are greeted by a doorman dressed in tails—with a revolver hidden in his back pocket.

Khaled Saab once described his regular clientele for me. "We had Lebanese tourists, foreign businessmen, politicians, and even a few hashish growers, arms merchants, pirates, and gamblers. While they were under our roof they all behaved like perfect gentlemen. We even had Gloria Gaynor come sing in 1980. She sang, 'I Will Survive.' It was really fantastic."

Indeed, the worse things got in Lebanon, the more the Lebanese seemed to refuse to accept a life of poverty. After the Israeli army invaded Lebanon and finally consolidated its grip over the southern half of the country, the first ship to arrive at the Lebanese port of Sidon when the Israelis allowed it to be reopened was loaded with videocassette recorders. Sidon was partially destroyed, people were desperately in need of cement, housing materials, and other staples, but what came steaming into the port first were VCRs from Japan—machines which enable people to enter a

dream world and escape from reality. First things first.

Even when Beirut was at its most chaotic, the Lebanese figured out a way to profit from the vagaries of their own anarchy. They did this by speculating on their currency, the Lebanese pound. There were no exchange controls in Beirut, so Lebanese would constantly be converting their pounds into dollars or dollars back into pounds, trying to anticipate rises and falls in the two currencies. If, for instance, you converted your dollars to Lebanese pounds right before a prolonged period of quiet, you could take advantage of the Lebanese currency rising in value thanks to the economic stability; if you converted your pounds back into dollars a few hours before a car bomb exploded, you could make a windfall as the dollar soared and the Lebanese currency fell in anticipation of dislocations.

Today, the most frequently asked question in Beirut after a car bomb is not "Who did it?" or "How many people were killed?" It is, "What did it do to the dollar rate?" Why do people even bother learning to cope with such an environment?

To be sure, thousands of Beirutis haven't bothered; they've simply moved abroad. But many more have stayed. For some, Beirut is simply home and they cannot imagine living anywhere else, no matter how much the quality of life in the city deteriorates. Others are captives of their assets. The homes or businesses they have spent lifetimes building are anchored in Beirut, and they simply cannot afford to start over somewhere else. Better, they say, to be rich and terrorized in Beirut than safe and poor in Paris. Still others cannot obtain visas to take up residence in other countries because the quotas for Lebanese have already been filled. So they learn to adapt because they don't have any other choice.

I used to play golf in Beirut with a rosy-cheeked Englishman named George Beaver. George was a salesman for International Harvester in the Middle East and had lived in Beirut since the 1950s, because, as he would say, "of the absence of taxes, the availability of household help, and the low cost of whiskey." When it

came time for George to retire, he chose to remain in Beirut. Although he was 89 years old when I got to know him in 1979, he had played golf, usually by himself, almost every day since the Lebanese civil war began. He always walked the course with just three clubs in hand: a driver, a five-iron, and a putter. Sometimes he played the course backward; other days he played only the holes he liked, occasionally having to leave one out because the green was covered with shrapnel. Only the most intense bombardments in the summer of '82 kept him off the links. When I asked him why he kept playing, George just shrugged his shoulders and pronounced the motto of every Beirut survivor: "I know I am crazy to do it, but I would be even crazier if I didn't."

George, who died a natural death a few years ago, understood the secret of coping with the violence of Beirut—that it required something more complicated than just hiding in a basement shelter. It required a thousand little changes in one's daily habits and a thousand little mental games to avoid being overwhelmed by everything happening around you.

The most popular means of coping I saw in Beirut was simply learning to play mind games—games that eased one's anxiety even if they didn't protect one from actual danger. For instance, Diala Ezzedine, a college student and Red Cross volunteer whom I met when she helped dig out the rubble of my own apartment, once told me that to calm herself during the worst bouts of violence she would make probability calculations in her head and try to convince herself that someone was actually keeping score.

"I [would] say to myself, 'There are 4 million people in Lebanon and so many in my family; what are the odds of anyone in my family getting killed?'" Diala explained, with great earnestness. "I had a cousin who died recently. I was very sorry he died. But—and this may be a terrible thing to say—I also felt a kind of relief. Like, okay, that's all for our family now, we have made our contribution to the odds. It always reminds me of the joke about the man who carries a bomb with him whenever he goes on an airplane because the

odds against there being two bombs on one plane are much higher."

In an attempt to make their anxiety more controllable, the Lebanese would simply invent explanations for the unnatural phenomena happening around them; they would impose an order on the chaos. Their explanations for why someone was killed or why a certain battle broke out were usually the most implausible, wild-eyed conspiracy theories one could imagine. These conspiracies, as the Lebanese painted them, featured, variously, the Israelis, the Syrians, the Americans, the Soviets, or Henry Kissinger—anyone but the Lebanese—in the most elaborate plot to disrupt Lebanon's naturally tranquil state.

In 1983, Ann and I attended a dinner party at the home of Malcolm Kerr, then president of the American University of Beirut. During the course of the dinner conversation that evening someone mentioned the unusual hailstorms that had pelted Beirut for the two previous nights. Everyone gave his own meteorological explanations for the inclement weather before Malcolm asked his Lebanese guests with tongue in cheek: "Do you think the Syrians did it?"

Sadly, Kerr, a charming, intelligent man, was himself assassinated a few months after that dinner—and though his killers were never caught, every Lebanese had a perfectly rational explanation for why the Christians, the Shiites, the Israelis, the Syrians, or the Palestinians had done him in.

Similar "rational" explanations were also employed to explain why the other guy got killed and you didn't. I rarely heard any Beirutite admit that the violence around him was totally capricious and that the only thing that kept him alive was callous fate—which was the truth. Instead, I would hear people say about a neighbor who got killed by an errant shell, "Well, you know, he lived on the wrong side of the street. It is much more exposed over there than on our side." Or they would say, "Well, you know, he lived next to a PLO neighborhood," or, "He shouldn't have gone out driving 15 minutes after the cease-fire started; he should have waited 20 minutes—everyone knows that." In order to continue functioning, Beirutis al-

ways had to find some way to differentiate themselves from the victim and to insist that there was a logical explanation for why each person died, which, if noted, would save them from a similar fate. Without such rationalizations no one would have left his home.

Maybe the most popular Beirut mind game of all was learning how to view one's environment selectively. Richard Day, an incisive and sensitive American-trained psychologist who taught at the American University during the early 1980s, once studied the coping mechanisms of his students and discovered that those who survived the Israeli invasion of Beirut in the best physical and mental health were those who learned how to block out what was going on around them that was not under their own control and to focus instead only on their immediate environment and the things that they could control. This prevented them from suffering from "system overload." Day explained what he meant by viewing one's environment selectively: "I am on my way to play tennis, and an Israeli F-15 suddenly flies overhead. Can I do anything about it? No. Is he coming to bomb me? I don't think so. So I continue on and play tennis."

I learned to be quite good at this myself. Late one afternoon in the summer of 1982, I was typing a story at the Reuters bureau when the crackle of machine-gun fire erupted in the park across the street. Another American reporter in the bureau, who had just arrived in Beirut, ran to the window to see what all the commotion was. He became transfixed at the sight of a Lebanese militiaman firing a machine gun at someone off in the distance. Eventually this reporter peeled himself away from the window, rushed over to me, and said excitedly, "Did you see that? Did you see that guy? He was holding a gun like this right in his gut and shooting someone."

I just looked up from my typewriter at this fellow and said, "Was he shooting at you? No. Was he shooting at me? No. So leave me alone, would you?"

Viewing Beirut selectively didn't mean being suicidal and simply walking obliviously through a firefight, but it did mean learning to isolate dangers in your mind and to take calculated risks in order to

continue to be able to live a reasonably full life. Often you would be driving down a street and suddenly see all the cars in front of you screech to a halt and hurriedly turn around and go the other way; sometimes they would not even bother to turn around but would just go backward at 50 miles an hour. You would ask a pedestrian what was going on and someone would shout, "Snipers" or "Car bomb." In any other city people would probably go home, hide in their houses, and lock all the windows. In Beirut, they just drove two blocks out of their way and went around the trouble, as though the disturbance were nothing more lethal than the highway department doing roadwork.

My associate Ihsan Hijazi once told me, "When the civil war first started, if I heard there was fighting in the Bekaa Valley—50 miles away—I would get the kids from school and bring them home. That was 14 years ago. Today, if I hear fighting down the street, I ignore it. If I hear it outside my building, I move away from the windows into a safer room. I only start to worry now if the fighting is outside my own door—literally on my doorstep. Otherwise, it doesn't exist for me. I just ignore it, and turn up the volume on my television."



Beirutis talk about violence the way other people talk about the weather. When they ask, "How is it outside?" they are not referring to the chance of precipitation but, rather, to the security climate in the streets. Lebanese radio stations compete with each other for market share by trying to be the fastest and most accurate at warning drivers which roads are safe and which are not, the way local American radio stations do with traffic reports. You could literally hear a bulletin over Beirut radio saying: "The main crossing point between East and West Beirut was closed at 5:00 P.M. due to a gunfight between two taxi drivers. Drivers are urged to use alternative routes." Every Beirut driver knows the radio lexicon: a road described as *amina* is totally secured by army or police; a road described as *salika* is free of snipers or kidnapers, but not policed; *hatherah* means the road is passable, but with a roughly 30

percent chance of kidnapping or sniping; and finally, *ghair amina* means the road is unsafe at any speed.

Part of learning how to view one's environment selectively is learning to make oneself numb to some of the more grotesque scenes that are part of the texture of life in Beirut. Terry Prothro, an American University psychologist, used to say that in Beirut, at least, the ability to repress things was not necessarily pathological. It could actually be quite healthy and useful for survival.

I know it was for me. I covered more than a dozen car bombings in Beirut, and after a while I simply trained myself to stop seeing the gruesome aspects. I stopped noticing the stunned pedestrians with blood trickling down their cheeks who happened to be standing on the street when the lethal Mercedes—the car of choice among Beirut car bombers—suddenly turned into a ball of flame. I stopped seeing the smoldering charred carcasses of the other automobiles engulfed in the blast or the chaos of the rescue workers as they scurried around on tiptoe among the shards of glass and twisted car parts to pry out the dead and wounded.

Instead, after a while, I found myself focusing entirely on the incongruities: the juicy pieces of roast chicken that were blown all over the street from an adjacent restaurant but somehow still looked good enough to eat, or the smell of liquor from a shelf full of broken Johnnie Walker bottles. And eventually, after seeing enough car bombs, I started focusing on the leaves. When a car packed with 100 sticks of dynamite explodes on a crowded street, the force of the blast knocks all the leaves off the trees and the road is left buried beneath them, like an autumn lawn. My friends in the Lebanese Red Cross still tell the story of the man they found at a car bombing near the Ministry of Information whose chest had been blown open. They knew he was still alive because, through the blood that filled his mouth, little air bubbles kept surfacing. The thing that they remembered most, though, was that two leaves had come to rest gently on his face—one over each eye.

Not everyone can be so emotionally well-defended in every situation, and in

such moments of vulnerability Beirut really starts to take its mental toll. When your blinders come loose or you start thinking about the dangers around you that you cannot control, even the most insignificant daily routine can become filled with dread. I knew a longtime resident of Beirut, Lina Mikdadi, a Lebanese writer and the mother of two, who was hardened to virtually every danger the city had to offer—except car bombs.

"Snipers and shelling never bothered me," she would say. "But booby-trapped cars—that is what really scares me. If I am in a traffic jam, I get hysterical. I put my hand on the horn of two, and I don't take it off until I get out. The children start screaming in the back seat because they don't understand why I am honking. I am afraid to tell them. I just want to get away from being trapped between all those cars."

Some Beirutis have become too adept at viewing their environment selectively and tuned the world out altogether. This is dangerous because it dulls a person's normal protective instincts as much as any drug. (Valium, though, is sold over the counter in Beirut, and the Lebanese are believed to be among the highest per capita users of the sedative in the world.)

When I was working in Beirut for UPI and had to stay late many evenings at the office, I would often walk home alone at 11:00 P.M. I liked the eight-block hike for the exercise. One night I dragged my wife, Ann, home from a movie at that hour. As we were walking down a sidewalk holding hands, a man jumped out of a first-floor window and landed right in front of us, like a cat. He was carrying a sack of something in one hand and a silver revolver in the other. We looked at him. He looked at us. We were all too dumbstruck to speak, so he just scampered away. Beirut was so dangerous that even criminals didn't care to be on the streets after dark. When I think back now on my habit of walking home late at night, I can't believe I actually did it.

Somehow, it always reminds me of a story Terry Prothro told me when I asked him how much longer he could go on adjusting to the perversity of everyday life in Beirut. He answered, "There is a test we

used to do in class to see how easily living things can adapt. You put a frog in a pail of water and gradually turn up the heat. The frog just keeps adjusting to the new temperature, until it finally boils to death, because it is so used to adjusting that it doesn't think to jump out of the pail. I feel like that frog."

In coping with the violence of their city, Beirutis also seemed to disprove Hobbes's prediction that life in the "state of nature" would be "solitary." At those moments during the Israeli siege of West Beirut or in the depths of the Lebanese civil war, when Beirut society seemed to have disintegrated and when all formal law and order virtually disappeared, the first instinct of most Beirutis was not to go it alone, to rape their neighbor's wife, or take the opportunity to rob the corner grocery store. Of course there were many incidents of thieving, bank robbing, and kidnapping for ransom, but they were not nearly as widespread as might have been expected under the free-for-all conditions that prevailed; stories of people being mugged on the streets or held up in their homes were relatively rare.

Rather, the behavior of Beirutis suggested that man's natural state is that of a social animal who will do everything he can to seek out and create community and structures when the larger government or society disappears. Beirut was divided into a mosaic of neighborhoods, each tied together by interlocking bonds of family, friendship, and religion. When Beirut's larger, macro-society and government splintered, people's first instinct was to draw together into micro-societies based on neighborhood, apartment house, religious or family loyalties. These micro-societies provided some of the services, structure, and comfort normally offered by the government. They also helped to keep people alive, upright, and honest, sometimes even in spite of themselves.

Elizabeth Zaroubi, a young Christian

woman who lived in West Beirut, said that during the summer of 1982 she discovered her family and neighbors as never before. "I live in the same building as my parents," she explained. "Before the war I used to see them for maybe five minutes a day. But during the fighting we would sit together for hours, prepare meals together, play cards, and chat with all the neighbors. If someone found strawberries or bread or cucumbers during the Israeli siege, he would buy enough for all the neighbors and everyone would come together. Before, we used to pass the neighbors on the street, but now we know all kinds of details about each other's private lives and children, and we ask about them. I discov-



Life amid the ruins: A Druse family in their apartment.

ered that I know the relatives of one of my neighbors. We have a common point now that we didn't have before. When you go through an experience with someone like that, you can't ignore them. You can't say anymore that you don't care about them."

Myrna Mugrditchian was a delightfully articulate Armenian dental student whom I first met when she came to my apartment as a Red Cross volunteer to help in the rescue effort. After that, we used to see each other regularly at post-car-bomb scenes, and eventually we became friends. I once asked her how she could have volunteered for such depressing work. She told me it really was not out of altruism but in order to keep busy and maintain a

purpose to her life. "I had a choice," explained Myrna. "I could sit home all day quarreling with my family and going crazy, or I could get out on the street. The only way to get out was to be either a helper or a fighter. I chose to be a helper."

In this quixotic struggle against chaos, many Beirutis actually discovered good things about themselves—and others—that they never could have learned except in a crucible like Beirut.

Dr. Antranik Manoukian, the manager of Lebanon's only mental-health clinic, told a symposium held in Beirut after the summer of 1982 that his patients who were caught in the middle of some of the worst Israeli shelling and bombing actually got better mentally and required less medication and treatment during the fighting than when it was over. This was largely because the patients focused all their limited mental faculties on trying to survive the chaos and so actually became healthier. That could be said of most Lebanese to some degree or another, which is why the real mental-health crisis for Lebanon will come when the civil war ends and peace and quiet returns. Only then, when people let down their guard and take stock of all they have lost, will they truly become crazy. Until then, many Lebanese won't simply survive, they may even thrive.

Anthony Asseily, the director of the J. Henry Schroder & Sons merchant bank branch in Beirut, said that after the start of the Israeli invasion in the summer of 1982 he closed his office and relocated to London, leaving behind 32-year-old Munzer Najm—whose job had previously been to fetch coffee for the bank's employees and guests. Munzer's only instructions were to watch over the place as best he could. As far as Asseily knew, Munzer, the coffee boy, spoke only Arabic.

One day, during the height of the Israeli siege of West Beirut, Asseily was sitting in his office in London when suddenly his telex came alive. "It was Beirut on the line," he recalled. "My first reaction was to ask how the situation was. The answer came back: 'Not so good.' Then I said, 'Wait a minute, who is this on the line?' The answer came back: 'Munzer.' At first, I couldn't believe it. I thought maybe some-

one had a gun to his head and was telling him what to type. We had a [telex] conversation and eventually I found out that while he was sitting around the bank all that time with nothing to do, he had learned some English and taught himself how to operate the telex." Asseily remarked later that Munzer the coffee boy could just as easily have stolen the bank's telex and sold it on the street to the highest bidder as learned how to use it. There was no one to stop him: no police, no prisons, and no courts. But he didn't.

The real problem with the Lebanese today is that they have gotten too good at this adapting game—so good that their cure and their disease have become one and the same. The Lebanese individual traditionally derived his social identity and psychological support from his primordial affiliations—family, neighborhood, or religious community—but rarely from the nation as a whole. He was always a Druse, a Maronite, or a Sunni before he was a Lebanese. And he was always a member of the Arslan or Jumblat Druse clans before he was a Druse, or a member of the Gemayel or Franjeh Maronite clans before he was a Maronite. The civil war and the Israeli invasion only reinforced this trend, dividing Lebanese into tighter-knit micro-families, or village and religious communities, but pulling them farther apart as a nation.

But the very family, village, and religious bonds that provided the glue holding Beirutis together in micro-societies and which helped see them through hard times when the national government disappeared also helped to prevent a strong national government and national identity from ever fully emerging or lasting. When the city's water system failed, Beirutis dug their own wells; when the city's electricity went dead, they bought their own generators to power their homes; when the police disappeared, they affiliated themselves with private militias for protection. The Lebanese sociologist Samir K̄halaf summed up the situation: "The formation and deformation of Lebanon, so to speak, are rooted in the same forces."

I don't mean to suggest in any way that these ad hoc family, neighborhood, or religious communal associations can adequately replace the Lebanese society that

collapsed or that Beirutis find them preferable to a properly functioning government. They aren't really a cure for Lebanon's ills; they are just a palliative—Ace bandages on a body politic stricken with cancer. They make life in the Beirut jungle not quite so solitary, nasty, brutish, and short as might be expected—although the life is still plenty frightening.

Beirut taught me how thin the veneer of civilization is, how easily the ties that bind can unravel, how quickly a society that was known for generations as the Switzerland of the Middle East can break apart into a world of strangers—lessons I will never forget. I have never looked at the world the same since I left Beirut. It was like catching a glimpse of the underside of a rock or the mess of wires and chips that are hidden inside a computer.

Steven Spielberg once made a movie called *Poltergeist*, which was about a lovely suburban house that, unbeknownst to its inhabitants, had been built above a cemetery. The family who owns the house discovers what lurks beneath only when some of the dead spirits, angry at the fact that a house has been built on their graves, start rising up and haunting the place. Eventually the family hires an expert demonologist to purge their home of these angry spirits, and she determines that a closet in an upstairs bedroom is the gateway through which the demons are entering and exiting. In the climactic scene, the expert, a tiny woman with her hair in a bun, delicately opens the closet door and out rushes this wild, screaming, fire-breathing monster, the embodiment of uncontrolled rage and violence, which bowls over everyone one in its path.

Ever since I left Lebanon I have felt, no matter where I am, that I am living inside

that house, never knowing when a door might fly open and suddenly I will again be facing the roiling abyss I confronted in Beirut. I go to baseball games or to the theater, and I look around at all the people seated so nicely and wonder to myself how easily all of this could turn into a Beirut. It has been my own private nightmare, but also a source of inner fortitude.

I realized that my first week in Jerusalem. When Ann and I finally moved from Beirut to Jerusalem in June 1984, we found ourselves going to a movie on our first Saturday night in the Israeli capital. Not knowing our way around the city, we hired a taxi to take us from the Sheraton Hotel to the Edison Theater. It was only a short ride, but the Israeli taxi driver tried to cheat us by not turning on his meter and then asking an exorbitant fare.

We told him we would give him only a fourth of what he asked for, and when he refused this offer and started screaming at us, we just put the money on the seat and walked away. The driver, his face flushed with anger, threw open his door, got out of the car, and began bellowing that he would do everything from beating us up to calling the police.

Ann and I looked at him and then looked at each other, and we both started to laugh. "Do you know where we have come from?" I shouted at the driver in English, pointing a finger to my chest. "Do you know where we have been living? We've been living in Beirut, in goddamn Beirut. Do you know what that means?"

We walked into the theater chuckling to ourselves, leaving him standing in the street spewing curses at us in Hebrew and Arabic. There was nothing that he could threaten us with that we hadn't already lived through.

We had been to Beirut.

