



Lebanon: A Traveler's Confession *by Edward Norden*

Dual citizenship was not without advantages. For example, first as a journalist on his own with an American passport, then as an Israeli in army uniform escorting foreign journalists to the front, then as a Jerusalem-based journalist again, the ex-American was able to spend much of the second half of 1982 and not a little of the next two years making raids across the border into Lebanon.

There he was taught a few things at first hand which before he'd only heard spoken of, or read about.

He learned, somewhat late in life, that some people have trouble, while some are only under the impression. He learned that if, thanks to his dual citizenship, he could wear two hats, this wasn't the ultimate in options, because the professional war reporters and war photographers packed even more—they were voyeurs and journeymen, emissaries and crazy persons, careerists and saints, knaves, moralists, and daredevils in safari jackets. He himself was no daredevil. Traveling for days and nights at a time and going where he pleased in the Land of the Cedars, he learned that it's possible to fear every harmless window, every innocent wall, every driver of a beat-up Mercedes weaving in your direction. Compared with what could happen in Lebanon, the stone-bullet-and-tear gas routines at the Birzeit campus; over the Green Line half an hour north of Jerusalem in what the trade knew as the occupied West Bank, were farcical.

He was taught in the steaming port cities and cool, dry, picture-postcard villages glued to the

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Lebanese mountainside that there were limits to what the Israel Defense Forces were capable of. The same went for the Shabak (more or less Israel's FBI) and the Mossad (its CIA), both of which were very much on the scene as well.

He learned in Lebanon too of the casual heroism and viciousness of ordinary Arabs, ordinary humans, ordinary civilians in a country where the front was everywhere and the nearest thing to consolation was revenge. He learned that all the tribes had justice on their side. Furthermore, all went in for atrocities, and all, including the Maronites who suffered from a bad press and the Palestinians who were in Lebanon in the first place only because they had lost to the Jews in the Galilee all the way back in 1948, fought like tigers when their turf was in question. Everyone was brave, and strangely enough everyone was likable. The ex-American was surprised to learn that likable people could behave atrociously—likable human beings could treat human

beings of other tribes and even of their own tribe worse than dogs and either think nothing of it or love it.

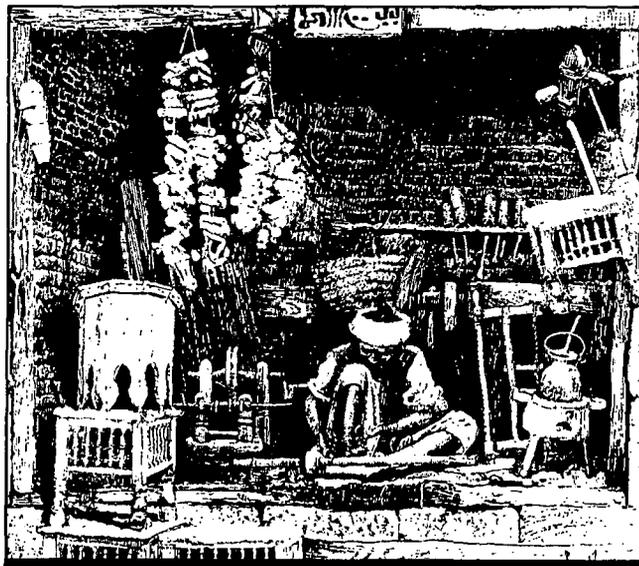
No saint himself, he learned that a taste of chaos can be sweet. Queasy as he often was in Lebanon, he'd find himself almost missing the lawlessness when back in quiet, boring Jerusalem.

And in Lebanon he learned more about what some called Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza District. He had stopped covering these parts of the Land of Israel four years before, and liked to believe that after eighteen intensive months over the Green Line, he knew everything there was to know about them. He was, it now emerged, very wrong.

No one, he now learned, should say that he knew Ramallah, Bethel, Hebron, Ophra, Nablus-Shechem, Gaza, and supposedly united Jerusalem until he had been in the ruins of Arafat's Kingdom and walked alone at dusk, heart thumping, across that other Green Line, the one which separated Beirut's Christian and Moslem halves and was nothing but sandbags, teen-aged gunmen, rats,

garbage, and block after block of buildings shot to Swiss cheese. Yes, Lebanon and Beirut were the West Bank and Jerusalem come into their own.

His eighteen months as a reporter in Ramallah, Bethel, Hebron, etc., the maudlin songs on his car radio of the Palestinian refugee Fayruz who resided in Beirut and all his reading about the Geopolitical Context, the Arab World, and the Palestinian Diaspora, had prepared him almost not at all for what he saw, smelled, heard, and felt when he got to Beirut. There was nothing like being there, they said, and in this case the cliché was on target.



He had written distantly of Lebanon years before in an essay on Ramallah. He had reported the thoughts and words of a young Palestinian woman from a good Ramallah family who was rubbed the wrong way by Israeli occupation, who wore a crucifix dangling into her cashmere sweater, and who had been attending the American University of Beirut when the troubles started in 1975. "It's crazy up there!" he had quoted her. Not until he got to Lebanon, though, did he really understand what she had been talking about.

First he had to see for himself the adult children and the juvenile adults, the rats scuttling on the Green Line, the gunmen, the thriving restaurants, the Arab civilians of all the various tribes who writhed under, put up with, and positively relished the gore. Many found the gore funny—they couldn't get their fill. He had to see the bodies of hundreds of Palestinians, massacred by other Arabs, laid in a mass grave and covered with lime in the Shatilla refugee camp. The Arabs who'd done this massacring were temporarily allied with his people. He had to learn that a sensitive Jew like himself could see such a sight with his own eyes and then go to a restaurant and eat heartily. He had to sit in a Beirut restaurant spooning creamy *labane* into himself and have a rat the size of a puppy scamper across the bar. The English barmaid jumped, and an Armenian Beiruti sipping a drink remarked that the only thing the Arabs didn't understand was force.

He visited the campus of AUB. Piles of garbage smoldered here and there. Posters of Khomeini and the Dome of the Rock were plastered on the walls—Liberate Jerusalem, ordered the Ayatollah. The ex-American, doing his job, interviewed Arab doctors at the AUB hospital, both Moslem and Christian, who had become proficient at treating gunshot wounds and trauma. These wounds over seven years' time had been inflicted on Arabs mostly by other Arabs. Some of the latest had been inflicted by his own people, by the Israelis, by the Jews. He saw and listened to his countrymen, his fellow soldiers, far from home. He was disguised as an American who didn't know Hebrew, and he eavesdropped on their bafflement at how things had turned out. He heaved a sigh every time he crossed the border back into the law and order and safety of

Israel. To arrive in the Jewish state from Lebanon was like arriving in Switzerland from the Jewish state.

And in Lebanon too, rather late in life, he was tempted by a notion which he had only come across before in books—that when all was said and done the only difference between various peoples, tribes, outfits, and nations was the magnitude of their crimes. This was the old idea he was tempted by when he witnessed the Israeli army's siege of West Beirut.

He watched a crew of skullcapped tankers shelling houses a mile away. Who knew who was inside being blown to pieces? The Mossad? The Shabak? "Wow, that's pretty!" exclaimed the Israeli boy in the turret after a shell impacted. The ex-American, not a professional war reporter, was frightened by a PLO counter-attack with Katyushas. He saw the IDF ambulances racing to collect the casualties. He saw the IDF engineers shutting off the water to half a million people.

Later, after Arafat sailed away and the siege was history, and after the Syrians liquidated Bashir

Jemayel, he crossed into West Beirut for the first time and toured the wreckage of Arafat's Kingdom. He read the catchwords daubed on walls in Sabra and Shatilla. "Long Live the Liberation of Palestine," someone had scrawled. "With Fire and Blood Until the Victory of the Revolution," another fool had written in snaky Arabic on the wall of a hovel hit by an Israeli shell. He watched the bloated corpses of Palestinians massacred by Phalangists being laid in a mass grave and sprinkled with lime, he watched the news photographers clicking away for the Pulitzer Prize, he stuffed himself in a restaurant on the seafront, and back in his hotel room he dipped into the book he had taken along, Edmund Wilson's *Europe Without Baedeker*.

"The Allies," Wilson reported for the *New Yorker* from Italy in 1945, "bombed Milan as cruelly and as indiscriminately as the Germans ever did London. Most of this hideous damage was inflicted in August, 1943, when we were trying to force Badoglio's hand by a series of pure terror bombings aimed at densely populated districts."

Wilson arrived in Milan two years



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after the event, so his readers had to accept as the truth what the man of letters was told by the townspeople. The ex-American in a Beirut hotel had no trouble accepting it. He could also believe it when Wilson added: "Since the departure of the Germans, the Partisans in the North have been guilty of some ruthless and probably unjustifiable bloodshed: they are supposed to have killed some twenty thousand people."

The ex-American's unspoken faith had been that the Jews were different. Without toughness, of course, empathy could be suicidal, whoever you were—in principle, he had known that for a long time. Yet he had also believed that basically the Jews were the ones who chiseled and the *goyim* the ones who killed. He had held on to this little article of faith after moving to the Jewish state. Yes, he had read the books on the war in 1948—the most trustworthy, least propagandistic of them confirmed some of the stories he was told by older Palestinians in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza of how his adopted countrymen, in the midst of and following a desperate war, had encouraged them to leave and bulldozed their villages. He

had spent eighteen months getting to know the occupation. He had heard stories of torture. Some, not many, of these were true too. He had made a journey of exploration and discovery in the Land of Israel, and come out fatalistic, but still believing that the Jews, thanks to their nature or intelligence, played the tough, inescapable game of power and war somewhat differently, somewhat less like criminals, and, interestingly and encouragingly enough, somewhat more successfully. He liked to believe that the difference between Jews and *goyim* in this respect was so great that it was effectively a difference of kind, not degree.

The war in Lebanon and the siege of Beirut finally opened his eyes. Here it turned out that to banish Arafat and his men, and redraw the geopolitical picture, the ex-American's people were ready to starve and bomb a city most of the people of which had nothing to do with the PLO. The Lebanese had suffered at the hands of the PLO and were now suffering at Jewish, at Israeli hands. He experienced some guilt as a Jew and as a relatively new Israeli.

He experienced it, while at the same time resenting what some of the foreign newsmen whom he was escorting and who were buying him lunches were doing. They and/or their editors in London, Paris, and New York were taking this chance to bash his adopted country in print and on the tube, saying things they had waited years to say, making the invasion out to be as bloody as anything in history. Well, the war was bloody, it was bad news, it also did not seem to be a particularly intelligent operation on the Israeli side, yet what these reporters were up to galled him.

His anger, split in two, canceled itself out, leaving him confused. He was angry with the journalists, these faithful agents of the right to know and see, who were only interested in the Palestinian women, children, and old people the IDF had injured, ignoring the Lebanese—both Moslem and Christian—who had welcomed the Jews as their rescuers. But soon enough, he became angry with Ariel Sharon and Menachem Begin too for sending the IDF into this madhouse. For something had gone wrong. He had been dazzled, at first, by the size of the operation. The IDF going in looked all-powerful. But when Operation Peace for

Galilee turned into a siege of a metropolis, he had second thoughts. The IDF wasn't made for sieges. This couldn't have been planned or foreseen. Something had gone wrong.

Lebanon was a higher education for the ex-American, for not a few other Israelis, and for the occupied Palestinians in Ramallah and Gaza, especially the teenagers. The last drew conclusions from the IDF's publicized troubles, and these were to give birth to the *intifada*. There was always more to learn, however.

Having come so far, and Sharon having been obliged to quit after the findings of the commission of inquiry into the massacres had been published, the Jews couldn't and didn't just run home. If they did that, the limits of their power and intelligence would be shown up too glaringly, and there would be all kinds of geopolitical hell to pay. So the ex-American watched as the IDF, aided by the Shabak and Mossad, slowly pulled back by stages, shooting at unexplained roadside objects, and grimly improvised a security zone along Israel's northern border, inside Lebanese territory, which was to prove more successful than not.

Also, returning to Beirut after Arafat had sailed away, he learned that the siege, as sieges go, had been mild, far from total. He wouldn't have liked to be on the other side. But compared with other sieges described by historians and eyewitnesses from Troy to Leningrad, this one seemed to have been not so horrible.

Lebanese in West Beirut told him that the water had never been shut off for more than a day at a time. They informed him that food was always being smuggled through in quantities and except for two days—August 5 and 12, 1982, when the IDF seemed to go crazy—the bombing and shelling was pinpointed on the refugee camps and Palestinian neighborhoods, which as far as most Lebanese were concerned was all right.

It was a close thing, but finally he rejected the idea that everything and everyone was the same.

He thought, too, about civility. When it came to civility, the *goyim* in their pressed uniforms put the shouting, nosy, sloppy, chiseling Jews to shame. It had supposedly always been so, and it was definitely so in the last quarter of the twentieth century, even now when the Jews had their own country again. Yet didn't good manners mask a craving for

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violence that raged in more *goyim* than would readily confess to it? They felt it and were terrified of the happiness they would get from satisfying it—yes, the ex-American thought he sensed this strain among many Lebanese civilians and gunmen, and also among the mild-mannered, likable U.S. Marines and sailors and French paratroops who spent a season in Beirut keeping the so-called peace.

The Americans were especially likable.

He and his traveling companion, a German journalist, drive into the U.S. Marine Corps installation at Beirut airport one sunny day in 1983 looking for a story. Anyone may drive right in—it's early days yet. The Americans, these other countrymen of his, have arrived to keep the peace. They're to be seen catching beneficial rays and cutting the grass and pumping iron, each leatherneck with his Walkman and not a weapon in sight. The two reporters introduce themselves to the press officer, a major with a tent of his own, and he asks, "Are you here for the cheerleaders?"

Never betray puzzlement! Without missing a beat, the German answers that they are indeed.

"There's a bird leaving now," the major tells them. "Run get on it."

Run they do. A crewman gives each a pair of earmuffs for the noise, and before you can say foreign correspondent they've been hoisted a thousand feet over the Shi'ite slums, the Palestinian refugee camps, the Commodore hotel, and the campus of the university, and are zooming over the Mediterranean, where ships of the Sixth Fleet, including the USS *New Jersey* with her fearsome guns, are strung out like the models the ex-American put together in boyhood. The German grins at him and shrugs his shoulders. They touch down on the deck of the helicopter landing ship USS *Raleigh*.

The ship is sitting low in the water, because on her must be gathered half the sailors of the fleet and most of the Marines from on shore—four thousand or so young Americans packed together like expectant sardines. They're clinging

to the *Raleigh's* spars, hanging from the bridge, shinnying half-way to the top of the superstructure where the radar dishes rotate under the Stars and Stripes.

A lieutenant takes him and the German in hand. He brings them to the wardroom, where the Dallas Cowgirls are mixing with officers and getting their USS *Raleigh* caps. Most of the ships of the fleet, the lieutenant says, sailed from Norfolk more than four months ago. There'll be no shore leave for another month—shore leave, by the way, is going to be in Haifa, not Beirut. It seemed like a good idea to have some entertainment before then for the men.

The ex-American asks a sailor back on deck why he's been sent to the Middle East.

"We're here to keep the sides apart while they reason with each other. Maybe we'll have to kick some ass."

The boy is from Nebraska.

"This show is just going to be a big



prick tease for a lot of the guys," he forecasts.

And indeed, the redhead, the brunette, the soul sister, and the five blondes when they appear on deck have on almost nothing at all and are more perfect than anything Hugh Hefner dreamed of as an Indiana high schooler. Yet the show isn't hot. The young ladies do what they do, they give it everything they've got for ninety minutes, but it's not hot, not dirty, not apocalyptic. It's just good clean fun far from home.

"You men," says the black girl into the microphone, "are good-looking, you're built, and we love what you're doing for America!" The *Raleigh* shivers with cheers. The Cowgirls perform a hoe-down, slapping rock-hard, silky thighs. They do a cancan. They sing a Pointer Sisters song—"I want to wrap myself around you." They turn cartwheels under the blades of a chopper. They do an encore, then another. The show, viewed and enjoyed by some of the 241 Marines who would be crushed to death in their sleep one quiet Sunday morning not long afterwards, couldn't have been a bigger success.

"All right!"

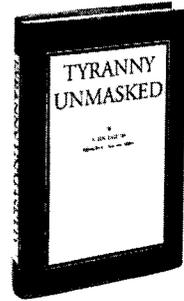
Outrageously, the ex-American returned to dry land charmed and with his conscience soothed. For what could he demand, in all fairness? That his ex-countrymen, so far from home, think and behave and express themselves less innocently? It would have been very different if they had been in a situation comparable to that of their friends the Israelis, if, to let the imagination soar, there was a Mexico Liberation Organization, armed by the Kremlin, operating across the Rio Grande and confining the people of El Paso and San Diego to underground shelters. Or if, having been bloodied, the Americans with their memories of Danang had committed themselves to a real war, no matter how far from home.

The ex-American, like other Israelis, was saddened when those Marines were killed in their sleep a few months later. He wasn't surprised that, in response, the *New Jersey* opened up with her VW-sized shells on villages overlooking the airport. Nor was he surprised when President Reagan cut his country's losses and pulled all the Marines out, followed by all the U.S. diplomats in wretched Lebanon. It was simply not that important for America to have its way there. Yes, among some people, *goyim* as well as Jews, the craving for violence was generally held in check by prudent self-interest and a decent respect for the opinions of mankind. There was no end to the lessons taught across the border. □

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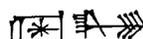
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Tears and Cheers

by Benjamin J. Stein

Wednesday

Here I am again in Heber Springs, Arkansas, visiting my hero father-in-law. It's a warm, dry day, and time for little me to visit the local school. I'm interested in education, plus I'm interested in faces. For years now, I've been working on a general theory of faces, which basically holds that the farther inland from New York or Los Angeles one travels, the sweeter and more intelligent the faces. Arkansas has about the best-looking faces I've ever seen, and I say this even though it also has been known to produce some very cagey, slick faces.

At the sprawling campus of the Heber Springs combined elementary school, junior high school, and high school, my father-in-law Col. Denman and I strolled into the elementary school. We registered our humble selves with the powers-that-be in the principal's office, and then were shown around the pleasant school.

Computers, computers everywhere. A forest of computers. Kids sitting at computers learning reading, spelling, math, vocabulary, geography, history. Computers in neat rows, computers donated by the local grocery store, computers via the taxpayers of Arkansas and Cleburne County. In the background, teachers hover and help, often talking to little knots of children who do not happen to be at computers.

Elementary school as I knew it years ago—long before there were any computers besides the refrigerator-like things at the Strategic Air Command—has apparently vanished from Heber Springs.

Benjamin J. Stein, author most recently of A License to Steal: The Untold Story of Michael Milken and the Conspiracy to Bilk the Nation (Simon & Schuster), is a writer, lawyer, economist, and actor living in Malibu, California.

There are no Miss Carters standing in front of the room saying "Two times two is four. Four times four is sixteen. . . ." I guess that's all done by software designed somewhere far away.

The kids had extremely sweet faces, and the teachers looked like my dream of what teachers should be: focused, kindly, patient, and eager to teach. But I wonder what the effect on kids is of interacting, if that's the right word, with a TV screen instead of with a flesh-and-blood adult. A computer is unforgiving and mechanical. You can "talk" to it while you pick your nose. You need learn no skills of social accommodation when you learn from a computer. You do not learn how to get along with your fellow humans. You do not learn how to think and memorize and reason while you learn to follow some general rules of human conduct.

I loved the school at Heber, and I loved the faces, but I kept thinking that having an adult teach you what is correct and incorrect is better than having a machine do it. I would rather have children grow up thinking that their elders were the source of wisdom than thinking that a machine they can turn on and off is their only master.

Then again, what do I know? I can't even turn on a computer.

Monday

Electon eve in Houston. I'm here at the behest of Comedy Central to broadcast to the nation from the Bush-Quayle Victory Party at the Galleria Westin in Houston. I used to wonder where all of the Iranians who aren't in either Iran or Los Angeles have been hanging out, and now I know. They're driving taxis in Houston, working as desk clerks at Houston hotels, waiting tables at Bennigan's at the Galleria. I like Iranians. They're smart. Not sweet, but smart.

Off to the Bush Victory Rally at the Astrodome. It's the last night of the campaign, and even though Bush is far behind in the polls, there's a mob scene here. There are lines of cars stretching for miles to get in and cheer for Bush. We barely got in, and when we did, we had to edge forward slowly to get a glimpse of the entertainment before Bush's speech.

There was Bob Hope, God love him, still in there pitching; Charlton Heston, God really love him, tireless for the cause; Ted Williams, great baseball player and fisherman; Arnold Palmer; some wonderful country singers; and a fabulously good choir from the First Baptist Church.

These people are enthusiastic. Not just enthusiastic, enthralled, wildly devoted to Bush. They look as if awaiting the One True Messiah. I've never seen such enthusiastic human beings at a political gathering. They would crawl on ground glass for Bush. Women are leaning forward with misty, damp looks in their eyes. Men are flushed and breathing heavily. As I made a mental note of this religious revival, a young Bush storm trooper approached me and my producer for Comedy Central and shouted at us, "Press, back to your area!"

I tried to tell him that I couldn't really get a feel for the crowd's enthusiasm from the press pen, but he wouldn't listen. He said he would call the police if the press did not return to its area. He looked as if he was just itching to call the police. His face was mottled and wet with perspiration.

I meekly went back to my press area, but the thought occurred to me that this hostility to the press and by the press had to be a two-way street. How smart Reagan was to have been endlessly friendly and one-of-the-boys to the press. How idiotic to treat the press with mean-