

LETTER FROM BEIRUT

In the front garden of the beautiful Sursock Mansion, now housing an elegant Beirut Art museum, stands a sandstone sculpture of two women: one veiled, one unveiled - Muslim and Christian. Mothers, perhaps widows, they are seated, arms extended but not touching, meeting over the space meant to represent an urn for human ashes. The work is by Lebanese artist Youssef el Howayek (1883-1962), who had been commissioned to create a monument commemorating the 1916 hanging of nearly three dozen Arabs, Muslim and Christian alike -- intellectuals, journalists, and poets -- seeking to be free of their ruthless Ottoman Turkish overlords.

The monument, unveiled in 1930, stood facing the sea in front of Beirut's mercantile and government districts, an area still known as 'Martyrs' Square'. Howayek meant as well to honour the unity of two Arab religions bonded in mutual grief. From the beginning, however, strident Lebanese nationalists called for its removal, describing the work as a 'servile and weeping monument'. And so in 1951 it was hidden away in the Sursock Mansion, to be replaced by a newer work that 'neither weeps nor bows'. In 1960, the replacement in bronze was unveiled, sculpted by the Italian Marino Mazzacurati (1907-1969). It could stand in any country: a heroic ensemble of two wounded men looking up at a triumphant female figure carrying a torch, and guiding another male figure. Ironically, during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), the statue was badly shot up and the standing man 'lost' his left arm. The fragments of the statue were uncovered in the debris of the war's destruction and reassembled. What it now commemorates is debatable: heroic men dying for their sectarian beliefs? Deaths of thousands of civilians caught up in a senseless, protracted war? Irony is in the eye of the beholder, but Mazzacurati's work certainly holds nothing of the tenderness of the Howayek piece, where reconciliation resides. Instead, as the Roman senator Tacitus (56-117) bitterly concluded,

"To plunder, butcher, steal, these things they misname empire; they make a desolation and they call it peace."

The same warlords who prosecuted the fifteen-year Lebanese Civil War (120,000 deaths, 20,000 missing, countless traumas) now rule their various religious fiefdoms and have selfishly blocked all political, social and economic progress for over two years - no president elected, an unconstitutional parliament, a paralysed cabinet headed by an emasculated Prime Minister; and a powerful non-state armed force now fighting for the regime in Syria. For several months uncollected garbage piled up in the streets, the valleys and woods. Water and electricity are rationed in a land where neither should be scarce. Corruption, yes. When civil society protesters took to the downtown streets near Parliament and the Prime Minister's offices last year under the banner of the 'You Stink' movement, the security forces closed off large nearby sections home to upscale restaurants and shops that were built to demonstrate Lebanon's recovery from the Civil War. Many now display dusty 'for rent' signs. The struggling economy hasn't helped either as western nations and Arab Gulf states warn their citizens not to visit Lebanon. We find this peculiar as each Saturday morning in the same area we and hundreds of others enjoy shopping at the organic farmers' market.

Over eighty years ago the renowned Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran warned presciently: "Pity the nation that is full of beliefs and empty of religion. [...] Pity the nation whose statesman is

a fox, whose philosopher is a juggler, and whose art is the art of patching and mimicking. [...] Pity the nation divided into fragments, each fragment deeming itself a nation.”

There is no war now in Lebanon, although the occasional car bomb and assassination remind us of its potential. In the region lies military mayhem: Syria, Yemen, Libya, Gaza, Iraq, The greatest number of refugees since World War II flee for safety; well over a million Syrians and Iraqis have come to Lebanon, nearly one-third of the native population' Syrian beggars, mainly women and small children, sit on sidewalks. If and when the wars end, some- one will surely commission heroic statues.

Nevertheless, we live a good life, albeit in a privileged bubble. We have many dear friends, go out to concerts, plays and art galleries, browse bookshops, attend poetry readings, eat well at restaurants, walk along the sea-side corniche where traditionally- dressed people share space with young moderns, fishermen line the railings, while joggers and bicyclists manoeuvre around us. To the east we view the high mountain range that runs down the spine of the country - snow-covered in winter - and to the west, glorious sunsets. Fishing boats, swimmers, the patrolling German destroyer (UN-mandated after the 2006 Israeli war with Hezbollah), and container ships heading to the port, make up the panorama of lives going on normally.

We live in an old 1960s building near the campus of the American University of Beirut, one of the few green spaces in the whole city, but off limits to the general public. Our lane is called 'California Street'. From our north-facing balcony and rooms we have views of the Mediterranean Sea, broken by expensive high-rise condominiums in which few of their owners actually live. From the south we look over to the new Saudi Arabian embassy, a Jeddah-like cream- coloured tower decorated with wooden mashrabiyya window covers, with fountains and gardens behind thick walls, overseen by video cameras. The ambassador, staff and their families are housed there.

The lane is blockaded to traffic at both ends, and pedestrians are meant to walk along a narrow defile off the street. Security is provided by three different Lebanese armed forces: At one end is the army, a gaggle of young men often lounging, smoking, their rifles held loosely, smart-phones at the ready, and guarding a cannon-armed personnel carrier that would take some time to mobilise. At the other end is a special contingent of police in blue camouflage uniforms whom we call the 'blue meanies'. They grunt when greeted. Before our building entrance are the Interior Ministry's ISF, the Internal Security Force, in grey and white camouflage. Knowing the usual meaning of 'internal security' in this part of the world, you might think these would be the most frightening, but in fact they are the friendliest, responding to our regular greetings of the day. They address my wife as Professor and me as Uncle. One of the armed men brought me a jar of honey from his village in the south. One welcome benefit of the barricades and security is that we no longer fear SUVs coming at us in both directions at top speed. A tribe of cats has proliferated. Next to our building lies a twisted pomegranate tree, a remnant of an orchard that used to cover our lane and the condo building plots. It straggles up against a concrete wall, limbs misshapen, bearing a surprising number of fruits each summer. In front of one neighbouring high-rise are gardenia bushes from whose overhanging branches I pluck flowers each spring to bring as gifts to my wife.

I thank Professor Walid Sadek of the American University of Beirut for his insightful essay on the Sursock sculptures, 'Pensive Monument'.

Published in PN Review (UK), 42:6, July-August 2016.