

Civil War Anniversary

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Ranwa Yehia meets parents whose children's kidnappings still haunt them

Forgotten victims speak

Zeinab Jabr threw herself backwards and covered her face with her hands. The heavy body of the 68-year-old woman quivered as she let out deep moans. She then began weeping uncontrollably. Her grandson, accustomed to her behavior, calmly handed her a glass of water.

Jabr was deep in conversation about her missing son and though tears didn't stop throughout the two hours that she spoke, she broke down when she recounted how her husband died in 1993 without seeing his son again.

Ibrahim Melhem Jabr was kidnapped on April 12, 1984, in Hamra at a time when kidnapping by militias was a regular occurrence. He was 28.

"At first it never occurred to us that Ibrahim was kidnapped, but when we heard that there had been kidnappings in Hamra that day, we knew Ibrahim was one of them," Jabr said.

Jabr's other children tried over the years, to no avail, to convince her to join them in Denmark, where they emigrated after their brother's kidnapping.

"How can I leave this house when I still have hope that Ibrahim will come back one day? I don't even sleep at night for fear that he might knock on the door and I won't hear him," Jabr said.

Her home is a dark, humid ground-floor apartment in one

of Beirut's most destitute suburbs - Hayy al-Selloum.

She suffers heart and lung problems. She has insomnia and refuses to take sleeping pills prescribed by her doctor. Giving up hope that she will leave the country, Jabr's children and doctor urge her to move to her Bekaa village, where the atmosphere could benefit her health. She occasionally visits her village, Bwarej, but by nightfall, she is back at her run-down apartment, waiting for her son.

"I suffer during this month as much as I suffer the whole year round," she said.

Over the years following Ibrahim's kidnapping, Jabr's efforts focused on making arrangements for her 13 other children to leave the country.

Two months after Ibrahim's kidnapping, allegedly by the Progressive Socialist Party, another of Jabr's sons, Tamer, was kidnapped by the Phalangists. But Tamer was lucky. He was released 10 days later.

"That was when I knew everyone had to go. I wanted them out of the country so that I could concentrate on finding Ibrahim without worrying that my other children were in danger," she said.

For the next six years, Jabr visited every militia office in the country and even went to Syria in search of her son.

"The PSP people kept telling me that I would have to make a dozen more visits to inquire

about Ibrahim. A Syrian official told me that he might have been handed to the Phalangists. The Phalangists kept telling me to come back later. That's how it was and still is. The only difference now is that I seek information from those released from either Israel or Syria," she said.

Jabr has made just one visit to her children in Denmark. They tried to convince her to stay but when news arrived that the Committee of the Relatives of Missing and Kidnapped during the War had resumed its work in Lebanon, Jabr took the first plane back. "Standing in front of Cabinet headquarters every week and meeting other families helps," she said.

What frustrates Jabr most is the lack of understanding she frequently encounters.

"People tell me I have an army of children and should be satisfied with what I have. How can I make these people understand that my children can't replace one another?" she asked.

Jabr has kept Ibrahim's belongings exactly as they were the day he disappeared.

"Look, his books are still arranged the way he left them but the papers have turned yellow. They're still here for him to read when he comes home."

Dozens of carefully organized files, each entitled "Andre," lie on the living room table in an

immaculate Hazmieh apartment. "I have files up to here," said Emile Chaib, pointing to his knee to indicate the vast amount of information he has collected on his son over the past 15 years.

"I keep saying I don't want look at them any more but then I start all over again."

The frail 76-year-old law professor was composed as he described his son. Very slowly, he reached out, his arm shaking, to take a file from the pile in front of him. "Let me introduce you to Andre Chaib first," he said, beginning to list his son's achievements.

Andre Chaib was one of three Central Bank employees kidnapped by militiamen on Aug. 8, 1985, as they attempted to cross over to East Beirut.

Andre, who has three doctorates, was the director of economic studies at the Central Bank from 1981 until his disappearance. He was also former Central Bank governor Edmond Naim's "right hand" and was even nominated for the position of governor.

"He was 30 years old when he was nominated for this position - a genius. Prime Minister Salim Hoss vouches for both his accomplishments and his morals," Chaib said.

"They offered Andre high positions in Washington and Paris," he said, reflecting upon how much he wished his son had accepted them. "But Andre kept asking me, 'if everyone did the same what will happen to this country?' I'm going to explode from all this!"

He disappeared into another room and returned clutching several pictures. "Ah! A World Bank meeting. Andre Chaib was Lebanon's delegate there. Andre Chaib at the International Monetary Fund meeting in Washington. Andre Chaib with the governor of the German Central Bank," he said, flipping through the pictures.

Sighing, Chaib put down the pictures and spoke gravely: "Even if he was a bad person, like many of our big names here, he is still my son and I want him back. I would have liked to see one of the many governments throughout the years show concern for this issue."

Chaib laughed at himself. "I was probably the first person to drop a letter in the complaints box that President Lahoud put at the Presidential Palace after he was elected. Some people received responses to their complaints but there has been nothing on this issue because it's forbidden to talk about it. What can I do?"

Chaib's frustrations are understandable: "Why is it that only those in Israel are mentioned? What about the others? Aren't they Lebanese citizens too?"

He doubted there would be real results from the work carried out by the government-appointed commission "Nothing will come out of it and even if they found something out, they wouldn't tell us," he said.

Another file is opened. In it are handwritten letters of support from people all over Europe. "I know none of these people. They write to tell me that they feel with me and are working in their countries to gather support. I write back to them."

Chaib believes his son is still alive, more than 15 years after he disappeared. "I don't know what shape he'll be in, particularly since he's a man of principle and conscience, but I do believe he's alive."

Chaib has two other children, a son and a daughter. "My son and daughter are a source of pride for me, but they're not like Andre. He's special."

Chaib's greatest fear is that



Ahmad and Zeinab Saleh: "I saw them ... My children are not lost. People I know took them"

the day will come when the issue of those who were kidnapped will be forgotten.

He never faltered, never shed a tear while talking about his son. There was pain in his eyes, but his final gesture said it all. Before closing the door, Chaib gazed down at the floor, hesitated, then was gone. Submission hung heavy in the air.

Ahmad Saleh and his wife, Zeinab, would never have survived the tragedy of losing three sons in one day had they not buried themselves in the minutiae of their search.

Over the past 25 years, the elderly couple has pursued every detail that could prove their children are still alive or inform them of their whereabouts.

At first, it seemed strange that neither parent expressed strong feelings of frustration, anger or grief while recounting the details of their sons' abduction. But as the hours ticked by and they continued to list every person they had spoken to and every place their search had taken them in the past 25 years, it was clear that they needed to be engrossed in the details. It was their way of dealing with the tragedy.

Khalil, Ali and Ibrahim, the eldest of 10 children, would now be 46, 45 and 38 respectively. The family, Shiites from the occupied village of Qantara in Marjayoun, lived in Sin al-Fil, where Saleh owned a bakery.

On Sept. 18, 1975, Saleh was in his shop when Phalangists began shooting at his neighbors, he raised a white flag and

headed for his apartment two floors above, but he was shot twice in the back. Within minutes, his wife and three children were struggling to take him to hospital.

"They were in my arms and a minute later they were gone. They (Phalangists) told me they would bring back my sons in 30 minutes. I'm still waiting," Zeinab said.

What tortures the couple most is that those responsible for their sons' disappearance were their close neighbors.

"I know every one of them. I saw them shoot me and then take my sons. My children are not lost. People I know took them," Saleh said.

He and his wife took turns recounting their efforts over the years. The scene would have been comical, were the subject matter not so tragic.

"No, that's not how it happened. You're losing your memory," Saleh said, interrupting his wife's version of how she ventured to Ashrafieh in 1979 to ask about her sons.

"I was there, not you," she replied, folding her arms and sighing theatrically.

The couple recounted incidents when, by pure coincidence, they found more evidence that their children were alive.

"In 1980, I was at a grocery shop and started talking to the owner when he said he heard that three brothers from the Saleh family were working in a bakery in Jdeideh," Saleh said.

Saleh and his wife followed every lead but whenever they felt they were getting closer to the truth, they met more obstacles.

Saleh's most recent experience was in 1991, when an

army officer told him that his children were still alive.

"The next day ... the officer called to tell me my three sons would be with me the following Sunday. I collapsed," he said.

Again, more complications arose. Before 1991, every lead indicated that their children were detained by the Lebanese Forces in Karantina. They even knew the cell numbers their children were in: 3, 5 and 10.

When the militias were disarmed following the Taif Agreement, the Karantina "prison" was vacated. The whereabouts of the detainees is unknown.

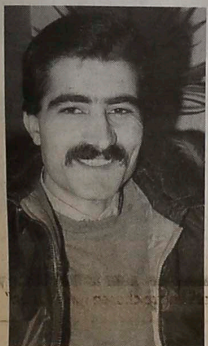
"Some tell me the LF handed them to Israel and some say they were sent to Syria. The last I heard was that they were in some desert between Israel and Jordan," Saleh said.

The elderly couple, whose other children are now married with children of their own, still hope that one day they'll see their three missing sons. But as they grow older, their efforts to search for them diminish.

"Two years ago, I saw Khalil in my dream. He was blaming me for not asking about him and his brothers any more and told me that he was alive."

"The government has done nothing for me. If only I could group all the men who took my children, I would kill them. You don't know how many times I considered a suicide attack against the people who took my sons," Saleh said.

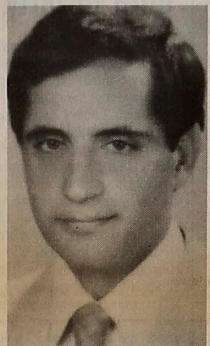
"It is my right. The government didn't give me my right. I wish I could have a meeting with the president for three minutes just to tell him that I will commit a crime unless the government takes action," he said.



Ibrahim Jabr: kidnapped 1982



Zeinab Jabr: no sleep in case Ibrahim should return in the night



Andre Chaib: kidnapped 1985