

THE DAILY STAR

Copyright (c) 2009 The Daily Star

Thursday, May 21, 2009

Audette Salem and the betrayal of memory

By Michael Young

Daily Star staff

Last Saturday, Audette Salem was hit by a car, and died soon afterward in hospital. By then she had become as much a symbol as anything else, the mother of a boy and girl, Richard and Christine, kidnapped in August 1985, along with their uncle, Georges, none ever seen again. Audette had been a stalwart at the tent set up by family members of the disappeared outside the ESCWA building in the downtown area. Until the end she believed her children were still alive, and in a final act of consideration a DNA sample was taken for identification purposes in case she was right.

Some friendships go far enough back that it's difficult to remember when they started. I first met Richard sometime in the 1970s, and together with a cousin of mine with whom he was very close, we would spend almost every Saturday afternoon in a Beirut movie theater. My first nip of single malt scotch was from a bottle he crossed half of Beirut to purchase, and I still resist the urge of darkening the memory of that inveterate, jovial hedonist with the tragedy of his disappearance.

A few details return. At the start of the 1982 Israeli siege of Beirut, the talk in the Salem household was not of war and death, but of the proper way to make polenta. I was again at their house on the day the news of the Sabra and Shatila massacres came out, and spent half an hour with Richard looking at the repugnant photographs in the newspapers, before leaving hurriedly when the Israelis blocked off the neighborhood in search of weapons. Of Christine, I remember only her shyness and that our bulky glasses would clink when we greeted each other with a kiss.

I remember, too, their uncle Georges, proud of being in fine form though he was over 70. And I remember his wife Claire, the daughter of a prominent Palestinian family, who, after her husband was gone, spent almost a decade in a no-man's land of old age, with nothing to look forward to and her past abruptly deleted. A woman of few words and discreet generosity, she was yet an eloquent reminder of the bestiality of individuals who, in a few moments, could destroy a pulsating network of lives.

I never shared Audette's optimism about her children being alive, but one has to admit that there was much about the case that was never explained. What was the motive behind kidnapping two youths, she in her teens, he barely out of them, and an old man? There were many abductions in those days, but almost never did they involve females. The bodies were not recovered, though that, too, perhaps was a recurring phenomenon; few bodies were ever recovered at the time, even though the murderers had little enough respect for the living to be ashamed of dumping the dead.

Over the years the families of the disappeared have been engaged in a struggle on several fronts, in a general way focused on three objectives: to define the legal status of the disappeared for essential practical reasons related to clarifying property, succession, and personal status issues; to discover, quite simply, what happened

to their loved ones and close a psychological parenthesis; and to demand some form of public recognition for the wartime victims - and, given the disappearance of Lebanese citizens into Syrian prisons after 1990, the postwar victims.

On the latter two issues in particular, much more could and should be done by the authorities to help the families. Even after all this time, there is plenty of information about the fate of the victims out there. There are still police reports and former militiamen, even former militia leaders, who, if the context and mechanism is right, can provide indispensable insights and information into the abductions. It would be a mistake to assume these were all the result of pervasive anarchy. Militia leaders had more control over their men during the 1980s, but also more knowledge over what they were doing, than anyone can imagine.

By the same token, the Lebanese state must make elucidation of the fate of those who disappeared into Syria a priority in relations with Damascus. The Syrians have told Lebanese officials in the past that there are no Lebanese alive anymore, a view the Lebanese have parroted. Both sources are

20090521-00026-12

unreliable. Don't expect the Syrians to give an accurate accounting of those whom they illegally arrested, brutalized and killed; and don't expect the Lebanese to have special insights into those the Syrians arrested, brutalized or killed, since this was not even information Syria's intelligence services necessarily shared with each other, let alone with outsiders. That's why Lebanese representatives should bring up with Syria not just whether those who disappeared are alive or dead, but what happened to them and how their bodies can be returned to their families for burial. The Syrians will stonewall; the Lebanese should not.

Then there is official recognition. Why has it been so difficult to create a space honoring the wartime dead and disappeared? Next year, Lebanon's postwar period will be a generation old; yet there is not a single memento in the capital to suggest that anyone has an interest in remembering a national trauma that killed over 100,000 people. One need not embrace a truth commission for Lebanon - and I don't - to argue in favor of conceding something valuable to memory. Surely, it must be one of the terrible insults of our peacetime that the families of the wartime and postwar victims, despite their age and torment, have been compelled to set up a dilapidated tent in an isolated corner of Beirut to attract attention to their cause. Their stridency and aggressiveness is a source of irritation to the authorities. But can it be any different given the way the political class in its entirety has shown a disgraceful lack of imagination and compassion in dealing with individuals who, in the end, only refuse to abandon their humanity?

However, I concede, with great guilt, how little I saw of Audette in the past 15 years. Memory is a difficult thing to keep alive. That's why she, like her comrades, in refusing to forget, in pursuing her logic all the way, in manning her tent through fair weather and foul, and ultimately dying at its door, was worthy of so much better than the hand she was dealt.

Michael Young is opinion editor of **THE DAILY STAR**.

THE DAILY STAR

Copyright (c) 2009 The Daily Star