

War relic rusting – the odd fate of the Ain al-Rummaneh bus

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The bus shooting in Ain al-Rummaneh was to the Lebanese civil war what the murder of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo was to World War I.

Between Malaab Baladi, and Tel al-Zaatar refugee camp, Christian militiamen ambushed the bus carrying Palestinians on April 13, 1975, killing 26. It was widely seen as the incident that triggered the civil war.

The war came but the bus weathered the times. Except for a few bullet holes and shattered glass, it was salvageable.

Mustafa Ali Hussein, the driver and owner, survived the shooting and fixed the bus shortly after his two months in hospital. Soon after it was halted en route, the bus was back on the road again.

Say "Ain al-Rummaneh bus" to most Lebanese and they immediately flash back to the start of the war. But for Rida Hussein, son of Mustafa Hussein, it was a reminder of good times with family and friends.

"Before the shooting, my dad used to round up the neighbors, pile us into the bus and take us on trips to the mountains or to the sea," said Rida, smiling with reverie. "As kids, my siblings and I knew the license by heart." He still remembers it: "95303. How could I forget?"

Love is in the eye of the beholder, however. Rida remembers the bus in a positive light, but his mother Laurice dubs it the "cursed bus."

Just after the shooting, a bomb nearly hit the bus as it was parked at Hussein's house in Salim Salam. It was repaired and used as a school bus by Mustafa's brother Mohammed. Rida began driving it in 1980, before it was bombed yet again.

After the last bombing, and eager to do away with it once and for all, Laurice Hussein gave the bus away in 1985 to a



"On its way to Jerusalem. That's the trip it should make" Mohammed Ayyash behind the wheel

car-parts dealer, Abdel Abbas Hashem. She told no one and asked Hashem to sell it for parts. When Mustafa Hussein died on April 27, 1998, after years of kidney ailments, Hashem sold it to its current owner.

Tucked away in a junk yard in Harrouf near Nabatieh, flanked by lush pastures, is the carcass of the bus mounted on a yellow flatbed truck. Neighborhood children, like 10-year-old Mohammed Ayyash, often play in the yard, clambering over the wrecked vehicles.

"This is the Ain al-Rummaneh bus," Ayyash declared, hopping into the driver's seat.

The frame-number is solid proof of the bus' authenticity. Attached to its hood is an aluminum tag with the number 1360902086 still visible on it.

The present owner, Sami Hamdan, didn't need proof. He "knew it was the one."

"I dug up newspaper archives about the bus until I tracked it down in Hashem's junk yard," said Hamdan. "The bus type has sentimental value to me since I used to drive a similar bus when I was young."

Hamdan's son Mohammed recounted how several television stations had been there to film the bus and speak to his father. "Once, someone told a camera-



Love is in the eye of the beholder: the "cursed bus" in 1975

man that if he approached the bus, he would die. The cameraman believed him and ran away," said Mohammed, finding the anecdote hilarious.

"This bus is the most important souvenir from the beginning of the war," said Sami Hamdan. Having experienced a similar incident to the Ain al-Rummaneh shooting in 1982, Hamdan had great affinity to the bus and to Mustafa Hussein.

"When I saw it abandoned there, I decided to buy it. I want to fix it up and drive it from here to Jerusalem." Why Jerusalem? "Just like Jesus took the road through Jerusalem, the road of pain, so the bus, by starting the

war, was symbolically on its way to Jerusalem. That's the trip the bus should make." He paused. "But I might die tomorrow and do nothing about it."

But Hamdan has more immediate plans: to bring the bus to Beirut, find a plot of land to park it, fix it in place and leave it standing as a war memorial.

"I've spoken to Byblos Bank to ask if they'll sponsor my project. They declined," said Hamdan. He also asked Beirut's municipality for a plot of land, but to no avail.

The relic of war still stands on its pedestal, framed by a scenic view, its fate determined by the rust that eats away at it.