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Soha Bechara. *Resistance: My Life for Lebanon.* Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2003. Index. $14.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-887128-80-3.

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Resistance: Soha Bechara as Witness

One of the most extraordinary moments in that extraordinary week in May 2000, when the south of Lebanon was liberated from the brutal Israeli military occupation that had begun in March of 1978, was the liberation of the notorious internment camp at Khiam. Along with millions of other people, in Lebanon and around the Arab world, I had sat in front of my television screen for several days, watching breathlessly as first one and then another of the villages were taken, not only by an advancing group of Hizbullah fighters, proudly flying their yellow banner over the captured tanks and armored personnel carriers that they triumphantly rode, but by a growing and increasingly exhilarated and emboldened mass of unarmed civilians. They walked or rode whatever primitive vehicle they had access to, further and further into the occupied territory, breaking down barriers, shaking open, with their bare hands the huge locked gates surrounding the UNIFIL stations that had served as protective barricades between them and their occupied villages and towns. After the first few hours, the television cameras and the radio reporters had arrived. The news of the advance spread like wildfire, and civilians and resistance fighters, unstoppable now, their numbers swelling exponentially by friends and relatives who were joining them from Tyre, Sidon, Beirut and wherever else they had been living in exile, advanced on their home villages.

As the excited crowd of people descended on a village, those who had remained under occupation, minding the crops and other businesses of the predominantly rural area, emerged dazed from their homes or fields and only slowly began to grasp the news that the occupation was over, and that they were being reunited with the rest of the country, from which they had been cut off for so many years. Amidst shouts of *allahu akbar* (God is great), ululating women showered rice on the gathering crowds; children leaped around merrily, enthusiastically joining in the celebration; middle-aged men joined hands and, as much as their age and ample girths permitted, kicked their feet in spontaneous *dabkes*. Later, as one watched the proceedings in cooler and less euphoric moments, on video-tape instead of live television, one felt that some villagers were probably especially eager to demonstrate their happiness to their liberators: employment in the Jewish settlements and factories across the border had begun as a desperate means of survival, but had led to dependence on those hard-earned wages. Before the occupation, the Lebanese state had consistently been accused of neglecting the south.

A far more serious form of collaboration was membership in the hated South Lebanon Army, the "proxy militia" which carried out the orders of the Israelis and wore their uniform. From the time of its founding, young men in the occupied region had to make a fateful choice: either join the ranks of the SLA, or go into exile. Because of the natural demographic constitution of the south, the majority of SLA members were Shiite Muslims, but most of the leaders and top personnel were from the Christian towns and villages. Fear of retaliation, as well as of being subject to the now more powerful Muslims, led to a conspicuously less joyful reception for the liberating forces in the Christian villages as opposed to the Muslim ones. Hizbullah wisely made a deliberate effort to quell the fears of these people, to reassure them that the same religious co-existence that had existed for centuries would continue, and to remind their own constituency that SLA ranks were, in fact, filled with more Muslims than Christians.

Once the Israeli decision to withdraw from Lebanon was announced, the SLA gradually collapsed with little or no resistance. Some of its members fled with the retreating Israeli army, living to this day in exile, and complaining bitterly that they never received the reward they deserved from the Israelis. The vast majority, however, handed themselves over to the advancing groups of resistance fighters, or took refuge in mosques or in the homes of town notables, who, under instruction from

Hizbullah, had promised them protection from the expected vengeance on condition that they surrender and turn themselves in. Eventually they were all handed over to Lebanese Army Intelligence, which took them by the truck or bus load north to prison, and hence to the trials that were indeed held over the next few months. No one was killed: later, the leader of Hizbullah, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, pointed out with pride that, hated though they were, not one of them had received so much as a slap in the face from those they had betrayed and tormented for so many years.

It was on the last day that the apogee was reached. The crowd of liberators and reporters advanced on the town of Khiam; and then, once they had secured it, rushed to its outskirts and the internment camp, always referred to simply as *al mutaqal*, the camp. By the time they arrived at the non-descript grounds and building, originally constructed during the French mandate as a barracks, its SLA guards had already fled, but the gates and the doors, the bars and the barricades were still intact. I shall never forget the sight of those people, with not a gun in sight, literally breaking down the gates with their bare hands, kicking down barbed wire and link chain barricades.

The most extraordinary sight of all, terrifying and wonderful at the same time, came as the liberators, followed closely by TV cameras, entered the dark dank corridors lined with cell doors, solid iron but for small barred partitions in the middle, through which food and water had been passed. At first, there was a moment of quiet as the liberators, who had been noisy and anarchical in their approach, quieted down, awed at being inside the place whose very name had created dread in far away breasts. In their turn, the prisoners, deeply alarmed by the noisy chaos outside, and completely unaware of the events of the last days, had retreated as far as they could into their cells, trying to distance themselves from the din and the unknown new torments they thought it was bringing. But as they began to understand their situation, as they were told, with the intermittent shouts of *allahu akbar* that the Israelis had been defeated, that they were being freed, and that it was all over, the shouting on the outside was echoed by a more desperate kind of shouting from behind the bars. Hands and arms emerged from the black holes through the bars in the iron doors, groping around in the air, trying to grasp at freedom as though it were a physical entity which they would be able to take hold of and embrace.

By now the corridors were full of people, yelling, screaming instructions, and pushing each other in the narrow space. Young men picked up whatever they could and banged away at the chains and the locks, kicking at the cell doors until they all burst open, and the prisoners, smiling, laughing, but clearly disoriented by this sudden and dazzling change in their situation, emerged to the engulfing embraces of sons, brothers, comrades, wives and daughters, all of whom had gathered, participating in this liberation and joining in the earned festivity, as the rest of the world watched on television. I remember especially watching a boy in his early teens fling his arms around his liberated father's neck. His eyes closed, and resting his neck on the older man's chest, he simply refused to let go even as the man staggered around under his weight, trying to see around him, turning to greet the others, hugging and kissing other members of his family. Every now and then the camera would return to this pair, and we could see the boy still hanging on, clinging to his father for all he was worth.

Later, for weeks on end, people from throughout the country, including my family and myself, drove around the liberated south, reacquainting ourselves with the beautiful landscape, with towns and villages, and with barricades, whose names we had become painfully familiar over the years, as battle after battle, resistance attack after resistance attack had led to the victory which was now so happily being celebrated. After driving around, rediscovering the land, we finally entered the grounds of the Khiam prison with a sense of awe, to see for ourselves where so many had suffered. By the time we saw it, former captives had organized an official tour of the terrible place, and proudly served as tour guides. Some had spent years in the camp, others months, but all were numbingly familiar with the interrogation rooms where they had been tortured, the minuscule solitary confinement cells, and the collective cells, where bathing water and buckets, as well as some fresh air and very little exercise, had only been allowed after the Israelis finally permitted the International Red Cross to enter.

Strangely enough, undoubtedly the single most famous resident of the Khiam prison was Soha Bechara, who did not in any way fit the standard description of its residents at the time of liberation, and who was not even there, as she had been released two years before. Though dozens of other women had also been incarcerated and tortured in Khiam, most of them had suffered there for relatively short periods, and had been relations–wives, mothers, sisters–of members of Hizbullah, and most often they had been tortured for information, or held as a form of pressure on their men. Most of them wished to remain anonymous, and were reluctant to talk of their experiences. Soha Bechara, on the other hand, was one

of the few women who was there for her own merits: she had been incarcerated for ten years after her failed attempt to assassinate Antoine Lahd, the commander of the SLA. Perhaps her fame was a result of her association with the Communist Party, which, because of its international backing, was able to rally interest in her case in the international press, and to create pressure for her release in international organizations. Hers became a household name in Lebanon, and often she was the only prisoner of Khiam that anyone outside the area could name at all. When, following her release, she was transported in a jubilant convoy to Beirut, she was given a hero's welcome.

The final victory was unquestionably won by Hizbullah, the principal force that eventually forced the Israelis to quit Lebanon, but Soha Bechara's drama was a constant reminder that before Hizbullah took over the fight almost completely, other forces had not only been involved in the resistance movement, but had begun it. Various factions of the PLO (before it was expelled from Lebanon following the Israeli invasion of 1982, which is when Hizbullah was founded); members or affiliates of the Communist Party, like Bechara herself; members of the Syrian National Socialist Party; and other groups, many of them secular and all of them, like Hizbullah, in spite of their various and often opposing ideologies, united in their dedication not only to the liberation of the occupied South, but to a more general and wider resistance to the Israeli military and political agenda, had participated in the Resistance.

After her release from Khiam and relocation to France, where she now lives, Soha Bechara wrote the book under discussion here. I have heard people who had thought anxiously of Bechara during her imprisonment, who enthusiastically welcomed her release from her tormentors, and then as enthusiastically bought her book, comment on their disappointment in it. One inevitably expects powers of expression equal to the deeds from a courageous member of a multi-faceted resistance to a brutal occupation army, who suffered enormously because of her action and who took fate into her own hands in the most male-dominated activity, war. I was reminded of our reactions in the late 1960s when engineers and technicians led us to the moon and then so clumsily expressed their astonishment and wonder at the new world they had discovered. Poets, we said then, writers, artists, musicians, philosophers should have been sent up with the engineers: only they could express our feelings, not only at reaching the moon, but at living in a now rewritten universe.

Soha Bechara's *Resistance* is by no means a great work of literature or even of history: it contains no exquisite passages of eloquent prose, no great insights into human behavior. The depths of evil and cruelty which she experienced first hand in Khiam, and which she describes in chilling detail, are not philosophically explored. Although she explicitly mentions her initial revulsion at killing, and her general rejection of violence, she cannot tell us–nor does she try–how she overcame them. The book is not a blow by blow historical account of the occupation and resistance, and, not surprisingly, it contains little or no analysis of and insights into the political structures and ideologies that led to the final victory–the only one of its kind in all the decades of war with the Israelis. Nor is it an entirely feminist memoir, with reflections on the place of women in political and military life. Probably the best written passage (in the English translation of the book, which of course was written in Arabic) is the superb introduction by Sondra Hale.

But Bechara is not a writer, so why should we expect the book to be written in a manner or style worthy of celebration? Nor is she a historian, a philosopher, or a poet. She is an activist whose fame rests on a single courageous but failed exploit, the attempted murder of Antoine Lahd. This is an activist's book, and our interest must lie in tracing the mental and political development of an activist to the moment of her apotheosis as she sees it, not as we wish her to reconstitute it. What is significant here are the details she chooses to share with her reader, the memories she wishes to dwell upon, the notions she wishes to impress upon us. This is a book about resistance to occupation, to cruelty and injustice, and the memory of that resistance.

Looking back on her life, Soha Bechara sees a special significance in the timing of her birth, which she points out she never celebrates, in June, 1967, the month of the great Arab defeat. June was also the month of the massive Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. A member of the Greek Orthodox community, she was born in the Christian village of Deir Mimas in south Lebanon, which enjoys a clear view of the northern land of Arab Palestine, lost to the Israeli settlers in 1948. As she was growing up, and especially after the Lebanese war began, the Palestinian experience of occupation, exile, and resistance became part of the south Lebanese experience, as the cross-border incursions of Palestinian resistance groups were taken up or at least encouraged by the Lebanese. In the end, after the occupation of Lebanon, and then the departure of the PLO, the fight and the resistance became almost exclusively Lebanese.

Some of the details she provides about her early life in the village are puzzling to the reader. She writes, for instance, with apparent fondness, or at least no revulsion, of her surly paternal grandfather Hanna, who regularly bestowed on his relations, including his womenfolk (and Bechara herself) fisticuffs and other forms of violence. We get different and contradictory impressions of her parents, their relationships with each other and with her, at different moments in the book. While it is normal that relationships should fluctuate under different circumstances, in her writing, these variations are not organized into a coherent vision. Bechara 's father, a committed communist and trade unionist, worked as a printer when the family settled in Beirut in the early days of the civil war that began in 1975, but seems to have been sternly tight-lipped on these and all other matters, while her mother is variously depicted as, on the one hand, sympathetic to the communist vision, and, on the other hand, entirely contemptuous of all political activities equally.

Bechara writes of her growing political awareness, her admiration for her father's political commitment, which sets her on a path of active engagement. She recounts an interesting anecdote in which, as a child, she had excitedly reported to her mother a misdemeanor of her brother and cousin, explicitly revealing the identity of the guilty parties. For this betrayal she was punished by her mother, making the lesson clear that one does not denounce one's friends. This incident, told early on in the book, serves as a foreshadowing of her later fate, when she was tortured for information on her comrades in the resistance. She says, however, that the incident taught her the habit of secrecy.

She describes her academic and athletic progress, through school and the state Lebanese University, and her advancement in the Union of Democratic Youth, the youth group of the Communist party, culminating in her reluctant election to its National Council. When the Lebanese war began, the Union served as a kind of auxiliary to the fighting communist militias, offering first aid, participating in civil defense, and running the local clinics. In the meantime, her political maturity grew through her own experiences of the war, her work with the Union of Democratic Youth, her increasing sympathy with the Palestinian cause (especially after the beginning of the first intifada), and her father's activities.

Interestingly, she grew ambivalent towards the communist party, to which she did not formally belong, but to which her "whole little world" did. While her acceptance of the ideas and attitudes of the left are unquestionably clear in her writing, she self-consciously felt it was not the Marxist-Leninist ideology in which she had been schooled that was at the heart of her attraction to the party, but the notion of a unified national identity which it expressed, in total rejection of the narrow sectarian view taken by most of the fighting militias. By the early 1980s, she had become convinced that the real force behind the war in Lebanon was not class struggle or sectarian interests, or even the presence of the Palestinians, but the mischievous role of the Israelis. "Lebanon," she writes, "had only one real enemy, one occupying power: the state of Israel. To my mind, the civil war was just a consequence of this situation.... I thought their aim was clear: to cause Lebanon to disintegrate, then to seize additional land, strengthening Israel's core by enlarging its reach" (pp. 34-35).

It was, in the end, the Israeli invasion of 1982 that sealed her conviction, and set her on the path that was to bring her fame and huge suffering. Anyone who was in Beirut during that momentous summer would find an echo in their own hearts of Bechara's description of those days. Finally, she writes: "Ever since the announcement on September 16, 1982, of the creation of a united Lebanese Resistance Front against the Israeli occupation, my mind was made up. I was going to join them. But to do what" (p. 46)?

The answer to this question evolved gradually. After various frustrating attempts to be taken seriously enough to make contact with the resistance, she had what were to become fateful meetings, first with a man she calls M.A. and then with another she calls Rabih. It was the latter with whom she finally organized the plan to assassinate Lahd. At first, however, her task was to make frequent trips to the occupied south to gather information. Her cover was courtship: pretending to be in love with a young man of her acquaintance gave her the excuse to spend long periods in the south, where she stayed with relations, and became familiar, not only with the security forces under the command of the SLA, but also with those directly run by the Shin Beth. Noting that the idea that the south should secede from Lebanon and become the buffer state the Israelis wished to set up was meeting with growing acceptance in the SLA community, she came to believe that the best way to defeat this notion would be to strike at the SLA leadership.

Feeling her way slowly, she first took a position as an instructor in a sports center, and then as a personal aerobics trainer to Minerva Lahd, Antoine's wife. Her description of Minerva, who she says went under "the ridiculous title of First Lady of South Lebanon," is almost

comical: this woman seemed devoted to keeping up the cosmopolitan standards of fashion and grooming acceptable in her native Beirut, a difficult task in the rural south. Her ideology was so far removed from Bechara 's, that Minerva even dreamt of organizing an aerobics competition between the Lebanese and Israelis! With relative ease, Bechara gained Minerva's confidence, though she felt from the beginning that Lahd eyed her with some suspicion, as did members of the militia. After making herself a regular presence in the household, she began practicing smuggling a gun into the house, but one day, when the opportunity presented itself to kill the unprotected Lahd while he ate his lunch, she found herself unable to do the deed. Recognizing that she had to harden herself and overcome her natural abhorrence of violence, she resolved that she should not shoot him in the head (as she had been instructed to do), because that seemed a particularly unacceptable method. She continued to stall, until she began to sense a growing suspicion of her motives by the security services and at the roadblocks that she had daily to pass through; thus, she knew her time was running out. Finally, in November, 1988, while engaged in an apparently casual visit to the Lahds, she took out her gun, pointed it at Lahd's chest, and fired two shots. She was captured and, after an initial interrogation across the border in Israel, she was bundled off to Khiam, where she remained for ten years. Only after she had been there for some time did she learn that, though seriously wounded, Lahd had survived the incident.

For anyone who has read prison literature–Ariel Dorfman's play, "Death and the Maiden," comes most directly to mind in this context–her description of her interrogation, torture, and then years of incarceration, including whole months in solitary confinement, confirms the understanding that it is only in high art or philosophical writing that these experiences can be expressed to our satisfaction, properly located in a moral universe, and that the real victims are often the last to be able to adequately articulate their own suffering. If this sounds like a cruel judgment on her book, it is not meant to be: it is meant merely to warn prospective readers that they are not entering the world of high art, or of philosophical inquiry, but the real world of ordinary people with ordinary powers of expression, who because of an extraordinary courage and commitment, are made to suffer cruelly. It is up to the reader–indeed it is the reader's duty–to make the leap of imagination necessary from the precise and literal descriptions she offers, which allow us to feel what this woman has felt, to know what she has known, to suffer as she has suffered, and to survive what she has survived, to reach an understanding of the human nature which allows such cruelty, and such courage in its face.

Bechara writes of her interrogations and torture at first in a matter-of-fact, stiff upper-lip sort of way, which is sometimes difficult to accept. She loses a tooth in one of her early beatings, then, she writes, "on the floor, on all fours, I stumbled on it, which in spite of everything, made me smile" (p. 74). She is threatened with rape, and several of her guards address her with obscenities sprinkled with sexual innuendos, but it is never clear whether or not the threats were in fact carried out. Occasionally she admits to terror, and later on in her account, she writes of the place: "Khiam, or hell with no name, with no existence" (p. 79). A little further on, she writes that though the Israelis and SLA both denied the existence of this place and released prisoners were warned not to speak about it, knowledge of it inevitably seeped out to the outside world. "From what scraps of information various human rights groups had gathered, Khiam already held a high place on their list of infamy" (p. 79). This rhetoric is her way of trying to reach the heights of expression which she instinctively seems to feel is required, but most of her account is written in simple, almost pedestrian, prose, as she tries to chronicle, as closely and as consistently as she can, her daily travails.

The forms of physical and mental suffering to which she was subjected are almost unbearable to consider. I shall not burden the readers of this review with a recital of the details of electric torture or beatings with studded whips; ice cold water poured in the dead of winter over the victim who is left shivering on the bare ground; being shackled with a short chain, right hand to right ankle; being blind-folded, or having a hood over one's head for days on end; or hearing the screams of other victims and imagining their suffering. I leave it to the reader to learn of these and other horrors for themselves. As we read Bechara's book, we learn of more unexpected problems, such as having to find ways to defeat the excruciating boredom of the long incarceration, where books and exercise were, for years, not permitted. To keep her sanity and her physical strength up in the tiny, dark cell in which she was confined, for months at a time, and to defeat the efforts to break her spirit, she reviewed mathematical equations, and learned how to walk a couple of miles a day, though she could cross her cell in only two paces. With her comrades, she learned how to send and receive secret messages, and how to steal unimportant objects–plastic bags, nails, scraps of paper–to make essentials. They learned how to convert a nail into a needle with which they could sew, among other things, sanitary napkins. They learned how to make rosaries from olive

pits.

Bechara had to learn for herself which of her fellow prisoners were collaborators, informants, and spies, and which of them she could trust. One of the latter, with whom she became fast friends, was named Hanan, and was an active member of the Hizbullah resistance. Another was a young Palestinian woman named Kifah, who had survived the Sabra and Chatila massacres, and had been captured during an operation against the Israelis. Kifah was to become the subject of a documentary film, *ard al nissa'* (*The Land of Women*) by the Lebanese director Jean Chamoun. In one scene we see Kifah and Bechara reunited after their release. They reminisce over their days together in Khiam, their efforts to dupe their guards, to find ways to pass the time, and to communicate secretly with each other. The extraordinary thing about this scene is that, though interspersed with some grave moments as they remember the horrors they shared, many of their recollections are recounted with gales of laughter. This is the picture one remembers most, two brave young women laughing together, who, in their survival, had not only triumphed over the evil that had tried to crush them, but had retained their humanity.

In naming her book simply *Resistance: My Life for Lebanon*, Bechara seems to wish to convey to us the point not only of her writing, but of her life and commitment. In the end, it is the necessity, fact, and endurance of resistance to inhumanity and to injustice which is the point she makes above all others. It was a stubborn, persistent, obdurate resistance to vastly superior force in a fight that often seemed entirely hopeless, that finally led to those ecstatic scenes I described above. It was a resistance in which Soha Bechara, and thousands of extraordinary ordinary people like her, proudly played a part.

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