

# After nineteen years ...

## Eyewitness

Ellen Siegel was a nurse working in the Gaza hospital in the Sabra Palestinian refugee camp in September 1982. She was one of the few Westerners to witness the massacre. The following is an abridged version of an article due to be published in the December issue of *The Middle East Policy Journal*

Nineteen years ago I volunteered to go to Beirut to work as a nurse. I wanted to use my profession to help the Lebanese and Palestinians who had been wounded in Israel's invasion of Lebanon. As a Jew I wanted to show that not all Jews supported this action. So it was that during the September 1982 massacre in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila, I was there, working in a hospital in Sabra. Afterwards, I went to Israel to testify before the official commission of inquiry whose task was to "investigate all the facts connected with the atrocity."

This year's anniversary of the massacre in the camps is different from any of the earlier anniversaries. On this anniversary, what happened in those camps almost two decades ago is once again in the news. This time the story is not about a thousand Palestinian and Lebanese men, women, and children, some horribly mutilated lying in piles on top of one another as troops of the Israeli Defense Force stand watch outside of the camps. The story this time is about the attempt to bring to justice the current Prime Minister of Israel, Ariel Sharon.

When we draw attention to what happened between September 16th and 18th in 1982, it is important to be clear about what the efforts are and are not. These efforts are not about anti-Semitism or being anti-Israel. They are not about Zionism or anti-Zionism. They are not about disliking Sharon or being sympathetic to the Palestinians. The efforts are about justice. They are about remembering something that was almost forgotten, about reminding a whole new generation of what happened. And they are about honoring and paying tribute to those who perished. So it is important to relate what I saw and heard during the days of the massacre. I want those who know little about this story to learn about it; those of you who are familiar with it, I want you to be reminded.

First, I must tell you something about myself and how I came to be in those camps. I am a second-generation Jewish American. My grandparents came from Eastern Europe to escape the Pogroms there. I was raised in a middle-class, mostly Jewish environment. My family observed the Sabbath and other Jewish holidays. I attended Hebrew School, regularly went to Sabbath service, and celebrated a Bat Mitzvah; I attended a Jewish School of Nursing. I grew up in the years that followed the Holocaust; what adults told me about this event had a strong effect on my lifelong beliefs. My parents, my Jewish teachers emphasized that the reason six million Jews perished was that no one spoke out.

In 1972, I traveled with a Jewish friend to Europe. Equipped with our backpacks, we were ready to see and experience; we wanted to broaden our horizons. We started in London, moving slowly eastward. After months of traveling we needed med-

**Photographers showed family members in happier times, their homes, land and orange groves**

ical attention. In September, we decided to go to Beirut, to the American University Hospital.

Neither of us had ever met an Arab, much less been to an Arab country. This seemed like a good opportunity to learn about the Palestinians. After obtaining treatment, we settled into an apartment in the heart of West Beirut. We decided to educate ourselves about the Palestinians here, in one of the world's most magnificent and fascinating cities.

Our first lesson was a visit to a Palestinian refugee camp. A Lebanese-style shared taxi dropped us at a camp called Bourj El-Bourajneh, close to the airport.

What affected me most, what made the biggest impression, was my experience at the hospital, Haifa Hospital. Palestinian refugees name their camps' medical facilities after cities in Palestine that they had to leave in 1948. I visited several elderly patients. Faded photographs showing their families in happier times, their homes, their land, their orange groves and their olive trees adorned the walls around their hospital beds.

And so it began, this education about the Palestinians. Ten years later, almost to the day, I would find myself in another hospital in another refugee camp in Beirut. In many ways I had never really left the first.

In June 1982, using the pretext of an assassination attempt on the Israeli ambassador to England, Israel invaded



Lebanon and unleashed a war on the Palestinians. Night after night I watched on television as Israel's air force bombed a nation's capital.

I was assigned to the Gaza Hospital, a Red Crescent facility, in the Sabra refugee camp in West Beirut. I lived at the hospital, sleeping on a hospital bed in a room shared by several health workers, foreign and Palestinian.

(On) Tuesday, September 14th 1982, Bashir Gemayel, the newly elected President of Lebanon, was assassinated. Gemayel had been the leader of the Phalangists (also referred to as the Lebanese Christian Militia, Lebanese Forces, and Kata'ib) a military and political party vehemently opposed to the Palestinians. The absolute hatred of the Phalange towards the Palestinians and their desire for revenge were common knowledge in this part of the world.

After the assassination of President Gemayel, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) decided to enter West Beirut. They also ordered the Phalange militia to enter the camps "to search and mop up."

Throughout the night of September 14th, the radio played somber music. Early next morning, Wednesday, September 15th, Israeli planes flew over the camps; we heard the explosive sound as they broke the sound barrier. We also began to hear light artillery fire from the area around the hospital. This artillery fire continued all day, increasing as the hours passed. Next morning, Thursday, September 16th, the hospital suddenly became very busy and very crowded. About 2,000 inhabitants of the camp rushed into the building seeking refuge. Another 2,000 could not get in; they huddled outside. The refugees were terrified and hysterical. Screaming, they kept repeating "Kata'ib (Phalange), Israel, Haddad (another Lebanese militia)" and made a motion with their fingers and hand as if to show that someone was slitting their throat.

Inside the hospital, the scene was chaotic. The morgue was overflowing. Wounded were streaming in; some had been shot in the elbows and legs as they tried to run away. I remember a dehydrated premature baby that was brought in; in all the excitement it had not received enough fluid. I do not know what happened to this baby once it was rehydrated.

Refugees crouched in every corner. We tended to the wounded. We tried to feed those who had sought refuge. Both heavy and light artillery fire continued all day. I kept listening to BBC news on my tiny transistor radio. The main story was the death in a car crash of Princess Grace of Monaco.

That evening, a few other health care workers and I climbed to one of the top floors of the hospital; it was unused since the recent invasion. Because most of the walls had been bombed out, the view was unobstructed. We watched for a time as flares were shot into the air, brightly illuminating different parts of the camp.

Not a sound was heard from the camps except the noise of the flares being projected and the shots that followed. No screaming, no cries for help, no human sound, nothing. Israeli planes continued to fly overhead as the night went on.

The next morning, Friday, September 17th, suddenly and with great urgency, all of the Palestinian and Lebanese staff left the hospital. The hospital administrator had told them that it was no longer a safe area. The only staff members who remained were some twenty doctors, nurses, and physical therapists from Great Britain, Norway, Holland, Sweden, Finland, Germany, Ireland, and two

of us from the US. All of us volunteers.

That afternoon, in great haste, all the patients who could walk left. The refugees inside and outside the building also fled. They feared it was no longer a safe place. The refugees told us that the militias were making their way towards the hospital. The only patients who remained were those who could not move easily and those in critical condition - altogether about fifty people.

The sounds of high explosives, mortars, and artillery fire, both light and heavy, continued almost non-stop, and they were getting closer. Sometime Friday morning, in the midst of this bombardment, a film crew from Visnews came. They did some filming, then left. Late in the afternoon, representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross appeared; they evacuated a half-dozen critically injured children, whom they placed in other hospitals around the city. They also left us oxygen, blood, and other vital and much-needed supplies.

That evening, as I was working in the Intensive Care Unit, two unfamiliar young men approached me. They looked different from the local population; well groomed and freshly shaven, with neatly ironed shirts and well-tailored trousers. One of them asked me "Are the Kata'ib coming tomorrow morning to slit the throats of Palestinian children?" He asked me this twice. His eyelids appeared to be drooping. He wanted to know who was in the hospital. I answered "All foreigners." I later learned that there were about twenty of these young men wandering around the hospital smoking hashish. To this day, I have

no idea who these men were. By that evening, the heavy artillery had ceased. Only the sound of light artillery and gunshots could be heard. Sundown marked the beginning of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year of 5743.

That night I managed to get a few hours' sleep. Very early on Saturday morning, September 18th, I was awakened by one of the other nurses. On an ordinary morning, we awoke to the tinkling of the bell of the vendor selling Arabic coffee from his colorful cart. This morning there was an eerie silence; even the familiar crowing of the roosters had ceased. My colleague said, "Get downstairs right

ducked. Someone told me, "keep walking." The militiamen themselves did not react at all, they completely ignored the sound; it was as if they had not heard it. Some of the camp residents, including some of the cooks and cleaners who worked at Gaza, followed us. The militia stopped them. Along the way, a Palestinian had joined us; fearful, he begged for one of us to give him a lab coat. Someone did. He looked Arab, though, and was quickly confronted by a militiaman asking for his ID card. The Phalangist slapped his face with the card and made him take off the lab coat. I turned around and saw him on his knees begging. As be-



Israeli soldiers look over earth barricades surrounding the camp

fore, someone told me, "Keep walking." The next thing I heard was a shot. I did not look back.

As we continued marching down Rue Sabra, we saw dead bodies lying along the sides of the street; some were old men, shot point-blank in the temple. As we moved on, we approached a large group of camp residents, mainly women and children, huddled together, with men in uniform guarding them. They were so scared. We were very worried about them, and they were frightened for us, seeing us led past them at rifle point. One young woman, fearing she would not survive, stepped out of the crowd and handed her infant to one of the female doctors. Dr Swee Ang was able to walk a few feet with the

One of the soldiers had instructed her to tell others "not to be afraid, as they are the Lebanese Army."

I looked out of a space that had once held a glass pane, blown out long ago by the force of a high explosive. In front of the hospital stood about a dozen men in uniform, wearing helmets and holding rifles. Others were herding people who lived close by the hospital, away, down the street. I quickly put on my lab coat over the green hospital uniform that I had slept in, grabbed my passport, and made my way down eight flights of steps.

In the bright morning sun the international health workers who had come to help stood together at the front door of our medical facility. The men and woman waiting for us were clean, their uniforms starched and well-fitting - but they bore the insignia not of the Lebanese Army, but of the Phalange. In contrast to them, we were a haggard and tired-looking group; many of us had blood, pus, and other human waste on our uniforms and lab coats. The militiamen spoke with each other in Arabic and French and to us in English. They told us they were taking us away for awhile, that we would be coming back. A few of the doctors successfully negotiated with them to allow one doctor and one nurse to remain in the Intensive Care Unit.

Our captors led us down the road in front of the hospital and on to Rue Sabra, the camp's main street. As we were marched along, I heard gun shots being fired on both sides - on the right, then the left, then the right. After each one, I instinctively

As we moved on we approached a group of scared camp residents with men in uniform guarding them

As we moved on we approached a group of scared camp residents with men in uniform guarding them

As we moved on we approached a group of scared camp residents with men in uniform guarding them

As we moved on we approached a group of scared camp residents with men in uniform guarding them

As we moved on we approached a group of scared camp residents with men in uniform guarding them

As we moved on we approached a group of scared camp residents with men in uniform guarding them

As we moved on we approached a group of scared camp residents with men in uniform guarding them

As we moved on we approached a group of scared camp residents with men in uniform guarding them

As we moved on we approached a group of scared camp residents with men in uniform guarding them

nurse away with them. They seemed quite insistent. One of our doctors asked someone from the IDF to intercede. He did, and the jeep drove off without the nurse.

Within minutes of our arrival, a crew from Israeli Television appeared. Bottled water, fresh fruit, and bread were brought to us; the crew filmed us as we ate and drank. Our presence was of little interest to the Israelis. I was not aware that any of them asked what had happened to us.

The Israelis said they would allow three of the doctors to return to the hospital, and an Israeli officer gave one of the physicians a note in Hebrew and Arabic, telling him that the note would get him past the checkpoints on the way back to the hospital. The doctor still has this note and has offered it as testimony.

The IDF loaded the rest of us into jeeps. I sat in the front seat of the jeep that led the convoy, as I was familiar with Beirut. The IDF offered to drop us off anywhere along the coast but said it was too dangerous for them to drive into the city proper, as they were too few.

Along with a few other health workers, I asked to be dropped off at the American Embassy, which was located on the coast. We went in. I told an embassy employee that something was terribly wrong in those camps; I wanted to report what I had seen and heard over the past few days. I was told that the person in charge was out: to come back the next day.

I did go back the next day. By then the world knew what terrible things had happened in those camps during the past few days. I met with Political Affairs Officer Ryan Crocker; he had been to the camps, had counted bodies. I spent that night at the embassy; next day I went to Syria, where I met up with other health workers.

Early in October I heard that the government of Israel was establishing a Commission of Inquiry into the massacre inviting witnesses to testify. I knew that the Palestinians and Lebanese who had survived would not go to Jerusalem to testify. They were frightened; the idea that they might go to Israel to testify was unrealistic.

I remembered what I had learned as a child: someone needed to speak for them, to be their voice. I asked all of the health workers who had been present during the massacre and who were still in Beirut if they would like to testify. Only Dr Swee Ang and Dr Paul Morris accepted.

We left for Israel on October 31st. From Baabda we drove straight through to the border with Israel. Along the way we passed through Israeli checkpoints and piles of rubble which had once been the homes of Palestinians.

On the morning of November 1st we appeared before the Commission. I was first. I introduced myself, read through my 12-page document, and answered questions. Towards the end of my testimony I reminded the justices, that as Jews we continue searching for Nazi war criminals in order to punish them and to bring about justice. I said, "I hope that justice will also be done in regard to this massacre." Justice Aharon Barak responded, "Justice will be done."

(On the findings of the Kahan Commission of Inquiry)

An extensive communication was in use, on September 18th at least, as evidenced by the continual use of walkie-talkies. The Israeli forward command post overlooked the camps. The IDF could intervene to stop the execution of light-skinned, blond-haired health workers holding Western passports and could stop the Phalange from abducting a Norwegian nurse. Given these facts,

**At the end of my testimony I said: 'I hope that justice will also be done in regards to this massacre'**

I believe someone in that IDF command post knew what was happening - could even see at least some of what was going on in the area ... Someone had the authority to rein in the killers.

It seems that these and other similar facts indicate responsibility that is more than indirect. Yet, Ariel Sharon has never served time in prison for his actions; on the contrary, he is now head of the Jewish State. He is officially welcomed in most countries, including the United States, where he has met with the President at the White House.

And so Justice Barak, justice has not been done.

Nineteen years have passed. I think of those in the camps often, especially on the anniversary of the massacre. I wonder how they are, what their lives are like, what their memories are. Do they know that a Jewish-American living in the capital of the world's most powerful nation shares something with them?

In the meantime, efforts continue in the search for justice. In the long run, one hopes that nations and leaders will become accountable for human rights abuses. Violations must be documented, and violators must be punished. Justice must be done for all.