

“We are all responsible for what happened to Lebanon”

An Interview with Claire Gebeyli conducted by Wafa' Stephan Tarnowski

Claire Gebeyli is a household name among most Lebanese women. Readers look forward to her weekly supplement in *L'Orient-Le Jour* on medical news, fashion, beauty and women's affairs. She is also a writer and a lecturer in French Literature at the Universite St. Joseph in Beirut. Last June, Gebeyli was nominated a Member of the prestigious New York Academy of Science (founded in 1817) in recognition of her work propagating scientific news and information to the general public. For many years, Gebeyli also worked as a UN National Officer in Lebanon, heading the UN bureau in Lebanon and keeping it open during the worst years of the war under extremely challenging circumstances.

Her first novel, *Cantata For a Dead Bird*, is due to be published soon in Paris. It tells the saga of a Mediterranean family, beginning in an unnamed country in the mid-19th century and ending in the 1990s in Beirut. *Cantata for a Dead Bird* is a tale of migration and adaptation to a new life after leaving an old one. Gebeyli calls these people of mixed background, who grow up in one place only to be forced by the “winds of history” to live in another, “the birds of history.” Gebeyli should know something about this reality, since she herself is such a “bird of history.” Arriving in Lebanon from Egypt in the late 1950s, Gebeyli had to adapt to a new mode of life and deal with nostalgia for her former existence. Her husband, shattered by the loss of his roots, never recovered. Despite her training in the social sciences, Gebeyli went into journalistic writing, beginning with a column entitled “Historical Portraits” which appeared in the weekly magazine *La Revue du Liban*. These portraits quickly proved successful, and Gebeyli thus achieved literary recognition along with other intellectuals of that period, such as Naccache, Salah Stetieh, Berkoff, and most importantly, the poet Nadia Tueni, who became Gebeyli's closest friend until Tueni's death twenty years later. Describing her friendship with Tueni, Gebeyli says, “she was a second me; there was never any rivalry or hurt between us. She taught me the secret of belonging to poetry and to life at the same time. She still helps me to live and to face life,” she said with controlled emotion. “She taught me how to face suffering with the dignity of an empress.”

After writing her columns on “Historical Portraits,” and along with her job with the UN, Gebeyli wrote short commentaries about the war entitled “*Billets*”. Some were gathered into a book by a circle of French intellectuals, and later published under the title of *La Corde Raide* (“The Tight-Rope”). This

book was chosen by this circle of intellectuals as their book of the year. “The value of the *Billets*,” says Gebeyli, “was the fact that they were a spontaneous testimony of the war, like the shout of a wounded person. They were a cry against death, but now that the war is over, that person who cried out has recovered from her wounds and has to find another path. It would have been dishonest to continue with that trend, because it would have taken away from their specific value. I have to be faithful to my vocation as a journalist,” declares Gebeyli. “A journalist is a mirror of his or her time; he or she has to be responsible towards the readers and very humble towards the power of the word” Gebeyli says that she is always quite conscious of the consequences words might have and thus tries to be “judge and jury” of her own work.

Gebeyli commented that the greatest reward of her work comes “when I feel that people trust me; it gives me courage. My phone number is available to everyone and I get lots of phone calls from people who express appreciation. That is one of the greatest joys I experience as a journalist. What most interests me are human beings. I do not care about what a person's color or religion may be; as a journalist, I feel that I am a servant of this human being for whom I write. This is one of the reasons why I completely changed my style of writing since the end of the war. Now, I want to share with my readers what they most need at this point in time, and that is scientific knowledge.” This type of writing brings her a lot of satisfaction. She says she feels “at peace with herself” and “useful”.

Gebeyli's philosophy of life is that “life is a form of capital that we have to manage as carefully as we manage our money. We have to do the maximum with what is given to us. We have no right to disburse this precious capital lightly; we have a responsibility to use our intelligence and talent, not only towards ourselves, but also towards the force that created us. Life is an immense gift, a treasure that is given to us.”

Before the war, Gebeyli had a happy family life and a successful journalistic career. But inside herself, she always felt a sense of unrest. She was witnessing Lebanese society committing exactly the same mistakes which brought about the downfall of the Egyptian society she had known before coming to Lebanon. She was tormented by this idea, and tried to write about it, but those days were days of “euphoria and festivities, and general unconsciousness” she recalls. Eventually, her premonition that something bad was about to befall Lebanon led her to work for the United Nations in order “to try to do something for [Lebanon's] development.”

Prior to 1975, she had already written a series of reports in *L'Orient* newspaper concerning the underprivileged regions of Lebanon, such as Akkar, Hermel and the South, in order to awaken public awareness of the social problems existing in these underdeveloped regions. But no one paid any attention, "it was like a person shouting for help, and people saying, 'what a beautiful voice this person has!'" Gebeyli tried to disregard her premonitions until they were realized with the outbreak of fighting in April 1975. In spite of her intuition that something terrible was going to happen, she claims that she never could have guessed or expected the severity of the violence Lebanon experienced during the long war; not even in her worst nightmares had she anticipated such a disaster. She comments that she could never understand how such "smiling people were capable of such cruelty and barbarity."

When asked why she did not leave Lebanon during the war, Gebeyli responded that "I'd chosen this country when I needed it, so I estimated that I had a debt towards it, so I stayed because I felt I had a duty to discharge. If I had left," she added, "I would have denied all my life's beliefs. So I stayed with my job at the UN, even after all the foreigners had left, protecting other people's jobs, Muslims and Christians alike. I later received a letter of recognition from the UN Headquarters in New York for my efforts in those days," she recalls.

Gebeyli feels that, on balance, the overall effect of the war on her, as a person and as a writer, was unique. On the positive side of the ledger, the war was a source of inspiration and a call for more profound thinking and mature action. On the negative side, however, the war created a big gap in her life. "So many precious moments wasted! One cannot recover from such a shock," declares Gebeyli, "especially our generation. In our souls, we have an area of ruin that each of us always carries. These ruins weigh us down. We were all responsible for what happened to Lebanon, because we intellectuals did not speak out enough; we did not do enough to stop the war."

In Gebeyli's opinion, women reacted to the war more positively than men did. "There was not one woman war leader, but there were a lot of women from different religious and social backgrounds who united for a peace march against the war" (see *Al-Raida*, Vol. VII, No. 30, Fall, 1984 for a discussion of the 6th of May Peace March organized by Lebanese women of all confessional backgrounds to call for an end to the war). "Each time there was a call for peace, it came from women," Gebeyli asserts. "This is due to the fact that women are more humane; they give life and know how to appreciate its value and fragility more than men do. There is also a solidarity among women as child-bearers which makes them reluctant to surrender to death after they have given birth." For Gebeyli, woman resembles the earth. She, like it, has humility. She, like it, receives seeds and brings forth fruit. She, like it, doesn't hold grudges.

Recalling the height of the war, Gebeyli asserts that she didn't live the war as an ideology, but as a reality. War became her life, a part she refused, but something that she had, by necessity, to experience. For this reason, she finds it difficult to describe the differences between her life before and after the war occurred. Even five years after the cessation of armed conflict, the war is still continuing on the intellectual level, according to Gebeyli. "Currently, we have a war against the after-effects of the war," she states. The war that Gebeyli now fights on the moral plane is less barbaric, but just as vigorous and as essential. This is the struggle to prevent a repetition of what happened before, a campaign to tell others about the sacrifices made and to guarantee that those sacrifices were not made in vain.

For as long as she can remember, Gebeyli says that she has been on the side of the weak and the powerless. It is part of her personality not to envy people in power or to desire power for herself. She finds the all-out competition for power difficult to comprehend. Gebeyli's views of contemporary Lebanon are disheartening. She believes that the country is deteriorating and wasting its assets just like an immature and spoiled child. She cannot understand this, especially after all of the clear lessons provided by the long war.

Concerning women in particular, Gebeyli feels that they were much more heroic during the war than they are now. Then, they waited for hours under the bombardments to pick up their children from school. They went out to shop for needed bread and vegetables, despite snipers, car-bombs and roving militias. Now, however, most women are busy preparing big banquets and shopping for superfluous luxury goods. "For whom are all of these banquets, new restaurants and fancy boutiques?", she asks. "For a couple of hundred fortunate individuals who have invested their capital abroad and come to Lebanon just to party and to be seen at big cocktail parties!?" In Gebeyli's view, women's role in post-war Lebanon has lessened considerably as a result of the conflict. There have been no major socio-economic reforms in favor of women following the war. Women's status has not evolved, whether professionally or socially, and this is apparent among all of Lebanon's religious groups.

As for her particular field, journalism, Gebeyli does not find the post-war environment encouraging. She believes that the freedom of the press is not as strong nor as assured as it used to be; consequently, there are many social problems which are not being addressed adequately by the press.

Finally, if Gebeyli were to address women living in other countries torn by war and violence, such as the former Yugoslavia, Chechnya and Somalia, she would tell them "Don't forget that you are women; you give life, so resist whomever tries to destroy life. It is your mission as human beings!" As for the future of Lebanon, Gebeyli hopes for a re-awakening of conscience and consciousness at all levels: from schools to universities, from families to communities to government.