BACK TO THE FOLD
One Prison May Hide Another…

Testimony of a former inmate
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“The topography of the prison dormitory had itself a social dimension... It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to call it a class dimension... It was essentially divided into three sections: closest to the entrance was where the chairperson of the cell—call him whatever you want—would sit surrounded by his favorites and his entourage. It was a kind of divan where food was served but was also a kind of information point for newcomers. Being closest to the entrance, it was the most aerated part of the dormitory—you could feel the breeze produced by the fans hanging on the ceiling—and it also had a view of the television in the warden’s room. The middle of the cell was the most populated section. These were the average inmates. They were not allowed to move forward, though some of them may have had family ties with the chairperson. The section furthest back, the rear as we called it, was the one nearest the toilets and the makeshift sink. Being placed there meant one of two things: either that the prisoner in question was about to finish his term of punishment or that he was downtrodden and lacked any status. As things changed and I had the opportunity to be upgraded to the first class section, my move reordered the position of the inmates, causing a few of them to get closer to the rear... in other words: to the toilets....”

This is how journalist Hassan Sahili, who collected and drafted the testimony of X***, renders the story told to him by his interlocutor who served several weeks in a cell in the prison in
Zahle—a town in eastern Lebanon. In fact, the geographic and social organization of that cell is copy/pasted from the world outside it—or at least this is how it seems to X*** who found himself there after being arrested for a trivial, drug-related issue.

In comparison to many others who have shared their testimonies about time spent in prison, X*** cannot compete in regard to the time he spent behind bars or in terms of his treatment, nor can he claim that what led him to be there was the noblest cause in the world.

However, this testimony is no less violent and powerful than the those of individuals who spent long years in prison and were subjected to the most inhumane torture. This testimony is, in fact, an open story of an endless, three-fold imprisonment experience.

It took X*** being physically jailed to realize that up until he became an adult, he had never left with his possessive family: brought up in a rural region within a family culturally at odds with its clanic milieu despite the kinship associating it with this milieu, and suffering from asthma, he did not grow up like his peers and it took him a while before he moved away from his family and started to find his own way. Nevertheless, the difficulties of his upbringing were not easily forgotten and even once away from the family he became hostage to a deep crisis of self-esteem.

X*** didn’t realize how mentally and emotionally fastened to this past he still was until his week-long carceral experience. However, this discovery wasn’t the worst thing he went through in prison!

Once jailed, he found out that the cell he was to be confined in was largely filled with inmates from his mother’s clan. Most of them were there for drug related crimes. Additionally, during this time in prison X*** found himself to be out of sync with his peers. As a youth he was under the protection of his mother and father, but here, in the wilderness, he had no other choice but to voluntarily come back into the fold, putting himself under the protection of the family and enjoying the luxury and security of the first class section in the cell!
“In spite of being imprisoned on a second floor dormitory of the prison of Zahle, the feeling of being dumped somewhere, in some underground oubliette, never left me... it wasn’t to do with the location in which I was confined, but with myself: in that dormitory, under the supervision of my family, I felt that I went back to square one in terms of all of the effort that I had made to recover myself.”

A couple weeks after his arrest X*** was set free. Free? Well not exactly...

«I didn’t spend more than a couple weeks in prison. Forget how long... I felt as if I had spent years inside...Still today, four years after that experience, every time I step into a enclosed space the same feelings grip me once again. I went to see a psychiatrist. He gave me some medication but it did not really help. Indeed, I feel free of it from time to time, but too often I’m the prey of my memories and I have the impression that they are assaulting me again: I don’t want to be denounced and taken to jail again... I don’t want to be at the mercy of my cousins/cellmates again... And as soon as I recover from this spate of anxiety, I realize that most of my former inmates were set free... and are today carrying on, good or bad, with their respective lives and that I’m the only one who’s still in the dormitory... there....”

While this testimony X*** shared with Hassan Sahili as if delivering a conféssion does not hide its subjective and introspective nature, it would be unfair to discount all that this tells us about the prison culture in Lebanon—and especially about the perception of prison as an occupational hazard within some communities—such as the one to which X*** belongs.

Given all this, this booklet’s subtitle deserves to be understood more as a statement than as a pun and more as a general observation than a subjective conclusion of the experiences gained through incarceration: one prison may hide another, and any given society may hide a lot of prisons!