

# The Human Face of Evil

*Were life to imitate art, Roger Deeb\* would look grotesque on the outside. Portrayed in the larger-than-life characterization of a nineteenth century novel or of an early Hollywood movie, Roger would have a crooked nose and dishevelled aspect and would be stooped with unthinking subservience in his role of sidekick to the Archvillain: Mephistopheles to the Devil.*

*Reality is by far more fearsome and thought-defying than the best of fiction. Roger does not materialize out of nowhere as a demon to wreak havoc on man. He is, by his own account, an ordinary man and a product of his society where massacres had become commonplace.*

*Roger lost his wife and son to Palestinian gunmen in Dammur. He became a mass murderer for his surviving daughter – justifying his acts as safeguarding her future – as he explains why he along with fellow militiamen stormed Sabra on the fateful 16 September 1982.*

Roger is a car mechanic who specializes in expensive German cars. His tools of the trade line the wall of his garage meticulously like instruments of torture – screwdrivers on the left in decreasing size, spanners and heavier tools on the right. Roger labours on a Mercedes during our interview.

“They say a car mechanic loses his sense of smell after a while,” he says, grunting to free a bolt under the hood. He applies his weight so that the car sways and shudders. “Too many fumes.” He shrugs. “Don’t know about that. Maybe. But I tell you what – my nose still picks out the stench of urine and excrement in this country. The stench is everywhere these days not just in Beirut.”

He has removed the air filter and shakes his head disapprovingly at the dust. “And all those kids on the streets – it’s a cancer in our society. The parents breed a wholesale number of children to send them begging on the streets.” He asks me to switch on the engine so he can check the inlet valve. “Dirty, scrawny imps who are abused by their parents and who’d probably prefer to be dead.” I am asked to rev up the engine.

“Of course I killed some women and children during the war. Didn’t actively seek them out, not like some of the other fighters. But when they’re there, in front of my gun –” He leaves the sentence unfinished. “A kid like any of those you see begging on the boulevards killed my best friend. Shot him point blank because my friend hesitated when he saw such a young fedayeen. The boy was maybe 9 or 10 – who cares. The point is Palestinian women and children fight alongside their men. They were soldiers not civilians, and therefore legitimate targets.” Reaching for a new air filter, he hesitates. “Not all of them were fighters in Sabra, of course. But that’s war for you – you can’t separate the wheat from the chaff, not in a Palestinian camp anyway.”

His tone turns vindictive. “And what about all the Christian women and children that were massacred? They’re more important than the Palestinians who died.” He seems genuinely surprised when I ask him why the death of a Christian child is a greater crime than the death of a Palestinian child. “Because it’s like a car-on-car accident between the latest Mercedes, full options, leather seats,” He pats the car in his garage approvingly, “and a cheap and clapped-out French car like a Renault or a Peugeot. Which are you going to care more about?” He answers his own question: “The German car”. After a while, he pursues, “On average, Christian families have two or three children; children who are loved, cherished and sent to school. We believe in giving the best that life has to offer to our young. If one of them dies, that’s half or a third of the children and of the love and care that vanishes.” He nods emphatically. “Palestinians believe otherwise. They have many children even if they can’t look after them. If a Palestinian child dies, the parents have so many offspring anyway they probably forget which one of the brood is missing. They have human factories in their homes, not families.” He nods again. “It’s elementary maths: half or a third versus a seventh or even a tenth. Naturally Christian children are more valuable.”

He slams the hood of the car. “The main problem, you see,” says Roger, “is that we live in a region riddled with lies. The mother of all lies, for instance, is that a Christian of the twentieth century AD can live side by side with a Muslim of the fifteenth century Hegira. That’s madness. It’s like asking a community of advanced Europeans to live with backward Bushmen.

“Muslims want us to forget our Phoenician and Aramaic pasts. They would skip the glorious seven centuries from the seventh to the thirteenth when the Lebanon was a proud Christian state. We are not European colonialists who arrived from a distant continent – we are of this land, and this land lives through us. Our blood is Phoenician; our soul is Aramaic.”

Roger’s expression becomes grim. “Some men fought for money and others simply because they enjoyed it, but I have always fought for my country, for my people. I killed in the Palestinian camps for the sake of Lebanon. And, if God gives me strength, I would kill some more until Christians are given their own state.” He gives a brief nod. “It’s our fate and the fate of all Christians in the Middle East. And I am what you might call a latter-day crusader.” He argues, “Why is it when a Muslim declares he is on a jihad everyone applauds him, and when a Christian says his fight is for God he is sent to an asylum for the insane?”

His grimy hands come together as though in prayer. “It’s all a matter of survival and sometimes it’s necessary to do evil so that good may come. You want to know about Sabra, well let’s talk about it. Let’s remember the same Sabra that, throughout the 1970s was synonymous with torture and death. It was hell on earth, a bottomless pit where our Christian brothers and sisters were taken never to return. It was a growing abscess that had to be removed. The Palestinians lost the war in Lebanon because of the Israelis; but it’s thanks to Sabra and Shatila that they will never try to take Lebanon again – not for a thousand years. I’d say we did a good day’s work that day.”

Roger turns to the tap in his garage and, reaching for a bottle of detergent, he scrubs his hands clean of the grime.

*\* Name changed.*

\*\*\*