

The Levinger family and friends arrive, and the battle for Hebron is on

The 'weekend' that has lasted for 20 years

TEN MONTHS after the Six Day War drove off Hebron's traditional tourist trade, local hotelier Faye Kawasmeh took a phone call from a man inquiring about a three-day vacation. It was a call he wishes he had never answered.

Within two days of the Levinger family's arrival on April 9, 1968, nine other families and many more singles joined them for the Pessah seder at the graceful, flower-decked Park Hotel on the outskirts of Hebron.

Although they could not eat the hotel's food, they liked the place so much that they booked for another three days. On the sixth day Minister Yigal Allon visited and told them they were "privileged to be the first to revive the Jewish community of the city of the Patriarchs, the cradle of the nation."

Kawasmeh, who was used to receiving VIPs in pre-Six Day War days, thought Allon's visit would be good publicity. But Kawasmeh feared the Israeli occupation of his hotel was becoming more than a holiday jaunt when his guests moved in desks and chairs on the ninth day to set up a schoolroom for their children. "I cut off the electricity and water and demanded that the Israeli military governor throw them out."

In retrospect the battle of the Park Hotel can be seen as the beginning of the great battle to decide who will be proprietor of the Hotel West Bank-Judea and Samaria. Kawasmeh's closure of the Park Hotel to tourists since 1969 might be considered the longest-running commercial strike in the administered territories.

Rabbi Levinger never left Hebron. The 10 families were transferred to the compound of the Israeli military governor and fought from there for the undeniable justice of their demand to live in a city in which Jews had lived continuously until Arabs massacred 65 and chased out the others in 1929.

In 1968, Levi Eshkol's government favoured retaining the Hebron

area, but there was no established Israeli settlement policy. The Allon Plan was in its first draft and Gush Emunim came into being only six years later. To prevent a confrontation in Hebron's old Jewish quarter where Arabs now lived, the government built Kiryat Arba. In September 1971, Rabbi Levinger left the military compound with his followers to move into the first permanent Jewish housing there.

Today, Kiryat Arba is a 4,000-strong community with its own winery and its own hotel. The Jewish quarter has been restored and Gush Emunim has been instrumental in setting up 125 new communities in Judea and Samaria, housing 65,000 Israelis.

But as Amos said: "Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria."

AS PALESTINIANS enter the fifth month of their *intifada*, the settlers are beginning to feel insecure and in the hard, dry confrontation, a spark can ignite a blaze as the attack on hiking youths from Eilon Moreh showed. In Beita, 14 houses were destroyed. Yet the guilt, or stupidity, of a settler will not be punished. Another village will be radicalized. Yet there are differences among the settlers, which Palestinians hope to exploit, as there also are differences among the Palestinians, as the Beita incident showed, which Israelis seem to exploit so poorly.

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, spiritual leader of Efrat, a community of 2,000 in the rocky green hillside of Gush Etzion between Bethlehem and Hebron, believes it is now necessary to reaffirm in this land of all

Jonathan Immanuel

lands, that the true owner is neither Jew nor Palestinian, but God. "It is a divine command and a historical necessity that we live here. But we have to reach out to the Arabs and to live in the land as their cousins, perhaps even as their brothers," he says. Politicians must translate this religious insight into a political solution.

Efrat stands out from a distance as a prosperous cluster of red-roofed houses. Its housing is among the most expensive in the West Bank which undermines its moral authority in the eyes of more militant settlers. In Kiryat Arba, Efratis are considered too laid back, almost as ignorant of Arabs as shopkeepers on Dizengoff Street.

In Ofra, where the seat of Gush Emunim is located, in Sebastia near Nablus, where the first settlers slept on the floor of an ancient synagogue, or in Kiryat Arba where the first settlers slept in army barracks, the name of the game is not coexistence, but ownership. With the best will in the world, Gush Emunim supporters are unable to recognize Palestinian claims as equal to their own.

"The Palestinians have to be patient," says Arieh, a soft-spoken tailor aged 57 who has lived in Kiryat Arba from its inception and like so many Gush Emunim settlers prefers to keep his last name from journalists.

"They have problems, but I tell them Israelis have problems too.

The older generation know it's good here, better than in other Arab countries. That's why they stay. If the younger ones are not satisfied they can demand change, within the law. If they break the law they should be rehabilitated in prison."

IF ARIEH were an Israeli talking about Israeli Arabs, his statement would be sound. But, he is talking about a non-democratic military regime with its different laws for Israelis and Palestinians as though it is perfectly reasonable and democratic. He has accepted political inequality as a norm.

The new management does not understand why the Palestinians, who partly managed a three-star hotel called the West Bank with Jordan until 1967, should be impatient with the Jewish management which is turning it into a five-star hotel called Judea and Samaria in which Palestinians will be honoured guests with every right to place their complaints in a little suggestion box if they feel uncomfortable.

To Gush Emunim, the Palestinians are guests who came long after Hebron was sold in perpetuity to Abraham. "If you don't like it here no one is forcing you to stay," is true enough, but a callous remark to make even if you are a hotel manager.

Arieh is proud of the service he provides. "I had six Arabs working for me in a stitching shop here. Now they all have their own shops and their own villas," he says.

Faye Kawasmeh has also adjusted and done well. He started a bus line which takes hundreds of Arab guest workers to Jerusalem every day. Many of them help to maintain

Jerusalem's new hotels and restaurants which have taken tourist business away from Hebron.

His business helped to finance a fine home he built five years ago behind the Park Hotel. He is many times wealthier and more leisured than Arieh in his three-room Kiryat Arba apartment. In the Judea and Samaria Hotel there are more colour TV sets than there have ever been.

Yet the wealthiest Palestinian has fewer rights than the poorest Israeli there.

Kawasmeh said he was administratively detained in 1969 for six months on unspecified charges of sympathy for the PLO. His younger brother Fahd was expelled after terrorists shot dead six Israelis in May 1980. Fahd had been elected mayor in 1976 and had established his home in the Park Hotel.

Levinger, the former Park Hotel guest, now the proprietor of Hebron and host to government ministers, demanded Fahd's expulsion. Since then, the Park Hotel has been empty and neglected.

When Fahd Kawasmeh was shot dead by Syrian agents in Jordan three years ago, Defence Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who bewails the absence of Palestinian leadership in Judea and Samaria, would not even allow his body to return to the West Bank.

One thing is sure: Faye Kawasmeh will sooner hope that the devout and opulently wealthy Arabs from the Gulf Emirates who patronized his hotel before 1967 will return to his hotel, than sell it to Jewish settlers. He will continue to make a living bussing guests workers to Israel, but he will never accept those whom he believes breached the rules of Arab hospitality. He suggests more snobbery than fear when he says "they are the worst people, these settlers. They don't want to live in peace," as though he is afraid they will smash the crockery if allowed into his hotel again.

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The light that failed

THE STATE of Israel will be 40 this week. It should have been a happy anniversary for, with all her problems, she has much to celebrate.

Here was a country of under a million Jews which, within a few years, doubled its population, then doubled it again, without serious disruption. She was small, weak and lived in fear of her hostile neighbours. She is now the foremost power in the Middle East and, given her nuclear capabilities, she is a power almost of world rank.

She is at peace with the one Arab country, Egypt, which could threaten her security. Her farmers are the most efficient in the world and her scientists the most inventive. She exports advanced technology to most Western countries and even — if surreptitiously — to Communist China (which in turn exports it to Saudi Arabia, which in turn might use it against Israel), and this without natural resources other than the ingenuity of its own people.

It is a vivacious and colourful country and glitters with artistic talent, yet its mood is anything but festive. Passover, which precedes Independence Day by some three weeks, is the festival of Jewish reawakening, and the Song of Songs, with its vivid evocation of spring, is read in synagogues: "For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone, the flowers appear on the earth, the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land."

The hills are ablaze with poppies and the country is at its loveliest, and during Passover week public offices close and Israel becomes a nation of ramblers. On 6 April, towards the end of Passover, a group of youngsters from the Jewish West Bank settlement of Elon Moreh, accompanied by two armed guards, set out to explore the hills of Samaria near the village of Beita. They were attacked with stones. The guards opened fire and in the ensuing fracas one Jewish child and two Arabs were killed. The tragic incident climaxed four months of unrest, in which 130 Arabs died and thousands of others were injured.

Israel's 1984 election had returned a hung Parliament in

CHAIM BERMANT, on the eve of Israel's fortieth anniversary, finds the country with much to celebrate, but in a far from festive mood.

which Labour was prepared to make territorial concessions in return for peace, while Likud was determined to retain every inch of the West Bank and Gaza as 'the eternal patrimony' of the Jewish people. The arguments continued over the head of the Arabs as if it was none of their business.

The Arabs have now shown that it is very much their business and, in the absence of a ballot, they have voted with stones. They have suffered a Sharpeville by instalments, and whatever force the Israelis may use to restore order, the occupied territories will never be the same again.

Abusive letters

The Israeli Press has condemned the excesses of the army and the police and has consistently called for a territorial compromise, as have most of the Israeli intelligentsia, but they do not reflect popular opinion. Hannah Zemer, a liberal and perceptive woman who is editor of the Labour daily *Davar*, said she had never received so many abusive letters from her readers, most of whom, she presumes, are members of the Labour Party. "If that's how they feel," she said, "what can you expect from Likud?"

The political future of Mr Peres, who seemed set to win the forthcoming election, is once again in doubt. When he and Mr Shamir addressed a large festive gathering in Jerusalem last week, he was hissed and barracked, while Shamir was loudly cheered. Every stone thrown by Arabs, it is said, means a vote for Likud.

But a majority for Mr Shamir is not the worst that could happen, for he is being seriously challenged by parties to the right, all of them to a lesser or greater degree religious, with views so extreme as to make him seem moderate. Shamir, at least, is ready to live with the Arabs; the others are talking ominously of population transfers, and they were heard in full cry after the Beita tragedy, when they called

for the erasure of the village from the face of the earth.

Israel over the past few years has been seized with a wave of religious fervour which has not yet abated. Immigration has been reduced to a trickle, but the few Jews from Russia and elsewhere who settle in Israel are nearly all religious. They are outnumbered by emigrants, who are nearly all secular.

The religious parties have always had an influence in Israel out of all proportion to their numbers. They now also have the numbers, but with all their religiosity they seem to lack a spiritual dimension, and the nation which gave Isaiah and Ezekiel and Amos and Micah to mankind has little better to offer than Rabbis Kook and Druckman and Walkman, the mentors of the Jewish settlers movement, who have warned that to return even an inch of the Holy Land to the infidel would be a desecration of God's name.

The founding fathers of Israel, Weizmann, Ben Gurion, Sharett, Eshkol and others, were all non-religious or even anti-religious, but they used the Bible as the collective folk memory of the Jewish people and drew on prophetic teaching to build a liberal and humane society which became a model of everything a developing state should be.

Not-an-inch lobby

Israel had saved herself by her exertions and helped others by her example and had, in the words of the Prophets, become 'a light unto the nations.' That light is now extinct, and it would almost seem that the greater the fervour of the faithful, the further they recede from the principles of their faith.

There are religious Jews in Israel who have argued against the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and though they include some distinguished individuals, they are the merest handful. A recent Peace Now rally in Tel Aviv attracted a gathering of 20,000. A similar rally

staged by the not-an-inch lobby attracted more than 60,000.

The overwhelming majority of the 65,000 settlers with homes in the occupied territories are religious, with little affection for the Arabs (and even less for Israeli journalists, whom they regard as a pack of traitors). Some had settled in Yamit at the time of the withdrawal from Sinai, and they had to be forcibly evicted by the army. They are all armed, and in the event of a peace agreement the problems which the army now has with the Arabs would be fun and games compared to the problems it would have with the Jews.

One does not have to be religious to understand the grip which Judea and Samaria have on the Jewish imagination, especially if one traverses them with Bible in hand, for they reverberate with echoes from Jewish history. But they also happen to be densely populated with Arabs, which brings us to the heart of the problem. The settlers live more in the past than the present and attach greater weight to the claims of history than the claims of men.

Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien, one of Israel's warmest friends, has argued in this paper and elsewhere that some problems are insoluble, and that those of the occupied territories are among them. He seems to feel that if England has been able to live with the problems of Ulster for 300 years, Israel should be able to manage with those of the West Bank and Gaza for a while yet. That is not the view of Chief Rabbi Lord Jakobovits, who in 1980 told a group of Israeli journalists:

"There are many who believe that an accommodation with the Arabs will never be found. I do not and cannot share this despair. If I did not have absolute faith that some time in the future — in 10, 15 or even 20 years — an understanding with the Arabs would eventually be reached, I would rather salvage what can be salvaged, and we might as well liquidate the state, for it could not for ever prevail against 100 million Arabs in a hostile world."

Lord Jakobovits is at least sustained by a belief in divine providence. Many Israelis share his forebodings without sharing his hopes.