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Visiting with Bat Galim residents in the aftermath of war

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Posted: Friday, October 27, 2006 12:00 am

BY: SAM HELLER Special to the CJN

As one drives on the coastline highway through Haifa, a community resembling Monte Carlo sweeps on the horizon.

Visiting with Bat Galim residents in the aftermath of war

This residential apartment building in the Bat Galim neighborhood of Haifa was partially destroyed by Hezbollah rockets fired from Lebanon during the 34-day war last summer.

A closed casino dominates the seacoast. Windsurfers ride the undulating waves in the Mediterranean Sea. Beautiful people wearing Gottex swimsuits tan on the soft and silky sand. Nearby lies Rambam Medical Center - considered by many to be the best hospital in the north.

Turn east toward Mount Carmel, and the view is of apartments that are crumbling and badly in need of paint. The Bat Galim neighborhood in Haifa, the seaport district which figured prominently in the Paul Newman film "Exodus" as an area of hope for the new state of Israel, has become one of its poorest areas. Bat Galim is a melting pot, of sorts, with immigrants from Russia, Africa and Ethiopia.

Noah, a 60-year-old man grew up in Bat Galim. "It was a wonderful place then," he says. "There were beautiful neighborhoods with lovely people. Now, the neighborhood has declined, the buildings have not been kept up, and people have moved up to live on Mount Carmel."

Bat Galim got hit harder than any other vicinity in Haifa during the recent Lebanon war.

Holes from the ball bearings of the rockets riddle the walls of apartments throughout the area. Adjacent to a synagogue is an entire apartment complex destroyed by a Katyusha missile; piles of debris are still scattered on the ground. Engineers will examine the structure, but it seems inevitable that the building will be torn down. However, people in the area are thankful that nobody living in the building was injured.

On the other side of the street, an older woman is meticulously tending her rose garden. She remained in the area throughout the war because she had no place to flee. "The impact from the apartment building was so violent that debris flew over the fence and hit my apartment and damaged my door," she says.

A deserted apartment, missing its windows after they were blasted by rockets, is opened by a policeman. Visible

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inside the apartment is a picture of the Moroccan immigrant family that lived there. Furniture is piled up in the kitchen and in the bathtub.

A 12-year-old Ethiopian boy with 12 siblings came back from Hagno in the south after the cease-fire. The entire neighborhood where he resides in Bat Galim was leveled. The boy lacks the clothing and school supplies needed to start the school year. Nevertheless, he is ecstatic to go back to school.

An elderly woman living alone emigrated from Morocco in 1962. The nearest bomb shelter was too far away, so she stood in the stairwell trembling during the Lebanon war. "Nothing has been accomplished from the war," she says. "So many soldiers died."

A third-generation Israeli, a father of four, was more sanguine about living in Bat Galim. He avoided going to shelters despite the heavy bombardment. His children saw the bombs, he says, but they were secure. "I will stay and die in Bat Galim," he continued. "Israel is my country."

Sam Heller is the nephew of Cleveland resident Tammy Gould. The two were in Israel after the war.

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