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Review/Film; In Beirut, Struggle as Way of Life
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LEAD: ''Beirut: The Last Home Movie'' begins in a New York subway, when Gaby Bustros steps on the J.F.K. Express and heads for a plane to the city she left 15 years before. ''Shells have landed in my family's garden,'' she says, and we quickly follow her through the rubble of bombed-out Beirut, with clouds of smoke hovering over empty buildings, to arrive at her family's home - a 200-year-old house fronted by a huge marble staircase and filled with chandeliers and

''Beirut: The Last Home Movie'' begins in a New York subway, when Gaby Bustros steps on the J.F.K. Express and heads for a plane to the city she left 15 years before. ''Shells have landed in my family's garden,'' she says, and we quickly follow her through the rubble of bombed-out Beirut, with clouds of smoke hovering over empty buildings, to arrive at her family's home - a 200-year-old house fronted by a huge marble staircase and filled with chandeliers and Oriental rugs.

This oasis, in one of the most desolate parts of Beirut, is the setting for Jennifer Fox's astute documentary about the Bustros family. Stubborn and apolitical, they remain in their ancestral home while the seemingly endless civil war surrounds them. Privileged and anomalous, they are a rich, psychological mystery, which Miss Fox turns into an consistently intriguing film.

Though we meet Gaby's widowed mother and 26-year-old brother, Fady, this is a story of three sisters. Mouna is the strong-willed oldest, who at 39 seems dour and lonely. Nyla, three years younger, appears so compliant she is without will at all. And Gaby, at 35, looks perpetually tired, with bags under her eyes. As the film progresses Gaby seems less sure of her purpose in returning - to convince her family they are foolish, if not suicidal, to remain in the house.

As the sisters address the camera - speaking, quite directly, to us -Miss Fox's narrative strategies are shrewd and subtle. She resists crass contrasts between the Bustroses' faded opulence and the war around them. Instead, she reproduces their points of view and duplicates their sense of enclosure; only occasionally does she leave the insular world of the house to show the streets outside. Eventually we see the sisters' children, and find their neighbors huddled in the house during a bombing, watching cartoons on television. It is mildly surprising that other people share the sisters' lives.

Only late in the film, off-handedly, do we learn that the Bustroses are Christians. Throughout, Miss Fox's tone is as free of politics and rhetoric as the Bustroses themselves. She leaves it to the audience to judge them as noble or self-indulgent.

Slowly, the film discovers a family hiding emotionally as well as physically. ''Nobody wants to talk about the war, nobody wants to talk about money,'' Gaby complains. ''I mean, nobody's wanted to talk about anything in this family, ever.'' Miss Fox gets them to talk about their comfortable childhood, their disbelieving reactions to the war, their tangled personal relationships. Here are children taking their cues from a cold-hearted father and an aloof mother.

When Mouna's future in-laws came to discuss wedding plans with her father, she recalls, she sat in another room reading ''The Fountainhead.'' ''I was very happy to get married, but it wasn't enough for me to leave my book.'' When Fady says, ''I didn't have the hate'' or ''the political view'' to take part in the war on either side, his nonchalance makes us wonder whether everyone in the

family is not, after all, a version of Mouna, who admits, ''Every time there is something painful in my life I stop feeling.''

Ultimately, the Bustroses' resistance to war and change becomes an oblique comment on the way Lebanon's civil war, after more than a dozen years, has become a way of life. ''This is not the last party, not the last bombings, not the last anything,'' Nyla says after Fady's wedding, and by then we can feel the pull between common sense and the family's need to survive by creating their own reality.

Miss Fox's production notes explain her story's slightly fictionalized frame better than the film itself. Gaby returned to Beirut when the shelling of the garden took place, in April 1981. Miss Fox and her film crew only joined her six months later, after a brief visit by Gaby to New York. And Miss Fox describes Gaby's role as "the go-between" for the family and the crew, accounting for tensions the visitors must have caused in three months of shooting - intrusions the film itself never touches. Nonetheless, ''Beirut: The Last Home Movie,'' which opens today at the Film Forum 1, remains a highly accomplished portrait of characters under siege despite themselves. Civil War BEIRUT: THE LAST HOME MOVIE, directed and produced by Jennifer Fox; written by Miss Fox and John Mullen; cinematography, Alex Nepomniaschy; edited by Mr. Mullen; music by Lanny Meyers and Ziad Rahbani; released by Circle Releasing. At Film Forum 1, 57 Watts Street. Running time: 120 minutes. This film has no rating.