

ALGERIA

Over the past few years I've spent a lot of time in the south of France, not far from the Mediterranean. I've been aware of the three closest countries in Africa: Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria. Morocco and Tunisia invited with warmth and an apparent openness. Around Algeria, however, there seemed to be a forbidding dark circle. "Don't come near" it seemed to say. We had some neighbours in France who had started life in Algeria. In my naïve bright way I'd say to them "Ah vous etes des Pieds Noirs. Racontez!" Their backs were turned. How foolish I had been to mention it.

So why ?

Native Algerians are Sunni Moslems; the Arabic they speak is a bit different from others because influenced by French, Turkish and Berber languages. Algeria was formerly part of the Ottoman empire. Algeria is the biggest country in north Africa, with a magnificent coastline and huge reserves of oil and gas. What a prize for the French when eventually they took it over after a bloody war which lasted from 1830 to 1903. What they told themselves was that they were aiming to increase their king's popularity after the Napoleonic wars. And in fact the slave trade and piracy did end after France took over. But under French rule Algeria was not a happy country. There were constant uprisings and protests against the French. There were fights for independence in the form of the OS (the Special Organisation) but on the other hand Arabism and the new nationalist party were increasingly unpopular. Algerian Moslems could only become French citizens if they renounced their faith. Children were forced to attend French schools. Military conscription was obligatory. There was mass migration to other Muslim countries.

So finally from 1954 to 62 the Algerian war was fought. These years

were traumatic ones, bringing appalling suffering. The bloodshed found its way to Paris, as pro-independence demonstrators were killed in the heart of the city. French torture and executions of civilians in Algeria caused widespread dismay. No wonder the French are still ashamed and many refuse to talk about it..... Meanwhile The FLN (the national liberation front) tried its hardest to oppose the French and eventually of course Algeria won its independence. But it is said that the violent struggle left the country physically and morally destroyed. This was a war that has been described as one of the most brutal decolonization wars in the world.

Some of us might remember the long-serving president Bouteflika who was from a military right-wing class and basically seemed to want to keep the status quo and hang on to as much power as he could. Currently president Tebboune is a bit more liberal and has paid many diplomatic visits to western countries. But Algeria has shoddy public services, and under investment in the energy industry. There are shortages of staple foods, water cuts. It's a state that is seen as incompetent by its neighbours. Attempts have been made by different leaders to find peace through compromise but it never works and cannot work while the old right-wing military establishment is in power. And the grip of this class has so far proved unshakeable.

The Harkis are people who preferred life under the French, and we met a group of them who had settled in France, warmly welcomed I'm sure.